

# REFLECTIONS ON THE RIOTS

By Shanta Acharya

**H**ow does one reconcile a vigil in a north London suburb turning into the worst riot in England for decades? Mark Duggan, 29, was killed on Thursday, 4 August 2011, in Tottenham, after police officers stopped the minicab in which he was travelling to arrest him. At the time of his death he was under investigation by officers from Trident, the Metropolitan police unit responsible for gun crime within the black community. It was reported that Duggan pulled a gun on the police; the Independent Police Complaints Commission confirmed he did not fire first. The sequence of events that turned a peaceful vigil into riotous burning and looting in Tottenham on Saturday night remains unclear.

As the riots escalated, it was not clear what their demands amounted to? Disobedience is the true foundation of liberty. But this was no act of civil disobedience driven by a clearly defined ideology. There was no protest; they were not shouting slogans against police brutality, carrying banners demanding justice for Duggan. Instead they were carrying off whatever loot they could lay their hands on—mobile phones, shoes, clothes, TVs, etc—from shops they had broken into. They say God helps those who help themselves, but this is not the kind of self-help that pays off in the long term.

### **This civil violence was class based, not confined to poverty stricken youth**

The profile of the looters as it slowly emerges is varied—ranging from students and teaching assistants to a mother, a chef and an aspiring songwriter. This is not to impune all students, chefs etc; besides, some mothers reported their children to the police on spotting their criminal acts on TV. While many of the rioters were from deprived backgrounds, not all were poverty-stricken youths. They came from different racial groups, and their rampages were not confined to their local boroughs; the age of participants ranged from early teens to individuals in their forties. Clearly, there was an element of opportunistic criminality. Unlike the Arab spring, the late summer flowering of discontented youth in our streets does not offer much hope.

Not long ago we saw thousands of students taking to the streets of London in protest of increased university tuition fees. While the student protest also escalated into violence, it did not descend into the kind of looting, and thuggery

seen recently. The student protest divided opinion across the country, but the recent riots have caused widespread consternation, shame, disgust, anger and fear. Even those who sympathize are horrified by the way in which otherwise tranquil suburbs were transformed into no-go zones, cordoned off by fear and apprehension instilled by hooligans.

It is also not clear why this madness was not curbed sooner as police lost control of the streets to hooded gangs of youths, who were undoubtedly the main participants in the trouble. The rioters organized themselves via Twitter, Facebook and other electronic media.

The burnt-out shops and flats in Tottenham became a key image of the riots



The police and the fire brigade on the other hand were unable to respond to the crisis. They seemed unprepared for the ferocity of the attacks; that they were inadequately resourced was a contributing factor. The House of Reeves, a furniture shop in Croydon, for example, which has been with one family for five generations and survived two world wars, was razed to the ground overnight. The owner's son phoned the fire brigade, located in the neighborhood, within minutes of the fire starting. By the time help arrived, 15 minutes later, there was not a lot the fire-fighters could do. The fire kept blazing through the night. London had not experienced such scenes since the blitz.

### **The Police lost control of the streets to hooded gangs**

What was also worrying was the initial response of the police. In some affected areas, there was virtually no police presence; in others, the few policemen

present stood by doing little. Their mandate is to uphold law and order. Criminal acts were taking place in their presence; why did the police not intervene, why were reinforcements not sent? The riotous youths went rampaging for hours moving from one suburb to another without being arrested. They were not protesting peacefully, why did the police then not apply reasonable force in establishing law and order? Is it not ironical that it was a police shooting that triggered the riots in Tottenham in the first place!

There exists a history of protests against the police in the UK, much of

fit. Even such a statement is simplistic as such irresponsible behaviour was not confined to poverty-stricken youths. It can safely be said that the looters do not know what true poverty really is. In one incident, a woman in south London—by no means rich or privileged—was asleep in her home. Some youths broke into her house and left with her handbag and whatever else they could. They felt entitled to break into someone else's home and simply help themselves! It is this basic lack of respect for any kind of rule, authority, let alone a sense of duty, decency and honour that is puzzling.

### **Many youth belong to gangs, disenfranchised from family, community**

Is it then correct to conclude that these angry youths resent government cuts and the closure of youth clubs, they are protesting because unemployment among youths is highest in the country? Is it because teenagers today have nothing better to do? Or is their malaise born out of a culture of consumerism and a misguided sense of entitlement? Has years of unemployment finally killed the work ethic? Or it is that the young simply feel they are worth it?

London has been witnessing fatal youth crimes for years now, the gang culture being widely prevalent. The killings were as sinister as this outburst of violence, directed at others, where the gangs worked together. Astonishingly, there are over 200 youth gangs in London alone. Many of the rioters come from families with a single mother who at best struggles to make ends meet. She is either not at home (if she has the good fortune of having a job; sometimes, she is doing more than one low-paid, part-time job); or, if she is at home, she is possibly depressed, dependant on alcohol/ drugs. There is typically no father figure who goes to work and provides for the family. Nor are the children used to any parental guidance or discipline. Not only have they been let down by their families, but also by the schools they attend. They are illiterate, have no interest in education or in improving themselves, their future prospects bleak. Brought up on a diet of violent video games and other forms of violent electronic entertainment, many of them are immune to violence. Many belong to a gang, disenfranchised from their family and community.

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### Bankers fatten on massive bonuses, ordinary people lose jobs

At the same time, we live in a culture dominated by electronic media that worships celebrities. We hear of success stories often driven by greed, dishonesty and/or stupidity. Think of all the scandals we have had recently—the banking crisis with major banks having to be bailed out by governments while bankers continue to receive massive bonuses as ordinary people lose jobs, livelihoods; the MPs expenses scandal, the phone hacking scandal with journalists bribing the police—the list goes on and on. If the rich and so-called educated people behave in such a depraved manner, where are the role models for the young, especially those who have never had the advantages of a stable family, good education, and well-paid jobs etc?

This is not to condone the violence of the rioters, far from it! There are decent people living in the same deprived areas who are deeply disturbed with the criminal behaviour they have had to put up with. It is a small minority responsible for such vandalism. Most people lead lives of quiet purpose and hope, if not desperation. All our lives are small acts of protest; it need not turn into desperate acts of terror. However, it is true that societies that are deeply divided, where the gap between rich and poor keeps growing, where the young receive no guidance or discipline from parents, nor do they get any real education at school, where individuals foster little hope for their future; nor do they possess the intelligence or the means to chose a path that could save them from a life of crime, drugs, disease etc, then sooner or later such societies disintegrate into chaos.

It is the poverty of aspiration that is shocking among the rioters—the lack of determination to build a better life for oneself through education, hard work, honesty, integrity etc. One can understand young people feeling alienated, disenfranchised etc. It is unfortunate they cannot discover positive ways of channelling their anger. The purpose of alienation, which by the way even rich and well educated kids experience, is to explore oneself, to discover something beyond one self—be it through science, music, literature, art, sports, nature, etc. I wonder how many of the rioters are capable of enjoying reading a book, painting, listening to music or doing something creative. It is a pity they have not learnt to think. As far as that feeling of loneliness is concerned—well, some of the greatest men and women were also driven to achieve great things by their alienation. Feeling lonely, scared, confused, an outsider, is fairly common.

6 CONFLUENCE

What distinguishes one individual from another is how s/he deals with it.

### Governments influence the behaviour of its citizens

The current crisis of course did not

become a lifestyle choice for many! The Welfare system has not diminished the five “Giant Evils” in society—squalor, ignorance, want, idleness and disease. Most adolescents rebel against authority. Offering benefits to the young if they

what it is, is prone to misjudgements.

The cost of the recent riots pales into insignificance compared to the wealth wiped out by stock markets, which affects the world and its prospects. It has and will alter the life paths of many who had nothing to do with it. As a nation we will be guilty of moral hazard if we treat the destruction of assets differentially. How many bankers, regulators etc have been arrested, questioned for plunging the world into a financial crisis? Coming down heavy on the young rioters is not going to help much. Young people learn to be responsible when they see others taking responsibility. As long as governments and those in power behave irresponsibly, what moral authority can they really exert?

Talking of a broken society will not automatically heal the divisions. In the final analysis it is what individuals in authority—including parents, teachers, politicians among others—do that matters, not what they say. It is regrettable when parents and teachers feel they have no control over their charge. Do they have the courage and the wisdom to do the right thing, guide young minds to a better life? It is clear a concerted social effort is needed. Bees have no law, no religion, no moral training etc. They act on instinct, seem to know their survival depends on working together. Despite all our achievements, we humans are so much poorer for lacking such a developed sense of social responsibility.

My message to young people today is—it may not be a fair world but you can always try to make it better. Do not think of yourself as non-productive members of society, and do not feel marginalised because others marginalise you. Each one of you has a role to play—each one of you is good at something. So, go discover your real strength. Rioting is not a career. It will lead, sooner or later, to imprisonment of some kind. When you can be free and be someone, why settle for anything less? If you believe and expect great things of your self, and work towards it, you will find your place in the world. **C**

Shanta Acharya was born in India, won a scholarship to Oxford, where she completed her doctoral thesis before going to Harvard as a Visiting Scholar. She has the rare achievement of being published in fields as diverse as poetry and literary studies as well as asset management.



Pakistani community observing a minute's silence in memory of the three men killed in Birmingham.



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happen overnight, it is the unintended consequence of past government policies. Give a woman preferential social housing if she has a child, and top it up with other benefits, and you end up with single mothers. What was intended by William Beveridge as a safety net for a few has

opted for education, or better still for work apprenticeships, would have been a superior investment of public funds. Governments influence the behaviour of its citizens; policy-makers need to examine carefully the consequences of their decisions. Human nature, being