



Lee Bridges & Paul Gilroy **Striking Back**

The police use of race in crime statistics is a political act.

It was the actions of black (and, to a lesser extent, white) youth on the streets of Britain's cities last summer that, more than any other factor, forced the issue of police accountability to the top of the domestic political agenda. Since then, we have had the Scarman Report and the public debates between Chief Constables over the best methods of re-establishing a consensual basis for urban policing. Yet, events since the beginning of the year have shown that, so far as their relations with the black community are concerned, the police can effectively bypass the question of accountability, drawing their authority instead directly through the media, always ready to activate popular racism in support of increasingly repressive measures. This is the lesson of the Metropolitan Police's publication of selective, racialised crime statistics, and even more of the police's repeated resort over recent months to full riot control measures, including the instant deployment of newly-trained and specially equipped units, in dealing with even the most minor incidents involving the black community.

These developments, and the Left's inadequate and at times dangerously misguided reactions to them, have given the black community a deep sense of foreboding over their immediate safety at the hands of the police. Certainly, if the Left hopes to understand the black community's fears, let alone to respond more effectively to the 'fire next time', it must begin now to re-think its position on a number of crucial issues.

Race and crime

The racial crime figures, purporting to show heavy black involvement in certain categories of violent crime, have been widely criticised for their sensationalism, insensitivity and statistical unreliability. It now appears that they were released without the prior knowledge of either the head of the Metropolitan Police's own Community Relations Branch or the Home Secretary as police authority for London. Of course, criminologists have long been aware of the need to treat all crime statistics with extreme caution. This is especially so when it is known that the police probably record only between 5% and 10% of actual crime. With such a vast pool of normally unrecorded crime, changes in police tactics, such as the mass stop-and-search operations increasingly employed against the

black community, or in public sensitivities to specific types of offence or offenders, can result in disproportionate increases in the official crime rates for particular groups or areas. In other words, crime rates may only reflect patterns of police activity and are open to manipulation in attempts to criminalise certain sectors of the population.

There was indeed a good deal of evidence of such direct manipulation in the racial crime figures released by the Metropolitan Police in March. To begin with, their publication came only after a well-orchestrated press campaign over a number of weeks highlighting the problem of black 'mugging' and the inability of the police to deal with it in view of the restrictions supposedly imposed on them following the Scarman Report. Then, when eventually published, the crime statistics provided a racial breakdown for only a very small proportion of London's overall crime. These were the 18,763 incidents categorised as 'robberies and other violent thefts', a heading which is both artificial and contradictory since in law 'robbery' is distinguished from 'theft' precisely by the element of violence involved in the former but absent in the latter. Thus, the term 'violent theft' is a legal nonsense and, more importantly, wide open to arbitrary interpretation by the police on the ground who, like any members of the public, become sensitised to particular crimes by popular fears or political debate.

But in a sense to criticise the racial crime figures as unreliable, or to note the heavy white involvement in other categories of crime such as burglaries or fraud, or even to draw comparisons with the frightening level of attacks on both Asians and West Indians revealed in the recent Home Office report on this subject, is to miss the fundamental point. The significance of the racial crime statistics did not lie in their accuracy but in the wider political support they engendered for the police in their continuing campaign to assert control over London's black communities. Their release was a deliberate political intervention by the police, and in this they found ready allies not for the first time in the media and even among elements of the white intellectual Left. Thus, in an attempt to 'take crime seriously', certain radical criminologists¹ have put forward the thesis that it has been the alarming increase in black street crime, itself a product of cultural conflict along generational lines within

the black community and the attendant 'political marginalisation' of black youth, that has forced the adoption of 'military policing' methods, leading in turn to the alienation of the police from the wider community and a 'collapse of the basis for consensual policing'. While paying lip service to the economic and social deprivations of the black community, this view portrays the police as caught in a vicious circle, unable themselves to resolve society's deeper ills but required by public demand to take the necessary measures to combat the 'objective reality' of black crime.

The police v the black community

There are numerous problems with this approach, not the least of which is the intellectual support it gives to racist stereotypes of the black community as socially and politically disorganised. In this view, youth of Afro-Caribbean descent are seen as enveloped in a deviant, criminal sub-culture, which their counterparts in the Asian community — equally subject to supposed cultural and generational conflict — remain quiescent victims, incapable of organised resistance, demanding greater police protection. Any idea of the two communities being potential allies, based on their shared experience of police harassment, is simply discounted. More tellingly, the above scenario overlooks the fact that London's black areas have never enjoyed 'normal' or 'consensual' policing. As far back as 1965 the West Indian Federation published Joseph Hunte's *Nigger Hunting in Britain* documenting the pattern of police abuse in Brixton, and nowhere has the colonial style of policing, in which every black is treated as *a priori* suspect, been more evident than on the streets of Southall. As the Institute of Race Relations noted in their evidence to the Royal Commission on Criminal Procedure:

'The first experience of a police force that the colonies had was that of the British police force — and it is that force's colonial tradition which still persists among the indigenous police even after independence. To continue that same policing tradition in the black ghettos of our inner cities is not to win black people over to "the traditional English view" of the police but to confirm them in their traditional view of the English police — as a police against the people.'²

The black community's response to this has not been one of 'alienation' or 'political marginalisation' but of organised resistance, albeit in forms drawing on traditions of anti-colonial struggle which do not necessarily fit with the Left's perceptions of politics. In particular, community defence campaigns around the criminal trials of West Indian and Asian youth have had the broad support of first and second generations alike.

Nowhere was this communal solidarity more evident than in the protests that developed following the Deptford fire in January 1981 in which 13 black youths died. Indeed, insufficient attention has been given to the continuity between those protests and the April uprising in Brixton. The black community's collective outrage stemmed not just from the tragedy of the fire itself but even more from the police's callous mishandling of the subsequent investigation, at once appearing to deliberately disregard evidence of an outside arson attack and subjecting the young survivors to long periods of detention and threats to obtain 'confessions' of their alleged involvement in setting the fire themselves. Following criticism of their methods, the police leaked these supposed confessions to the press, which obligingly published their contents as authoritative proof of the police's version of events. This led to the march of 15,000 people from South London to Fleet Street and Westminster — a march the press chose to portray in terms of blacks 'rampaging' through central London — and to further protests around the official inquest in March. Whether or not intended by the police as a direct response to these protests, it was only shortly afterwards that Swamp 81, the mass stop-and-search operation that

immediately preceded the Brixton uprising, was launched.

This dimension, of intense local political organisation against police abuse in the black community, is largely absent from the Scarman Report's account of the causality of last year's uprisings, as it is from much of the Left's own analysis of these events. Though the police's presentation of the racial crime statistics can be seen as a response to the Scarman Report, it would be wrong to see that Report as in any way challenging police power, let alone as a 'missed opportunity' for the Left. Indeed, the opportunity that has been



missed was in accepting the Scarman Report as a serious account of the complexities of last summer's conflicts, rather than a hasty mish-mash of ideas, largely drawn from early 1970s Home Office and Parliamentary Committee reports, which provided a warrant for his endorsement of the further militarisation of police methods and equipment. More particularly, Scarman went out of his way to discredit radical critics of the police within the black community, baldly denying the existence of institutional racism and singling them out for blame in generating the riots in the first place. If the police were disappointed with the Scarman Report, it was only because he declined to lend his imprimatur to a further, immediate police offensive against an insurgent black community, and it was precisely this gap that the publication of the racial crime figures was intended to fill.

While the white Left and Right alike are predicting further 'riots', for their own political ends, black communities all over Britain are facing the future in the grim realisation that their neighbourhoods will come under increasingly heavy siege by the police and are preparing for a protracted defensive struggle. Recent events in Toxteth and London's Ladbroke Grove signify that changes in tactics on both sides make it unlikely that conflict will re-appear on the scale of last summer's events. The police have kept a much tighter rein on the flow of information from 'flashpoints' and the militant youth have avoided pitched battles which they know they cannot win. Effective intervention in this situation from the Left will not be constructed from abstract formulas for police accountability nor from moralistic pronouncements on the nature of black working class crime, especially when these ignore its history and its social and political character. The Left response must begin by respecting the experience and political judgement of those fractions of the working class who endure police malpractice as a day-to-day aspect of their worklessness, their poverty, and of racism. Without the ability to encompass their resistance the campaign for accountability will be hollow.

¹ John Lea and Jock Young, 'Urban Violence and Political Marginalisation: The riots in Britain, summer 1981' *Critical Social Policy* No 3 1982.

² Institute of Race Relations, *Police Against Black People*, London, 1979.