

The violence on London's streets is less political and less structured than has been the case in Northern Ireland. It is the result of decades of social and economic deprivation and inequality

Tuesday evening may see the possibility of the use of 'baton rounds' by the police to counter rioters in London. While rarely seen in mainland UK, [Bill Kissane](#) writes that their use is still normal practice in Northern Ireland. Making comparisons between the two places, he asks are British riots any less dangerous than those of Northern Ireland?



The Good Friday Agreement signed in 1998 brought peace to Northern Ireland. One way of welcoming this was to say that Northern Ireland had then become a normal part of Britain. One way of responding to the current riots is to say that Britain has become like Northern Ireland. The truth is that riots, parades, and sectarian violence are still normal in Northern Ireland. At present baton rounds, the role of the Ombudsman, and the decisions of the Parades Commission are all being discussed. Yes, Britain threatens to become normal like Northern Ireland.

It is no consolation to say that Northern Ireland's riots are more political, part of the rituals of a deeply divided society, and that what is happening here is less dangerous because it is less structured. The truth is that the degree of violence in a conflict situation may bear no relationship to the 'causes' of conflict. We have civil wars which are practically genocidal and those that are essentially political crises. The violence in Northern Ireland is actually more containable, because there are local leaders with some control, and also there is a tradition of controlling violence too. Major violence, though not exclusively, has recently occurred in Derry and Belfast, as it did during the 'Troubles', whereas the London riots are mobile and unpredictable. Riots in Northern Ireland are less likely to be attacks on local areas and tend to be directed at the police or members of the other group. The violence in London could be more random if it gets out of control.

Of course in Northern Ireland, there has also been learning on the part of the security services. At the moment both baton rounds and water cannons are used. Yet things went disastrously wrong in 1969-1972. The response to the civil rights movement was disproportionate, and the riots themselves became out of proportion to the issues which initially motivated the movement. One reason was that policing was a political issue and a crisis of the whole system followed. This is less likely to happen in Britain, but the potential for lawless violence at the moment is huge. This suggests a weak or absent social contract. Moreover, as the Marching Season in Northern Ireland demonstrates, once violence becomes ritualised, people can re-enact moments of violence. In the literature we refer to these as 'conflict entrepreneurs'.

While Northern Ireland is largely at peace following a political settlement, the violence on Britain's streets is not political. Much is down to social and economic deprivation and arguably to decades of neglect of poverty and inequality issues. Why has social class disappeared off the agenda of the social sciences when it matters more than ever? Why is there a huge literature on the 'ethnic' conflict of Northern Ireland, and silence on what has been happening to western democracies since the 1980s? The current riots are open to a short term and a longer term response. The first is to provide security. The second is to assess what has gone wrong. One is not comforted by the fact that it took decades of conflict in Northern Ireland before the second process reached maturation, and three decades before the beginning of a solution.

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