



'The Fish Rots from the Capitalist Head'

Riots in the wasteland of the free

Joe Sim

This paper will provide a critical analysis of the urban disturbances that occurred in August 2011. It will address three issues. First, it will contest the explanations which have dominated state, political and media discourses with their corrosive emphasis on the feral mindlessness of those involved, and their links with a desperate, chav-obsessed, dysfunctional 'underclass'. This discourse not only reduced the issue of human agency to a deterministic understanding of the poor as degenerate atavists propelled by forces beyond their control, but it also contributed to a broader narrative in which alternative explanations were either simply dismissed at best, or, at worst, were constructed as condoning the disorder that occurred. Second, it will illustrate how the social construction of the poor, as politically and morally dangerous, and the 'polluting shadow' they cast, justified a series of coercive interventions, especially by the courts, where reimposing order triumphed over proportionality, human rights and state legitimacy itself. This response will be contrasted with the political and state response to the crimes and misdemeanours, past and present, of a political elite unhindered by the iron discourse of personal responsibility imposed onto, and into, the hearts and minds of the powerless. Finally, the paper will consider the aftermath of the disturbances and the significant changes that are occurring with respect to the reconfiguration of the criminal justice and state welfare systems, through the interventions of private capital and third sector organisations, which have been further legitimated by the events in August. It will also consider the interrelationship between these changes, and other networks of social control, involving the increasing medicalisation of human behaviour, the individualisation of the social world via new media technologies and the decadent soma of consumerism. These remorseless developments are contingent and contradictory but, taken together, they raise profound questions about the state's response to the austerity and social disintegration engendered by the destructive power of neoliberal capitalism.

5pm - 7pm

Thursday 1st December 2011

Venue: 68 Hope Street, L1 9BZ

Attendance is free

No registration required

