

Riots and Radical Confusion



Rioting in sandals!

I CONTINUE TO BELIEVE that riots at certain moments are entirely legitimate and can be positive in their effects. The response of the residents of Railton Road and neighbouring streets in Brixton to 'Operation Swamp' in 1981, is a case in point. There are many occasions when orchestrated disorder by turbulent crowds are right and proper, extending from the Hyde Park Riots in support of 'manhood suffrage' in 1866, to the anti-fascist Battle of Cable Street some seventy years later, on up to, and including, the struggle of traveller communities in defence of their homes and

families in the Battle of Beanfield in 1985, or that of the Dale Farm evictions last year. As is so often the case, it's a moot point who are actually the rioters, the forces of 'law and order', or those resisting them? Repression and state violence is most definitely the common denominator in any riotous assembly reported over the last couple of centuries.

Yet the British left has often been confused by the selective nature of state violence and repression in what has been since 1928, a bourgeois democracy, enjoying widespread support amongst great swathes of working class and lower middle-class people. This means that a certain strategic sense is demanded of those supporting the mayhem if popular support is to be garnered amongst the population at large. Of course, 'fact' is rarely possible in the midst of riotous assemblies but it is certainly necessary in their aftermath when the wider public is required to assess the legitimacy of violent and turbulent events.

The present 'Kill the Bill' demonstrations and riots are relevant here. Clearly the intension of giving the police powers to suppress protests that are 'too noisy' or 'too disruptive' is patently absurd when the explicit purpose of many protests is precisely to be loud and disruptive – these elements, noise and inconvenience, are surely integral to our freedom to protest.

The madness of giving the police such wide discretion is surely revealed by the use of a drone to identify and arrest a couple walking their dog through a deserted landscape in the Lake District during the pandemic. Similar examples, up and down the country, of police apparently incapable of using their judgement during Covid-19 have been widely reported. These incidents have ranged from arresting nurses demanding higher pay, to families daring to enjoy their own front gardens. Recently this lack of judgement came violently into view with the police attack upon the vigil for Sarah Everard on Clapham Common.

Clearly, the new proposals to extend police powers to judge whether or not protests should be allowed to go ahead must not be countenanced by anybody.

Consequently, the demonstrations against the proposed law, should be wholeheartedly supported. However, some confusion has crept in regarding the draconian laws introduced to suppress the spread of the corona virus. A muddle has arisen between those refusing the extension of police powers regarding protests in general, and those committed to opposing the Covid-19 restrictions on principle.

The rejection of emergency powers, taken by the authorities in defence of public health, should not be confused with new powers that will allow the police to determine that protests are unlawful because they are noisy or disruptive. Yet this is precisely what has happened. The authorities, truly astonished by the extent to which the general public have supported Covid-19 emergency powers, have decided to up their game with the police, crime and sentencing bill.

There is no doubt that every effort must be made to prevent the provisions of this bill becoming law. However, the confusion that has arisen in the minds of the general public, and amongst left wing and radical protesters, between blanket attacks on pandemic emergency powers, and permanent extensions of police authority is disastrous.

The deleterious effects of this confusion will be seen in widespread support for the authorities in the aftermath of the Bristol riots and of police actions against jolly gatherings of unruly youngsters insisting on having fun in parks and on heathland; young people evidently driven positively barmy by being locked up in flats and rooms in halls of residence for months on end. Disobedient young people during the pandemic are being muddled up with riotous politicians fighting the good fight. The authorities will make hay out of this confusion as they strive foolishly for the apparent convenience and tranquillity offered by new police powers. When we all know that such powers will simply incite strife without end.

This confusion has been ably assisted by a left-wing culture in which the perfectly rational response of bourgeois democratic governments engaged in deploying emergency powers, are denounced as attacks upon civil liberties. Large sections of the left have been uneasy about openly supporting draconian public health laws and regulations, while in practice most have quietly complied.

Emergency powers are indeed grievous encroachments upon civil liberties; however the response of a large minority of libertarians, radicals, and red-hot lefties has been absurd. Opposing mask wearing, lockdowns, and other onerous restrictions, have become *de rigueur* for many radicals, despite the widespread support these measures have won amongst the public at large. Most people understand that emergency powers in defence of public health are entirely legitimate, but certainly believe that they should be temporary and removed immediately that the particular threat is over.

Therefore, it is imperative that clear distinctions are insisted upon by those protesting against the police, crime and sentencing bill, on one hand, and Covid-19 emergency powers, on the other. Unfortunately, Bristol's revolutionaries, flushed with their statue-toppling success, appear to lack strategic wisdom. They seem to believe that burning police cars and pelting the cops with showers of pebbles are emancipatory acts worthy of legendary celebration. They're unaware of how such actions in the present climate can only assist the authorities, isolate the left still further, and strengthen the hand of the Tory government. These eejits are intoxicated with their heroic insurgency, which will undoubtedly be confirmed when the police come knocking on their doors, armed with arrest warrants and extensive photographic evidence.

Then we will be invited to rally against police repression all over again – and so it goes on – provocation, successfully provoking the authorities, leading to radical outrage at the arrest and

incarceration of rebel arsonists and radical fighters for freedom (if not democracy).

Anything, anything at all, that results in the isolation and defeat of those opposing the police, crime and sentencing bill, must be rejected. Anything that muddles up or conflates the pandemic emergency powers with attempts to award the police new and permanent rights to close down demonstrations and protests, must be rejected.

It is time for those on the left to begin to use their strategic nous and judgement in order to win and retain the support of the wider public against the indiscretion of foolhardy radicals apparently incapable of distinguishing between emergency powers, and permanent attacks upon civil liberties.