



“Oh the Banks are made of Marble

WITH A GUARD ON EVERY DOOR”: This is as true today as it was in 1948 when Lee Rice, an apple farmer from upstate New York, wrote the song. And the vaults continue to be “stuffed with silver” that the farmer, the seaman, and the miner, “sweated for”. This trio of caryatids held up the sky in the American populist tradition, a muscular socialist tradition that the Westinghouse War Production Co-ordinating Committee had invoked a few years earlier when it recruited *Rosie the Riveter*, sleeves rolled up, biceps bulging, to the fight against the Empire of Japan and the Third Reich. Nowadays, it is doubtful whether hairdressers, keyboard operators, account clerks, shop assistants and call centre workers could be expected to carry such a burden. They lack the essential glamour and glossy muscles of workers wresting their living from the unforgiving soil and the hard steel of industry.

However, whether “the labour theory of value” is your cup of tea or not, it must be admitted we would be in a pickle without them – all of them – whether in offices, warehouses, shops, factories, or driving from place to place, the capitalist class just can’t get along without ‘em. Of course, this is just as true of soldiers, sailors, airmen, Bobbies on the beat, and truncheon wielding riot police. We need the armed forces to protect the country and its interests, and we need the police to protect us from each other, but above all we

need the riot squad to protect the concept of private property.

Consequently, when anti-capitalist militants break the windows of a McDonalds restaurant or a branch of Starbucks, or when they smash their way into the offices of the Royal Bank of Scotland, we can expect the police to take ruthless action. Yet, the promptness and violence of the police response to attacks on shareholders' values always seem to catch the left off guard. Veteran protesters, young black-clad anarchists, disconcerted peaceniks, and eco-warriors, all express astonishment and anger every time the cops trap them in police cordons, beat them up, or smash their way into their homes to carry out searches and arrests.

People, whose general outlook and analysis of capitalist society tells them that the political establishment will always put profits before people are, paradoxically, surprised when it does just that. The obvious fact that the authorities are simply not going to allow them or anybody else to shut down the City of London, or smash up shops and restaurants, seems to elude them; the authorities are not going to allow them to break into banks and brokerage houses to wreck the furniture or loot the computers.

This leftwing or radical surprise and indignation about state crackdowns does, however, appear to be as genuine and as reliable as the violence of the constabulary. I suspect that this is because in an old democracy like Britain the left, even anarchists and 'violent extremists' have formed their political outlook in the expectation that the police will behave themselves; they are genuinely shocked and alarmed when they witness the raw violence of repression. This is because state violence in England, Scotland, and Wales, unlike that in Ireland and other colonial territories, has always been relatively muted and historically minimal. In Britain very few people are murdered in police cells, very few people are done to death in police raids. The police kill very few people on

the streets, and soldiers have killed nobody at all in civil strife on Britain's streets for a century or more.

However, this relatively peaceful state of affairs should not allow anybody to believe that the defence of private property is optional. On the contrary, the defence of private property is the keystone in the arch of bourgeois democratic relations. The state, with the active and certain support of at least half the population, is never going to allow private property to be attacked or undermined with impunity. All measures including brutal repression, arbitrary arrest and killings, would be brought into play if there were the slightest chance of a revolutionary challenge to private property.

Consequently, those engaged in violent attacks on London's shops, banks, and restaurants, should ponder hard and long on the fate of the Paris Commune, the Spanish Revolution, or the Chilean labour movement during the seventies. Vast, well-organised movements, including mass trade unions, constitutional assemblies, and elected state governments, let alone the efforts of dilettante G20 rioters or carnival-esque pranksters, were crushed without mercy.

It is fundamentally irresponsible to pull the tiger's tail if you lack the means to shoot it and have omitted to plan your line of retreat. Witness the chilling scenes on the afternoon of April 2 in East London's Earl Street and Rampart Street, of eighty young people, hands bound, sitting subdued and apprehensive in rows on the pavement, while the bully boys of the Met's Territorial Support Group swaggered around them, cracking jokes. Here, a triumphant force of hundreds, complete with shields, truncheons (and no doubt guns in reserve) had surrounded the homes, meeting places, and studios of anti-capitalist community artists and protesters. They swept in with impunity; tazers drawn screaming "Get down! Get down!", arresting whoever they wanted from a list they'd brought with them, making it abundantly clear that if you are going to challenge the state you'd better make coherent plans and be prepared to take casualties.

You had also better be prepared for collateral damage. Passers by will get injured and occasionally killed, and you will, inevitably share some responsibility for this along with the direct perpetrators of police violence. Al Qaeda, of course, felt no responsibility when the Met shot Jean Charles de Menezes dead at Stockwell (the Islamists would just have cheerfully murdered Jean Charles along with everybody else in the tube train). But anarchists, socialists, and community activists, unlike Al Qaeda, do have a responsibility not to participate in the creation of circumstances in which the police run riot and lash out with truncheons in all directions. Because it is in circumstances like these that a hyped-up and vicious policeman can murder a hapless passer-by, like Ian Tomlinson, in plain sight of tourists and demonstrators alike.

Of course, just as those responsible for the killing of Jean Charles should have been brought to book, so the killer of Ian Tomlinson must be held to account. We must demand that he is charged, brought to court, and tried by judge and jury. We should not accept the 'findings of internal police inquiries' or any form of disciplinary action short of criminal charges and a public trial. This is because the police, who we give the right to use reasonable force in carrying out their duties, must not be allowed to get away with murder.

But we should not allow this campaign to distract us from the real lessons of recent events in and around Threadneedle Street, Earl Street, and Rampart Street. Demonstrators should not plan to use violence against property or the police, and arrangements should always be in place to ensure that, if violence does break out, the principal organisations involved have effective tactics for bringing it rapidly under control *before* the police go on the rampage. That way a mass movement can be built that deepens democracy and strengthens social solidarity without giving hostages to those responsible for repression.