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SUMMER DOUBLE ISSUE

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Darkness visible

The blame for this summer's riots does not lie with alt-right social media agitators alone. A political theologian exposes the deeper roots of the UK's current social malaise / By ANNA ROWLANDS

"... from those flames no light, but just darkness visible ..."

John Milton, Paradise Lost

ON THE FIRST Friday evening of this summer's disorder, in a town close to where I live, a local Anglican priest and his colleagues stood protecting churchyard gravestones from rioters attempting to smash them into weapons to throw at the police. When a priest stands in the gloom of a Friday night between masked protesters and the headstones of local people to be fashioned into anti-police missiles, any notion that the riots are simply about protesting the deaths of three young girls, supporting their bereaved families or protecting British culture is shown as a mask for mere hatred and violence.

It has been disturbing to watch the grief and shock at the murder of three young girls turn into an "event" of manufactured social rage. The legally necessary delay in naming the 17-year-old who had killed the children became the "opportunity" the far right had been waiting for to fill the information gap with a manufactured story that the Cardiff-born boy was a Muslim terrorist who had just got off a boat from France. This false narrative was more gruesomely compelling than the truth (that will take time to emerge) for those eager to feed the social media machine with "evidence" that our social ills are to be laid at the door of racial and religious minorities arriving "illegally" on our shores. That fiction was used to legitimise violent protest, looting, intimidation and destruction of property.

This has not been standard summer riot behaviour. It represents a new and worrying pattern of elite social media-agitated racial and religious intimidation that led to vigilante border controls and para-policing within neighbourhoods. It fuses political messaging from mainstream politicians to justify unlawful action the rioters say the state should have taken in their name. Brexit was putatively all about "taking back control". The narrative that we can take back our sovereignty from the EU morphs into a new form with these riots. If we can take control back from the elites in Brussels, we can take it back from the elites in Westminster – "two tier Keir". We, "the people", are the constituting power, and we

can stop and search a car to see if its occupants are "white" and "British". We can intimidate Filipino nurses on their way to work. We can torch asylum hotels and run refugee lawyers out of town. We can supplant the police by literally overturning them and taking their place.

This is a dangerous and powerful sub-story of the sovereignty of the people, peddled by elites to those whose social griefs find little hope of being addressed, who would dearly love to feel sovereign of something. And so those who feel they are often looked down on as socially deplorable attack others they accuse in turn of being socially deplorable.

HOW DID we get here? The blame does not lie with alt-right social media agitators alone. This has been the long, austere, road of post-industrial Britain. Those holding offices of state have administered this dose of toxic messaging to the people: we are prevented from controlling our borders by human rights lawyers; those arriving by boat are bogus and threaten our communities; Islam is a dangerous religion incompatible with British values; do-gooders are preventing these undesirable people from withering away into destitution or being voluntarily deportable.

In a hideous political game of call and response, human rights lawyers' names and addresses have been shared on social media and refugee charities have closed their doors, unable to guarantee the safety of their staff or of those they work with. Such closures and interruptions to the flow of life not only place lives at risk but more insidiously increase the sense of the power that a relatively small number of individuals can claim for themselves, a power rooted in fear. At what should be a time of summer freedom, rest and relaxation, Jews, Muslims, members of Asian and Black and other minority communities are restricting their movements, changing their patterns of behaviour and keeping their children indoors. Those who offer fair representation in the courts and who protect the rule of law are taking on extra risks or are being forced to restrict their activities. The routines of life are being altered. An ugly power is being revealed.

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order, and the recent writings of Pope Francis could not be more relevant. A social media frenzy that spills from a virtual space into the streets of towns and cities; a culture of digital agitation that creates an anti-community, with leaders without faces or names but with a vicious, terrifying presence. Ordinary people, families with children, expressing their own rage, caught up in the mix of manufactured hatred. A view of migrants as the cause of social suffering rather than as part of its antidote; a notion that outsiders are a threat to an established culture rather than part of how a dynamic culture seeks renewal and shares its rootedness; a belief that secure identities are built and defined against counter-identities, that I know who I am to the extent that I construct who my enemy is, rather than that identities are rooted in traditions and communities of belonging that do not require enemy-others for their own nurture and sense of purpose; a belief that resources are scarce and must be guarded against non-entitled others, rather than a commitment to finding ways to rethink the universal destination of goods, meant to meet the needs of all; a belief that violence brings social peace rather than being its antithesis, and that politics sometimes necessitates violence rather than being its opposite. A culture of miscommunication with digital interfaces driving social hatred and faceless social violence; a visceral scapegoating of migrant communities; religious and racial hatred; political cultures that look inwards to stasis and not outwards towards dynamic renewal within and without; a refusal of social peace and a glorification of social violence. Unnervingly and tragically, all this echoes almost exactly the diagnosis of our times – our failure to live together well as sisters and brothers of a common Creator, fit for a common destiny – offered by Pope Francis in *Fratelli Tutti*.

Francis' alternative vision is present in the horror and shame expressed by the "the people"



PHOTO: ALAMY, THOMAS JACKSON

Residents of Sunderland clean up on the morning after a night of far-right rioting

who showed up in massive numbers the next morning to clean up the streets, to check on their vulnerable neighbours, and to shake their heads in shock and disgust. They remain the majority, constituting their sovereignty, their freedom, in acts of community building and in their hopes for a form of government that does not administer toxic messaging to its people, that rather than distracting communities from the deeper questions of social purpose, productivity, belonging and dignity that gnaw at them, ministers to actual social needs, and provides decent work, adequate public services and provides a real basis for cultural pride. In other words, that serves the lasting common good.

ANY RESPONSE rooted in a search for a lasting common good must face the awkward fact that the burning cars and torched buildings were seen, by and large, not in our cities but in the streets of our towns. Rotherham, Sunderland, Southport, Middlesbrough, Bolton, Hartlepool ... This litany of post-industrial names needs to register with us. Equally striking is the evidence emerging from court hearings that those standing in the dock and weeping are often not hardcore English Defence League supporters but gullible youngsters or men with small-scale criminal records. These are among the faces behind the flaming wheelie bins.

I began with the image of a fire that casts no light from Milton's *Paradise Lost*. Virtue sought, he reminds us, burns no flames but gives off its own light.

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JENNIFER LIPMAN

From our diaspora perches, many of us are appalled at the splintering of Israeli society



TO SAY THERE was something jarring about watching *Fiddler on the Roof* at the open-air theatre in Regent's Park while a police helicopter circled overhead to monitor for potential rioters would be something of an understatement.

In the light of horrifying racist violence in cities across the UK, it was somewhat disconcerting to see the rural Jewish *shtetl* of Anatevka being set alight by its Russian neighbours, the beautiful set seemingly engulfed in flames. A case of life imitating art perhaps too closely.

The previous night had seen anti-Israel demonstrators protesting at this musical re-creation of the antisemitic pogroms of the early twentieth century: another dispiriting reminder that the world's oldest hatred continues unabated.

More than a century after Jews were massacred and driven out of towns across Eastern Europe, we now have a homeland. Yet this year has been a stark reminder of how precarious even that scrap of security is for my community.

TEN MONTHS on from 7 October, the horrors in Gaza continue. The Netanyahu-led government in Israel focuses on a military rather than a negotiated solution, while the leadership of Hamas seems intent on allowing the bloodshed to continue rather than seeking resolution. As I write, Jews are marking the nine-day lead-up to the ninth of Av fast day. This commemorates the destruction of the temples in Jerusalem and various other attacks on Jews over the centuries. In Britain, we wonder whether this will be the moment Iran chooses to retaliate against Israel, and we will be reprising the cycle of messaging loved ones and praying for their safety. Just talk? We can only hope.

While commentators here jostle over what to call the rioters – “homegrown terrorists” or “the misunderstood and disenfranchised” – we see similar linguistic muddiness when the BBC described the assassinated Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh as a “moderate”; who then would be a radical? Hezbollah's murder of 12 Druze children in northern Israel seemed to attract less opprobrium in some quarters than Israel's killing of terrorist masterminds.

London's Jewish community remains united but exhausted. Relatives in Israel

tell us life goes on; what else is there to say? We thought, hoped, it might be over by now. Instead, the cycle of high holy days looms next month and then the first *yahrzeit*, the anniversary of the attacks.

From our diaspora perches, many of us are appalled at the splintering of Israeli society, desperate for the time when incendiary goons like Bezael Smotrich and Itamar Ben-Gvir are ousted from politics, and their followers halt their senseless behaviour towards Palestinians. To me, to many Jews and many Israelis, they are no better than the Tommy Robinsons: prejudiced morons deserving nothing but censure.

A note of optimism, here, at least, as the Corbyn years are finally put to rest. For the first time in almost a decade, in last month's general election Jews could comfortably follow their political instincts (left or right), unfettered by fears over a party leader who could not find it in himself to confront antisemitism. In my constituency, the UK's most Jewish, a dynamic, passionate Jewish Labour MP was returned for the first time. The Gaza independents mark a sobering note, but our political system is robust enough to withstand a few cranks.

Some Jews have expressed concern about the new government's decision to drop the UK's challenge to the International Criminal Court's arrest warrants for Israeli leaders. But in the main, it is comforting to see a prime minister who balances criticisms of Israeli government policy with recognition of Israel's inalienable legitimacy. Plus, there's his Jew-ish wife; as in the US, where the first man may soon be of the faith, we can be proud to see Jews in high places.

In an Olympic summer, the headline is countries and communities coming together; and in the UK we have seen violent far-right protesters outnumbered by anti-racism counter-protesters. But the deep divides remain. Who else but Tevye to sum it up. “An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth,” says a villager, suggesting the Jews retaliate against the Russians. “Very good,” says Tevye. “That way the whole world will be blind and toothless.”



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