

Is London a Harbinger for America?

Great Britain: When is a Riot a Revolt?

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Contents

- [London's Revolt Forecasts](#)
- [Divided & Disorganized](#)

Several days of unprecedented revolt by the most impoverished minority-populated neighborhoods of London has shaken the normally staid and reserved British Establishment. Prime Minister David Cameron cut short his Italian vacation in Tuscany to return to the red-orange glare of a burning city. The prime minister was not the only one inconvenienced.

In an effort to mobilize 16,000 police officers concentrated in London alone, England's soccer-addicted fans saw their August 10 match against the Netherlands in Wembley stadium canceled.

So, this week at least, after years of ignoring glaring inequality and injustice, it is safe to say that all of England took notice of the crowded north London neighborhood of Tottenham and to similar minority communities in Birmingham, Manchester, Liverpool and Bristol where an explosive, fiery social consciousness has been rekindled .

Tottenham itself, where events first ignited over the police killing of an unarmed black youth, is a genuinely multi-cultural mix of mostly British-born African-Caribbean along with Turkish, Portuguese, Albanian, Kurdish and Somali peoples reportedly speaking 300 different languages.

It claims to be the most diverse community in all of Europe but there is no doubt that most share in common the intense poverty and the abuse and neglect by the rich and powerful that is all too familiar.

London's current revolt is quite different than the massive protests in other European capitals and even distinguished from those in the Middle East.

The poor of Tottenham, however, do share much with their brethren in the Black and minority communities of North America. Neither have powerful advocates that are independent of the political establishment.

London's Revolt Forecasts America's Future?

Traditional community and labor organizations in both Britain and the United States purporting to represent the working class have utterly failed these communities and allowed both Downing Street and Wall St. to impose their most austere policies on these least-represented amongst us.

"Most of all, it once again exposes the trickery and deceit of those who aspire to be our leaders. Not a single black 'leader' has spoken out in defence of the youths. Not one." Hal Austin writes in the

August 9 CounterPunch. Austin is a Barbadian, living in London and a leading journalist and social commentator from the black community.

Cannot the same be said in America where, for example, prominent national voices mobilizing the oppressed communities to demand jobs are noticeably absent?

Of course, the British government peddles a different story about events in Tottenham. Most are echoed by the establishment press.

A typical response came from GlobalPost's London correspondent, Michael Goldfarb, who was quoted on the PBS NEWSHOUR website as derisively dismissing the social problems of Tottenham by commenting that "the tension around [the police killing of the black youth] got out of hand very quickly, but it was clear almost from the beginning that this was plain old looting" by mainly unemployed youth with nothing to do on hot summer nights, he said.

To the extent that this crude opinion is shared by many in Britain, it only serves to confirm the truth: Tottenham residents are isolated politically and socially from the rest of British society, and particularly from the rest of the working class.

Fundamentally, their isolated existence explains the different form the rebellion took; more akin to a chaotic riot in many people's eyes as opposed to the far-better organized massive upheavals in Madrid, Athens and Cairo that united majority sections of their population and that, thereby, more easily won sympathy and admiration throughout the world.

It is important to recall that these same actions ultimately achieved major support from significant and massive social organizations that helped define the powerful and effective character of their protests.

Culpability for the desperate acts in Tottenham is shared by organizations of the working class that have so profoundly failed to embrace these communities and offer them the same shared benefits of organization and same shared status as brothers and sisters.

Their organizational and political inclusion early on, I believe, would have significantly altered, and strengthened, how Tottenham residents reacted these last few days.

Divided & Disorganized

Attempts during the era of the triumphant civil-rights movement to politically and socially unite the black community in the United States were met with government-inspired assassinations and police terrorism, as documented by revelations contained in the U.S. government's COINTELPRO papers.

As a result, beginning in the 1970s, criminal gangs began replacing FBI-targeted militant organizations like SNCC, CORE, SCLC, [1] Black Panthers, Young Lords, Brown Berets and numerous other effective social and political organizations in the communities of the oppressed.

This had a debilitating effect after several decades and results today in reactions to police brutality and poverty being often marked by scattered individual acts of frustration and anger. Protests are sometimes laced with anti-social behavior previously adopted as survival techniques.

For example, while ostensible political targets such as police cars and offices were burned in both Tottenham and Cairo, there was also in the former case, the indiscriminate burning of buildings and some personal accounts of victimizations that comes from pent-up rage.

There were other examples of criminal activity and even conflicts between gangs in the oppressed community of Tottenham that were also reported. Again, these are a result of decades of disorganization in the oppressed communities.

These are not excuses, neither are they defenses. It is an explanation that contains the answer for its resolution: new organizations must be forged that unite the community around common social goals and aspirations.

The proliferation of criminal gangs and the utter lack of a coherent, credible and socially class-conscious leadership is but another reflection of political and social separation from the majority of working people.

But this reality and the impact it has on distorting the communities' response should not in any way diminish the powerful and profound social nature of the Tottenham revolt, one deserving of our full support.

The 1965 Watt's rebellion in Los Angeles was similarly attacked in its day as a criminal enterprise but history has now properly recorded it as a true revolt against poverty and discrimination. History will also record Tottenham on this honor roll.

The rich and powerful benefit from divisions and rivalries in the oppressed communities, both in Britain and in the United States. Arguably, these same forces promote criminalization as a way of preventing the kind of social unity that could become a powerful political force.

A politically cohesive and united Tottenham is the frightening specter that certainly haunts the wealthy elite in Britain, even more than the current very dramatic random acts of outrage.

As for their richer cousins in the United States, the wealthy elite here are only too well aware of the smoldering embers of discontent that have been stoked by the same draconian reductions in jobs and social services that have been adopted in Britain.

These issues affect the majority of Americans and, hopefully, we learn from Tottenham that a united response is the best response with no community or section of working people left alone to fend for themselves.

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P.S.

* From Counterpunch:

<http://www.counterpunch.org/finamore08102011.html>

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Footnotes

[1] Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC); Congress of Racial Equality (CORE);

