The poor against the poor

Owen Jones

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The August riots in England may foreshadow far worse: they are the result of almost 30 years of deliberate destruction of a way of life and work that had a place for even the least-educated of young urban men

This August communities across England were terrorised by four days of rioting and looting. Peace soon returned to the streets but the country experienced a furious backlash. The word of the moment was “feral”: “feral youths”, “feral rats”, “the feral underclass”. In the *Daily Mail* on 12 August 2011, Richard Littlejohn described rioters as a “wolfpack of feral inner-city waifs and strays” and called for them to be clubbed “like baby seals”.

In this febrile atmosphere David Cameron’s Conservative-led coalition government suggested that those convicted of rioting and looting could be evicted from their social housing (along with their families, which is clearly collective punishment) and lose their state benefits. This linked unrest and social backgrounds, and set a precedent: if you are poor and you commit a crime, you will be punished twice.

In the prevailing mood of understandable but profound anger and fear, those who publicly suggested a look at the social and economic causes of the violence were shouted down as apologists for violence. Cases were then, and are still being, rushed through magistrates’ courts, which imposed disproportionate sentences. “Mum-of-two, not involved in disorder, jailed for FIVE months for accepting shorts looted from shop,” boasted Greater Manchester Police’s Twitter feed. “There are no excuses!” (Her sentence was soon overturned.) Two young men were sentenced to four years in prison for inciting on Facebook a disturbance at a restaurant that then never happened.

In 2009 the British political establishment was rocked when it was revealed that MPs had systematically pilfered taxpayers’ money, but only three of them ended up in jail. Some had embezzled funds to pay for widescreen televisions, just like those carted out of shops by looters. When Labour MP Gerald Kaufman was found to have claimed £8,750 for a television set, he was asked to pay it back. When Nicolas Robinson, 23, with no previous convictions, stole a £3.50 case of bottled water from a trashed shop, he was sentenced to six months in prison.

One of Cameron’s initial statements seemed to be in the language of the left: “Social problems that have been festering for decades have exploded in our face.” But he wasn’t talking about poverty or unemployment. He blamed a “slow-motion moral collapse”. To his newly receptive audience, he claimed that the root cause was “children without fathers, schools without discipline and reward without effort”. One solution was to construct a welfare state that “does not reward idleness”. The feckless, immoral poor and their chaotic lives were to blame.

Defining chavness

The riots were the zenith of the "chav" caricature (Fran Healy, the singer of rock band Travis called the unrest "the Chav Spring", in a reference to the "Arab Spring"). Chav — possibly from the Romani world for child, *chaavi* — came to national prominence in 2004. It first entered the dictionary to describe "a young working-class person who dresses in casual sports clothing", but soon became more hateful and class-loaded, implying anti-social behaviour, fecklessness, stupidity and binge drinking.

Acronyms were invented, like "council house-associated vermin"; and a website, ChavTowns, dismissed entire working-class communities. Positive representations of working-class people largely vanished from the media and television and "chav" caricatures flourished: the most famous was comedy show *Little Britain*'s Vicky Pollard, a white working-class single mother so stupid that she swaps one of her many children for a Westlife CD.

The "chav" caricature emerged after journalists and politicians claimed that we were now all middle-class, with one major exception. As the aspirational working class had become bourgeoisified, all that remained of the old working class had disintegrated into a feckless rump. Simon Heffer wrote: "Something called the respectable working class has almost died out. What sociologists used to call the working class does not now usually work at all, but is sustained by the welfare state". When I interviewed him, he described it as the same "feral underclass" that has been held responsible for the riots. Heffer would not bandy the word "chav" about but he conjured up the caricature.

It was a theory broadly embraced by the British elite. For the right, the exception to middle-class Britain was the underclass. The theories of US political pseudo-scientist Charles Murray were the key inspiration: the underclass was the result of many children being born to single mothers (with fatherless families being held responsible for the riots, this theory is back). When Tony Blair declared "we're all middle-class now", New Labour's exception were the "socially excluded". As Matthew Taylor, Blair's former head of strategy, put it to me, the concept suggested "that there is a process, that my own behaviour is replicated in my social status." Those outside middle-class Britain had only themselves to blame.

Thatcher's legacy

This is a triumph for Margaret Thatcher's Conservative governments of the 1980s, which unleashed a free-market revolution that transformed Britain. Thatcher once claimed that "there really is no primary poverty left in this country"; if there was poverty it was because people "don't know how to budget, don't know how to spend their earnings, now you are left with the really hard fundamental character — personality defect". Thatcherism established a political consensus that all should aspire to be middle-class; those left behind were castigated. The old pillars of working-class Britain came under attack: industries that sustained communities, such as mines, docks and factories; institutions, such as trade unions and council housing; and values, such as solidarity, were junked in favour of rugged individualism. Working-class pride and identity were battered.

The impact on broader social attitudes has been profound. In a recent study for BritainThinks, 71% described themselves as middle-class. “For the first time, I saw the working-class tag used as a slur, equated with other class-based insults such as chav,” reported pollster Deborah Mattinson. That included many who by most objective measures would be working-class, but did not wish to be associated with a demonised category, instead opting for the more “classy” middle-class. Among the small minority (just 24%) who self-identified as working-class, there was a sense that there was little to be proud of: it just meant being poor. Being working-class was something from which most wanted to distance themselves or escape.

This “middle-class” versus “chav” false dichotomy has airbrushed away the real working class. That’s not to say the working class hasn’t changed. Over seven million worked in manufacturing in 1979; today it is just over 2.5 million. People are less likely to work in docks, mines and factories; today it is call centres, supermarkets and offices. Today’s work is cleaner, less backbreaking and excludes women less; but it is more insecure, often less well regarded, and with relatively lower pay. A supermarket cannot serve as the heart of a community as a factory or mine once did.

The collapse of industry had devastating consequences for Britain’s social fabric. With a lack of secure jobs to fill the vacuum, many working-class communities never recovered. The numbers out of work — on unemployment or incapacity benefits — remained high in ex-industrial areas. Young working-class men could once leave school at 16 and take up a decently paid industrial apprenticeship. It was the gateway to a well-regarded job, a source of self-worth, and it helped structure lives. This is what Thatcherism’s deindustrialisation helped to kill. Youth unemployment today stands at a record level: more than one in five 18-to-24-year-olds is out of work. Even many of those lucky enough to find work suffer from profound economic insecurity because of Britain’s casualised labour market: there are now 1.26 million people who, unable to find a full-time job, have had to settle for part-time work. Another 1.5 million temporary workers can be hired and fired at an hour’s notice, be paid less for doing the same job, and lack rights such as paid holidays and redundancy pay.

Even before the riots, young working-class people risked being described as “feral”. We know that anti-social behaviour and crime are more likely to happen in poorer communities. But with so many lacking a secure future, it is no wonder that a minority will respond negatively. A study for the Prince’s Trust in 2009 found that the young unemployed were more likely to suffer from anxiety, depression and suicidal thoughts.

Most of those who appeared in court are under 24; the vast majority are out of work; most are men. In Tottenham, where the first riots exploded, there are 34 unemployed for every job vacancy. The rioters represent a few of Britain’s young poor. Critics respond that most poor and unemployed would never dream of rioting and looting, and they are right. But it only takes a small minority who feel that they have no future to bring chaos.

The August riots were no noble uprising of the poor and dispossessed: those living in the poorest working-class communities suffered most. The poor against the poor? A useful division, and not a new one. Tabloid exposés of immigrants supposedly living in luxury have long appealed to festering resentment, particularly among the five

million people on social housing waiting lists. It is easy to infuriate those in low-paid, unrewarding jobs with claims that there are benefit cheats living without working — even in a country in which welfare fraud costs £1.2bn, against £70bn for tax evasion. But these riots will further fracture working-class communities, distracting attention from the soaring pay packets of the wealthy.

The immediate aftermath is far from promising. Fear and hatred of a “feral underclass” has gone up by several notches. Any sympathy for the poor and unemployed is being undermined at a time of economic crisis. The social problems risk not only going unaddressed, with the impending cuts: they will worsen. The violence was terrifying. But we may have just witnessed a dark foreshadow of much worse to come.