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The Impossible Class

A spectre is haunting Europe: the spectre of an 'impossible' class, a newly emerging social subject whose very existence defies attempts by orthodox class theory to analyse it and attempts by the state to institutionalise it. Although for many years this class has been erupting in continental cities, its sudden eruption in riots last year in England has led to banal conjecture over their possible 'causes', particularly over unemployment levels. Those who thus attribute rioting simply to 'unemployment' thereby evade the historically new class relations facing us, no less so than the reactionaries who blame 'permissive' teachers & parents or lead pollution. And the common purpose of such analysts, each in their own way, is to identify the 'cause' of the rioting in order to eliminate it, so that the problem can be solved through 'real politics' rather than through street confrontations. In particular the left-wing version broadly aims to uplift marginalized sectors into full citizenship of 'the working class', into the full legitimacy of exchanging their labour for wages --that is, of existing as a part of capital.

Our purpose, of course, is just the opposite. We want to articulate the hitherto implicit politics of the uprising itself, to grasp its implications for re-defining 'the working class' and 'revolutionary organisation'. For we are interested less in how the working class suffers unemployment than in how the class becomes recomposed in ways which undermine the discipline of the entire labour market which tries to label us as 'the miserable unemployed' in the first place.

What Working Class?

In the past, orthodox class analysis has been able to trace mass social/political behaviours back to particular relations of production. For example, we could understand the historical succession of trade union organisations and Communist Internationals partly in terms of successive recompositions of the working class--from artisans, to craft workers, to 'the mass worker' expending abstract labour power (e.g. on an assembly line) deprived of any intrinsic meaningful content. Or we could examine the history of that 'other working class' (e.g. 'outcast London'), always antagonistic to the established institutions of its time and remembered mostly for its more violent confrontations with capital and the state. But it as well existed in some fairly well definable relation to the official labour market (as a 'sub-proletariat', 'lumpen-proletariat', or --in liberal rhetoric-- 'the poor', defined juridically in relation to the Poor Laws and more recently to the social security system).

What is new, then, about today's 'impossible' class? In the uprisings we saw antagonistic behaviours based not on any particular relation to the capitalist labour market but rather on its interface with a subterranean unofficial economy which (after all) had been the target of the state's attack on the insurgent districts in the first place. In this illegal labour market, in which earnings often supplement Supplementary Benefit payments from the DHSS, labour acts not as a creature of capital but largely outside it. Because payments for labour ignore statutory deductions, it is less the producer or consumer than the state who gets 'cheated'. Furthermore, unlike official wage-labour, which entails selling one's whole life in order to buy it back with commodities, this unofficial economy offers the state little space in which to mediate it. Indeed, there is hardly a political language available to communicate with the aspirations which develop within it.

Although aspects of that mass illegality are no less exploitative than that of the capitalist economy as a whole, its very existence undermines the discipline of the official labour market. Culturally, it opens up greater space for re-defining 'useful' production directly in relation to consumers by detaching use values from exchange value (e.g. self-publishing punk rock bands, to take a well-known example). And more generally 'black work' although depriving workers of statutory protections and guarantees--nevertheless trains people in illegality, in thinking and behaving beyond the limits deemed legitimate by the state. It reverses the bourgeois relation of future/present by replacing deferred gratification (of National Insurance or pension payments) with immediate gratification in wages or even in fulfilling work. It reverses the bourgeois relation of work/leisure, so that working time becomes determined by non-working time rather than allowing a purely recuperative 'leisure' to be determined by normal working hours.

In the 1981 uprising, then, it was this 'invisible assembly line' of that subterranean economy which broke through the surface, spreading widely on the basis of a shared oppositional culture and state oppression, and then disappearing with virtually no organisational trace --precisely because the insurgents cannot be traced back to any particular common site in the official labour market. To label them 'unemployed' is at best misleading and at worst patronising --as if they were simply passive 'victims' 'provoked' by the police. Although many of them might be officially labelled 'unemployed', our point is that their daily behaviour defies the system's expectations that they should feel apologetic or miserable for being so --for example, by trying to make themselves at least appear more 'employable'. That task seems to be taken up only by the Workers Revolutionary Party, with its youth retraining schemes in South London thereby doing the 'Right To Work' Campaign one better!

By contrast, the insurgents' uprising created a larger space in which their 'unemployability' could be given a more positive enjoyable meaning. The largely selfish, individualist character of everyday mass illegality could be superseded by a more social appropriation of goods--indeed, by a collective re-appropriation of the entire neighbourhood and its resources as a contested territory. The 'no-go areas' not only excluded the police but began to include wider layers of the local and surrounding population, while disorganising the collaborationist 'community leaders'. The buildings burned down included not only capitalist and racist symbols but also derelict property earmarked for state-controlled 'rehabilitation' schemes. In these various ways, the highly selective destruction was a positive affirmation of territory.

Crisis of Policing

For understanding the uprising's internal dynamic, our main point here is that the police came to bear the full burden of containing an 'impossible class' which could be neither integrated nor repressed by more subtle means. Although variations on such an impossible class have been emerging throughout Western Europe --Paris, Lyons, Zurich, Nijmegen-- it remains the riddle as to why mass anti-police violence erupted so widely and suddenly in England. Indeed, as England finally experiences the intensity of rioting already commonplace in other European countries, the British state becomes threatened in a far more profound way than elsewhere because here it is the state itself which is directly under attack.

Until 1981, mass violence against the police had generally arisen from mobilisations around specific demands, usually mediated by political organisations; weapons were limited to whatever was readily at hand (bricks, bottles, sticks, stones). In 1977, for example, when the police tried to protect a National Front march through Lewisham in southeast London, police attacks on the anti-fascist protestors led to a riot in which the police used riot shields for the very first time in Britain. In April 1981, however, those riot shields caught fire as Brixton rioters used 'molotovs' for the very first time as a street weapon in Britain. That riot, and the national wave of rioting which ensued 3 months later, erupted out of a long-standing conflict over the police presence as such, not out of demands on negotiable 'political' issues

Previously, the police had certainly come under attack when they were seen as political enemies of organised campaigns or festivals (such as the 1976 Notting Hill carnival). However, this new choice of anti-police weaponry signified a tactical decision by people to organise themselves specifically against the police, and specifically to undermine the sort of massive police concentrations protected by riot shields since Lewisham. Instead of the police isolating the opposition, a mobile and diffused use of petrol bombs isolated the police and even police stations.

In Britain not only haven't rioters demanded the jobs which the left always assumes they want, but the haven't even demanded an extension of the welfare state, such as the housing or youth centres at issue in continental cities. There the municipal councils could pacify the rebels by conceding (or even just negotiating on) well-articulated demands, even if the councils have feared jeopardizing their authority by doing so. But in the English metropolises, the rioters had no formal demands to negotiate and no representatives to do the negotiating. Rather, the battle was to defeat the police, to free those arrested and to go 'shopping without money'. While in other European countries the police intervention has come in order to break up demonstrations or occupations over specific social demands, in Britain it is policing itself which has shaped the 1981 confrontations. Over and over again last year, the British police have blatantly provoked riots --either through their routine harassment of individuals on the street, or through massive intervention into otherwise 'normal' public gatherings. These provocations have led on to virtual police riots - riots as much by the police as against them. Although some critics have described these police actions as 'military', that

hardly describes a situation where the police themselves go out of control, where they lack the discipline to implement a truly military strategy.

The background to this violent escalation lies in intensified police aggression over the last few years, especially against black youth. In the mid-1970s, sections of the police and media organised a propaganda campaign against the threat of 'street' muggings committed by black people. This provided the justification for massive police terrorism in predominantly black neighbourhoods. Furthermore, through a long series of racist attacks on black people and their homes, the police response was to ignore them, deny any racial motive, and/or harass the victims themselves. After the infamous 'New Cross massacre', it was friends of the dead children who suffered the most from the police investigation, and police attempted (unsuccessfully) to obstruct the March 2nd protest march through central London.

These police responses have emboldened young fascists to continue their attacks, especially on Asian neighbourhoods, with little fear or police reprisals. For example, when on July 3 hundreds of fascist skinheads invaded Southall, the eventual police intervention served to protect them from the Asian youths trying to chase them out of the neighbourhood. The next night there began the concentrated 10-day national wave of anti-police rioting, in large measure taking revenge for years of police harassment.

Unlike the rest of Europe, then, the British crisis has become a crisis of policing as such as more diffuse forms of social control have been disintegrating. Since it's the bourgeois order under threat, it is worth examining how the more sophisticated bourgeoisie has analysed the causes.

'Secondary Control' *The Economist* (18 July 1981), a ruling class journal, has developed the concept of a breakdown in 'secondary control', a control which normally makes low-key policing sufficient and which comes from an 'unofficial network of vigilance: local figures of authority, the publican, the shopkeeper, the teacher, parents, housewives chatting on the doorstep, recognised people "occupying" the street.' These are 'the true policemen of any close community', an 'unofficial authority'.

In the national wave of rioting *The Economist* pointed to the utter collapse of such authority, the collapse of a sense of 'close identity between individuals and their immediate environment'. *The Economist* noted that this breakdown didn't occur in many immigrant areas - e.g. East London, many in the Midlands (predominantly Asian neighbourhoods) --which were conspicuously absent from the rioting. Instead it occurred especially in neighbourhoods with a strong presence of second-generation West Indian youths, even though the festivities attracted many other people as well; there what shocked the bourgeoisie was 'the novel acquiescence of parents and other local adults in the 4, rioting'.

Of course, far less tangible than the decomposition of the traditional proprietary 'community' is the recomposition of a new oppositional 'community'. This organisationally expresses its lack of any stake in the existing order, in ways which are both nihilistic and creative at the same time. How to disorganise that tendency, and reconstitute a proprietary community, is the real bourgeois project underlying the current public debate. Socialist ideologues tend to attribute the entire problem ultimately to unemployment, and so prescribe all sorts of job-creation programmes, but the people directly faced with managing the crisis know that the reasons are rooted more fundamentally in the texture of daily life.

The Economist went as far as to suggest that the riots signify the utter failure of the entire post-War social-democratic project, which it euphemistically labels 'the Anglo-Saxon tradition of town planning'. In other words, it is the project of 'social engineering' which has destroyed people's sense of having a stake in a community. In particular, the journal argued, the riots occurred precisely in those areas where governments have spent enormous sums of money on 'redevelopment projects', whose clearances have replaced traditional neighbourhood housing with a more anonymous high-rise housing and have eliminated small indigenous property-owners. 'Local councils have used central government funds to buy up, often compulsorily, anyone with any financial stake in the community - home owners, shop keepers, landlords, small businesses. . .' Therefore it is this 'communal vandalism' by public councils which is to blame.

In order to reconstitute a popular proprietary stake, the journal argues, the government should rely less on creating yet more artificial jobs than on fostering 'communal reconstruction'. This means supplying material resources and

political legitimacy to indigenous projects which can restore 'secondary control' over deviants. For example, it could institutionalise squatting by re-establishing 'classic squatters rights on public property freed from any controls'.

A Self-Policing Community?

What is crucial for state control, though, is not that the police keep out entirely, but that they be seen to intervene only within a local informal authority. This requires reforming at least the widespread racist image --if not the practice-- of the police. However, there seems little prospect of implementing even cosmetic measures such as hiring more black police to patrol black neighbourhoods, of only because this would require acknowledging that the police are not impartial. According to the official ideology, the police by definition cannot be racially discriminatory; rather, they are necessarily 'colour-blind' because so is the law, which it is their duty to enforce. It is that rigid conception of maintaining 'law and order', somehow above politics, which officially legitimises the police in operating above the law, while receiving little condemnation from politicians.

What, after all, is happening to would-be reformers of the police? The one-man vanguard of the new urban counter-insurgency known as 'community policing' --Captain David Webb of Handsworth, Birmingham-- has been preparing to leave the police force (to become a Liberal Party politician); his decision comes less from any decisive failure to win over a collaborationist black petty-bourgeoisie than from outright reactionary resistance to his reforms from within the police force itself (see the *Observer* colour supplement, 10 Jan.1982). And what is perhaps most remarkable about the Scarman Report is that --having clearly absolved the police force of any institutional racism-- the Report has come under far more attack from the right than from the left, simply for having dared to criticise the police at all. Its main result has been to legitimise the increased armament of the police force. Yet, even if we know that Scarman's proposed reforms would only serve the state anyway, it is nevertheless important for us to understand the real institutional obstacles to their implementation.

The major obstacle to reform has been the growing institutionalised racism of the police in which their changing role (and thus recruitment) has selected for racist individuals and reinforced their racism. Far from employing more enlightened, educated people (as recommended by the Kerner Commission Report after the USA riots), the British police have been moving in the opposite direction. The Home Office has had to request substantial salary increases in order to find new recruits capable of passing the literacy tests!

After mass mobilisations of police against black strikers and antifascist demonstrators in 1976-78, there were many defections by those police who simply wanted to remain a local 'bobby-on-the-beat'. The only such policeman based in the Railton Road, Constable Brown, found himself totally isolated in condemning the 'Swamp 81' police invasion there.

It is the police themselves who have sabotaged the possibility of a self-policed community. For example, when police in Brixton made an arrest which was to spark the July 1981 riot there, a local Rastafarian shopkeeper tried to intervene -- only to find himself beaten up and arrested for 'obstructing' the police, even though he was a member of the police-community liaison committee.

Here is the contradiction for a self-policing strategy: Aspiring local leaders now find themselves hardly capable of mediating, as their longstanding attempts to moderate police behaviour come to nothing, and as their appeals for moderation among rioters go unheeded. But if the police continue to resist demands for 'accountability' to the community, it is not simply because they are malicious or reactionary. It is also because there is increasing confusion as to who is this community. If the rebels have no permanent organisation or delegates, then to whom might the police be accountable?

Police Create 'Criminals'

Until and unless a new proprietary community is reconstituted, the major political parties have little option but to give full support to the police force, who soon received a *carte blanche* offer from the Tory government for any and all of the hardware which the security forces have tried out in Northern Ireland over the last decade. Heeding warnings that heavy technology can isolate or burden them, the police have so far taken up primarily the one technique which has proven the most successful in Northern Ireland: driving Land-Rovers at high speed directly into

crowds so as to undermine their 'psychological ascendancy' over the street and then pick out the boldest rioters with snatch squads.

The political context for this approach was set by representing the police as protecting 'the public' from criminal elements, that is, protecting society from social disorder.

However, it wasn't long before the police themselves undermined such a strategy. In order to regain the 'psychological ascendancy' lost by ordinary foot-patrols during the rioting, they invaded people's homes and drove their armoured vehicles at high speed all over the neighbourhood (in one case killing a disabled man on his way home).

Whatever ambivalence local people had felt about the riots, these 'search & destroy missions' demonstrated that the police presence had nothing to do with protecting them. In fact, these occupations led to yet more local people fighting the police. The so-called 'criminals' have become *potentially everyone* who lives in these rebellious districts. Everyone is potentially guilty of refusing to keep off the streets.

Here, again, lies the threat to the existing society, and perhaps the possibility of a new 'community', as the counter-attacks on the police have been uniting people across barriers of race, sex and age. It has drawn on and emboldened far more people than the small core of mostly male youths who have been suffering police harassment on the streets.

Work Discipline

Given that for many years Labour Party politicians (among others) had already been warning about 'riots in the streets' if unemployment were to exceed ½ million (!), why didn't anything like the 1981 uprising happen sooner?

The Labour government, despite all its budget cuts, expanded the Manpower Services Commission to manage unemployment more effectively. In particular, the Youth Opportunities Programme (YOP) offered to pay school leavers £21 per week if they would accept the 'work discipline' of 40 hours mock-employment. Meanwhile the Labour government tried to keep alive the vain hope that prosperity was just around the corner.

After the May 1979 general election, however, not only did unemployment increase (officially) to 1.5 million, but the new Tory government gave up all pretence of hope for better times. Many school leavers, initially grateful for YOP placements, have ended up leaving the programme before the end of their 6 months because they find the jobs so degrading and meaningless (a preparation for real jobs!).

In reality official unemployment is still far below that of the 1930s Great Depression, but the nature of employment itself has been changing. Only a small, declining section of the working class has been able to sustain its job security and living standards (and even those workers only through increased overtime), while the rest get relegated to menial, insecure and part-time jobs. The restructuring in industry is fast removing the material basis for an identity in paid work, especially the link between effort and reward - reward both in terms of job enjoyment and wages.

Unlike the 1930s, not only are few unemployed people willing to blame themselves, but their passive exclusion from wage-labour is gradually turning into an active rejection of such work, or at least of officially paid work. A community worker in Toxteth (Liverpool) told journalists that, after a few weeks or months eagerly searching for a job, many school leavers become so resentful that they entirely lose interest and base their lives instead on 'hanging out' with friends. It is this threat which has been the target of the schools, the DHSS and Department of Employment-and ultimately the police.

More generally, such behaviours indicate a long-term crisis for the entire Keynesian strategy of containing the class struggle through welfare measures whose recipients now increasingly devise ways of subverting them to create their own independent space. Instead of serving to reinforce the link between reward and effort, the intended targets of these measures have learned how to use them for getting the most reward for the least effort, as had already happened in the 1970s with the social security system. So the Tory government remains reluctant to implement the Labour Party's proposed solutions (e.g. massive public works projects), not simply because of dogmatic

Thatcherism, but also because such social-democratic proposals seem unlikely to succeed in restoring the discipline of the capitalist labour market.

‘Criminal’ Cultures

The limitations inherent in any Keynesian-type solution lie in the deviant behaviours which have been developing over many years, and which have emerged as more publicly obvious and better organised during the rioting. As one Tory politician admitted after the first Brixton riot in April 1981, heavy policing is necessary there, not simply because the crime rate is high, but also because the people living there ‘have no respect for authority’. Brixton stands as one extreme case of people developing their own ways of getting money outside the official economy and their own ways of enjoying themselves outside of the official marketplace. It is the self-organisation of non-work, or of unofficial work, which makes the entire culture extra-legal and labelled ‘criminal’ by the state.

In black neighbourhoods where half the youths are unemployed, so-called ‘deviance’ becomes the norm, symbolised for the police by sound systems and marijuana. It is this affirmative culture which the state has set out to disorganise --be it with social workers, the YOP, ‘community police’ or the Special Patrol Group. Although the police choice of target is obviously racist, it is not merely so, for it is the public, affirmative character of black people’s response which is their target. Their oppositional street culture becomes a public assertion of self-worth, no longer needing a job for one’s identity. And it is this refusal to suffer individually which the police label as ‘criminal’ in practice. As was said in the film *Blacks Britannica*, the police systematically harass black youth during the day because they are supposed to be either at school or at work or looking for jobs.

Although that police practice has along history, the police have come to extend it to all working class youth, so that it is no accident that the ‘multi-racial’ 1981 uprisings revolved around battles for ‘street space’. After the first Brixton riots in April, the local police tried to maintain a low profile, but became afraid that Brixton was becoming a ‘no-go’ area for them; so they soon resumed their usual bullying approach and provoked the later wave of riots there. Peaceful co-existence is impossible because one side or the other must win.

When a Liverpool Labour Councillor declared that conditions are so bad in Toxteth that people would be apathetic if they didn’t riot, she was pointing to a process of public self-affirmation in the rioting itself. And here is the supreme threat posed by the revolt: that its offensive character, its sense of fun in defying the authorities, can speak positively to the misery of most people’s lives and lead them to question the daily sacrifice which they normally make, be they in or out of jobs. This process became clearer with the riots in Wood Green (North London), not a particularly depressed district, where a group of white rioters replied to a journalist’s question about unemployment: "We’ve all got jobs. We want a riot!" Another group in Wood Green said "We were trying to prove that it’s not all the blacks who cause trouble. We’ve got friends who are blacks. It’s everybody who causes trouble."

Marginalisation Strategies

From the state and party system, there have been various strategies for marginalizing the revolt which has so far erupted. After the first Brixton riot in April 1981, the more sophisticated media attributed the event to exceptionally racist police provocation, bad housing and high unemployment --as if the same potential ‘causes’ didn’t already exist in most metropolises in England. Three months later, when there came the national wave of rioting, many right-wing commentators pointed to the ‘multi-racial’ composition of the rioters, as evidence that racial provocation obviously couldn’t be the cause (also that many rioters were too youth to hold jobs). Implicitly this meant that the allegedly exceptional causes of the Brixton riot were now missing as a potentially political legitimisation: these were mere ‘copycat riots’. Therefore, they argued, the rioting was not political but merely "criminal".

Although the left needed a political explanation in order to blame the Thatcher government, they also needed to marginalize the rioting, or to instrumentalise it for a narrow definition of politics as with the patronising slogan ‘Riots or Revolution?’ In the public debate over the ‘causes’, the project is to reform away what are seen as the provocations for the rioting --be it police bullying, unemployment, and so on. These are treated as factors for why youths feel excluded from society, which must let them back in --for example, through a massive project of public works. But now that they have the shared experience of defeating the police, of ‘shopping without money’, and of decisively asserting ‘street space’, there is no going back to capitalist normality, even to the conventional aspirations of British socialism. In the neighbourhoods which revolted, it’s not simply that the rioters are an oppressed minority

excluded from society; as the police well realise, it's also that their daily lives express an active rejection by creating a new social space which threatens not to attack the community but to become a new community.

Thus we can begin to understand the recent riots as less about unemployment as such than about the changing nature of employment. However, the growing refusal of work doesn't simply mean choosing leisure over work, because the new 'deviant' behaviours lie outside the duality of legitimate work/commodified leisure.

The threat to capital lies most fundamentally in breaking the normal connection between work and leisure - that is, leisure as individualised commodity consumption, centrally mediated through the market, and geared to reproducing one's capacity for submitting to wage-labour. Instead, there are developing directly social forms of enjoyment which resist that submission and undermine capitalist reproduction. These behaviours do not serve to valorise capital by gearing labour power to produce surplus value; rather, they serve to undermine the value relation and to realise (or valorise) people, to define needs outside the cash nexus. Italian communists (presently being criminalized) have called this tendency 'self-valorisation', or self-realisation through use values appropriated outside commodity exchange.

The Right Not To Work

Despite these new structural challenges to bourgeois society, the left like to represent the recent upheavals as a passing phenomenon of recession, or even to attribute them to the Tory government's policies, which must be replaced with 'socialist' ones. But in reality the subcultures of resistance challenge the traditional 'productivist' perspective of socialism. Defining a space largely outside the world of official wage-labour, these cultures undermine all the other institutions (family, school) which normally prepare people and sustain them for the labor/-capital relation.

In other words, refusing identification with capitalist production these youth subcultures challenge the reproduction of capitalist relation relations geared to that production. At the most fundamental level, this is the significance of their attacks on the authority of the state, as organiser of capitalist reproduction. And that is why the police won't leave alone those who attempt to implement in practice 'the right not to work'.

This right not to work means refusing the discipline of wage-labour and refusing the paternalism of asking what should be done for the rebels. What is most significant about the riots is simply that the local people did it themselves, with their own rudimentary organisation. That achievement must be the starting point for asking how to build a new, stronger oppositional community of creative activity which can defend itself from being disorganised by the state and political parties. Although it's hardly yet clear how to go about building on the more creative moments of the recent revolts, it is becoming very clear that the demand for 'the right not to work' is not negotiable.

After all, in this case everything is upside-down, as it is the state which is making programmatic demands upon the people by trying to organise the impossible class into the official labour market or at least into official categories of 'unemployment'. Unfortunately for the state, the impossible class won't negotiate. Indeed, perhaps the class can't even be found . . . until the next uprising. For the battle is not over negotiable demands but over the legitimacy of the entire wage-labour system.