

London's rioters are Thatcher's grandchildren

By Pankaj Mishra, Times Colonist August 13, 2011

I am often asked, when in the U.S. or Europe, whether I feel frightened while travelling through such obviously dangerous places as Afghanistan and Kashmir.

I feel more insecure on the streets of Tower Hamlets, a London borough just south of Tottenham and Hackney, the epicentres of London's riots.

Tower Hamlets, where I often go to work in a friend's apartment, has among the highest rates of poverty, unemployment, overcrowding and crime in Britain. But it is not a ghetto. Segregation is more insidious, and inequality has shrewd disguises, in what is also one of London's most diverse boroughs.

Among the rundown, gang-infested council estates, the bingo halls, betting shops and working-class pubs, there are wine bars, boutique shops, cafes and studio apartments costing more than a half-million dollars.

There are bankers, artists, designers and other well-paid members of the creative class.

With their obvious education, wealth and mobility, these gentrifiers pay an indirect "inequality tax" in the form of routine burglaries, muggings and occasional physical assaults.

Teenage boys and young men in hoodies take evident pleasure in the fear they provoke. White, black and Asian, these menacing youths seem to have been released from any obligations to family or community.

In their indifference to the common good and single-minded pursuit of brand names, these recent looters hold an unflattering mirror to many other depoliticized consumers in Britain.

Britain, of course, is the original home of the free market. As the first country to industrialize, and to have an enormous comparative advantage, it inevitably adopted laissez-faire policies in the mid-19th century. The harsh effect this had on the working classes and the poor was gradually softened by such Victorian institutions as compulsory education, trade unions and social-service societies.

The political and economic catastrophes of the first half of the 20th century buried the idea of the self-regulating

market; and a new national consensus was built around the welfare state after the Second World War.

This all changed starting in the 1980s as successive British governments, Labour as well as Conservative, struggled with high inflation, falling productivity and conflict. The illusion that the nation could be saved only through immersion in a self-stabilizing market economy hardened into a revolutionary ideology, embraced by both major parties, that has shaped today's Britain.

In that sense, if Tony Blair and David Cameron are "sons of Thatcher," as the journalist Simon Jenkins puts it, the rioters of today are the grandchildren.

Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, who famously proclaimed "there is no such thing as society," rapidly privatized state-held assets including railways, steel mills, airlines, coal mines and telecommunications providers.

She decimated many public services that tended to the most disadvantaged and vulnerable people in Britain.

More importantly, Thatcher abandoned the idea of full employment.

She ushered in policies that reduced hiring costs for employers, giving workers the dubious gift of endless mobility and a downward race for wages.

As more contract and part-time work appeared, the old bourgeois ideal of a stable career disappeared. An underclass consisting of the unemployed and unemployable grew and grew, even as the old working class fragmented.

More policing and imprisonment become the easiest way to deal with rising social problems; Britain now has more people in prison per capita than any major Western country apart from the U.S. During and after Thatcher's years in power, state expenditure on law enforcement rose exponentially.

High public spending on welfare benefits has long disguised the reality of stagnant wages for the squeezed middle class in Britain. A high level of consumption enabled by cheap credit, and a salacious entertainment culture, has also helped keep many politically quiescent.

There is more violence ahead. This week's rioting was but a part of a larger social breakdown. Over the years I have felt a sneaking sympathy for those lower-middle-class British Muslims in long pious beards or headscarves who resist assimilation into what they see as a godless culture of greed

and consumption. Their stern notions of morality in public and private life are not mine. But, as the rioters pursue the logic of laissez-faire into pure nihilism, I know I'd feel much safer in a mosque in Kashmir than on the streets of Tower Hamlets.

Pankaj Mishra is the author of *Temptations of the West: How to be Modern in India, Pakistan, Tibet and Beyond*.

© Copyright (c) The Victoria Times Colonist