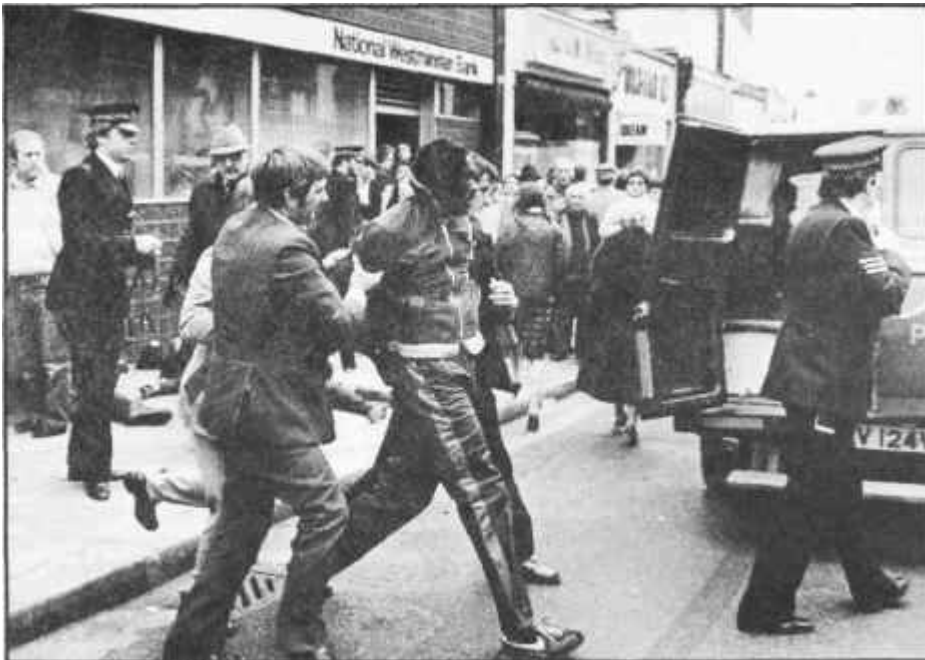


Discussion

Race and Crime

John Lea and Jock Young



The recent issue by the Metropolitan Police of crime statistics involving ethnic distinctions for a particular type of street crime has once again raised the question of race and crime. The overwhelming response from the Left has been, correctly, to deplore the one-sided, political, nature of these statistics and to see them as consistent with an attempt to fuel an atmosphere of 'moral panic' in which the issues raised by the Scarman Report and the Greater London Council's campaign for a democratic police authority can be safely ignored.

But certain writers on the Left have gone much further: either questioning the validity of any connection at all between race and crime (eg, Lee Bridges and Paul Gilroy, *Marxism Today* June 1982), or arguing that the problem is irrelevant as such crime is insignificant by comparison with the 'crime of the powerful' (eg, Chris Harman, *Socialist Review*, 20 April 1982). Bridges and Gilroy suggest that any link between crime rates and ethnic background is purely a function of police prejudice and that any discussion to the contrary gives 'intellectual support to racist stereotypes of the black community as socially and politically disorganised' (*op cit* p35). Such a position, quite apart from the

vacuous definition of racism involved, appears to associate critical discussion with silence! It is precisely such silences that have placed the Left continually on the defensive and guaranteed the hegemony of the Right over the terrain of law and order. A challenge to this long established domination by the Right must begin with the simple recognition that crime is a pressing problem for the poor, and for the black community, and that the control of crime is a vital issue for socialists.

In all industrial societies a small minority of the oppressed sections of society are brutalised into criminality. But because crime is produced by the system it does not follow that crime is some sort of cryptopolitical struggle against the system. Bridges and Gilroy refer evasively to the 'social and political character' of working class black crime (*op cit* p35). One might as well argue that dying of asbestos poisoning, undoubtedly a disease produced by industrial capitalism, was some sort of political activity. The notion of crime as some sort of politics rests on a few myths that need to be dispelled.

The facts about crime

Most importantly it should be noted that

working class crimes are predominantly intra-class and intra-racial. A poor person is more likely to rob a poor person than a rich person, a black is more likely to assault another black than a white, and a white more likely to attack a white than a black. 80% of crimes of violence involving serious injury and 62% of those causing slight injury are intra-racial.¹ The high crime rate of certain minority segments of the black community is directed in on itself. Street culture is, on the one hand, expressive, liberative and on the other individualistic, macho and predatory. Hustling is not a pursuit of angels. As Ken Pryce put it: 'People . . . become the victims of their own unrestrained irascibility. In their day-to-day interaction with each other they inflict much damage on themselves and on each other, in much the same way that the environment brutalises them socially and economically.'²

Inter-racial crime is a minority, albeit very serious, phenomenon; within this category a substantial proportion occurs because of overtly racist reasons. Thus a recent Home Office study attributes one quarter of all inter-racial crime instances to racist motives. In absolute terms these represent only a 0.25% of recorded crime but what is of significance is the victimisation rate within it for minority groups. The rate for Asians was fifty times that for white people and that for blacks thirty six times.³

Inter-racial crime, involving blacks against whites, is a rare phenomenon. Mugging is far from being an exclusively black crime — yet it is also one of the few crimes where there is some evidence of an inter-racial component.⁴ The mass media have ironically picked upon an atypical black crime and portrayed it as the *typical* crime, whilst at the same time grossly overestimating its seriousness. It is, in fact, largely without serious violence, involves small sums of money and it is the amateurish crime of young boys and adolescents. But its impact should not be underplayed. £5 stolen from an old age pensioner is of far greater significance than £500 stolen from Woolworths, which is why the former, rightly, creates more alarm and disgust than the latter. Mugging, regardless of whether the perpetrator or victim is white or black, is a despicable crime but one which must be seen in perspective. It must neither be exaggerated, in an alarmist fashion, nor ignored as a matter of petty importance.

The starting point

Both intra-racial and inter-racial crime are demoralising and divisive within the black community and the working class. The fact that most working class crime and black

crime is directed against the working class and black communities, coupled with the situation where such communities are less likely to receive adequate police protection than the rich, should be the starting point for the Left. The issue is surely one of more efficient police protection responsive to the needs of the working class and the groups within it.

If unemployment and deprivation brutalise a minority of the poor into criminality, why is there such a problem for writers like Bridges and Gilroy in the proposition that the accentuation of such deprivation, through the additional mechanisms of racial discrimination, results in higher crime rates? The claim that the higher recorded rate for certain types of crime for young blacks is purely and simply a product of police prejudice is open to a number of objections:

1 Such a claim makes the assumption that the 'real' crime rate for all social groups is the same. This is tantamount to the suggestion that the black community does not in reality suffer any additional ill effects from racial discrimination.

2 The recorded rate for a range of Asian crimes is consistently lower than the white rate.⁵ Police racism would have to manifest itself very strangely indeed to be entirely responsible for such results.

3 The crime rate for the first generation of West Indian immigrants recorded in the 1960s was lower than the general rate.⁶ Either real changes in the crime rate within the black community have occurred or the police were exercising positive discrimination for over a decade in favour of the black community!

4 The argument for higher crime rates for black youth is only made for certain types of crime. The police do not claim for example that blacks have a higher rate for burglary than whites, or for bank robbery. The issue centres around street crime.⁷

If then higher rates for black youth in

certain types of crime really exist, although undoubtedly exaggerated by police practice and prejudice, then police harassment of the black community is to be explained less by direct invocation of explanatory devices such as 'the requirements of capital' than a drift at ground level whereby a combination of rising crime rates and racial prejudice leads the police to stereotype whole communities as criminal. This, coupled with changes in police technology over the last decade leads to a breakdown in police-community relations such that information enabling crime detection passes less and less from the community to the police. The importance of this dynamic is not that the black community ever experienced an idealised 'policing by consent' but that policing in the inner city and black communities is *moving further* in the direction of a military style of policing founded on 'Swamp — 81' type operations which, of course, further antagonise the community.⁸

Police accountability

This understanding of the dynamics of breakdown in police-community relations, coupled with the recognition that crime is something from which the working class and black community *suffers*, and from which it needs protection, serves as the starting point for an initiative from the Left on the politics of policing and law enforcement. Such an initiative is made all the more urgent by the spontaneous response of thousands of young people last summer to the regime of military policing. The Left must avoid the type of romanticism which identifies rioting as an effective form of politics. It is one thing to applaud the courage of the fightback, it is another to see it as a political breakthrough. It is rather the symptom of a failure of the political process to grant a mode of effective expression to the grievances of a growing army of long term young unemployed. This growing marginalisation of the young unemployed and black youth in particular from

the channels of effective political expression is in no way lessened by the adoption on the part of sections of black youth of forms of demonstration and activism 'drawing on the traditions of anti-colonial struggle which do not necessarily fit in with the Left's perception of politics' (Bridges and Gilroy). Under present circumstances such forms of politics are a reflection of marginality and impotence rather than its overcoming.

These two aspects: the need for effective policing and the need to overcome the growing political marginalisation of youth and unemployed are very clearly linked in the movement for stronger forms of police accountability which has been developing in recent years. We would stress the need to see two dimensions to the question of accountability. First, accountability as a monitoring of police activity and the presentation to the police of the detailed requirements of the community and the groups within it for effective protection against crime. The second dimension of accountability is that through the creation of an effective democratic political structure at local levels, within which a political debate on policing priorities can proceed, those sections of the community marginalised from the political processes of the centralised state can re-enter the polity. At this point of course the debate on police accountability becomes part of a much wider discussion of democracy and decentralisation.

¹P Stevens and C Willis, *Race, Crime and Arrests*, London HMSO 1979.

²K Pryce *Endless Pressure*, London Penguin 1979.

³Home Office *Racial Attacks* London HO 1981.

⁴M Pratt *Mugging as a Social Problem* London RKP 1980.

⁵Stevens and Willis *op cit*.

⁶J R Lambert *Crime, Police and Race Relations* London OUP 1970.

⁷*Vide* Scarman Inquiry Minutes, Day Two.

⁸*Vide* discussion in J Lea and J Young 'Urban Violence and Political Marginalisation' *Critical Social Policy* Vol 1 No 3 Spring 82.

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