

The Revolution: Is being Televised, Blogged, Tweeted, You-Tubed and Stood Up.

by Lisa McKenzie, LSE Fellow

A spectre is haunting London and that spectre is the rumble of grass roots civil disobedience, activism and – dare I say – a people's anarchism.



Karl Marx originally wrote the Communist Manifesto in 1848 as a pamphlet to be read and used by the masses in their class struggle. The Manifesto is a passionate and commanding piece of writing, which has inspired and captured the imaginations of academics, politicians, grass roots activists, and the everyday working class worker for almost 170 years. However since the fall of the Berlin Wall 25 years ago, and the defeat of the Miners by the Thatcher government in 1985, 30 years ago, it has been argued by many that class struggle has finished, its has ended, and the need for class consciousness, class politics, and class war has been rendered obsolete through identity politics, individualism, and the 'freedom' that Neoliberalism brings.

However, over the last few months a militant and grass roots activism has been rumbling away in the heart of our capital city. A dis-organised and responsive activism, communities reacting to the growing inequality, unfairness, and injustice they experience from living in a city where in one square mile there are millionaires working in the financial district, while next door in Tower Hamlets, 50% of children live in poverty. Communities, groups and individuals are fighting back in London without any official or mainstream politics or political figures supporting them or even knowing that they exist.

As a working class woman, and an academic working at the London School of Economics, I also consider myself to be a community and political activist. Consequently over the years I have been involved in many community projects and campaigns. Not since the 1980's, however, have I experienced the militancy and anxiety amongst working class people and communities which appears to be happening all over London. Maybe I am a naïve Northerner who hasn't yet got to grips with the politics of London. I might disagree with that though, because in 1984 I was the 16-year-old daughter of a striking miner in North Nottinghamshire, and I have lived through and experienced strange and difficult political times, and during that intense year of 1984-85 I saw glimpses of political revolution. However the events over the last few months in our capital city have left me feeling terrified, exhausted and weak, while simultaneously inspiring me and giving me hope for a future that definitely could be different.


My previous life in Nottingham consisted of community work, and academic research predominantly with mothers who lived on an inner city council estate, I spent 8 years researching the neighbourhood I had lived in for 25 years. I have documented the narratives of those women, their lives and the problems that are faced by working class people living in council estates in Nottingham elsewhere. However in the last 13 months I have lived in east London, and worked at the London School of Economics continuing my academic research but have also become involved in activism and campaigns in London. The energy, and the fight back in the capital has overwhelmed me and inspired me to the point where even I, a cynical lefty academic, believe that change is coming, and it's happening now. At the same time my research in East London has shown some of the worse examples of inequalities and injustice I have seen towards working class families.



The campaign and fight of the Focus E15 mothers have been one of those terrible examples of how working class families and young mothers in particular are being treated in austerity Britain. The young mothers with very young children were forcibly evicted from a homeless hostel in 2013 in Newham, East London; the hostel sits in the shadow of the billion pound developments of the Olympic Park and the Westfield Shopping Centre. The young mother's evictions were treated with a severe lack of empathy and with no apparent care for their welfare by the Labour council and a Labour Mayor who seems to despise their existence. They were told that the only social housing available to them was in Hastings, Birmingham, or Wolverhampton. Places where they had no connections, or family. They have been fighting for affordable homes for themselves but also the wider community since September 2013.

Meanwhile devastated families are facing eviction after the inherited estate of Britain's richest MP bought a stake in their homes on the New Era Estate in Hoxton, Hackney. Conservative Member of Parliament Richard Benyon's £110million family firm is part of a consortium which bought the housing estate and announced plans for a massive rent hike. Up to 90 households fear the Benyons' plan to charge "market rents" will treble their bills. Which will force the families who have lived there for generations to leave the neighbourhood, and the residents also know that if they lose this fight they will have to leave London as rents soar way above the affordability of any working class family.

At the same time, multimillion pound housing developments in London are segregating less well-off tenants from wealthy homebuyers by forcing them to use separate entrances. A Guardian investigation discovered a growing trend in the capital's upmarket apartment blocks – which are required to include affordable homes in order to win planning permission. However poorer residents are forced to use alternative access, a phenomenon being dubbed "poor doors". Even bicycle storage spaces, rubbish disposal facilities and postal deliveries are being separated.

It seems that social cleansing, social apartheid and social inequality has been accepted as 'common sense' by the political elites of London.  Through the narrative that London is a special place where the special people live, and if you cannot afford to live in London you need to leave, and leave quickly and quietly.

The unintended consequences of this hard line neo-liberal approach to the identity of Britain's capital city is that some of the most dispossessed and powerless groups are forming their own political movements, growing in working class communities around a class consciousness centred around the precarity of low paid and insecure work, rising rents, and the onslaught of gentrification of their neighbourhoods which seldom includes them in its plans. This grass roots activism is thriving amongst those groups who are being treated harshly, and have very little or no power, they are fighting for their lives, their communities and for the future of their children as we did in 1984 against pit closures. This fight has become especially apparent amongst working class mothers, who until they faced eviction and homelessness they were not politically active, or interested. There are now campaigns all over London from Hendon to Lewisham fighting forced evictions, and the unfair inequality and struggles that Londoners are now experiencing in their everyday lives. I have met women with their children on recent protests at the TUC Austerity March 'Britain Needs a Pay Rise' who have never been on a political march before, and mothers with their babies are picketing outside the notorious 'One Commercial Street' that was investigated by the Guardian as a 'Poor Door' developer.

And if all of this grass roots activism hasn't been strange enough in belly of the beast which is London, we have had an emergence in 'celebrity' activists bringing attention to the causes of the Focus E15 and the New Era Campaigns in the form of the self-styled messiah and agent provocateur Russell Brand, who I bump into almost daily at some community meeting, protest, or picket. The BBC3 programme 'The Revolution will be Televised' is also on site at most protests, filming and interviewing those who have a fight in London. The politicians of Westminster have no

idea that this is happening; while celebrities are in awe of these strong and determined working class women, hanging on the their coat tails for legitimacy in their own political positions.

There is an energy in the Capital, and dare I say a class-consciousness is rising amongst people who even just 12 months ago had little interest in politics. Something is happening; a spectre? Or is Revolution in the air as Russell Brand's new book 'Revolution' advocates? Perhaps, although I am doubtful Mr Brand's book will have the impact that 'The Communist Manifesto' had as a call to arms to the working class to shake off their chains. Undoubtedly Mr Brand and other celebrities are adding and highlighting the rumble of discontent within the Nation that mainstream politics are failing to reach.



I am hopeful and inspired that the discontent and change in working class politics are coming from the grass roots, from mothers with babies on their hips shouting 'shame on you' as they march for the first time past parliament.

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