SMALLTALK WITH STEPHEN SMALL

WRITING ON THE WALL

WHAT HAPPENED DURING THE LIVERPOOL 8 PROTESTS?

Photographs courtesy of Sonia Bassey and the Liverpool Law Centre.

We know that on Friday July 3, 1981, the police arrested Leroy Cooper, a well-known and popular Black resident of Liverpool 8.

We know that he was man-handled. We know that several street battles began, and stones and bricks were thrown at police officers. We know that the police flooded Liverpool 8 the next day and that night the battles continued; we know they got worse on Sunday night. We know that hundreds of police officers from across the region were brought into Liverpool 8. We know that in the early morning of Monday July 6, for the first time in mainland Britain, Chief Constable of Merseyside, Kenneth Oxford, authorised the use of CS gas to disperse the crowds. We know that several local Black residents were injured by CS cannisters, and that at least one later got significant financial compensation from the police. We know that disturbances continued intermittently in the following weeks and erupted again later that month, when on 26th July, David Moore, a local white disabled man, was killed after being hit by a police Land Rover. Two police officers were later found not guilty of manslaughter.

We know that the majority of protesters – and rioters – did not act randomly or chaotically – they selected key targets for damage or destruction and left others completely untouched. They targeted the police.

They targeted the highly despised Racquets Club – a bastion of white elite male privilege. It was burnt to the ground. So was the Rialto building, the Nat West Bank and many shops and buildings on Lodge Lane. These places symbolised the racism, hostility, and violence of Liverpool, past and present. At that time, we had been taught little or nothing in Liverpool schools about slavery and the slave trade. We had been taught nothing positive about Africa. We have been taught nothing about the long history of racism in Liverpool itself. But we still knew things, and we knew the stories in schools were biased. We knew because people like Joey Joel Senior, Eric Lynch, Bobby Nyahoe and Sandra Antigua had told us; so had Chief Angus Chukwuemeka, Jimmy Rogers, Herbie Higgins and Albert Fontenoy. The Adult Education Centre had become the Charles Wootten Centre a few years earlier, and Chief Ben Agwuna told us even more. Wally Brown had just started the **Elimu Wa Nane** library at the Methodist (these words were Swahili and meant Education for Eight, in recognition of Liverpool 8). They shared books and writings with us and not just about the West Indies, but about the glory of African nations prior to European colonisation and just how prosperous Liverpool had become on the backs of Blacks. We got even more fascinating information reading Angela Davis, Stokely Carmichael and Malcolm X. And we got concrete information from Reggae music. All helping us decolonise our minds.

Despite our miseducation in Liverpool schools, we already knew intuitively there was something wrong about Liverpool's obsession with William Roscoe and the legal abolition of slavery. That same year, 1981, the first real book on race and racism in Liverpool was published by Ian Law and June Henfrey. In the following decade, far more information became readily available, with books and articles by Peter Fryer, Ray Costello, Mark Christian and William Ackah. The Gifford Report – Loosen the Shackles – came out in 1989. Writings that gave far more accurate, far more comprehensive, and far more inclusive details of British slavery and Liverpool's role in it, and their legacies. Things we had guessed, but now we had the facts. And we protested.

Liverpool schools had preached abolitionism forever – a multifaceted myth of partiality, distortion and silence. And the few books at that time on Black people in England mostly focused on West Indian immigrants in London, Birmingham and Manchester. West Indians had gone to those cities in the 1940s and 1950s because there was work, but there was no work in Liverpool. These books said little or nothing about the long-established West African and mixed population in Liverpool. Nothing about the working-class African men on Elder Dempster ships, paid less and forced to work harder than their white workmates. And nothing about the anti-imperial, pan-Africanist men and women that visited and stayed in the city for days, weeks and months. Like Edward Wilmott Blyden, Nnamdi Azikiwe and Kwame Nkrumah. That information came later.

Statues were targeted during the protests too – like the Huskisson statue on Princes Avenue. And street signs were painted red, yellow, and green (the colours of Rastafari) or red, black, and green (the colours of African national flags). An affirmation of African and Black identity, in the face of racist denial.

Street signs were painted red, yellow, and green (the colours of Rastafari) or red, black, and green (the colours of African national flags). An affirmation of African and Black identity, in the face of racist denial.

Many important buildings were left untouched. No one touched the Princes Park Nursing Home, out of sympathy or pity. No one touched the Synagogue, the Greek Church or Streatlam Tower, all imperial structures on Princes Road. None of the African night-clubs on Princes Avenue – or nearby – were touched either. Not the Sierra Leone, nor the Ibo Social Club, not the Nigerian, the Ghana nor the Silver Sands club. And not the Yoruba. We didn't realize it at the time but there were more African nightclubs within a short walking distance of one another in Liverpool 8 than in any other city in the nation. A long-established reminder that in terms of its Black population Liverpool has always been an African city, not a West Indian city. No one touched the Gladray Club either. Even though the front of the house a couple of doors away from the Gladray was completely destroyed after an impudent and audacious rioter stole a mechanical digger, wrecked several cars, and then rammed it into the self-same house. When Gladys Adams and Rachel Freemen, co-owners of the Gladray, were asked why their club was left alone, they responded that it was the best club in the area. Plain and simple.

The milk factory at the top of Upper Parliament Street was not burnt down. But milk float vehicles were commandeered and used as battering rams against police barricades and vehicles. Images of smiling young teens driving recklessly but purposely was a surreal sight – images more appropriate for a Monty Python sketch than an urban protest.

We know that many white men and white boys protested – or rioted – as well. They had also been harassed by the police and had their own grievances. Besides, many were family members or friends, school pals and neighbours of Black people. If you were Black and lived in Liverpool 8 it was difficult or impossible to grow up without at least some white friends. Yes, Liverpool 8 was regarded as a ghetto by outsiders in Scottie Road, West Derby Village and Gateacre, (and by journalists and politicians outside Liverpool). But anyone with an ounce of knowledge

knew that although 90% of Black people in the city lived in Liverpool 8, they still added up to less than 10% of the Liverpool 8 population. All packed into one tiny neighbourhood, after a century or more of confinement and segregation. And before that in Liverpool 1. Black people in other cities lived in several districts. Liverpool was the anomaly. Curious, yet true.

We know that government, police and other authorities condemned what happened, insisted on the need for law and order and support for the police. We know there was massive spending on police equipment. We know that Home Secretary Willie Whitelaw compared what happened to "the troubles" in Northern Ireland. We know Margaret Thatcher was appalled and indignant, insisting there was no justification whatsoever for the violence. She advised Black young people not to self-segregate. Another politician getting things back to front. We didn't self-segregate, we were pushed aside, and always had been in this city. We know that Michael Heseltine became minister for Merseyside, received tens of millions of pounds, and all he created was a flower show – the International Garden Festival – opened by the Queen in 1984. More Monty Python antics. Not to mention the Tate Liverpool, opened in 1988 by Prince Charles.

We were pushed aside, and always had been in this city.

The Chief Constable of Merseyside – Kenneth Oxford – once again expressed his contempt for the people of Liverpool 8, blaming thugs, hooligans, and criminals. He'd already made us aware that he considered us scum – mislabelled as mongrels and half-castes, the alleged products of white prostitutes and transient African seamen. There was nothing wrong with the police, he insisted. He was intemperate, inflexible and in no mood for the truth.

Black people had a lot to say, too and we highlighted the indisputable evidence of racial inequality and institutional racism. The viciousness of local policing. And we reminded everyone of the relentless efforts we made to seek housing, education, jobs, and entertainment outside Liverpool 8, only to be knocked back and knocked down again and again. We dismissed the platitudes of racial harmony and togetherness spewed out by the city authorities. We had the most experience and the most insights. But our voices were heard the least.

Black people did what we always do – we continued to protest, march, demonstrate and organize for change...

So, Black people did what we always do – we continued to protest, march, demonstrate and organize for change, in Black and multi-racial organisations. We continued to defend ourselves and advance our lives and those of our children. South Liverpool Personnel and The Merseyside Community Relations Council helped. So did the Liverpool Black Organisation, which became the Liverpool 8 Defence Committee and then the Liverpool 8 Law Centre. The Charles Wootton Centre continued to keep us on the path to decolonising our minds as did the Elimu library. Liverpool Anti-Racist Arts Alliance (LAARCA) and Merseyside Anti-Racist Alliance (MARA) played important roles too. Black women were present and active in all these groups, often in the majority and frequently in leadership and management positions. We didn't get many detailed reports of Black women – nor about whites and Asians and other people of colour involved in all this. That story and those details are yet to be told and written.

Many Black people pointed out the unique features of our experiences and the contrasts with Black people in other cities. We'd been saying these things for decades, generations and actually for centuries. They were obvious for all to see. But no one listened or discussed them – especially people outside the city. Whether because of haste, carelessness, or indifference, they were obsessed with the similarities in Toxteth, Brixton, Handsworth, and Moss Side. And not the differences.

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).