

# Rebel Violence

## Book review

George Bradford (David Watson)

1986

a review of

*Rebel Violence v. Hierarchical Violence: A Chronology of Anti-State Violence on the U.K. Mainland, July 1985-May 1986*, B. M. Combustion, London WC1N 3XX

“Dangerous times,” reads one of the many fascinating newspaper clippings in this pamphlet produced by the same people who gave us *Like A Summer With a Thousand Julys*, *The End of Music*, and *Miner Conflicts, Major Contradictions*. Dangerous indeed, but heady, exciting times, as well, as the chronology demonstrates. A few examples of rebel violence will suffice to give a glimpse:

\* Wildcat strikes, violence by striking workers against cops and scabs, prison rebellions, football fans rioting against the cops.

\* Cop patrols stoned in Toxteth after chasing joyriders; cop car stolen when the cops chase joyriders on foot.

\* Anti-cop rioting in Manchester, Birmingham, London, and elsewhere...

\* “Large scale rioting in Brixton, South London, after cops shoot & cripple Cherry Groce, mother of 5, in dawn raid. Brixton police station besieged & petrol bombed, with community ‘spokesmen’ (both black & white) getting attacked when they told everyone to disperse and go home...” Followed by widespread looting which extends to other areas. Despite “some occasional fighting over the spoils,” there is as well “the usual joyful potlatch “7-year-olds were seen helping their grandmothers carry away boxes of alcohol. One old woman, terrified by the atmosphere of the riot, was calmed down when some black guy gave her a couple of bottles of stolen brandy. Someone nicked a whole load of electric kettles, piled them into a vaguely pyramid shape and set fire to them: the kind of thing which modern forms of art turn into museum-pieces become subversive when practiced without authorization...” Reporters—“unofficial cops”—are also attacked.

\* from a reprinted newspaper clipping: “Whooping West Indians sang ‘Oh, what a Beautiful Morning’ as they surveyed the riot wreckage yesterday.”

\* Young people clash with cops in Bournemouth, then form a “Westham Riot Squad” to fight cop harassment.

\* A police station is set afire in Bradford-on-Avon.

There seems to be little to compare with all of this here in the U.S., and one gets a sense of that social humus from which a vision of revolution such as that of the recent novel, *The Free* (see accompanying review), seems to be emerging. England is burning.

As the author observes, “In the increasingly barbaric and brutal situation which is the UK today, the patriotic British State, rearing itself up into its old-style essence (hopefully, before it’s vanquished forever), is treating its own proletariat as its last colony and final territorial imperialism...The atmosphere out there is extremely tense...Breakdown/schizophrenia/madness are on the loose everywhere.”

Violence is ubiquitous; some aim it in the right direction. others laterally at those who are their real allies, and still others on themselves as they are driven towards “a black despair.” The situation teeters over an abyss: social

revolution or nihilism, subversive unity or fragmentation and defeat? But the state is at an impasse, too, and has no strategy for containing the upheaval.

The possibilities are limitless. “Inevitably,” the author argues, “there is no middle ground between the violence of this society and the violence that opposes it.” And elsewhere: “Everything in support of the living death of this society is forcing ‘hooligans’ to either become intelligent about who their real enemies are or to become their own worst enemy.”

Yet the author of this text does not conceal the problems suggested by much of the violence—the stoning of old people who curse the rioters after their flats were inadvertently burned when stores below were torched, assaults on women, assaults on isolated whites by crowds of enraged blacks, attempted intervention by fascists and the racism of many of the “hooligan” gangs, etc. The author mentions a petrol bomb thrown into a crowd, which fortunately fails to ignite, and excoriates perpetrators of such “mini-terrorist” acts which give “molotovs a bad name” and which reduce rebellion “to a cliché—an unthinking repetition of fetishized tactics, trivial gestures devoid of strategy.”

Even a neighborhood health clinic gets torched along with a grocery store. “One doesn’t have to be a moralistic defender of the Welfare State,” we are told, “to dismiss such attacks as unthinkingly arbitrary.” As patronizing and dehumanizing as they may be, with immiseration levels so high, the clinics are worth keeping, says the author, “at least until a revolution transforms such places beyond their present role.”

This discussion, like those regarding rapes and indiscriminate attacks on people during the course of the rebellions, reveals a problem in the author’s argument—that denouncing racial attacks, for instance, is “not some moral liberal-left question” of black-white unity, but a practical one: “the question of how to consciously develop practical subversive communication and activity in which the dispossessed can recognize their own possibilities and desires in the rebellion of one another, to recognize their own common interests.”

The author would like to dismiss ethical considerations in favor of a harder, more “strategic” perspective, but fails to recognize the instrumentalism in such a perspective, fails to see that it isn’t a question of moralism but of overcoming our dehumanization by capital. The “strategic” argument is undermined in any case by the author’s denunciations of such acts, as if the perpetrators were people with revolutionary goals that are undermined by incorrect strategies, rather than madmen with goals of their own. The author’s critique of mindless hooliganism, of acts which “express the success of this society and add to it,” raises precisely the problem of consciousness and of principles, or ethical, revolt—revolt in which the recognition of the humanity of the other, of one’s proletarian fellows, even perhaps of the cops (while not hesitating to use every available means to combat them), is key to regaining our own humanity and liberation from the morass of capitalist social relations. Outside these ethical considerations, the violence seems almost entropic, centrifugal, representing a “catastrophe in meaning,” in Baudrillard’s words, with no vision of a new world and no hope of attaining it.

“The massive rioting dispels the myth the cops have got the inner cities sewn up,” the pamphlet argues. “The rioting boosts the confidence of hundreds of thousands of proletarians depressed after the defeat of the miners’ strike. Among inner city youth there is a massive advance in the consciousness of their own power, a consciousness which IF unlikely to retreat in the near future. Thousands of youths are quickly discovering that a revolutionary attack on the immediate expressions of their boredom, humiliation and alienation—the cops and shops and the architecture of the prison-cities in general—is both the most exciting activity available as well as the most dignified and appropriate, the most immediately available way of making sense of a senseless world.”

But it is obvious that a good share of the documented violence only contributes to the senselessness, the despair, and the fragmentation of life in capitalist civilization—which is why the heady description of rioting, looting and molotov cocktail parties is constantly interspersed with denunciations of asocial (and what might be seen as “microhierarchical”), violence. While it is clear that the fabric of this civilization is unraveling, whether or not radical communities are being forged out of the cataclysm, or what we have in the past called the proletariat is making a revolution, are at best open questions. Unfortunately, the pamphlet does little to describe the lives of “hooligans” and rioters outside of these sporadic (though constant) paroxysms. The author denounces in passing the activities of pacifists at Greenham Common against the cruise missiles (which may be legitimate criticism if one considers the domesticated nature of much of what passes for anti-war protest here in the US). But it may be worth asking if there is any connection to be made between those who may be expressing if only partially a vision of a future, peaceful, convivial society—perhaps among pacifists, or among those who gather at Stonehenge for pagan-influenced

festivals—and those who are expressing the rage which is felt towards this world? The visionaries may be innocuous enough to pose no threat to the present order, but rioting, too, represents only a fragmented opposition if it doesn't open the way for human communities to nurture into being new social relations and a new relationship with nature.

The general thrust of the text does go against a simply strategic instrumentalism and affirms a kind of radical “morality,” a will to create genuine human communities out of the crucible of anti-hierarchic violence. And it does not evade the responsibility of analyzing the violence and distinguishing radical anti-state expressions of solidarity and creative energy from the reactionary, nihilist manifestations of indiscriminate rage. It can't be otherwise if we are to destroy capital in all its forms, and it also makes it possible to recognize the positive character of much of the so-called hooliganism. (Most radicals and leftists have either denounced all hooliganism as fascist or “tribalist,” or have gone to the other extreme of glamorizing it uncritically, as for example the Os Cangeceiros group in France seems to have done.) \*

In raw, visceral language which will at times seem exotic to North Americans for its colorful slang, the text makes many other related observations of great interest in sections on drugs, the sports riots, music (“The rock star is always always always the enemy of the masses of individuals, the enemy of the individual in himself as in others.”), and the spectacularized destruction of commodities (especially cars) in the movies: “capital has learnt well how to profit from the spectacles of our desires. The representation of our fantasies of wrecking the commodities which maintain our isolation and separation is not meant to be practiced in reality, of course; we're all just meant to pay to watch it in passivity on a screen...”). One also gets a glimpse of the mining communities since the strike, how many of the miners have turned to “hooliganism” to continue their war against capital and the state. Even bureaucratic strikes by relatively privileged unionized strata like the printers turn into free-for-alls of radical anti-state and anti-hierarchic violence once the union bosses and the leftist politicians are pushed aside.

This is inspired and inspiring material and should be read by North Americans. Here in the U.S., where there is plenty of evidence of entropic violence (the black humor of commodity tampering which leads to such ridiculous newspaper headlines as “The Threat Against Jell-O” comes to mind), and some evidence of anti-hierarchic violence (like at the Hormel strike), the author declares class struggle to be “pretty dead.” A persuasive argument—in any event conditions here aren't at the ragged edge they've reached in the U.K., where, we are told, “the class struggle is slowly but surely becoming the central issue of people's lives.” Whatever the real meaning and ultimate outcome, this chronology gave me hope that people are still resisting the machine and refusing to be regimented by it.

\* The FE considered reprinting an Os Cangeceiros text on soccer hooligans, but so far have held back on it. We will provide photocopies free to people who send a self-addressed, stamped envelope or who request them with book orders. For an interesting discussion on baseball hooliganism after the World Series in Detroit in 1984, see “The Spectacle Explodes,” in FE #318, Fall 1984.

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