

# Off The cuff

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## It's culture innit

**LONG, LONG, LONG AGO**, Thomas Cromwell, the sixteenth century statesman, found himself in the midst of a serious fire at Canterbury Cathedral. He wrote to report the matter to the Privy Council back in London. In the letter he boasts of his role in organizing the rescue of a lot of gold and silver plate, and of immensely costly ecclesiastical vestments. Then, almost as an afterthought, he reports that "a great multitude of poor folk came from the town, they came not to help, but to hinder, and carried off the bedding." Here we glimpse an abiding truth about *class society*. In any kind of society where gorgeous gentlemen are ranged against powerless ragamuffins - in any kind of society divided between haves and have-nots - the poor will seize any opportunity, they will take advantage of any disorder, to hit back at the grandees and their institutions. I am not sure whether JD Sport in 2011 can stand in for Canterbury Cathedral circa 1530, but I'm sure you'll get my drift.

This incident was brought particularly to mind because David Starkey, the constitutional historian, and expert on the consolidation of the English state under the Tudors, has caused some uproar by attributing our recent spate of mass thievery, window smashing, and fire raising, to something called "black culture". He surely knows that sturdy vagabonds and hoards of marauding masterless men have been a problem in England since before the first slave ship, out from Bristol, set sail for the Gulf of Guinea. He surely knows that looting, disorder, and strife are nothing new in *Our Long Island Story*.

So why attribute rioting to "black culture"? It is evidently a racist formulation. Despite his hot-collared denials, Starkey is attributing our country's disorders to "black people", and attributing one's problems to a particular racial group is intrinsically racist - this is what the word

racism means: attributing your problems to a particular racial group. When the matter is put like this, Starkey then takes an interesting line of retreat: "I didn't say 'black people', I said 'black culture'". Just to make himself even clearer he asserts that "whites have become black" because of the manner in which they have imbibed "black culture".

What could he mean? Does he mean the novels of James Baldwin? Does he mean the thoughts of Nelson Mandela or the Presidency of Barack Obama? Does he mean the Somalis, the Nigerians, or the Eritreans in Britain? Does he mean Bob Marley or the Rastafarians? Ah, we're getting close . . . by "black culture" Starkey means Jamaican culture, but not the culture of Pentecostalism, or of murdering homosexuals, or of raising your kids with a Victorian sense of discipline and respect for adults in general, and elders in particular. No, he doesn't mean any of the complex religious and spiritual traditions, culinary habits, social and moral assumptions, or the music, painting, sculpture, and dance, or the agricultural practices, or legal codes and forms, employed by the people of Jamaica. By "black culture" David Starkey means something called "gang culture", not "gang culture" in Jamaica, but "gang culture" promoted by rappers to poor young people in Britain's inner cities and 'dump estates'.

It is this "black culture" which Starkey is arraigning before the tribunal of history for not simply turning poor white youth into blacks but for making many parts of our country *so absolutely foreign*. As a man, born like Starkey, into a working class community in 1945, I kind of know what he means about the country seeming "foreign". This is, I fear, an inevitable fate for old men in a rapidly changing society. Like Starkey when I board the Tube in London - the town I was born and raised in - I often feel like a stranger in a strange land. The dazzling variety of people, races, and languages, the dizzying path of social transformation which capitalism has frog-marched us all along is often as disconcerting as it is exhilarating.

Most peculiar, and this has caught Starkey's attention,

is the really odd way that many young Londoners speak - you hear this particularly on the buses. The accent which I grew up with, often misidentified by 'provincials' as "Cockney", was a broad kind of working class accent spoken from one end of the city to the other - it was the accent that Dick Van Dyke famously attempted in *Mary Poppins*, the accent that Stanley Holloway gave a rather posh polish to. And, it has much to my, and David Starkey's astonishment, been replaced not simply by 'Estuary English', but by a kind of strange new London-Jamaican patois. It is the kind of speech that confuses and outrages grandparents from Barbados, Kerry, and St Kitts, as much as it does David Starkey, from the once great County of Westmorland. (Everything keeps changing David; even the county where you were born is no more!)

Now, it is Starkey's contention that this hybrid London-Jamaican patois, has been used by rap artists (about which both he, and I, know almost nothing) to create the "black culture" of violence and criminality which has turned so many of our young white girls and boys into blacks - "culturally" - so that they have become gangsta acolytes, fatally attracted to looting, mugging, and vandalism on a large scale. Of course, this is really just the way an old 'public intellectual' has chosen to gloss his racist panic in the face of our recent spate of looting, arson, and violent disorder. He might just as easily have arraigned the 'culture' of the white executives at Adidas and Nike - but it's the blacks that he's after.

Starkey's use of "black culture", is not dissimilar from the more common attacks upon "dependency culture". Those who pride themselves with thinking-outside-the-box, like the no-nonsense boys over at *Spiked Online*, have even attempted to give this absurd phrase a makeover by rebranding "dependency culture" as "welfare state" culture: "The welfare state has nurtured a new generation that has absolutely no sense of community spirit or social solidarity. What we have on the streets of London and elsewhere are welfare-state mobs." Perhaps we should re-launch the revolutionary party, maybe we just need the smack of firm

government, alternatively a spell in the army might do the kids some good?

In this way, the deprivation of the rioting youngsters is displaced by the desire of journalists, academics, and think-tank wallahs, to find cultural solutions to what they clearly regard as cultural problems. The real material, and political circumstances of the rioters are shouldered aside by amateur semioticians making observations about manners, dress, speech, musical taste, attitude to authority, personal responsibility, or their take upon *something called* "community". Everywhere, pundits from left to right, have absorbed the single glaring truth that many of our poorer young people have not been successfully socialised. These youngsters do not understand the role of discipline with regard to the acquisition of useful skills, and they do not understand the necessity of deferred gratification, or of personal development, motivation, and struggle, in order to establish a place for themselves in society. They do not understand the importance of autonomy and self-reliance. This much is plain for all to see.

It has, not surprisingly, led to lots of discussions concerning how properly to socialise the rioters - how to re-engage them. Everywhere, the word "culture" is deployed to give the most banal and rickety musings some intellectual backbone. Many commentators seem to think that if they add the word "culture" to their latest trite observation it will immediately swell in size and substance. "Culture" is the yeast that will enable even the most insubstantial dough to rise. Consequently, we need a culture of responsibility, a culture of self-reliance, a culture of solidarity, a culture of respect, a culture of this, that, and the other.

The truth is what we need is quality education and jobs. We need the prospect that sustained effort on the part of poor youngsters can observably result in real improvements in their life chances. That is actually how most of us learned to become law-abiding citizens. We were not simply told the difference between 'right' and 'wrong', we learned that by meeting certain normal expectations regarding personal relations, and self-

development, we could get more of what we wanted for ourselves and those we care about. In fact we were disciplined by the labour market - by what my Secondary Modern School teachers chillingly called, "the world of work". We were discipline by the fear of unemployment, by the fear of failure, and then, by the fear of losing what we had managed to acquire.

This is the heart of the problem. Most of the young rioters have nothing to lose and little to fear. The present crisis, and it is a widening one, is rooted in the fact that very large numbers of young people are gradually coming to the realisation that the prospect of improving their circumstances are growing very thin indeed. The truth is that unless the political class find a way of turning the economy around there is every prospect that the rioting classes are likely to grow rather than diminish. Already, it is plain to see that people who are not strictly speaking poor, and certainly not in any sense, under-class, are in danger of being swept into the abyss of a life without prospects - a life of long-term unemployment. Consequently, we should not allow discussions larded with cultural nostrums to distract us from the most basic demands for good education, quality training, and jobs with a future.