

Rioting



OPPRESSION is not an incident, or event, it doesn't just happen. Oppression produces circumstances in which the rights of people are systematically denied. It results in their inability to exercise the same freedoms and privileges as others; it configures and disfigures their entire existence. Being told relentlessly who you are, being defined, being told what you can and cannot be; and to what you can, and cannot aspire, by the powerful, is the lot of most oppressed people.

I well remember being a novice teacher in a meeting with older colleagues discussing one of our 'problem' students. The general opinion was that Aaron, a sixteen-year-old Afro-Caribbean lad, was useless and should be thrown off the course. I had taught this lively troublesome kid, and intervened saying we should keep Aaron because he was witty and had a great sense of humour. My older, world-

weary colleagues, looked at me as if I was mad. So, I insisted that, "Aaron's wit and humour is a sign of his swift mind and intelligence". This cut no ice. The course leader brought the discussion swiftly to an end with the memorable observation: "He might as well go and stack supermarket shelves now, rather than later".

And so, Aaron's place in the world was decreed by a bunch of middle-aged white men, with very decided views about black lads that they clearly feared, and didn't like. That was long ago in the mid-seventies, but the prospects of young Aarons today are not a whole lot better. Of course, nobody would be so vulgar as to say what was said in a staff meeting forty-five years ago, but things are still stacked against black youngsters, here in Britain.

I finished my career teaching in Manchester Metropolitan University nine years ago at our central campus a mile or two from the main Afro-Caribbean neighbourhood in the city. Every September one or two black students would enrol in our faculty, and by Christmas they'd usually be gone. Hard to explain. The university and my colleagues were not 'racist' in any observable way. I'm pretty sure that we did not discriminate on racial grounds – it was, and is, a resolutely liberal institution. So how does it happen that the student body is drawn overwhelmingly from White, South Asian, and East Asian, communities? The large Afro-Caribbean population is simply not represented.

Clearly there are class issues at work here, the city's black population is solidly working class and is largely concentrated in Moss Side and Hulme. One area is composed of nineteenth-century terraces of densely-packed houses, the other is an area of flats and houses entirely rebuilt thirty years ago. The council has spent considerable sums over the years improving the older housing stock, and the newer homes have been built to a good standard. There are newly built schools, and colleges that offer excellent teaching and good facilities. And yet, and yet . . . the

problem of under achievement and exclusion amongst black kids remains.

It remains because the effects of oppression accumulate, are inherited, and sustained, narrowing horizons, limiting expectations, crushing the belief that you might be able to get ahead. This problem afflicts many poor white kids too, particularly white boys, living on embattled estates on the edge of the city, whose lack of social skills and low levels of education condemn them to a life at the bottom of the heap. This results in oppression too, in being defined, in being allotted a particular place in society, a place in which the institutions of the state, the welfare agencies, and the police, approach you with a solid set of negative expectations and prejudices.

In moments of crisis the disregard of the oppressed for law and order becomes manifest. Such people know well that they do not live in a liberal democracy, because they know that they cannot exercise the rights that they're supposed to have on the same terms as everybody else. They know, from bitter, daily experience, that access to good education and jobs that are worth having, is not equal. They know that the application of the law is not equal, and that everything is not on the level. They know that their chances and options are severely limited from the outset. In such circumstances it would be foolishness of the utmost kind for the oppressed to respect the law as if they lived in the same world as, for example, a middle-class white man living in an upscale apartment in the centre of the city.

Oscar Wilde had it about right when talking in 1891 about poverty as a form of oppression in his essay, *The Soul of Man Under Socialism*:

The virtues of the poor may be readily admitted, and are much to be regretted. We are often told that the poor are grateful for charity. Some of them are, no doubt, but the best amongst the poor are never grateful. They are ungrateful, discontented, disobedient, and rebellious [. . .]

No: a poor man who is ungrateful, unthrifty, discontented, and rebellious, is probably a real personality, and has much in him. He is at any rate a healthy protest. As for the virtuous poor, one can pity them, of course, but one cannot possibly admire them. They have made private terms with the enemy, and sold their birthright for very bad pottage. They must also be extraordinarily stupid.

I can quite understand a man accepting laws that protect private property, and admit of its accumulation, as long as he himself is able under those conditions to realise some form of beautiful and intellectual life. But it is almost incredible to me how a man whose life is marred and made hideous by such laws can possibly acquiesce in their continuance.

I'm an old man now, so my days of running through the streets and boldly confronting the powers that be are long gone. But I continue to think that there are circumstances in which rioting is entirely legitimate, particularly when the police, militia, or soldiers, attack demonstrators. It is then that the missiles and petrol bombs are bound to fly. Looting and arson are perhaps inevitable, but never right, and should always be opposed. Actively fighting back is another matter, fighting back against forces sent to suppress free expression, break up demonstrations and other manifestations of outrage, is not only inevitable, it is essential.

The solution to oppression is never submission. Gandhian submission to overwhelming odds, may present itself as a solution, but the essence of all resistance is a refusal, however fleetingly, to be governed, and a rejection of the right of the powerful to determine who you are. Resistance can take many forms, but rioting is an essential element in any struggle – whether it's the struggle of homosexuals for equal rights or the continuing battle of black people, here, and in America.

I well remember the rioting that broke out in 1981 in Brixton in response to the aptly named police action – “Operation Swamp”. The police invaded the area, sealed off roads, threw cordons across streets, and established what were in effect, checkpoints, to question anybody and everybody passing up and down Railton Road. The following day, as anger grew at what was clearly a kind of ‘colonial’ exercise by a white police force against a largely black population, the neighbourhood exploded. Fights broke out and the police were driven out of the area. As they attempted to win back control, buildings were set on fire and looting began – general lawlessness was the result of the authorities attempting to impose their conception of law and order.

If you oppress people, systematically restrict their opportunities in education and employment, you will be forced to resort to repression of various kinds, and this repression will, *as night follows day*, bring violence and riots in its wake.

It is common here in Britain to reassure ourselves that the oppression of black people is not the same as it is in America. Well, of course, it is radically different, stemming from a very different history and different social circumstances. However, it remains the case that a black man is far more likely to die on the floor of a police cell in Britain, than a white man. A black man is far more likely to encounter violence from police armed with taser, truncheon, and hand cuffs – far more likely to be randomly stopped on the street. It is far more common for a black driver’s car to be ‘pulled over’ for a registration check, and ‘routine’ questioning.

This is no doubt because black men are more likely to find themselves living in poorer, rougher neighbourhoods where crime and disorder are commonplace. There is something like a vicious circle in operation, where oppression results in forgone conclusions and self-fulfilling prophecies.

So, when rioting and looting erupts oppression is the issue, not criminality. Rioting and violent

resistance is an inevitable consequence of denying equal rights and equality of opportunity to people. If black people are unaccountably disadvantaged or brutalised by the cops, then it's incumbent on the authorities to rectify the situation, and bring an end to their oppression.

No doubt this will be immensely expensive and difficult to do – requiring extensive interventions in housing, education, training, and employment. None of this is optional. Real equality of opportunity, and real equality of access to education and good jobs, must be established if the discrimination and poverty inherent in the oppression of black people and poor whites, is to become a thing of the past.