

Interlude: Riot!

Only pent-up rage or potential for creating autonomous urban space?

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In August 2011, thousands of people rioted in several London boroughs and cities and towns across England after a protest in Tottenham following the death of an area youth who was shot to death by police. The resulting looting, arson, and mass deployment of police were called “BlackBerry riots” because people used mobile devices and social media to organize.

Its retelling here is by a participant.

The first weekend of August 2011 had been a double rainbow of a weekend in Hackney borough, London. The local social centre had expanded into the toy store complex next door with a week of furious refurbishment installing a café/gallery space, a bar atrium and even a stage built out of pallets, with working lights and a curtain. A hundred people had attended for a fundraiser for the decades old struggle against the Tories criminalizing squatting.

When Monday rolled round, I stepped out of the iron gates of the Well Furnished squat into a ghost town. I was out after a pint of milk and a pork pie, but found only shuttered shops and a brooding tension. For a moment, I thought it was a bank holiday.

Ear-wiggling on what the scarce huddles of people loitering on the street were saying, I clocked that there had been action in Tottenham, the next borough over, the night before—cars burned, shops cracked, authority defied. A drug-dealer had been shot by police on the Friday night, a peaceful march in protest the next day largely ignored, and now the peoples of London were in uproar.

Curious, I took a bike and rode down to Morning Lane for a scout.

“Tottenham might riot at night, but Hackney does it in the daylight, bruv.”

The high street was a smash-and-grab war zone. Wild-eyed youths were attacking public transport with bricks and iron bars. They kicked in the windows of Specsavers, and ran off down the road with armfuls of designer glasses frames. Kids in hoods were tearing up the shutters on the pawn shop, getting their shit back and liberating a few other peoples’ too.

The petrol station had been gutted and turned into a free-for-all. Police vans and jam-rollers were pulling up, black clad stormtroopers organizing defensive lines across the road, facing off against looters who were distributing Diet Cokes out of the Tesco’s storeroom. Undoubtedly as the youth ran literal riot, the bigger boys were putting petrol in their vans to go clear out some Toshiba warehouses.

The police advanced and the rioters retreated in a motley mass waltz, dragging bins and fences across the road to discourage an all-out charge. Horses were soon galloping through the streets of Hackney, scattering ragged mobs into fallback positions.

We rode our treaders over to Clarence Road to check on the Pogo Café, our local vegan/anarchist semi-legal. It was here that the riot police looked proper scared.

A car was burning outside the Pogo, fire rocketing twenty feet high from the gutted shell. The police lines were holding at various access points into the neighborhood, preventing people from entering, suffering under a rain

of glass bottles and bricks from the tracksuit clad marauders stalking between the tower blocks. I was eye-to-eye with one masked riot officer, stood stiffly behind her Perspex shield, eyes boggling with fear.

Two youths were chatting casually beside the terrified police:

“Yeah, you know what, I never did no crime, but after my cousin got stopped two times outside Morrison’s and searched by police, just ‘cuz he was a brother, then I think, fuck it, let’s stop being suspects and actually perpetrate.”

I’d heard a similar story the night before talking with a guy from the East End. He’d been pissing in a hedge when a jam-sandwich pulled up and two coppers started giving him the once over. They searched him, his tam, found nothing, then made him get in the back of the police car and pull down his trousers. The guy had been obviously distressed.

Two stop and search stories in 24 hours, and I hadn’t even been asking after them. It seemed clear to me that the riots were a response to consistent callous police abuse of powers, directed at black youth in London. Though the mobs of looters had definitely been of mixed race, Clarence Road was predominately black, and getting organized.

Right around the corner from the burning car was a broken child’s rocking horse, forlornly abandoned in the street amidst smashed bottles and shredded copies of the Evening Standard. A sudden flash of inspiration! I grabbed it, and wheeled back to where the car was burning in front of the Pogo Café. A line of media-men, single-lens eyes flashing, were snapping some notorious images, and I had to give them a little show.

Mounting up on the horse, I charged the line of media, satisfyingly getting them to retreat a few meters. I cantered up and down the line, fielding questions.

“I’m here representing the Anarchist Mounted Division!” “What’s the horses’ name?”

“David Cameron.”

The media-men chuckled, and in the midst of raging violence, disorder and chaos, we shared a light moment.

A masked geezer walking past chipped in:

“You don’t represent nothing, mate.”

Another car exploded, and the sheer lunacy of what I was doing struck causing me to abandon my mount and flee back to my bike to escape into the melee.

Scooting around later, riot-tourists taking in the sights, a guy we knew came caterwauling down the road screaming something unintelligible about losing his camera. He was quickly pulled into a garden by concerned locals who tried to calm him down. The Aussie squatter with us had been fingering his digital eagerly, and we sternly cautioned him against whipping it out in public now.

“No worries mate, I’ll keep it in my pocket.”

Ten minutes later, the dense bastard was being pinned against a wall by a large man in a black overcoat, demanding he hand-over the aforementioned device.

We wheeled in, four of us arguing and protesting that he would delete the photos, that we would leave immediately, that he had no right. He gawped round at us.

“You lot are too educated to be here.”

A damning pronouncement, based entirely on the way that we spoke, but it was clear we were out of our depth. More youths in masks began to cluster around us.

“Yo, bruv, get their bikes!”

The Aussie managed to snatch back his camera, and the four of us burst away down Clarence Road as fast as we could peddle, not daring to look back. The others nipped through the carnage of broken bottles and burning bins, but my own wheels gave a sudden hiss and the bike crawled to a stop.

Desperately, I jumped off, pushing the crippled treader out of the borough as quickly as I could, watching my three comrades speed off into the distance, oblivious to my plight.

As I made my snail-paced getaway, I had time to survey the scene. Clarence Road’s gangs and neighbors had established their own autonomous zone, effectively policing themselves, preventing the media and potential narcs from photographing people or entering certain areas. At the same time, people were organizing welfare to protect strangers and kin, thankfully for the guy who had lost his camera. Two examples of self-organization, manifesting out of the collapse of the usual social order that is your average riot, evolving within an atmosphere of reparations being made.

The next day, on page two of The Telegraph, was a full spread photo of a masked man on a rocking horse in front of a burning car, above a headline that read:

“GUERILLA WARFARE ERUPTS IN THE CITY.” If only it had been so.

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