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What Is Behind England's Riots

Is there a migration crisis in England? Yes, there is, says John Wight. And it's not the fault of the migrants.



Van on fire during riots in Southport, England, on July 30, 2024. (StreetMic LiveStream, Wikimedia Commons, CC BY 3.0)

“Let no Irishman throw a stone at the foreigner; he may hit his own clansman. Let no foreigner revile the Irish; he may be vilifying his own stock.” — James Connolly

The series of race and anti-migrant riots that have been sweeping across England's vast deindustrialised regions in the North West, North East, Midlands and Yorkshire have been ineffably ugly to behold.

Gangs of masked up men attacking hotels occupied by asylum seekers and trying to set them on fire, launching missiles at thin police lines, burning down libraries, attacking businesses owned by black and brown people, throwing Nazi salutes and launching broadsides against mosques: this is not Germany circa 1934 and '35, it is England in 2024.

That the far right has been emboldened across England by Brexit in 2016 is now not in doubt. Brexit was never about democracy; it was about identity. It was about who is really British and who is really not. It was about who really belongs in England and who really does not. And it was about what it really means to be British and what it really does not.

Millions of poor working class whites in beleaguered communities across the North and Midland were told and believed that Brexit would solve all their problems. They were bombarded with anti-migrant and xenophobic propaganda by a clutch of rich white hate preachers and opportunists — Nigel Farage, Jacob Rees Mogg, Boris Johnson, etc. — and they believed it.



Nigel Farage, Brexit Party leader, in 2018. (Gage Skidmore, CC BY-SA 2.0, Wikimedia Commons)

They were lied to.

Used as electoral fodder by the most reactionary section of the British ruling class and political elite, their focus was turned to an enemy they could see in front of them, among them, visible to the eye. Add to the mix a large sprinkling of base English nationalism and obscurantist tropes regarding the legacy of Winston Churchill and World War II, and what we are witnessing now was a crisis just watching for a spark.

This spark came with the horrific mass stabbing attack at a children's play centre in Southport, just north of Liverpool, on July 23. The result was three infant girls killed and a community and country understandably and justifiably enraged. That the alleged attacker

turned out to be a 17-year-old second-generation Rwandan migrant merely added to the rage already induced by the belief that initial police refusal to reveal his identity was down to him being a Muslim — someone who'd arrived on the shores of England on one of the migrant boats, whose existence has been cynically and effectively weaponised.

Is there a migration crisis in England? Yes, there is. Is it the fault of the migrants? No, it is not.

It is, this migrant crisis, the fruits of Western foreign policy stretching back decades. In other words, we, the West, destroy and destabilise countries across the Middle East and North Africa and those affected come to the West to escape the destruction. In this, these desperate and traumatised people are doing what any one of us would do under the same circumstances. Migrants and asylum seekers are not pets to be lavished with the sanctimonious guff so beloved of a liberal intelligentsia the denizens of which have never known a day of economic insecurity. They are people whose arrival in increasing numbers has posed a challenge socially and economically for working class communities that have been forced to endure 14 years of brutal and unremitting austerity.

This said, the demonisation and dehumanisation of migrants and Muslims, both lumped into the same racist box, is the devil's work. The real issue all right thinking people need to contend with is a capitalist system that has fashioned a utopia for the few and a dystopia for far too many. The result is millions of poor working class indigenous people being left afraid for the future and angry at the present. Living in communities that are screaming out for investment, dealing with under-funded public services, their anger is entirely justified. The problem is that it is being directed at the wrong target.

The amplification of cultural differences between different ethnic groups as a wedge issue by the right conceals the dire economic plight shared by all. Asylum seekers sitting in hotels are victims of the self-same neoliberal and colonial system as those who've been attacking them. The result is a ruling capitalist elite being able to sleep nights, knowing that their wealth and power will remain intact.

Poverty is the worst crime. Not only does it attack the body, it violates spirit. It sows despair and cultivates anger. That anger when directed at the actual source becomes a material force for good. When directed at the wrong source, as it has been these past few ugly weeks across England, it results in mindless thuggery.

The far right has never had it so good and learning the lessons of history has never been more critical than now. The far right has been confronted and defeated on the streets of England before and it needs, as a matter of urgency, to be confronted and defeated now. But in so

doing, it is imperative that we do not let capitalism and its wealthy and privileged disciples off the hook.

They, ultimately, are the handmaidens of this crisis. We are reaping what they have sown
John Wight, author of Gaza Weeps, 2021, writes on politics, culture, sport and whatever else. Please consider taking out a subscription at his Medium site.

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