How to live when the war comes home

Paul Chatterton

Being a 'Loiner' (someone form the city of Leeds) I have had first hand experience of the neighbourhoods which the world's attention turned to briefly in early July. In my school days I lived in Beeston, home to two of the London suicide bombers, in a large Victorian end terrace near Cross Flats Park. I often visited South Leeds fisheries for fish supper on a Thursday, long before Mahmood Khan, the Edgware Road suicide bomber, worked there. I had a paper round, delivering the *Yorkshire Evening Post* at the local newspaper shop, run by an Asian family and worked and socialised with many young friends from Asian families. My days after school were filled with hanging out with the kids of the area, Asian and white. We would cruise the streets in my mini metro, playing a mixture of bangra and techno after the summer of love in 1990.

I now live in Hyde Park, the location of Alexandra Grove and the house which was suspected to have been the infamous bomb making factory. That hot Tuesday, 12th July, I sat in my bedroom-cum-study redrafting a piece of writing for a journal, mildly distracted by the incessant buzz of police helicopters nearby. Life in inner city Leeds had made me immune, almost, to such noises. The link was not made until later that day when I wandered down to make a cup of tea and turned on the national news to hear that not five minutes away 600 people had been evacuated from their homes following the discovery of a suspicious substance during a police raid on a house. The house on Alexandra Grove, near the fruit and veg shop where I often pick up groceries, rented by Magdi al-Nashar the Leeds University Chemistry student and through him to one of the London suicide bombers, is still under 24 hour police surveillance and ominously obscured with black plastic hanging from scaffold.

I am not writing this to shed some light on the links between communities like Hyde Park or Beeston and the acts of the bombers. Let's face it. They could have come from dozens of other deprived inner city areas in the UK with high concentrations of people with south Asian origins. It is impossible to understand the motivations of one, or in this case four individuals from Leeds who chose to take their, and others, lives. We use labels like 'Islam' and fundamentalism' but we will never be certain. The reasons were complex and manifold, and different in each case. It's likely to include push and pull, or internal and external factors – that is to say, immediate concerns of poverty, police harassment and marginalisation in deprived communities, along with wider connections to Religious value clashes and responses to past and ongoing war and colonialism across the middle-east.

So, this piece is not about trying to understand the motives of the bombers. But we can make some attempt to understand ourselves and where we are positioned. Hence, this is series of reflections about our role in perpetuating a particular moral way of life in the UK. When discussing our lives many things are usually left unsaid. I want to discuss them here. It is about (re)learning to live when the war comes home.

Relearning history and a sense of place

First, it is worth saying that the war never really went away. It has always been here. It takes different forms in different times and places. A critical rereading of history in a local area normally reveals a very different story to that which we receive. When we look back over the last 250 years of industrial capitalism, historical examples abound of people who were killed and were prepared to kill to protect their ways of life, or at least turn to violence when their backs were up against the wall. In Leeds for example, in 1664 the decapitated heads of two men charged with plotting a republican uprising were skewered on spikes in the middle of Briggate, now the main shopping street and home to the premier retail outlet Harvey Nichols. In 1734 several people were shot by soldiers on this same street after rioting broke out at the introduction of road tolls. Between 1811-1813, over 40 workers were killed in the Luddite uprisings in Yorkshire where wool croppers attacked the new steam powered factories and their owners, while another 24 were hung and scores deported to Australia.

The 1960s and '70s was a time full of such violence across the world against various enemies such as the state, the capitalist economy and industrial civilisation itself. The Angry Brigade, Britain's first urban guerrilla group, undertook a series of bombings against embassies, politicians and banks and claimed in one of their communiqués that 'we are ready to give our lives for our liberation'. These were strong words. Although nobody was killed, four people were eventually sentenced for 'conspiring to cause explosives'.

Other similar groups in Europe and the USA included the *2nd June Movement*, the *Weather Underground*, the *Symbionese Liberation Army*, *Bader Meinhoff* and the *Red Army Faction*. Between the 8th and 11th of October 1969 *The Weathermen* undertook their 'Days of rage', when scores of people rioted through the streets of Chicago, burning and looting, ending in brutal repression by the police. John Ross in his recent book *Murdered by Capitalism* (2004) highlights how bombing is a quintessentially US pursuit. In the development of US society, ever since the Haymarket bombings during the struggle for the eight-hour day in Chicago, bombing has become a commonplace way for people to fight back at an uncaring system. The same rang true in Britain. Bombings have been a long part of British radical and labour history. They are part of a long tradition of using violence to fight back at the violence of the state, and the excesses of industrial capitalism. Dynamite, mainly due to its cheapness and availability, became the great leveller for the working classes.

Second, what we can see is that there are always many people angry enough at the current way society is organised, and the violence which the state is prepared to commit, to turn to violence themselves. And many of them are not Muslim or Arab, or African or Asian, or identifiable as different – brown, black, swarthy. They were and are, more worrying for governments, normal looking white people. They are the enemy within – ordinary people faced with few choices but violence in the name of self preservation. It normally takes longer to identify such people. Their radicalism undermines the liberal consensus that peace can be obtained as long as the number of outsiders or foreigners in a country can be minimised.

Third, the terrible problem is that in acts of bombing which are random and aim to cause maximum impact, innocent people, or at least those further away from political and monetary power, die, and the guilty, or those closer in proximity to positions of power, usually live. What separates the recent bombings in London with those of the *Angry Brigade* in the 1970s for example, is that the latter consciously sided with the oppressed in the UK and abroad and planted bombs which targeted the institutions of British power, while the former were prepared to kill people randomly to create a mass event. In the bombing campaign of the *Weather Underground* in the USA in the 1970s, they promised 'responsible terrorism' and 'principled violence', killing no-one but themselves accidentally while making bombs. The stakes have risen and now targeted killing is not enough. Mass random killings such as those in New York, London and Madrid may be an attempt to say that there is no such thing as non-complicity in the global web of violence, especially if your government chooses to support war in the middle-east.

Fourth, we assume that peace is the norm, when really our state of peace rests on violence and the use of force elsewhere – Bolivian tin mines, Indonesian sweat shops, structural adjustment policies across the developing world, oil and gas pipelines which are built through communities, to name a few. This works on a global and local level – Britain is more peaceful than Sudan, while the suburbs of north Leeds are indeed more peaceful than the inner city areas south of the city like Beeston.

Finally, we are surrounded by violence in our daily lives, but have largely become blind to it. A simple list would include: passing dozens of homeless people, *Big Issue* sellers and buskers without comment; black and Asian youth being 'stopped and searched' by the police; the deaths of over 1000 people in police custody between 1969 and 1999; the 300 people who die at work every year in the UK due to corporate negligence; asylum seekers being deported or living in squalid housing; the absence of under 16 year olds in city centre due to curfew orders; and isolated and impoverished people living on decaying housing estates. The latest example is an absence of mass civic uproar at the shameful execution of the Brazilian student Jean Charles de Menezes by the London Metropolitan Police due to a case of mistaken identity the day after the attempted bombings of July 21st.

Violence also happens slowly in our cities so we don't notice it. A road may cut through a wildlife area, council housing is cleared for new loft apartments, rents increase pushing small traders out of city centres. Day to day, this violence cannot be heard, smelt or seen. Only after decades do we realise what violence we have been and continue to be subjected to. We may ask ourselves, why did that happen? How could we have let that happen? Why do we not speak out or legislate against any of this, at least enough to bring about real change? But cause and effect have been broken by the passage of time and the complexity which holds together modern day society.

So how do we understand violent acts in our society? The histories of our cities have always been punctured with violence – both from those struggling against the state, and subsequent reactions from the state to quell dissent. We have to deal, then, with many different types: ongoing or everyday violence, which is state-sanctioned and flows daily out of the very nature of our social and economic system; non-state sanctioned violence undertaken by individuals or groups

but which is targeted at specific parts of the system through attacks on property, institutions, politicians and elites; and finally the more recent random violence which targets indiscriminately to maximise effect, panic and shock value, highlighting along the way that there can be no innocents. None of these kinds of violence stem from irrational thinking. They variably stem from frustration, marginalisation, desperation or a sense that one is morally right or superior. I do not want to condone violence, and so it is worth noting some differences here: state-sponsored violence is largely imposed by a minority on a majority and hence has little legitimacy, while 'targeted' violence by disrupting the system and minimising the loss of innocent life, may have more legitimacy than 'random' violence which aims to shock and panic with little regard to human life. In all cases, we need a much clearer understanding of what we mean by legitimacy, complicity and innocence.

Towards a self-managed, peaceful society

So where does this leave us? We seem trapped between the historical inter-relations of religious fundamentalists, capitalist governments, corporate control and repressive legislation – however expressed as a 'with us or against us' duality. So how can peace flourish?

Building a peaceful society means several things: *First*, it means challenging many sources of violence and acknowledging the violence which our society is built upon. Some of them are known to us through the mainstream media – that of religious and political extremists (of many different hues). Others are much less known to us – the terror, killings and deportations which our very economy and global empire needed for its take-off, the violence of industrial capitalism and neo-liberal economic policies that continue to kill and deprive in the name of profit and consumer comforts. Almost every act of consumption has in some way become an act of violence against someone or something – through environmental destruction, use of scarce resources, worker exploitation and transport pollution.

Second, it also means regarding wars, violence stemming from economic policies and terrorism as moral equivalents, and being prepared to stand up against all of them. The sorrow of the politicians towards the London dead seems hollow in the face of their complicity in continued deaths across the world, but most recently in Iraq. George Monbiot recently discussed in *The Guardian* (9/8/05) the need for an internationalist morality with which to combat a dangerous patriotism in the UK bordering on racism, and valued humans equally regardless of which country they live in.

Third, we have to learn to act for ourselves, collectively. We do not need people who will kill us indiscriminately to highlight what we need to do. We should have been able to understand this for ourselves. But we haven't. We have to unravel the chains of complicity which connect us to atrocities, and act upon them. Derrick Jensen in his book *A Language Older than Words* (2000) suggests: 'we don't stop these atrocities, because we don't talk about them. We don't talk about them, because we don't think about them. We don't think about them, because they're too horrific to comprehend.' We all need to take responsibility here – by not relying on easy and reassuring messages from the government and corporate media, and for making more effort to connect with those around us.

We also need to do more to highlight our non complicity in global systems of violence. This would include everyday acts like changing our consumer habits, to more connected attempts at civil disobedience which involve challenging arms traders and war makers, resisting global institutions such as the World Bank, corporate profiteers, or companies who strip resources from developing countries. The list is unfortunately quite long.

A week after the bombings there were peace marches in both Beeston and Hyde Park. In Hyde Park 400 people gathered and walked the local area chanting 'peace and unity in our community.' The crowd was as diverse as hoped for and the chant was the invention of the local school children rather than the dogma of a local socialist group eager to use the event as a recruitment drive. A number of speeches at the end, one from a central local figure in the 'Mothers Against Violence' campaign, stressed the need for peace and understanding rather than division. Time will tell but the streets of Hyde Park remain quiet, partly due to the absence of the 10,000 strong body of students who live there during the university term. But this community, like many others, is competent enough to heal its own wounds; to manage itself through the resources of its people, rather than through draconian government anti-terror legislation.

There are no good and bad bombs. Most veterans from militant groups look back with anguish and regret at their violent pasts. Perhaps targeted violence stemming from desperation is understandable. But it is not justifiable – drawing lines around the innocent and the guilty is morally difficult. However, unconditionally advocating non-violence is as foolish as trying to defeat the state and its corporate masters through violence. In some situations, violence (including that to property) is a useful last resort to stopping greater violences around us. Groups across the world draw a line in the sand to protect themselves from the excesses of neoliberalism and colonialism. Otherwise they are likely to be steamrollered by current political and economic policies. The Brazilian *Landless Peasants Movement*, the *Zapatista Army of National Liberation* in Mexico, the *Unemployed Workers Movement* in Argentina, the Soweto *Anti-Privatisation Forum*, and the *Free Papua Movement* spring to mind, to name but a few. In the face of ecocide and genocide how can we not occasionally turn to violent outbursts to stop conditions from at least worsening. I cannot embrace non violence in the face of hypocrisy, lying and murdering from those who claim to represent our best interests in government and commerce.

However, in the long term a more realistic and sustainable approach is well-connected non-compliance in the structures that perpetuate the violence. The lessons of Northern Ireland tell us that dialogue and negotiation can be a solution to terrorism. There is much work to be done before we can connect and enter into dialogue with each other as equals about our complicity without distorting interference from the corporate media and the state. But this is where the hope lies – with the power of ordinary people in their communities to self organise in their desire for greater awareness and peace, not in the lies and acts of violence of religious fundamentalists, big business, the state and corporate media.

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