

# PROTEST, DISORDERS, DESTRUCTION AND RIOTS ACROSS GREAT BRITAIN

Photographs courtesy of Sonia Bassey and the Liverpool Law Centre.

## The proud and decent people of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland had a lot on their minds in the summer of 1981.

To begin with, the 1970s hadn't been easy. Unemployment, the coal miners' strikes, and a three-day working week imposed by Edward Heath's Conservative government didn't help people's pockets or spirits. Margaret Thatcher was elected in 1979 – spurred to the front in part by her 1978 speech vilifying immigrants (and Black and Asian British citizens). Saying on national television that British people (meaning whites) were really rather afraid of being swamped by people of a different culture did the trick. This was the numbers game in full effect (a game that worked again during Brexit). Preoccupied with immigrants, especially West Indian immigrants, few people in government or media paid any attention to the Liverpool-born Black citizens, or our primarily African origins. Though that wasn't for want of being told by community leaders and Black organisations in Liverpool.

Black British people had more on their minds than most. In London, Birmingham and Manchester, the Black second generation – born and raised in Britain with West Indian parents – had fully emerged by now, to join the long established Black British population of Liverpool. Black people as a whole suffered more

unemployment, more bad housing, and more deficient education and more police harassment than white Brits. The second generation, building on their parent's protests rebelled in a variety of ways. Police racist use of the 'SUS' and stop and search laws, especially against young Black men, raised the pressure cooker to a boiling point. And the pot boiled over in St Pauls Bristol in 1980.

As 1981 began, some people took solace in the joyful anticipation of a Royal Wedding, Prince Charles and soon to become Princess Dianna, scheduled for July 29th. But Black people's joy came crashing down with the killing of Black teenage partygoers in New Cross, London on January 13th. A feeble and pathetic response from government and police – "Thirteen dead and nothing said" – led to one of the biggest protest movements of the period. The Black people's Day of Action in the month of March – organized by Darcus Howe and the Race Today Collective – saw several thousand Black (and other) people march from New Cross to the Houses of Parliament. No one realized that the protests were just beginning and that this would become a year never to be forgotten. Or, as Linton Kwesi Johnson later sang:

<i>It is noh mistri</i>	<i>(It is no mystery</i>
<i>Wi mekkin histri</i>	<i>We're making history</i>
<i>It is noh mistri</i>	<i>It is no mystery</i>
<i>Wi winnin victri</i>	<i>We're winning victory)</i>

## BRIXTON, SOUTH LONDON

*LKJ: it was in April, nineteen.....eighty one  
Down 'n on dee ghetto of Brix-ton  
Dat deh Babylon dem cause such a fric-tion  
Dat it bring about a GREAT insohreck-shun  
And it spread all over deh nay-shun  
It was TRULY an historical occasion*

The main protests in Brixton began on 10th April when a young Black man, Michael Bailey, who was bleeding badly, was chased around Railton road by several police officers. Several hundred young Blacks (and some whites) – almost all men – attacked the police. Over the course of the several days, several hundred police and civilians were injured, multiple vehicles and buildings damaged or destroyed. Estimates put those involved at several thousand or more, and almost one hundred people were arrested. By the end of the disturbances, several thousand police officers had been brought in and the streets eventually quieted down. The disturbances occurred after long-term antagonism between the police and the multi-racial community of Brixton had been exacerbated in previous months. This was the result of so-called Operation Swamp 81, a special police operation to combat what the police, politicians and media called 'mugging'. The word 'mugging' was an emotive label that created images of violent black men assaulting and robbing elderly white women. Government and media blamed the Black second generation, asserting that they were caught between two cultures, educational failures, jobless, lawless, and criminally inclined – especially black men.

## LIVERPOOL 8, LIVERPOOL

Several months later, the weekend of July 3rd, protests, street disturbances and riots broke out in Liverpool, following the arrest of local Black resident Leroy Cooper, for an alleged motor-cycle crime. Precipitated by constant police surveillance and harassment of young Black men, abusive use of SUS and stop and search laws, in an area of Black residential concentration and a context of high unemployment and poor housing. It looked like second generation immigrant problems once again, and that's what most people called it. But looks were deceiving, and first impressions wrong. The vast majority of black people in Liverpool 8 were long-standing Black citizens, and many had families going back decades, generations and even centuries.

The media also called it Toxteth, a name that no one in the local area used at that time.



## MOSS SIDE, MANCHESTER

On Wednesday 8 July, several days after Liverpool 8 had erupted, a crowd estimated at more than 1,000 youths (mainly male, mainly Black) protested at the police station in Moss Side, Manchester. Windows were broken and police vehicles set on fire. Police with riot shields and other protective equipment were called out to quell the disturbance. Chief Constable of Manchester, James Anderton, kept his police on low profile, apparently at the request of community leaders, over the next few days. Protests continued the following two nights – as did some burning and looting in the main road, Princess Road and adjacent roads and neighbourhoods. Several hundred police officers were brought in for more support. More than 150 people were arrested though there were no police injuries reported. A memorable piece of graffiti at the time – "Help the police, beat yourself up" - summed up the mood of many.

## HANDSWORTH, BIRMINGHAM

And just a few days later, the weekend following the Liverpool 8 disturbances, protests erupted in Handsworth, Birmingham. Again, with mainly so-called second generation West Indian young men (and some whites in the forefront). These events were apparently triggered by criticisms of a local police superintendent and a proposed National Front march. Over several days, more than one hundred people were arrested, tens of police officers injured and vehicles and buildings once again damaged or destroyed. Several people remembered what by then seemed to be the prophetic lyrics of local reggae group Steel Pulse, who sang in 1978:

### Steel Pulse – Handsworth Revolution, 1978:

*Fighting back*

*We once (were) beggars are now choosers*

*No, no intention to be losers*

*Striving forward with ambition*

*And if it takes ammunition*

*We rebel in Handsworth revolution*

*We know what you got to offer*

*We know what's going on*

*Don't want no favours*

*'Cause there is still hunger*

*Innocent convicted*

*Poor wage, hard labour*

*Only Babylon prospers*

*And humble suffer*

Street protests also occurred in Chapeltown, Leeds in July, with similar sets of issues. And in several smaller towns across the nation. But I think you get the idea.

## SHARED IN COMMON?

Each of the protests had distinctive features and common elements, certainly on the surface; and there were several common underlying characteristics, interacting with one another in various different combinations. They were all triggered by concrete incidents or events involving the police – the spark that lit the flame! And they all happened after increased tension and antagonism for months and longer between police and local Black communities. They happened in multi-racial neighbourhoods with a higher-than-average number of Black residents compared to other parts of the cities (though

Black people were not a majority in any city or neighbourhood). All neighbourhoods revealed high unemployment and widespread deprivation in terms of housing and facilities; exclusion from formal politics and relative powerlessness; and a deficient education system that pushed Black children and teens into units and schools for the educationally sub-normal – typically, against the wishes of Black parents. This endemic racial disadvantage was exacerbated by direct racial discrimination, well documented in all these cities.

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There were common elements to the explanations too. Most police, politicians and media emphasized racial issues – especially West Indian immigration, cultural adaptations, misunderstanding and misinformation. But they mainly blamed Black people, especially young Black men. Most Black people – in community organisations, schools, publications and in some media outlets – also emphasized racial issues. But they mainly blamed direct and institutional racism, by local government, employers, schools and especially the police. Both sides made some reference to apparent similarities in the United States.

It was obvious for all to see, although almost no commentators mentioned it – that the police were overwhelmingly men; men were at the front of protests too. It's not that there were no women on either side, but the male predominance and the masculine tactics of both sides (asserting authority, aggression, confrontation) were clearly apparent. So too, was the male predominance in government, police, and media responses. In all these arenas – government, policing, journalism, and television – men ruled. Margaret Thatcher of course, being the exception to the rule. But that's another story.

It was mainly women commentators that highlighted the gendered nature of these protests or paid any significant attention to Black women as victims; or as educators, community leaders or social activists. There was no detailed mention of the distinctive problems facing women and little or nothing on what Black women were doing to challenge problems, or as leaders in black organisations and black women's organisations. Black men were the majority in the

visible protests, but Black women were probably the majority in community organisations. One just had to look at Brixton Black Women's Group, Liverpool Black Sisters, Abasindi Women's Group.

Similarly, the role of white people in the protests – especially white men – though mentioned was neglected, downplayed, or simply ignored.

Because most attention was on the common elements across the cities, just about everyone outside Liverpool – and a lot of people inside Liverpool – missed the distinct differences in Liverpool. Differences in the Black population, our forced concentration in Liverpool 8, the dire economic conditions that we faced, and our unique cultural memory of slavery and the slave trade in Liverpool itself. There was also the myth of racial harmony in the city, a myth preached by city politicians and civic leaders. A myth that highlighted warm social interactions and a strong shared Scouse identity, but that failed

almost entirely to address the clear and lengthy evidence of institutional racism in jobs, housing and education – and in policing. These were well known but unspoken secrets in the city.



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My sincere thanks for their advice, suggestions and comments to **Jimi Jagne, Madeline Heneghan, Gloria Hyatt, Terry Small and Leona Vaughn.**



## Professor Stephen Small

**Department of African American and African Diaspora Studies,  
University of California, Berkeley**

Stephen Small is a Professor in the Department of African American Studies and African Diaspora Studies where he has taught since 1995; and he is Director of the Institute for the Study of Societal Issues (since June 2020). He earned his Ph.D. in Sociology at the University of California, Berkeley (1989); his MS.C in Social Sciences from the University of Bristol (1983); and his B.A. (honours) in Economics and Sociology from the University of Kent at Canterbury (1979). He researches the history and sociology of Black people across the diaspora, including the United States, Western Europe, the Caribbean and Brazil. He has held visiting positions at universities in Great Britain, the Netherlands, France, Spain, Brazil, Japan and Zimbabwe.

His most recent book is *20 Questions and Answers on Black Europe* published in January 2018. His next book is tentatively entitled: *Inside the Shadows of the Big House: 21st Century Antebellum Slave Cabins and Heritage Tourism in Louisiana*, to be published in 2022. He is currently writing a book on

Slavery, Imperialism and their legacies in Black Liverpool. As part of that project, he's investigating the voices and visions of Black men and women from across Africa and the diaspora in anti-colonial movement for self-determination. He is co-editor of *Black Europe and the African Diaspora*, 2009.

Stephen is a child of the Windrush Generation, his dad having arrived in England from Jamaica in 1946. He was born and raised in Liverpool – the city with the nation's longest-standing Black population. He was a member of several Black and multi-racial organisations across England, and in the 1990s was research assistant to the Right Honourable Bernie Grant, MP, researching and lecturing on reparations and museums. He was a member of the Consortium of Black Organisations and the Federation of Black Liverpool Organisations, both in Liverpool, in the early 1990s. And he was a Guest Curator at the Atlantic Slave Trade Gallery at the Merseyside Maritime Museum (which became the International Slavery Museum in 2007).