UK Riots' Resource and Cultural Roots: an in-the-trenches report

Contributed by Jan Lundberg and Chris Dilworth
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Publisher's note: Thanks to the submission of a report from a UK youth/homeless counselor and educator who sees the big picture consistent with Culture Change, we present his poignant and profound observations (see Chris Dilworth's section at end). - Jan Lundberg

I have stayed in Hackney, a poor section of London where rioting has been going on. It was a squat turned into a quasi-public word-of-mouth home, shared with revolving travelers and seekers. In the neighborhood I noticed anti-landlord graffiti. I was impressed by the conviviality and mutual aid of the squat. Needless to say, there was no bureaucracy involved. Nothing to riot about against the anarchistic management.

The UK is to a great extent a packed, overpopulated consumer society. How people can get by year after year based on generating cash to buy largely imported goods, without the former connection to the land they once held in common, is an amazing miracle. Of course it would break down, as we have just seen.

On my visit to Hackney and London, where I was speaking at The Institute of Petroleum, I got the full flavor of the metropolis. I was not impressed by the old monuments and "sense of history," rather it was dreary and hopeless to me. The downtrodden people aren't just the poor black youth enraged in the streets; they are "The little man who gets the train / Got a mortgage hanging over his head / But he's too scared to complain / 'Cause he's conditioned that way... / And all the houses in the street they've got a name / 'Cause all the houses in the street they look the same" - Shangri-La, the Kinks

For those not up on the news, there have been "blazing cars and running street battles in Hackney, of police horses lining up in Lewisham, of roiling infernos that were once shops and houses in Croydon and in Peckham. Last night, Enfield, Walthamstow, Brixton and Wood Green were looted; there have been hundreds of arrests and dozens of serious injuries, and it will be a miracle if nobody dies tonight. This is the third consecutive night of rioting in London, and the disorder has now spread to Leeds, Liverpool, Bristol and Birmingham [and Manchester, Gloucester and Leicester]." - Laurie Penny, 24-year-old London journalist

While the austerity measures impacting the poor in the UK are fearsome and loathsome, to analyze the rioting by looking at government finances and employment is to look at the mere surface. British society grew out of not just hierarchy but theft of the commons (the Enclosure) and the costs of its pointless but profitable, fading empire. What's more, peak oil has hit, reducing not just the North Sea petroleum-extraction revenue but jacking up of energy costs -- and energy costs are shot through everything people buy.

How can people riot against peak oil? They don't and they can't, but they sure as hell will riot against the effects. Just wait until the riots are out-and-out food riots. Carrying capacity of the gentle English ecosystem has been surpassed and trampled. The rich can buy what they want, only up to a point.

The debate on whether it's an insurrection or a violent reaction that will just fade is moot when we look at it all as a "rats in a cage" syndrome. In no way do I view people as rats or deserving to be caged. But let us be objective and see what modern society has done. Are there too many people for the local land and what it can offer? Britain industrialized originally because it had lost it's handy forests for fuel, so it exploited coal -- technologies for extraction, transport and processing became "wonders" celebrated as progress. If modern life is viewed by the average person as simply progress and science, having said goodbye to tribal ways and roots, then being an oil-dependent consumer who does what he or she is told by the "democratic" and "representative" government (and police state) is all well and good. Unfortunately, there is little future in it, and the injustice and inequality of it is something to riot over.

The social justice activists generally don't understand peak oil or ecology.
Is the message in the Jethro Tull Song, Living in The Past, apropos? "Now there's revolution but they don't know what they're fighting"?
Riots will come to the United Paved Precincts of America (USA) too, but whether they'll be termed food riots or class warfare is of secondary importance to the big picture of overpopulation, overcrowding, and peak oil (which arrived in the U.S. in 1971).

Petrol (gasoline) protests and shortage rocked the UK in 2000, as high prices and strikes involved blockades and interruption of supply. The causes were never addressed or solved, despite The Institute of Petroleum's taking note of my proposed "Citizen Petroleum Councils" idea in Feb. 2003. To implement something like that, there would have to be true democracy and open communication for all, instead of institutionalized and corporate-controlled media devoted to the status quo.

UK youth counselor on the cause of the riots

Chris Dilworth in the UK supplied this analysis to Culture Change:

Youngsters are running riot around the country. Some of us, who work in education and on the 'street', kind of predicted and warned of this possible eventuality. It has happened. Our kids have been trained to consume; have been thwarted by lack of progression and aspiration.

I am often talking about the famous 'Rats in a Cage' experiment as discussed in the Culture Change Magazine article "Overpopulation & terrorism: rats in a cage." I have been messaging people on a social website with the article's concise thoughts that cover mine on this subject. It has much to do with the possible/probable future that humans have on this planet.

When I mention heterosexual sexual activity and the consequent breeding that is going on in the world, my friends and myself can get weird looks from people who don't understand. They get very defensive about their innate right to breed. When you then tell them of the consequences of that and the behaviours of humans around the world, they get frosty and shuffle off feeling in some way offended by the observations.

The rioting in the UK over the past few nights by young people has come as a shock to the middle classes. The middle classes didn't bother about the 'ghettos' of housing estates where such behaviours have been going for years, and, us, working in these areas, just knew that eventually something would kick off. Well, it has.

The kids, who have been trained to consume are now taking stuff. A long wake up call. Part of that scenario is the fact of population and high density living so the 'rats in a cage' experiment' is pertinent.

I have trained as a counselor in group dynamics and also worked in youth work, mental health, and a drug, alcohol and homelessness centre over many years. Working with people who have been, in some way, having to work out how to survive from day to day. I now work in an education establishment.

Young people have great potential. They have dreams and aspirations. Yet, at the moment, they know that the prospects they face in the workplace and society are tough. Most work hard at school. There are a few that are difficult to reach but we attempt to do our best to nurture and improve their chances and challenge their negativity. Yet

somehow, we can only do so much. Tensions arise within the institution. Resources, including space, teachers, time are somewhat short of ideal. Youngsters know it is tough. Some achieve great things but also some find that competition daunting and off putting.

They are consumers of the education system. The system attempts to steer them. Many have the latest gadgets, and use them. They expect instant gratification of their desires, yet in some ways, no means of getting these desires met. No power, no money: leading to a somewhat despondent and frustrated view of their circumstances. Even the 'lucky ones' who have come away with good qualifications know that they will incur great debt if they continue their education beyond our 'A' level system. They have worked hard. All their aspirations tied up with getting through the next hurdle. They will consume the education offered. They are trained to consume.

But the resources are not there to support those hard won dreams. It costs. The resources question, in my opinion, also hides a way to not say 'there are too many people'. People don't want to raise this issue as it goes to the heart of our human condition; our ability to breed. My informal observations in school suggest that stress, depression and dissociative disorders are quite high. I can only surmise that maybe due to the crowded classrooms and corridors. The pupils, metaphorically, and, in some cases, literally, biting, kicking, pushing, bullying and exhibiting withdrawal from contact, in a place that is supposed to be safe for them. The staff do as good a job as they can to safeguard the children but that does not ameliorate some of the tensions.

Now we have summer holidays. Children have other priorities than going to school. They still have their aspirations, real or imagined, maybe some now find a cognitive dissonance, a dystopia, (not words they would use), in the way society is towards them. They are not powerful enough on their own but in a group they do feel that they have a say. The rioting is an expression of that need to feel powerful and wanted, in my opinion. They are going out to get what they want, period. Societal sanctions will not stop them. They feel that they have a right to these goods. Unfortunately, there is a disconnection between the receiving of the goods and the paying of them.

They are taking what they consider to be theirs to have.

This situation has been supported by the use of that technology they have in their pockets, the Blackberry. The texting of each other. They know this technology and are using it.

The article on overpopulation by John Omaha from Culture Change Magazine, late Fall 2001, is Overpopulation & terrorism: rats in a cage. It said,

When a pair of reproductively competent rats are placed in a closed space and provided with sufficient food, they will reproduce and reproduce until the space is filled with rats. At a critical density, wars break out. Some rats, alpha males, claim territory and defend it. Others attack. Sound familiar? Only difference between rats and humans is the language-making capability of the human left brain. We humans give names to our territories -- "World Trade Center" is one. The right brain, impelled by drives and emotions, is the fundamental force operating here. The left brain makes "reasons" for what the right brain is going to do anyway. Some of these "reasons" are: democracy, Islam, God, Allah, terrorist, Third World, globalization.

Further reading:

Overcrowding in Our Less and Less Natural Environment
by Jan Lundberg, March 2009

How The U.S. Population Can Overcome Its World Class Confusion, by Jan Lundberg, August 1, 2011

British Riots: Elites "Shocked" The Poor Are Rising Up Against Brutal Austerity Measures
and Panic on the streets of London
by Laurie Penny, Aug 9, 2011: "Riots are about power, and they are about catharsis... very few people know why this is happening. They don't know, because they were not watching these communities."

Toward conservation, food security and peace:
Citizen petroleum councils, Culture Change e-Letter #11, January 2003, by Jan Lundberg

The petrol crisis of 2000: Impact of September 2000 Fuel Price Protests on UK Critical Infrastructure,
January 25, 2005

On September 7, the first oil refinery, at Stanlow, Cheshire, was blockaded. Protests spread rapidly with more refineries blockaded on September 8 resulting in nation-wide panic buying of fuel on September 9. On Sunday, September 10, the protests had closed Britain's largest oil terminal at Kingsbury, West Midlands, and huge queues at gas stations were reported. By Tuesday, September 12, protesters had blocked six of the UK's eight refineries. Over half of Britain's gas stations were shut.