

Same riot/demo, different views (guest blog)

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By Shakuntala Banaji



This was the demo...

In riposte to various UK newspapers' and news channels' conservative versions of reality, I would like to give an alternative account of what happened on the November 10th NUS and UCU demonstration against student fees and on the break-away part of it at 30 Millbank, the Conservative party HQ.

The march was vibrant, inventive, angry (lots of banners and costumes as you would expect, music, dancers, and theatre groups, placards such as 'Medics Against the Cuts' and 'You Kant cut Kant, You just Kant!'). Anyone watching the demonstration would have seen no signs of the youth apathy and lack of interest in politics which is so often lamented in policy and press. However the demonstration route was also fairly short – passing through few populated areas – and the crowds were quickly dispersed.



...or was this?

Yes, there were over fifty thousand people there and that is something to celebrate if only because most of the marchers were young and some of them protesting for the first time; but experiences in February 2003 suggest that popular protests against unpopular policies in the UK may be allowed and then fairly swiftly discounted.

Incredible Hike

No-body hijacked the march. Some people – students for the most part, but also lecturers, and some parents – evidently decided that they did not want to protest in the dutiful, regimented manner which some union officials would prefer. The students who decided to stay at 30 Millbank – several thousand for over four hours – as well as a large number of lecturers were quite understandably frustrated. They were there to

protest about the proposed unjust cuts to the arts, social sciences and humanities, the incredible hikes in fees; and they were worried that the right to higher education will no longer be a right for a large segment of the British population.

Some, especially those who voted Liberal-Democrat, were seething at the manner in which pre-election promises are being broken. However, they were also good humoured, inventive and articulate; large windows at Conservative Head Quarters were broken so that people could get inside, and yes, there were placard sticks and plastic bottles being thrown which hurt a few demonstrators and a couple of police; there was a fearful moment when someone dropped a fire-extinguisher off the building.

But it was absolutely not the extended, vicious riot that is being talked of by so many news outlets. Ironically, in the crowd there were dozens of media and communications students from various parts of the country busily twittering, blogging and filming as part of their education.

Not A Mob

Precisely because of the low-key policing strategy at the beginning and because the protestors were not a mob, harm to people was minimal for the most part. Whether or not you approve of the violence against the Conservative Head Quarters and the chucking of placards at the police, it was never out of control. The atmosphere became much more intimidating towards nightfall when additional riot police arrived; at that point, those students who stayed to have their names and addresses taken, or to be cuffed and searched, are far braver than those of us who chose to leave.

We adjure our youth to become engaged, to take a stand, to participate in civic action. And when they do it in their various different ways, we should not turn our back on some of them and say they did not participate quite as we might have done. It takes creativity, and courage to stand up against long-term harm which is irrational and difficult to represent in a vitriolic glass-breaking snapshot: this violence is involved in taking to pieces the UK's higher education and welfare provision.

Although we will hear much more opprobrium heaped on the Millbank protestors in coming weeks, it is towards the tiny but powerful minority of ideological vandals who now rule our country that we should really be posing our questions: why have you hijacked our democracy? How dare you take something given to you in trusteeship and act as if it was yours to decimate?

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