

London calling

How many times has it happened? A young man confronting uniformed officers who want to arrest him or humiliate him. He won't put up with it. But his flight or his proud attitude are taken badly by those who are accustomed to being feared and respected. And this is why they reestablish their authority that was called into question in the only way that they know, with violence. One, two shots from a firearm and the recalcitrant young man is sorted out. Tidied up. Removed. An example for others, for his likes. But it's an example that sometimes doesn't work. It gets a result diametrically opposed to the one expected. Instead of causing passive obedience among them, a furious rebellion breaks out within them.

After Paris in November 2005, after Athens in December 2008, and a few weeks after San Francisco in July 2011, it is London's turn. Thursday, August 4, in the Tottenham neighborhood, the police killed a man who was fleeing to avoid arrest. He was named Mark Duggan, was 29 years old, had a girlfriend and four children. Two days later, Saturday, August 6, there was a protest rally in front of the district police station. The victim's relatives and various community leaders and local representatives organized it. They demanded answers, they required an explanation from the institutions about what had happened. With the passing of time, the rally swelled. There were those who wept and those who shouted. Those who despaired and those who got angry. Toward evening it now became clear to all that neither answers nor explanations were going to come from the institutions. From tears one passes to seeing red. Police squads were attacked. Buses were attacked. Businesses were attacked. After such an event, nothing can go on as before, nothing should go on as before. Disorders continue throughout the night, some rebels are arrested, some officers are injured.

The next day England wakes up in a daze. How was this possible? Incredible, but now they've let off their steam. No, not yet. After Tottenham, now it is all of London being put to fire and sword: Enfield, Walthamstow, Waltham Forest, Brixton, Oxford Circus, Edmonton, Ponders End, Islington, Streatham, Turnpike Lane, Chingford, Leyton. All these neighborhoods burn with new life; there is no longer merchandise to pay for, only goods to take; there are no longer uniforms to fear and respect, only cops with whom to clash. Sunday August 7 closes with 100 demonstrators arrested and 35 police injured (a car was driven into three of them while they were trying to make an arrest). Damages cause to businesses looted and sent up in flames rose to tens of millions of pounds. If the Stock Market burns this much money in one of its sessions, why shouldn't human beings do it in one of their rebellions as well?

Today, Monday, August 8, the English media, aghast, have launched into the most incredible hypotheses to find a reason for what has happened. According to some, “Moslems” are responsible. They are leading the rebellion. According to others, the rioters would be “anarchists.” They are leading the rebellion. Then there are those who take it out on “immigrants.” They are leading the rebellion. There is a long list of those ungrateful for western affluence to blame. In any case, whoever thought that when the weekend was over everything would go back to normal with the return to work, was disappointed. Yes, because today the neighborhoods of Hackney, Peckham, Clapham Junction, Camberwell and Lewisham rose up, followed by Croydon, Kilburn, Pembury and Tulse Hill. Like yesterday and the day before. Rebellion and looting, looting and rebellion, in which people of every race and age participated, even thirteen year olds. And, what is worse, the rebellion is not only organizing itself, as the circulation of fliers on how to act in certain situations, as in case of arrest (“Don’t panic, don’t talk”), but has also gone beyond the borders of the capital spreading into the rest of the country, to Birmingham and Leeds, for the moment. While the police say they are “shocked” by the violence directed towards them, the number of the arrested has risen beyond 200.

Why all this? Because the life that the inhabitants of these neighborhoods, this metropolis, this continent, this planet, drag on is as miserable as the one that the English police cut short Thursday night. Because Mark Duggan could have just as well lived not in Tottenham, but in any other poor neighborhood, in London or not, in any other city, English or not. He could have lived near our house. Furthermore, he could be one of us. It wasn’t the color of his skin that moved the finger pressed on the trigger, but his non-membership in the Party of Order. The London riots show how everywhere rage is mounting in the face of a life without meaning, passion, freedom, constrained inside the walls of daily survival. And how this repressed rage needs only a spark to explode.

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