Reflections on the riots in Hackney

Unlike some surgeries around the country, ours was neither attacked nor forced to close during the recent riots in England, although major street-fighting and looting took place in nearby Dalston and Tottenham. Shops close by in Stoke Newington were largely spared as a result of the mobilisation of the local Turkish community to defend shops and restaurants from the mobs threatening to extend their raids from Mare Street further north.

The Turkish mobilisation revealed a stark contrast between the cultures in the north and south of the borough, the former more independent and entrepreneurial, the latter more atomised and dependent on welfare and other forms of state intervention. The Turkish community is large and diverse, but it has strong networks of social, political, and religious organisations and a significant number of well-established local businesses. By contrast, the communities in the south of the borough, including diverse white, black and Asian groupings, are more fragmented and residents are more likely to be living on benefits in poor quality social housing.

Chronic high unemployment, poor housing and ill-health among both long-established communities and newly arriving minorities have made welfare dependency a way of life for recent generations. In recent decades traditional welfare policies have been complemented by therapeutic initiatives directed at individuals and families. The perverse effect of these well-meaning interventions is to erode still further community cohesion and, in particular, to undermine the authority of the older generation over the younger, and of parents over children. The younger generation is most acutely affected by the breakdown of parental and communal authority.¹ It is not surprising to find that young people who feel they have no stake in the community are inclined towards a wide range of antisocial behaviour, including petty crime and vandalism, drug and alcohol excess, as well as rioting and looting. It is striking that in Hackney, where 'postcode' gang affiliations are commonplace, youthful members of such gangs were so weakly bonded to their neighbourhoods that they were happy to loot

and burn their local corner shops.

In response to the recent riots leading politicians have called for more resources to be devoted to early childhood interventions, parenting classes in schools and youth work. Critics of the government have expressed concerns that impending public sector cuts will reduce the scope of such programmes and result in further disturbances.

The same commentators seem oblivious to the fact that the young people engaged in the riots have experienced the most comprehensive social welfare intervention of any generation in history. This is Blair's generation rather than Thatcher's: their parents have attended antenatal and postnatal parenting classes, Sure Start groups, and extended school programmes. As children they have been trained in emotional literacy and they have been the targets of government-led moral crusades, from the safe sex drive to the campaign against teenage pregnancy. It never seems to occur to the promoters of the therapeutic state that their activities are more part of the problem than part of the solution.

The lesson that emerges from the Hackney riots is that far from empowering individuals and communities, professional intrusion damages personal autonomy, undermines parental authority, and is corrosive of community cohesion. Rather than encouraging aspiration and achievement, it nurtures alienation and resentment. A wider perspective on the recent disturbances suggests that the response of the Turkish community is exceptional and the pattern manifest in the south of the borough more typical of the riots elsewhere in London and other cities. Indeed disintegrative trends are already clearly identifiable among the Turkish younger generation — not an encouraging sign for the future.

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