
Shooting hoodies

ACCORDING TO KARL MARX the lumpenproletariat was “a recruiting ground for thieves and criminals of all kinds, living on the crumbs of society, people without a definite trade, vagabonds, *gens sans feu et sans aveu*, varying according to the degree of civilization of the nation to which they belong, but never renouncing their lazzaroni character.” The “lazzaroni” were, by the way, the homeless of Naples who lived by begging and thievery. Needless to say, as a proper, if somewhat threadbare, Victorian gentleman, Marx did not empathise with them. He concurred with Adam Smith in describing the poor and destitute as the “dangerous classes”, and thought that although they could be swept up in a proletarian revolutionary tumult, they were just as likely to take the part of “a bribed tool of reactionary intrigue”.

In the *Communist Manifesto*, in *The Class Struggles in France 1848-1850*, and in the preface to *The Peasant War in Germany*, Marx and Engels, did not bother to express their sympathy or understanding for what they clearly regarded as the dregs of society - the social scum - a rotting mass - thrown off by the old society. They lived in a bracing social climate long before the incorporation of the industrial working class into society, long before universal suffrage, in a time of the Poor Law, charitable handouts, and ragged schools.

We on the other hand live in more democratic times where despite the popular hatred of “political correctness” and “human rights”, promoted by our government of millionaires, we think that every person counts and everybody should be given a fair crack of the whip, whatever their personal qualities or background. So we are astonished when the dangerous classes, who we have become accustomed to disregarding as style-disaster chavs, suddenly emerge from the stairwells of the noisome concrete flats and social housing estates,

onto the streets to burn and loot.

In stunned response, and within a matter of three short days, our democratic spirit has suddenly gone up in smoke. It has been replaced with a knock about debate between numbskulls in which the forces of sentimental empathy are ranged against those of no-nonsense repression. On the one hand we have those appalled by the lack of sympathy for the racially oppressed, for the poor and the dispossessed, and on the other hand we have the right-thinking and the ruthless calling for some rioters to be shot, and for the rest to be evicted from social housing, and deprived of their welfare cheques.

Neither side has much to commend them. Empathising with arsonists and thieves is about as dumb as shooting down children and teenagers in the streets. Sentimentalising muggers and burglars is as stupid as depriving them of their only legitimate income - their benefits - or of driving them onto the streets by evicting them from their homes. As Karl Marx and Frederick Engels knew, capitalism has always produced a substantial crop of disorganized and feckless people given to disorder and criminality. However, from around the last quarter of the nineteenth century this mass of people was subsumed into industrial working class communities and was largely disciplined by working class institutions - non-conformist churches, trade unions, Labour, Communist, and co-operative organizations of all kinds, along with a mass of more conservative clubs, and friendly societies.

As this world began to break up during the course of the nineteen sixties, seventies, and eighties, the feckless and disorganised came to be increasingly concentrated within communities in which few people had jobs, and poverty and deprivation became the norm rather than the exception. Technical innovations and changes to the way that commerce and industry are organized led to the progressive disappearance of unskilled and semi-skilled jobs. Traditional working class communities and their institutions withered. Better equipped workers, bought cars, bought houses and flats, and moved away, leaving the elderly, the sick, the least skilled, the lowest paid, and

the unemployable to form communities largely composed of people without work or any realistic prospect of improving their circumstances. 'Council housing', once the site of vibrant working class communities became, after the-right-to-buy campaign of the eighties, a stigmatised form of 'social housing', synonymous with failure and social exclusion.

We now have several million people, more or less permanently dependent upon state benefits of one kind or another. They often live in situations in which local bullies and criminal gangs, numbering hundreds of members, rule the roost in woebegone estates and social housing projects, in which there are few functioning institutions, beyond those run by embattled churches and hard-pressed local councils. The spirit of failure and disorder has leaked into the schools and the lives of demoralised parents, rendering their kids beyond control. In such conditions, ideas like responsibility, self-respect, self-improvement, seem remarkably abstract, or are concretely realised only in the machismo, bravado, and braggadocio, of criminal gangs. But that bejewelled glamour is only for the *crème de la crème*. For most, life actually becomes a round of insecure, temporary unskilled jobs, interspersed with uncompleted low-grade college courses, and periodic bouts of compulsory training imposed by government welfare agencies. This training is usually heavy on ideology and light on the transmission of practical know-how and education. It results in few, if any, skills, and certainly no regular employment.

Consequently, these young people establish emotional and sexual relationships, and have their own children, in an economy predicated upon the receipt of state benefits, temporary employment, periodic cash-in-hand jobs, and the exchange of contraband of various kinds: illegal drugs, smuggled alcohol and cigarettes, and stolen goods. It is a life dominated by shopping from catalogues that offer credit at appalling rates of interest, meeting commitments to loan sharks, and endless juggling to feed electricity meter keys, and topping up phone cards. It is a world in which life is configured

entirely by brusque and inconsiderate service in the cheapest shops and supermarkets, by unreliable bus services, broken lifts, badly maintained flats, streets and walkways, and the ever-present threat of crime and disorder.

Above all, it is a life lived amidst the plenitude, and brash luxury, of a wealthy capitalist society in which all and sundry are committed to an ideal of meritocracy in which everyone is supposed to be able to rise. The underclass, the lumpenproletariat, the socially excluded - call them what you will - do not live on the far side of the moon. They live in the midst of astonishing wealth and prosperity. They see the marks of their separation and exclusion at every twist and turn in the road. What they don't see is the enormous effort which most ordinary working class people expend in being able to pay a mortgage, have a meal in a nice restaurant every other month, a holiday every year or so, a computer and broadband connection for the kids. For the socially excluded, the lives of most people seem peculiarly privileged, small shopkeepers seem rich, and professional people seem indistinguishable from millionaires. The socially excluded have few ways of calibrating the wealth of those around them, or of calculating the effort and hard work involved in maintaining ways of life which to them, *because they are socially excluded*, are more or less incomprehensible.

As a result it is entirely unsurprising that hundreds of thousands of poor young people in our country not only have no 'moral compass', they have no compass at all. In fact they are lost in a society of which they are broadly ignorant; it is a society in which they do not know how to operate to their own best advantage. The ordinary lives of ordinary working class people are mysterious and unobtainable to them - let alone the lives of small businessmen or those of the professional middle class. Consequently, many people at the bottom of our society, those who live in its blurry margins, have only a vague idea of social solidarity, and only the slightest and most tenuous grip upon ideas of social responsibility.

So it seems very strange indeed that the millionaires

who run our country should decide to confront the mass outburst of criminal rioting, largely carried out by underclass youth, with paeans of praise for “social responsibility”. The enormously wealthy liar and turncoat, Nick Clegg, the leader of the Liberal Democrats, has attacked the rioting hoodies as “acquisitive criminals” intent only on robbing and stealing. This is an extremely popular observation in Parliament where all those squatting on the leather benches howl their approval at such pearls of wisdom.

Is it any wonder that our MPs are bemused by the fact that the rioters ripped flat-screen televisions from the walls of betting shops and then dragged them out onto the pavement in order to smash them in the street? Rioters in Ealing hung stolen baby clothes in the branches of trees; they trashed hairdressing salons, and scared the bejesus out of diners in restaurants by smashing windows and overturning tables. They threw packets of cigarettes in the air and distributed free booze to all and sundry. There was as much hatred and nihilistic violence as there was “acquisition”.

Prime Minister, David Cameron, and Deputy Prime Minister, Nick Clegg, evidently think that “social responsibility” is a purely ideological matter - something that can be promoted and instilled by shouting about it. The rank moral decay in evidence during the rioting has driven them into a frenzy of moralising in the desperate hope that a good wacking about the legs with a truncheon, and six months inside, coupled with a sermon on good behaviour and “social responsibility”, is going to set all to rights. Obviously, these people are *almost* as lost as the kids who make up the criminal gangs marauding in the streets. In order to be responsible people need to be engaged with society - they need the education, the training, and the jobs that would give them a realistic prospect of at least joining the rest of the hard-pressed working class.

This cannot be achieved without enormous and carefully targeted investment in housing, education and training. It cannot be achieved without an economy which privileges the goal of social solidarity. This is the

problem confronting the Labour Party, the Tories, and the Liberal Democrats. They have spent years creating winner-takes-all capitalism. They have all spent years being “extremely relaxed” about the rich “becoming *extremely* rich”. They have spent decades ensuring that tax arrangements and “light touch” financial regulation exclusively favoured the filthy rich. They have all spent years weakening trade unions, undermining democracy, and creating an oligarchy of wealth and privilege. In fact they have also, unbeknown to themselves, spent the last thirty years creating the criminal underclass. Now this appalling and shameful truth is out in the open for all to see, the political class is going to have to do more than bang on about “social responsibility”.