

“Life’s a Riot...” / Ice Magazine / July 2002



Citizen Piggott gives us a crash course in civil disobedience, via some tasty and very full-on fisticuffs...

Let’s be honest: rioting can be fun. (*Oh shit! Legal dept.*) For a moment, as you’re running down the street, smashing windows, charging the old bill, you feel you can take over the world. There’s a high from being a part of something, a feeling of power you’ve never known.

Rioting can also be dangerous. There’s always a chance some smelly Bristol punk with a bad aim’s going to chuck half a bottle of cider on your bonce. The streets are full of breaking glass, petrol bombs fill the air, and, of course, there are the police to consider.

Suddenly you wish you were home watching telly, in bed, in the pub; anywhere, in fact, but running down a side street with two dozen angry plod in Darth Vader get-up, and their rabid Alsatians, in hot pursuit. But enough about me.

So why do people riot? That depends on your politics. If you’re mainstream Labour or Tory, all rioters are vandals, criminals, the scum of the earth. From a hard left perspective, rioters are the disenfranchised fighting their oppressors, the lumpen proletariat rising up against the might of the State. And if you’re hard Right, frankly, who cares what you believe?

In truth, every riot is different. There are prison riots, football riots, political riots, religious riots, riots about films, riots about music, and riots which just happen. Wherever crowds meet, with a shared passion - Hinduism, Chelsea, Bolshevism or Ska - there’s a chance that a riot is brewing, and the only real surprise is that anyone’s still surprised about it.

There have been riots as long as there’s been someone to riot against. When the Romans came to

Britain, not everyone was grateful for their straight roads, their plumbing, and their fancy colonnades. The Brits were savages, and they wanted to stay that way. Led by their top girl, Boadicea, the locals turned on their invaders and gave them a fucking good kicking.

Even today, the Brits have a bit of a name for rioting. Much of this is based on the fact our football hooligans seem so keen on overturning Belgian coffee tables. But when did football hooliganism start? The Eighties, the Seventies?

The thirteenth century actually, when Red Ken’s predecessor, the Lord Mayor of London, banned football because of all the violence that surrounded it. Let’s face it, any game which started with kicking Viking’s heads around on a beach was always going to attract some unsavoury elements, and ever since the game started, violence, mayhem and riots have never been far away.

So football hooliganism is the English disease? Wrong. There have been violent incidents across the world since football became popular. Manchester United fans were attacked by Hungarian fans in Budapest as long ago as 1909. In fact the world’s worst football related riot was in Peru in 1964, when a goal was disallowed in an Olympic qualifying match against Argentina. 309 people were killed with 1000 others injured.

But football is only one reason for a riot. Music has led to serious rioting over the years, by punks, soul boys, mods and Teds. One of the most dramatic was at Southall in 1980, when a gig by the 4-Skins and other skinhead bands was seen as deliberately provocative by the local Asian community, and mayhem ensued.

We’re used to seeing riots from abroad on the news where people get killed, but in Britain the worst that ever seems to happen is someone gets a cosh from the old bill and twenty eight days for criminal damage, right?

Wrong. We’ve also seen our share of riots which ended up with fatalities, such as the Peterloo Riot of 1819. A crowd of 50,000 gathered in Manchester to protest about the price of cotton, and when things seemed to be getting out of hand, the army opened fire. Eleven people were killed.

Even worse were the so-called ‘Gordon riots’ of 1780, named after (would ya believe?) Lord Gordon, who didn’t like the idea of Catholics having more rights. After a march to Parliament 50,000 people rioted in Central London, causing enormous damage and leaving 285 dead. Then 25 rioters were hanged.

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And you thought Blunkett was hard.

Back in 1919, Glasgow dockers took to the streets to protest about high unemployment and in support of a 40 hour week. The Red Flag, symbol of communism, was even hoisted aloft in the city centre’s George Square. Then the troops were called in and there was the mother of all riots, between 100,000 dockers and 12,000 troops.

Nowadays, the British authorities have become experts at dealing with rioters. They don’t need to use machine guns to keep down the masses; they use more subtle methods: bye-laws, benefit cuts etc.

In recent years, there have been few fatalities in domestic riots. A notable exception was on the Broadwater Farm estate in Tottenham, North London in 1985. Fed up with living on a high-rise shit-hole blah blah blah, the residents started one of the worst riots of the twentieth century. Plastic bullets were used in mainland Britain for the very first time. Local MP Bernie Grant won the support of the local community and the condemnation of the press when he observed that the police had got ‘a bloody good hiding.’

In the Fifties, there were serious riots in Notting Hill between local whites and newly arrived Afro-Caribbeans. The riots were to lead to real tragedy - the godawful film, *Absolute Beginners*.

Recent years have seen a resurgence of politically-motivated rioting across Britain, particularly in declining Northern mill-towns like Oldham, Burnley and Bradford. These have often been called ‘race riots’ - but this is a dangerously misleading term. What these riots have in common with the other examples mentioned is that they are class riots.

The middle classes don’t often take to the streets in violent protest, mainly because it brings down house prices in the area and makes it difficult to get a frappacino and sun-dried tomato quiche when there’s burning cars all down the high street. After any riot, you can always spot the middle classes. They’re the ones saying things like, ‘I know they have a hard time, but honestly, destroying their own communities just seems a little – well - irresponsible...’

That’s the trouble with the middle classes: they just don’t get it. When you feel you have nothing, you have nothing to lose. You feel nobody’s listening, so you decide to make them listen. You’re sick of the cops coming into your neighbourhood and pushing you about. For just a few brief hours, you’re in control, you run your life, and it’s a wonderful feeling. At least, it is until you get half a bottle of cider in the face.

Sometimes, riots are a desperate protest against authority. Sometimes, they’re the result of unscrupulous *agent-provocateurs* using the masses to further their own ends. Usually, the truth lies somewhere between the two. What 2001’s riots had in common with the Eighties riots in Toxteth, Moss Side, Brixton and Tottenham was that one sector in society felt they were getting a pretty rough deal: not enough decent jobs, not enough money, vicious policing, alienation.

And let’s face it: whatever the politicians say, whatever the papers say, rioting *can* work - to an extent. After dozens of inner-cities and small towns rioted in 1981 it was decided the police had to adopt a new approach. Neighbourhoods were re-vitalised. Similarly, last year’s riots made the authorities re-examine what was happening in the ghettos they had created. Promises of change were made.

Of course, if these riots were to take place in Mayfair, then maybe things would change quicker. What scared the pants off Thatcher was the fact that the 1990 Poll Tax riots weren’t in some forgotten (preferably Northern) city - they were right in the centre of London. The battle of Trafalgar Square helped get rid of the Poll Tax, and in the end, it got rid of Thatcher. Who says rioting never solved anything?

It’s no coincidence that throughout Thatcher’s reign, riots got more serious. A riot at Orgreave in South Yorkshire during the miner’s strike saw some of the worst police brutality ever recorded on film. One image particularly springs to mind, that of a cop on a horse about to strike a prone pregnant woman with his truncheon.

Perhaps the most terrifying of all riots are those which take place behind closed doors. In 1990, inmates of Strangways prison in Manchester had enough of slopping out, sharing a cell with nonces and eating porridge, and went on the rampage. One inmate died of a heart attack. The damage came to millions.

Other countries have seen far worse prison riots. In the States there have been a number of multi-fatal riots, including one at Santa Fe, New Mexico in 1980, when 33 were gruesomely killed, including some poor bastards getting decapitated with shovels.

The States has always had worse riots than here in Blighty- not unconnected to their gun laws. In the Los Angeles riot of 1992, following the acquittal of four cops who’d been filmed beating the crap out of Rodney King, 50 people died, and state troopers had to patrol the streets in armoured cars for weeks

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afterwards.

The only place closer to home where that happens is, of course, in Northern Ireland, where rioting takes place almost every night with little or no news coverage.

It’s going to be a long, hot summer. And that means our inner cities and suburban estates are in the front line. The riot: coming soon to a town near you. Unless you live in Guildford, of course.

STATE CONTROL: METHODS FOR QUELLING RIOTS AND HOW TO FIGHT THEM

1. WATER CANNON

Doesn’t look that bad, does it? Special cannons which fire water at high velocity at rioters,

Developed as a ‘safer’ alternative to using real bullets, but have caused many fatalities. Bigger than you imagine: think Jordan’s sex-toy.

HOW TO FIGHT IT: Wear a suit of armour. Bounces right off, and possibly right back where it came from.

4. MALODORANTS

Developed in America, the ‘mother of all stink bombs’ makes the rioters feel so physically ill they drop the petrol bombs and rush to the nearest loo to pray before the porcelain. There are two main types. One is called US Government Standard Bathroom Malodour, a horrendously concentrated stink of human faeces. The other is known as ‘Who Me?’ - a collection of sulphur molecules that stank of rotting carcasses and spoilt food.

HOW TO FIGHT IT: Clothes-peg on nose.

5. PENNING PEOPLE IN

This is where the police simply block in the rioters/demonstrators, and bore them to death.

HOW TO FIGHT IT: Call a friend with helicopter - and a winch.

6. ANIMALS

Horses, rabid dogs, and other animals are sometimes used as an alternative to cops getting in the line of fire.

HOW TO FIGHT IT: A trip to the pet store to stock up on Winalot etc.

7. HUMOUR

Ever see that Monty Python sketch where they invent the funniest joke in the world? Why don’t the police use the same tactics so that the rioters forget about

dampening their enthusiasm. At close range it bloody hurts, though, and there are now plans to use an electrical charge to give rioters a real jolt.

HOW TO FIGHT IT: Run - or (in the case of English hooligans) dance.

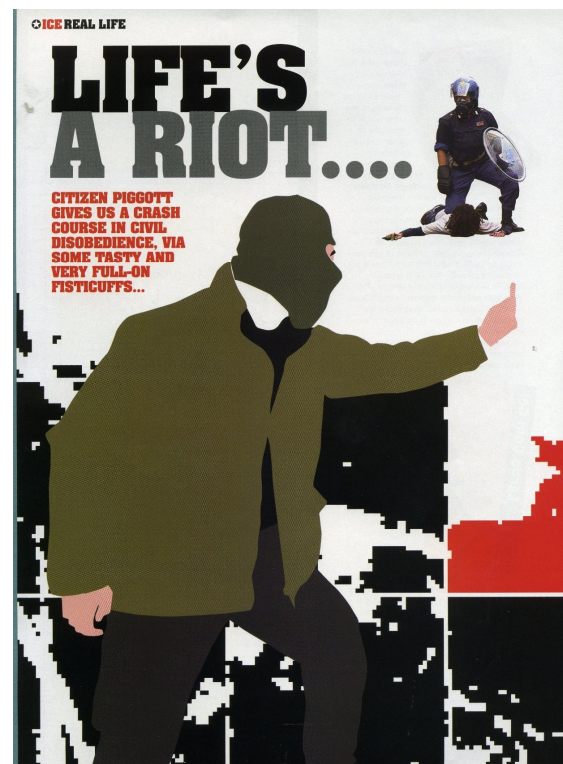
2. STUN GUNS AND CATTLE PRODS

A bit like one of those phasers on Star Wars- they zap potential trouble-makers in their tracks.

HOW TO FIGHT IT: Wear a rubber wet-suit. But not the flippers.

3. RUBBER/PLASTIC BULLETS

aggro and being heavy and just fall over laughing? It’s just a thought: now, did you hear the one about the Welshman, the dwarf, and the two-foot sausage...



The rioting experience: a personal view

In the Eighties, when I was younger and angrier (well, younger anyway), I went on tons of demons in the hope they’d end up in violence: CND, anti-apartheid, the miners... most of them did. Maybe it

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had something to do with the fact I was involved with *Class War* at the time, who could start a riot in a phone box. Not that we were always welcome. At Wapping, the printers told us to fuck off out of it. We did.

Best Riot Moment

At Notting Hill carnival, there were mini-riots; youths would line up along one side of the street and cops the other, and the bricks would start flying. Undeterred, I still managed to score dope, the rioters considerately throwing the bricks in a high arch over my head so I could reach them, do the deal, and bugger off.

Scariest Riot Moment

During the era of apartheid, there was an ongoing picket outside South Africa House in Trafalgar Square. I got a late night call that the National Front were about to attack. Sure enough, they turned up en masse, but for some reason never charged.

Funniest Riot Moment

A magazine commissioned me to infiltrate football hooligans so I went to the England/ Holland international at Wembley. The Dutch had a formidable squad. Trouble was, when I saw the Dutch hooligans, I got carried away and joined in the charge up the banking, leaving the other journalist wedged between coaches getting bitten by police dogs.

Biggest Regret

I missed the Poll Tax riot. Not because I was in prison, or on the run, but because I was hungover. I watched events unfold in my girlfriend’s flat in King’s Cross, but I was simply too ill and fragile to move. I wouldn’t have minded... but I really wanted that CD player.

Worst riot moment

May 2001. I was down the West End to meet some mates in the pub, and suddenly found myself hemmed in on all sides by line after line of uniformed cops. Along with about 5,000 others I was trapped for over eight hours, without food, water, shelter or toilet facilities. In 21st century Britain, the police simply herd protestors up and pen them in until they’re too cold and tired to do anything. When some old geezer with diabetes collapsed, the cops took him away and gave him a cup of tea, then pushed him back in the crowd. The pay-off? I had my name and photo taken.

TEN SONGS TO RIOT BY

What are the best songs to preserve morale when

you’re manning the barricades? Mark Piggott recommends the following...

THE CLASH: WHITE RIOT

The original - and still the best - with a hard three minute paean to the wonder of the riot.

GIL SCOTT HERON: A POEM FOR JOSE CAMPOS TORRES

‘The mother-fuckin’ dogs are on the street...’ Angry, powerful poetry.

BLITZ: NATION ON FIRE

‘The police are running, facing defeat/cities burning in the summer heat.’ Heavy.

HALF MAN HALF BISCUIT: THE TRUMPTON RIOTS

Back in the Eighties, it was all going off - Toxteth, Brixton, and a strange little place populated by firemen without mouths...

THE BEACH BOYS: STUDENT DEMONSTRATION TIME

Well, there’s a riot going on. They didn’t only sing about beach bums.

THE SPECIALS: GHOST TOWN

Capturing the mood of discontent in Thatcher’s Britain perfectly, this went to Number One just as ‘81 lifted off.

ROLLING STONES: STREET FIGHTIN’ MAN

Enough said. Listen and learn.

CHICAGO: THE WHOLE WORLD’S WATCHING

Includes recordings of students getting battered at a Democratic conference, which is a bonus.

STONE ROSES: MADE OF STONE

Ambiguous. Might not be about riots exactly, though with lyrics like ‘the cars they burn below me’, you have to wonder

WILL YOUNG: EVERGREEN

Because simply hearing this dross gives you an instant insight into what Capitalism is all about - feeding us shit, then making us pay for it... hey, there’s a lyric there somewhere...