

Rubber bullets, moralisation and the 'full force of the law' will not quell the high degree of civil unrest in this country. The causes of these tensions must be tackled head on

Now that the cleanup from this week's riots is underway, it is an apt time to reflect on why they occurred in the first place. While many commentators are quick to judge those who rioted as simply 'thugs and criminals', [Bart Cammaerts](#) argues that we must understand the long term economic and social reasons behind the turmoil if we are ever to move forward.



We are currently witnessing turmoil and panic in the markets as well as on the streets of London and other cities in the UK. Just as it is taboo to politicize the erratic behaviour of 'the markets' – i.e. the financial system is punishing states and thus also citizens for saving the financial system and preventing its meltdown in 2008 – it is also made impossible to politicize the civil unrest that is engulfing the UK at the moment. Anyone attempting to understand what is happening and thus inevitably adding a political dimension to the events on the streets is being ostracized, accused of relativism (see the Newsnight debate, [Gove versus Harman](#)), condemned for 'making excuses and seeking apologies', of condoning violence and of siding with the rioters. It seems almost, to paraphrase former US president George Bush, that you are either with the establishment or with the looters – an intermediate position is excluded.

Rioting or insurrection?

A disturbingly shocking example of this polarization was the vicious interview of the black writer and broadcaster [Darcus Howe](#) on BBC News.

At one point Howe said:

'I don't call it rioting, I call it an insurrection...of the masses, of the people. It is happening in Syria, it is happening in Clapham, it's happening in Liverpool, it's happening in Port-au-Spain, Trinidad, and that is the nature of the historical moment...'

The interviewer then accused Howe of being a rioter himself, thereby totally de-legitimizing the content of his message. While there are certainly problems with comparing the popular insurrection here with those going on in authoritarian regimes in the middle east or countries characterized by extreme poverty such as Trinidad, it does make sense to see current events in the UK as a form of insurrection that is to some extent political, and to position this as a reaction to a wider political and historical context rather than isolating these events as the work of mindless thugs and of criminals driven by sheer greed.

The rioting that took place across the capital before spreading to other cities in the country can and should indeed be seen as an insurrection, not against a political system nor with a defined political agenda, but against the prevailing capitalist conditions and conventions and against the forces of the state that protect capitalist interests of property and ownership. While this form of insurrection is not political in that it does not have a political agenda per se nor self-proclaimed leaders, it is political in the sense that it completely defies the capitalist and social order and the legitimacy of the police. However, in doing so it clearly stays within the logic of capitalism – materialism is at its core, taking indiscriminately. It does not even discriminate between local capitalism and the retail chains linked to global capitalism.

Listening to unheard voices

At the same time, the current unrest is only made possible by and through the political and economic opportunity structures that apply at this particular point in history and it is ludicrous to deny this. Acts like this do not occur in a political vacuum. Opportunity structures enable certain things to happen, but at the same time also create boundaries, point to structural constraints. If one listens to the voices of those engaged in the riots, they often self-define themselves as an underclass; deprived of opportunities, without any prospects and having nothing to lose. These sentiments of disaffection are not new nor have they emerged suddenly, but they have undoubtedly increased due to the draconian cutbacks in public services, in housing

benefits and especially in education and initiatives in vulnerable areas to combat social exclusion and deprivation, which directly affect youth.

Making this argument is fatuous and demeaning, [Michael Gove claims](#). But why is it deemed unacceptable to state that high levels of inflation, rising costs of living, low economic growth, high unemployment, combined with cuts in welfare benefits and stagnant (thus lower) wages, the ever-widening [gap between the rich and the rest of us](#) and a government mainly made-up of representatives of the upper-classes currently discussing tax reductions for the rich, is fueling a general political and economic climate which has made this possible? Making this link is not condoning the violence and looting, but trying to understand why it happened.

Reporting from around the world

The inability of the British establishment, including the liberal media, to acknowledge this macro perspective stands in stark contrast to the reporting on the riots in other parts of the world where this more holistic analysis is being made and where these events are not described as isolated incidents driven by criminal gangs, but the result of certain political and economic conditions. In an article in the New York Times the disruptive student protests and the attack on the royals in Regent Street in December last year, as well as the TUC rally and the UK Uncut occupation of Fortnum and Mason in March, are all linked to the current riots. The journalist – Ravi Somaiya – [writes](#):

'Economic malaise and cuts in spending and services instituted by the Conservative-led government have been recurring flashpoints for months'

In the French daily [Libération](#), a similar analysis is being developed, linking these events to previous riots in the Thatcher-era:

These social tensions are undoubtedly exacerbated by the restrictive budgetary policies put in place by the government of David Cameron, which touch public services and aid to the most poor. Just like in the 1980s when Margaret Thatcher was Prime Minister. [translation by the author]

However, while there are certainly convergences – tensions with police, Tory-led government, economic recession, high levels of (youth) unemployment in deprived areas, massive government cutbacks, a sense of general desperation amongst young people from certain backgrounds, there are also some marked differences between then and now. While it is true that the riots in the 1980s were localized in somewhat similar areas, the scale now is bigger and the level of organisation much higher, partly enabled through the use of social media and especially BlackBerry messaging which is encrypted to serve a corporate need for secrecy. This enables instant on-the-spot co-ordination of action by weakly organized large groups.

Another key-difference is that these events have not been racialised (yet) in the way they always have been in this country on previous occasions. Social media footage of the riots demonstrates that it is not only people of colour out and about, grabbing what they can get, but a mixed crowd both in terms of race and also gender. Many of the shop owners affected are non-white, and many of the non-white residents of the affected communities are as appalled and disgusted by what has happened than white members of the same communities. Nevertheless, recent events in Birmingham could potentially lead to an increase in racial tensions between Black and Asian communities across the country.

Investing in future generations

Maybe the correct answer to this profound crisis, which cannot just be solved by proclaiming simplistic law and order slogans, is to change that record now and start investing in people again, providing prospects, but also to confront the volatile market and subjugate the financial system to the interests of ordinary citizens, instead of the other way round.

The North London Assembly, a spontaneous assembly of more than 70 local community activists and organisations, is organising a march this coming Saturday under the banner 'Give our kids a future!'. They [state](#) that:

'this is not us seeking to represent the community but it is our attempt to try to bring unity to the community in which we live. There are many different views on the events but we are seeking the most positive outcome from them.'

Rubber bullets, moralisation and the 'full force of the law' will not quell the high degree of civic and uncivil unrest in this country. The frustrations of many citizens and the tensions this gives rise to run much deeper. This is why the causes of these frustrations and tensions must be tackled head on through state intervention in conjunction with civil society and community action instead of being ignored and brushed under the carpet as isolated, mindless and irreprehensible acts.