

Why so few riots in C21st Britain?

Black man gotta lotta problems

But they don't mind throwing brick

White people go to school

Where they teach you how to be thick...

In 1977 I struggled to clearly make out Joe Strummer's roughly-barked lyrics to the Clash's *White Riot*. But once deciphered the lyrics were not difficult to understand. To a teenager the Notting Hill Carnival riots of 1976 had seemed astounding, and in subsequent years riots always seemed to be breaking out. St Paul's, Toxteth, Handsworth, Brixton, Broadwater Farm – virtually every major English city had at least one riot and many had several in the 1980s. State buildings were attacked and set on fire; police fought battles lasting several days and nights with local people. If riots did not happen in your neighbourhood then you got to see them on T.V. I remember reading an interview with Duran Duran in the *New Musical Express* where one of the band members looked out of the window, yawned and (as if commenting on the weather) said: "Oh look...it's rioting." At the end of the 1980s we had the Poll Tax riots and the Strangeways Prison riot. The causes were obvious to all, even the politicians: a racist and oppressive State personified by the police who had legitimised means of harassment (e.g. through the hated 'SUS' laws); poverty, unemployment and social deprivation; profoundly unfair public policies; and in the case of Strangeways what Lord Woolf called "intolerable" prison conditions. Basically, the poor and disadvantaged were hitting out after years of being treated appallingly. Since then, apart from the 1995 Brixton riot (triggered by the death of Wayne Douglas whilst in police custody) and the 2001 'race riots' in Oldham and Bradford there have been virtually no riots in Britain, and civil disturbances that have occurred have tended to be characterised by violence between different groups of people (e.g. the Shrewsbury Chip Shop riot) rather than protest, destruction and violence against the symbols and representatives of the State.

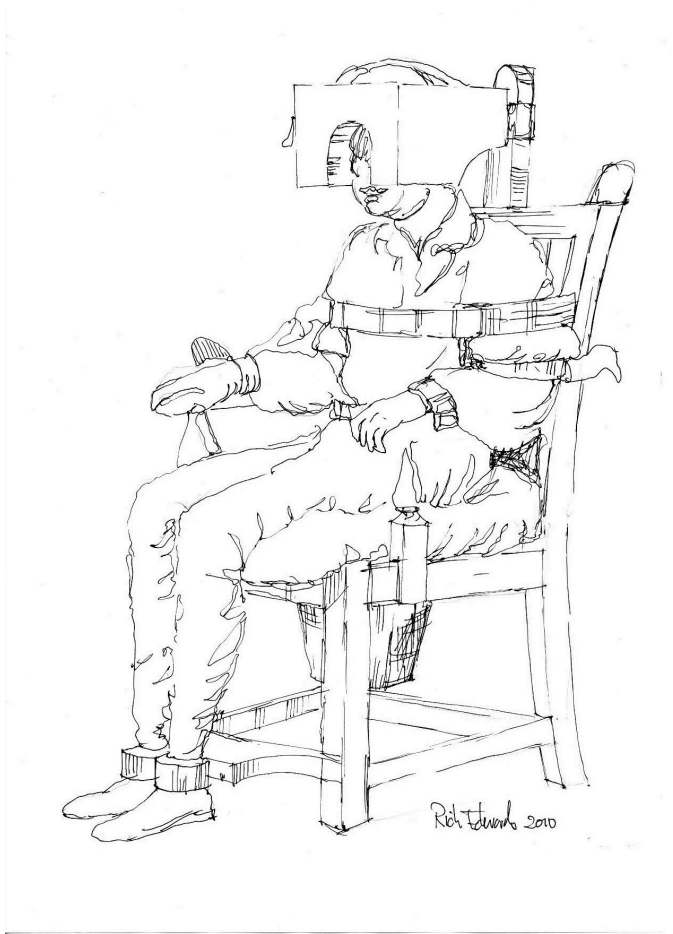


Brixton Riot, 1981

So why have there been relatively few riots in 21st century Britain? There are likely to be many interacting factors but I will concentrate on three that relate closely to my work as a clinical psychologist who has an interest in the social causes of distress and in the history of psychiatry.

Tranquillizing protest

Histories of psychiatry reveal recurrent themes e.g. harm inflicted in the name of help; an absence of listening to the people supposedly being helped and clampdowns on protest; denigrating and disempowering labelling of people categorised as deviant; and, perhaps above all, tranquillization and obsessive monitoring and surveillance of a stigmatized group in society.



The Tranquillizer, designed by Benjamin Rush

Rush's original *Tranquillizer*, where every movement of the patient was restricted, reveals the true purpose of the psychiatric drugs that initially shared its name and subsequently have been given to millions of people. David Healy, British psychiatrist, has shown that right from their discovery in the 1950s 'Major Tranquillizers' were known to have little effect on psychotic symptoms (e.g. voice hearing, delusions) but were known to produce indifference - a *who cares?* feeling. Other types of psychiatric drugs (e.g. 'Mood Stabilizers' and 'Anti-depressants') have similar effects. It can be argued that for some individuals this effect may be 'therapeutic' – people are less concerned by ideas, feelings or experiences that previously troubled or haunted them. Certainly these medications were, and still are, seen as enormously helpful on understaffed hospital wards where controlling people's behaviour is the major challenge. There is a long history of people who protest in psychiatric hospitals being sedated with medication until they conform or are 'zombified' – what patients for decades have described as 'the chemical cosh'. Until relatively recently such powerful mind and mood altering medications only tended to be used in in-patient settings, but

their use in prisons, schools and out-patient settings with people who have never been admitted to a psychiatric unit has massively increased in the last 20 years.

Pharmaceutical companies would like us to believe that needy and previously undiagnosed people are now benefiting from having their mental illnesses treated without requiring hospitalisation. For years we mocked the Russians for so brazenly medicating dissidents...yet are we so different? Doesn't it suit the elite to have the bulk of us working ourselves to exhaustion whilst people not willing or able to do this are kept quiet and made indifferent to their toxic social and environmental conditions through tranquillization?

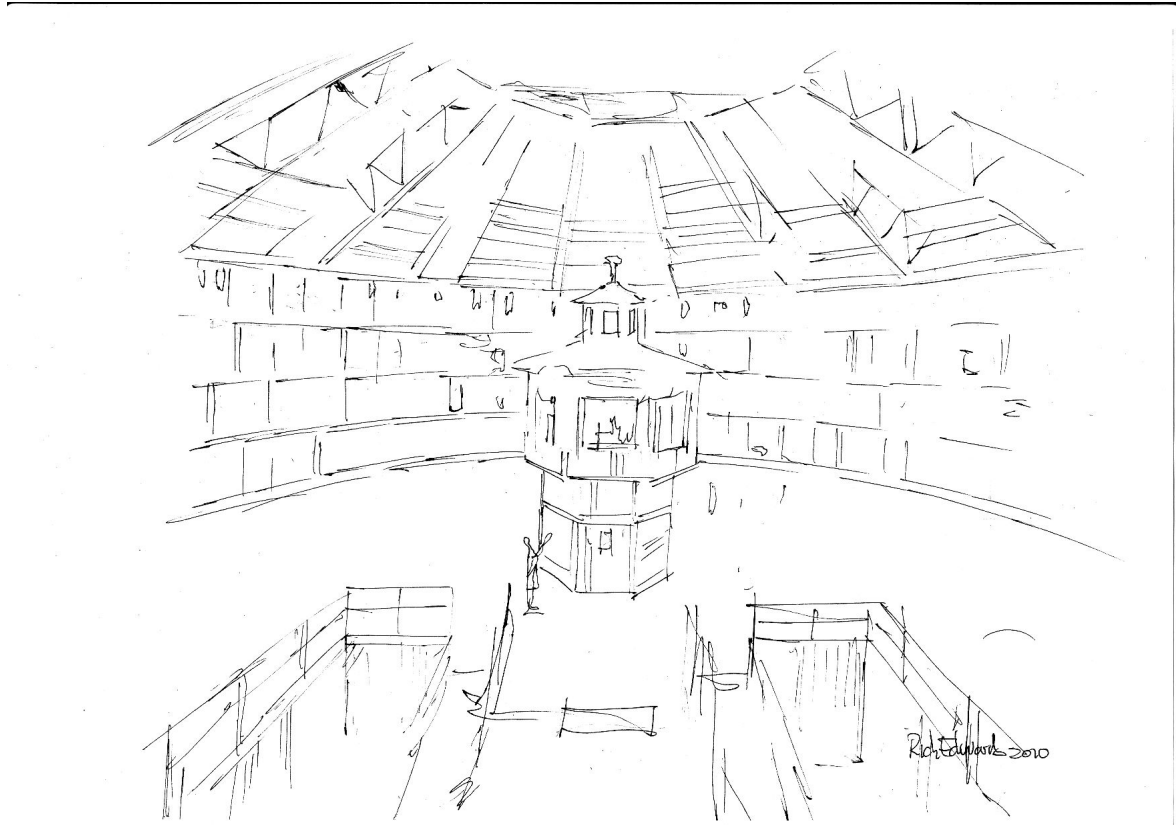


The Roundhouse, Nantyglo

The rich and powerful tend to be at best disinterested and at worst prejudiced and oppressive to the poor. Such an attitude, when accompanied by spirit-crushing policies, will induce learned helplessness (a.k.a. depression) in some, anger and protest in others. What to do about the protesters has always been the question that concerns the elite. In my grandmother's town of Nantyglo, a Welsh village, the owners of the iron works in the 19th century built their own private mini-castle, a bolt-hole to escape to as at some point they expected the local population to protest, riot and lynch them as a result of being treated so unfairly and oppressively. In the technological 21st century private castles are not needed: drugs that induce detachment, indifference and a sense of *who cares?* perhaps do the job just as well.

Surveillance and the confinement of all

Jeremy Bentham designed the *panopticon*, an institution where a small group of people could keep continual watch over all the inmates.



Bentham's Panopticon

In the early 1990s members of the Anarcho-CinderPunk movement and the Human Liberation Front pointed out how engaged members of the public increasingly are, with the spread of shopping malls with their own security and of gated communities, both of which colonise public space, and of the inescapable inroad of security cameras into all parts of 'the commons'.

In the 21st century, whilst the rich and powerful choose from a dizzying array of psychological therapies, the poor and disadvantaged are not so lucky. Psychiatric in-patients have nurses keeping watch on them from centralised nurses' stations, or if 'in the community' have home visits from Assertive Outreach teams aimed at checking 'how they are doing'. Survey after survey of both the patient and professional

experience reveal encounters that centre around risk assessments, note-keeping and the compulsory sharing of information between different state bodies: in short, overt and covert surveillance and monitoring. The similarities between prisons and psychiatric institutions were noted by Goffman in the 1960s; institutional practices that used to envelop the lives of a small number of people now seem to engulf the majority.



Strangeways prisoners, 1990

A few years ago I heard a radio interview with a man imprisoned for 20 years for a crime he did not commit. The interviewer, clearly moved by the injustice inherent in the man's story, tried to end the interview on a positive note and asked him how much he was enjoying his freedom. The ex-prisoner's reply went something like this: "When I go into a shop I notice I am on CCTV. A security guard stands at the exit and monitors me. When I open a bank account the clerk gets my details on her computer in seconds. My emails are undoubtedly screened, my phone calls give a trace of my movements. Walking down the street I am constantly filmed. Some streets, or houses, are gated – presumably I can not enter them without some kind of security clearance. Pubs have uniformed security on the door. You call it freedom, but to me it doesn't seem very different to the open prisons I lived in during the majority of my sentence."

A surveillance culture has become passively accepted in society. When a few people tried to challenge the use of video by police in filming peaceful protesters during the G20 demonstrations the police revealed they are not averse to using violence to quell such protest (at least until surveillance in the form of video footage by mobile phones of their actions was turned on them – what Foucault called the reversal of ‘the gaze’).

All the powers in the hands

Of people rich enough to buy it

While we walk the street

Too chicken to even try it

Everybody's doing, Just what they're told to

Nobody wants, To go to jail!

Public Policy

<i>“Disobedience, in the eyes of anyone who has read history, is man’s original</i> Oscar Wilde
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The succession of riots in the period 1976-1990 led to significant changes in public policy e.g. substantial public and private investment in inner city areas; abolition of the SUS laws and greater protection of people’s rights in the Police and Criminal Evidence Act; scrapping of the Poll Tax; prison reform and significant investment in the fabric of prison buildings. Wilde might be right. Whilst people who wish to live in a more equal, liberal, democratic Britain might describe such changes as meagre (and even Gordon Brown describes the number of children currently living in poverty in Britain as a “scar that demeans our nation”) there may have been public policy changes following these riots that subsequently defused the type of protest that takes the form of a riot.

But conditions that sparked the riots of that period appear to be returning: presidential style-government which only pretends to listen to people and ignores legitimate protest (e.g. two million people demonstrating against going to war); a deep recession at a time when (even according to the government’s own figures) millions live in poverty; a widening gap between rich and poor (Richard Wilkinson’s research shows the greater the inequality of income in a country the higher the levels of violence); overcrowded prisons described as “officially full” and “appalling” by the Prison Reform Trust; anti-

terror legislation that allows more stop-and-search of (predominantly Black and Asian) people and long-term detention without charge; a rise in stereotyping, oppression and violence towards minority groups and a growth in support for fascist, racist parties (the National Front/BNP). Maybe people will continue to act out their anger by self-harming or conducting frustrated individual acts of aggression on their neighbours. But maybe not. Joe Strummer wanted *a riot of my own*: the current generation, despite being more tranquillized and under surveillance than any other in history, might get theirs.

About the author

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A version of this article was published in Asylum Magazine in 2010.