

A History of Riots

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PREFACE

An alternative word for a riot is an *emeute* and that is perhaps a better way of describing many of the events considered in this book. *Emeute* does not draw such a hard and fast distinction between a riot, an uprising and a rebellion as the English language does, perhaps recognising that one thing may lead to another, or it may not.

While the riots considered here are, appropriately, of an historical nature it is clear that the riot remains very much a feature of the modern world across the globe. A week does not go by without reports of a significant riot, with the familiar features described below, taking place somewhere.

Marx himself described a London riot in Hyde Park in June 1855.

The issue was a Beer Bill and a Sunday Trading Bill that restricted the ability of ordinary people to enjoy a drink and shop for essential items on that day when it was the only one in the week when they were not working.

Hyde Park was targeted because it was where wealthy Londoners enjoyed riding on a Sunday, their pastime which was not threatened by the Bills.

A crowd, Marx estimates at 200,000 partly organised by the Chartists gathered but was dispersed by 'forty truncheon swinging constables' who claimed Hyde Park was private property.

However a substantial crowd remained and the well to do taking recreation in the park had to run a gauntlet of what Marx describes as 'a babel of jeering, taunting and discordant noises in which no language is as rich as the English'. He describes a cacophony of 'grunting, hissing, whistling, squawking, snarling, growling, croaking, yelling, groaning, rattling, shrieking, gnashing sounds'

For the range of riots considered below, from Scotland around the Act of Union to London in the 1840s and 1880s and the US in the 1930s, the parameters set by Marx are key. It is the interchange between the authorities and those who have discontents and grievances that creates the potential for a riot. But the riot in most cases will not lead directly to violence but will display a range of expressions of discontent. These may appear and sometimes be designed to be intimidating but the aim is to make a point and seek a remedy short of an actual riot.

INTRODUCTION

KEITH FLETT

1. The 1831 Bristol Riots and a British tradition

A couple of weeks before Easter 2013 I was in Bristol. I thought I'd take a look at Queen Square.

A large Georgian space in the centre of Bristol, it was the scene of a riot in October 1831—a precursor to the 1832 Reform Act. The riot was one of the biggest in UK history, lasting several days. E. P. Thompson suggests it had similarities with the 1780 Gordon Riots in the sense that “backward looking patterns of behaviour” could be identified amongst some of the rioters.¹

Yet, a visitor walking around the square today—still substantially as it was in 1831—could be forgiven for missing the history around it.

True, on one corner of the square an information board does explain something of the riot, including the role that Isambard Kingdom Brunel, arriving in the city to start work on the Clifton suspension bridge, played in it as a special constable.

On another corner a further board complains that the events of October 1831 ruined the architectural unity of the square, as several buildings were destroyed.

Yet, this light-touch approach to British history, particularly the bits which are a little inconvenient to modern eyes (do we really want to recall that a central part of the road to parliamentary democracy involved a massive riot?) appears to be reflected in how history is taught in our schools.

The study of riots flourished in a period—the 1950s to the 1970s—in which there were very few in the UK, and then went out of fashion. Perhaps the signal was the abolition of the Riot Act itself in 1973. However, by the 1980s riots were back, but their historical study was not.

The historiographical framework laid down by George Rudé, E. P. Thompson and Eric Hobsbawm remains very much the guideline within which any modern study of the history of riots needs to start.

The secondary literature on the history of riots is confined to this post-1945 historical period. It starts with George Rudé's analysis of the Gordon Riots published in 1955 and extends to the later 1970s when it more or less abruptly stops. Perhaps Rudé's *Marxism Today* piece on riots,² which argues that they are not a legitimate contemporary political activity, was designed to draw a line under the wider research interest.

However, the more-than twenty years' worth of material on the history of riots does provide a rich store of conceptual and methodological tools for the current historian.

There is an important corrective. All three historians made their assessments of what the riot was as if it was a matter of purely historical interest. We now know that this is not the case.

In reality, riots continue to occur as a form of protest around the world. A key question is to ask whether the riots of the early years of the twenty-first century are in fact the same or similar to those of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, or whether there are fundamental differences.

As riots around the world in the first years of the twenty-first century appear to have a close correlation to rises in food prices, one conclusion might be that the motivating factors of riots have in many cases not changed a great deal since the situation analysed in E. P. Thompson's work on eighteenth-century food riots.³

The riot stands as an act of resistance to authority, or at least an aspect of it, as much now as it did then. There is some modern commentary on riots that argues that, in effect, riots are not what they were, and these days comprise just criminals and looters out for themselves, rather than representing a form of wider political statement. Yet, when we look at the work of George Rudé on Paris and London in the late eighteenth century we find him taking up and debunking comments of a very similar kind: "what also dies hard is the legend of the crowd as riffraff or canaille or as a 'mob,' 'foreigners,' layabouts or simply ... the inhabitants of the dangerous districts."⁴

The format of a riot is strikingly similar in 2013 to how it would have been, for example, in Bristol in 1831. Crowds gather, things get smashed and sometimes burnt, the authorities appear, arrests are made and, in due course, the rioters disperse, rarely to return to that specific location and context.

2. Historiographies of the Riot

The resurgence of the riot as a form of protest in Western societies in recent years has provided a new literature, albeit one that does not deal in any detail with the earlier literature, in the main.

At the same time, some studies, in particular “Reading the Riots” sponsored by *The Guardian* and the LSE⁵ which looks in considerable detail at the UK riots of summer 2011, provide a large amount of empirical detail, such as interviews and social media analysis, which can be compared with the evidence we have from the nineteenth century.

One key indicator of comparison is the mechanisms by which riots spread, and who spreads them and how. There are differences—Twitter did not exist in the early nineteenth century—but some significant similarities as well.

A basic similarity is how those in authority and the press—now the media—describe those involved in riots.

One of the first things George Rudé addresses, and a point he returns to, is what to call those who riot. He prefers the term “crowd,” but also notes usage of the terms “the people,” “*sans culottes*,” “swinish multitude,” “rabble,” “mob” and “*canaille*” on a broadly left to right spectrum.

Rudé made his position clear

“I have never felt in any way inclined to share the view of those to whom riot & rebellion have appeared as an abnormal and distasteful deviation.”⁶

Perhaps it was this partisan standpoint that led to Rudé’s approach to riots receiving considerable criticism, not all from the right by any means. Rudé himself, recognizing the strength of argument from some of his critics, reflected on understanding not just the act of rioting, but the mind of rioters themselves and how historical accounts of them could be improved.

Eric Hobsbawm, reviewing *Wilkes and Liberty* in the *New Statesman* on February 16, 1962, queried why the Wilkites had appeared at that moment and not another. Richard Cobb, writing in *The Times Literary Supplement* on December 30, 1965, wondered how rioters were characterized, noting that: “a man who describes himself as a wine merchant when caught in a riot may, at other times of day, be a clerk, a brothel keeper, or riverside worker.”

The point was that it is just as important to understand why riots do not happen as why they do. Cobb used the term “Rudéfication” to describe a process of finding historical patterns in riots where he felt there were often none. Rudé’s view⁷ was that there was a need to try and understand the

intellectual outlook of the crowd better. He argued⁸ for a requirement to grasp the “collective actions, moods and motives of the crowd” and to “look through the telescope at both ends.” He went on to suggest that, using Marx’s phrase,⁹ it was important to grasp the ideas that “grip the masses ... that play so important a part in both the peaks and troughs of the popular movement.”¹⁰ Rudé’s idea was, in short, to try and put the mind back into history.¹¹

3. Carnival and the language of riots

With the Notting Hill Carnival has come a renewed commentary on riots, what they are and the language used to describe them.

Professor Vincent Brown, writing in *The Guardian*,¹² has challenged whether the use of the term “riot” in connection to carnival is right. Brown’s point is that to label black revolt as a “riot” with the implications of inchoate behaviour and criminality that this can have in the official mind is to completely miss the political motivations behind such actions.

Writing in the *Morning Star*,¹³ Peter Frost recalled the 1958 Notting Hill “race riots,” but if we look at these through the perspective suggested by Professor Brown a rather different angle emerges.

Riot there certainly was in Notting Hill in 1958. It was started by fascists organised by Oswald Mosley, and to some extent facilitated by police. Right-wing riots are not a new feature of British society. The Gordon Riots in 1780—which were anti-Catholic, at least initially—were certainly that. When the Afro-Caribbean community of Notting Hill fought back against the fascists this was hardly a riot—it was an essential means of self-defence to protect their homes and families.

What people who take part in street protests are called or labelled by authority has long been an issue.

Again, George Rudé was clear on the matter. Writing in *Marxism Today* in October 1981 he noted that “to reactionaries and conservatives riots are all basically the same.” Rudé notes that typical ways of describing those who take part in riots are “criminal elements” or “social riff-raff.”

The formulations go back to the French Revolution where Edmund Burke warned of the “mob.”

Gustave Lebon, an early crowd, psychologist followed on, describing rioters as “mobs” and “dregs from the gutter.”

There are two problems with this approach. Firstly, as Professor Brown notes in his *Guardian* piece, it overlooks the actual reasons, often political or social, why people are drawn to rioting. If you can’t understand something, your chances of dealing with it sensibly are limited.

Secondly, it is entirely wrong on the question of who actually participates in riots. Rudé's study of those who rioted in the French Revolution¹⁴ and David Goodway's analysis of those arrested for rioting in London during the Chartist period show the same thing¹⁵—they were, for the most part, not “dregs” or “riff-raff,” but skilled workers and tradesmen.

Of course, pondering what language we use to describe rioters (and I'm with Rudé in preferring the term “the crowd”) doesn't indicate approval of rioting as an effective means of protest.

Moreover, the crowd, as the Notting Hill Carnival demonstrates, can be something that gathers together to celebrate and enjoy. To those in authority, however, the crowd is always a concern, a potential for collective activity that might challenge the status quo in some way.

Riots are a sign of issues that explode onto the streets because they have not been effectively picked up by whatever political processes exist in a particular society. As I explained at length to a *Daily Mail* journalist in August 2013 questioning me about the Tottenham riot of August 2011, as a trade union activist I would hardly use the riot as a way of changing the world. But sometimes we don't get to choose and, as Harold Macmillan possibly did not say, “events, events, dear boy” just happen anyway

4. Petitions, Tumults and Riots

The dividing line between what was regarded as peaceful and lawful protest and what was seen as its opposite was finely drawn and fixed not by an absolute legal definition but by the context and circumstances of a particular moment.

The framework is the Tumultuous Petitioning Act of 1661 which forbade the presentation of petitions accompanied by demonstrations. The Act itself simply repeated the clauses of a 1649 Ordinance which recognised the right to petition but restricted its presentation to Parliament to twenty people in a “peaceful and orderly manner,” noting that petitions had previously been presented in an “riotous manner.”

A Royal Proclamation in 1679 banned petitions raised for “specious” reasons as tending to “raise sedition and rebellion.” However, the 1688 Revolution and the Bill of Rights specifically recognised the right to petition. Indeed, it was King James' refusal to recognise the right to petition the King that led to his removal and replacement in 1689 by William and Mary of Orange.

It was reinforced by the Six Acts in 1819 which limited the right to organised assembly in public without permission and was still in use in the 1960s. It was replaced by the 1986 Public Order Act.

Historians make little reference to the Act but it was something in the minds of organisers of protests over several hundred years. If the government decided a potential protest might transgress the terms of the Act they could restrict or ban it and deploy police and the army to enforce the ban. That is what happened to the Chartists in London on April 10, 1848 [meeting permitted, demonstration banned] and June 12, 1848 [meeting banned].

The legal reality was that any meeting not called for the purpose of petitioning Parliament was of doubtful provenance, yet the process of petitioning itself might also fall into the same area.

The initial question was what dictated the passage of the 1661 Act associated with the restoration of the Royal Family after the Commonwealth period, which could well be seen as an attempt by Parliament to control and limit dissent. It is also suggested that it was needed to contain the large number of petitions being presented to Parliament at this point, making its day-to-day activity difficult if not unworkable. Brian Manning's study of the end of the Commonwealth and the Restoration in 1659–60 underlines that the issue of petitions did not simply come from the quarter of those unhappy with this development. Many were about claims for land taken during the Parliamentary period and that it was restored to its pre-1649 ownership.

The Act survived but was arguably not of particular significance until the arrival, or re-arrival, of mass political activity in the late eighteenth century. It may be recalled that a revolutionary aspect of the London Corresponding Society was that it allowed "members unlimited."

5. The City and Riots

Eric Hobsbawm's essay "Cities and Insurrections" is one of the few by a historian in the classical Marxist tradition to acknowledge that riots do occur, as he puts it, "even in the affluent megalopolis of the late twentieth-century industrial world." Hobsbawm reviews the ways in which the structures of a city, including the modern city, can help or hinder a riot. He finds that buses have played little part compared to trams which, if stopped, can block roads, and underground railways none at all.

Hobsbawm tries to model the "ideal city for riot and insurrection," arguing that ideally it "should still be possible to traverse it on foot," a criterion that rules out many modern cities, though certainly not mid-

nineteenth century London. He also allows that cities where motor transport predominates might avoid this point.

He also argues that there must be some basic unity amongst the population of the poor in the cities and underlines that the familiar historical terms of “*le menu people*” or “the mob” point to the reality that this has been the case.

While Hobsbawm is doubtful about the impact of suburbs, whatever their composition, on the potential for riots he is clear that “in the ideal insurrectionary city the authorities will ... be as intermingled with the central concentration of the poor as possible.”

6. Glaziers, Riots and smashing glass

I have been researching the history of the modern riot (i.e. since 1760) for several years. There remains much work to be done, in particular in examining how the riot, mostly held by historians to belong to pre and early industrial times, is still very much with us in 2012. It is a form of protest and social dislocation that does not appear to want to be consigned to the history books.

A sideline of this research has led me to look at the issue of glass and windows.

Reading (or more accurately digitally searching the text, as you can now do) the Chartist paper the *Northern Star* for 1848, the year of revolutions, it is clear that one key determinant of whether a street protest or demonstration had any of the characteristics of a riot was whether or not any windows happened to be broken during the process.

The same criteria are used to determine the modern riot, although arson plays a greater role here in the assessment of whether a riot has taken place.

It would seem that glass and glaziers have an important if little remarked-on role in riots. Indeed, there is even a parable about the general question.

As a recent study¹⁶ has underlined, glass and glass manufacture was a major factor of Victorian capitalism. One need only think of the Crystal Palace of 1851, constructed largely of glass, to understand that it came to symbolise a dynamic market society.

Through plate glass windows one could gaze but not touch objects. The glass provided a barrier between perhaps well-to-do customers and those perhaps less well to do who passed by outside. So the smashing of panes of glass was symbolic of shattering the power and influence of

capitalism to display itself—a practical way of demonstrating that not all were partaking of the profits that the glass protected.

Certainly the smashing of gas lamps—protected by glass or windows—was taken to be one of the key symbols of the Victorian riot, and arguably remains so today.

Yet, a search of the *Northern Star* for the 1840s shows that the large Chartist demonstrations of the period were very careful to emphasise that they did not partake in or allow the breaking of glass. That all windows and lamps remained intact was the sign of the organised and orderly Chartist procession. Where breakages took place, by contrast the point was that less reliable and controlled forces were at work.

Strangely, David Goodway's book on London Chartism—the classic study of the large Chartist protests of the 1840s—hardly touches on the issue of glass and its smashing as a key determinant of the character of a demonstration. Goodway's book is now the best part of thirty years old and its research may have come from a period when the riot was not as much of a preoccupation as it has become again in more recent times.

If one searches the *Northern Star* for references to glass the vast majority of “mentions” of the word relate to beer and wine glasses. Glass was a very familiar part of the urban environment in mid-Victorian times, as now. There are some references to the skills involved in glass making. In terms of protest reports, the paper is careful to underline that in Chartist-organized demonstrations glass did not get smashed. Smashing glass was a dividing line between the political crowd and the nobility, at least as the *Northern Star* saw it. Yet, the plate glass windows of central London shops were surely a provocation to those who could not afford the items displayed.

7. Simon Jenkins,¹⁷ Egypt and the mob—a continuing tradition of history and historical research

In February 2012 the London Socialist Historians Group organised a conference on the History of Riots at the Institute of Historical Research in London.

One of the themes of the conference was that while riots have a long history they are still very much with us, as are debates and arguments about how to understand them.

Simon Jenkins' article in *The Guardian* on July 5, 2013 about recent events in Egypt makes the point well. While he is clear about the British imperial impulse to intervene in the Muslim world, stretching back over a

century, he is more or less equally unenthusiastic about those who seek to build an Arab world free of imperial influence.

Jenkins writes:

In almost every case, British public opinion has backed the insurgent mob against the regime, as if sated on *Les Misérables*. By the time of the Syrian uprising, it assumed that Arab mobs were always in the right and always won. This applied even when, as in Bahrain, this proved not to be the case, or it required some ethical gymnastics, as in Egypt. But then mobs make fickle friends. As Kipling warned, every mob "whose head has grown too large / Ends by destroying its own job/ And earns its own discharge."

In the final paragraph of the article he does relent and refer to "protesters" rather than the mob, but nowhere does he use George Rudé's term "the crowd."

As noted, Rudé has made the point that, following Lebon, the first to write about crowd psychology, conservative historians have used terms like the mob, "riff raff" or "dregs from the gutter" to characterise rioters and revolutionaries, often making little or no distinction between them.

What was seen in Egypt in late June was a second Arab Spring, a revolutionary movement, intent on forcing President Mohamed Morsi from office and replacing him with, at the very least, a less authoritarian regime. The army was not that, so protests have remained a work in progress.

Jenkins' arguments about the mob amount to the point that it is an unpredictable and indeed unreliable ally. But this simply points to the perspective of the conservative wary of popular mobilisations because of where they might lead.

The reason why Rudé was concerned with using the term "crowd" rather than "mob" was because his historical research into riots in France and England in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries demonstrated that, far from being an inchoate mass of un-rooted people, most of those involved in riots were those in work—craftsmen and the like. We know this particularly from the profiles of those arrested.

So, while criminals may well have used the disorder of a riot for their own ends, the vast majority were politically organised and motivated.

This is what concerns Jenkins the most. He dislikes the idea of Western intervention in the Arab world but is also concerned that, left to its own devices, the mob seems to install, not liberal secular democracies, but conservative autocracies.

That is, as can be seen across several countries, a possibility. But those who were on the streets in Egypt in June were protesting about a

conservative autocracy, and few were demanding that the army sort matters out for them.

In short, while outcomes are never certain, trusting the democratic impulses of the crowd is better than fearing the possible reactionary consequences of the mob.

Notes

¹ E. P. Thompson noted of the 1831 Bristol Riots in *The Making of the English Working Class* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1963) that “the democratic sentiments informing the rioters should not mislead us into mistaking the Bristol riots for a politically conscious revolutionary action. Bristol in 1831 exemplifies the persistence of older, backward-looking patterns of behaviour.”

² George Rudé, “The Riots in History,” *Marxism Today* (October 1981).

³ E. P. Thompson, “Customs in Common,” Chapter IV *The Moral Economy of the Crowd in the Eighteenth Century* (London: Merlin Press, 1991).

⁴ George Rude, *Paris and London in the Eighteenth Century, Studies in Popular Protest* (London: Collins, 1970), 28.

⁵ *The Guardian*/LSE, Reading the Riots project. Civil Unrest, Rioting in Our Cities (London, 2011).

⁶ George Rudé, “The Changing Face of the Crowd,” in Harvey J. Kaye *The Face of the Crowd* (New Jersey: Harvester **1988**).

⁷ George Rudé, “The Changing Face of the Crowd,” in L. P. Curtis jnr (ed.), *The Historian’s Workshop* (London: Garland, 1985), 200.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 201.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 203.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*,

¹² *The Guardian*, August 24, 2013.

¹³ *The Morning Star*, August 24, 2013.

¹⁴ Rudé, *Paris and London In The Eighteenth Century*, 96.

¹⁵ David Goodway, *London Chartism 1838–48* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982).

¹⁶ Isobel Armstrong, *Glass Culture and the Imagination, 1830–1880* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

¹⁷ Simon Jenkins, *The Guardian* July 4, 2013.

CHAPTER ONE

FROM REVOLUTION TO NEW UNIONISM: THE IMPACT OF ‘BLOODY SUNDAY’ ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF JOHN BURNS’ POLITICS

SEAN CREIGHTON

Introduction

According to the Central News, the new Conspiracy Bill which is to be brought forward will empower magistrates to deal with the case of conspiracy symbolised in Ireland by the “Plan of Campaign,” and will have the effect of modifying the more elaborate and slowly moving machinery of the Irish executive. It will touch every kind of conspiracy, not excluding the agitation identified with the crofter’s movement, and the organisations for Socialist purposes, Boycotting and similar forms of intimidation for social and political ends will be promptly and effectively dealt with by means of summary arrest and conviction.

So reported *The National Reformer* in January 1887.¹ The opposition to the handling of popular unrest in Ireland by the British Government increasingly found its support in England linked with issues around free speech. They came together explosively on “Bloody Sunday,” November 13, 1887.

In support of the cause of Irish freedom the Metropolitan Radical Federation planned to demonstrate against the imprisonment of some Irish Nationalists on Sunday November 13, 1887. The demonstration was banned as part of a general attempt by the government, the police, the local shop keepers, and the west end clubs to stop the continual use of the square as an unemployed camp, and for political agitation against unemployment and other issues. The ban was seen by radicals, socialists and some liberals as an attack on free speech and the right of assembly. They defied the ban and the

police backed up by army units attacked the demonstrators to impose the ban and disperse the estimated 100,000 who took part. The demonstrators defended themselves as best they could, and most fled, understandably. It was officially defined as “a riot,” and continues to be so.² A week later a further confrontation in the square led to the death of Albert Linnell.

While technically within the legal definition of “riot,” the events of “Bloody Sunday” were a violent assault by the government on its citizens. There are many accounts of what happened on that day in books including those about John Burns, Tom Mann, William Morris and Eleanor Marx.³ There does not appear to be a comprehensive study which looks at it from every perspective. This chapter is not designed to do so, as that would require a book.

Instead, because the Battersea socialist firebrand John Burns was arrested, tried and imprisoned for his role on the day, this essay examines his political development up to and alongside other important events which contributed to “Bloody Sunday.” It appears to have helped him to rethink how economic, political and social change could be achieved, moving him into electoral politics and trade union organisations. While the effect of “Bloody Sunday” was important, there seems to be a significant aspect of the wider story, which is the degree to which the issue of free speech and the use of the police helped shape a common outlook shared by socialists, radicals and many liberals, helping lead to the New Unionism movement from 1889–1892.

John Burns

Born in 1858 John Burns trained as an engineer, and in 1884 he joined the Democratic Federation, which shortly added the word Social. In early 1885 he gave a talk to the Battersea Secular Society entitled “Poverty, Its Cause and Cure.” This had a profound effect on many in the audience. His speech provided a breakthrough in social analysis which many working class radicals were seeking. It led to the formation of the Battersea branch of the Social Democratic Federation (SDF) in May 1885. In a few short years, the work of the branch transformed working-class politics in Battersea. It gave Burns and others a base which also became a training ground for many other activists who went on to strengthen the local, London and national socialist and trade union movements, including Tom Mann, John Ward and later Stephen Sanders.⁴

Tom Mann

Tom Mann is important in gaining an understanding of Burns. Born in Warwickshire in 1856, he started work at the age of 9, and later became an engineer, involving himself in co-operative and teetotal activity. He moved to London in October 1877. During one of several temporary jobs he became influenced by Sam Mainwaring, a unionist and radical/socialist. Mann married and joined the Amalgamated Society of Engineers, became a co-operator, he was attracted to Malthusianism and the economic analyses of Henry George, Thorold Rogers and John Ruskin. He moved to Battersea and worked at Brotherhoods in Belvedere Rd, Lambeth, joining Battersea SDF shortly after its formation. He later recalled that Burns had already won renown as a public advocate of the new movement. The SDF provided Mann with the answers he had been looking for: "I found Socialism a more complete satisfaction than I had ever before experienced."⁵

The Work of the SDF

SDF activity was dominated by public meetings, in Burns's case at Battersea Park particularly. "With the starting of the SDF in Battersea John Burns gave most of his Sundays to open-air meetings at the south-west gates of Battersea Park," recalled Lee, the national SDF's historian. "The meetings were large, and the sales of *Justice* and Socialist literature exceedingly good."⁶

Mann recalls that the branch 'was a rapidly growing body.' In addition to the Battersea Park meetings, there were Sunday evening meetings at its meeting place at Sydney Hall, and various meetings during the week. Mann has left this description of Burns:

He had a splendid voice and a very effective and business-like way of putting a case. He looked well on a platform. He always wore a serge suit, a white shirt, a black tie, and a bowler hat. He looked the engineer all over, and was easily recognised. Surprisingly fluent, with a voice that could fill every part of the largest hall or theatre, and if the wind was favourable, could reach a twenty-thousand audience in the parks, he was undoubtedly the most remarkable propagandist speaker in the country.⁷

They became "close friends and good comrades." When Burns stood as a Parliamentary candidate in West Nottingham in 1885, Mann was Treasurer of Burns' Election Fund. He stepped in and took up the work of the Battersea branch as "chief advocate."⁸ He acted as election agent for the SDF candidates in Hampstead and Kennington in the November 1885

Parliamentary election. In the internal split that followed SDF leader Hyndman's acceptance of Tory gold to finance the SDF's candidates, Mann stayed loyal to the executive and did not join the Socialist Union split-off.

The branch developed social service provision, providing free breakfasts to the children of the unemployed. At one breakfast in February 1887 catering for 270 children, Burns gave a short address and there was vocal and instrumental music. "As the children left, each was presented with a packet of sweets and a cake of chocolate."⁹

Trade Unionism and the Eight Hour Day

Like the SDF as a whole, the branch membership was divided in its attitude to practical palliative reform activities, particularly in the trade union sphere. Burns and Mann differed over "what was best in tactics." Both were members of the Amalgamated Society of Engineers. Mann considered that it was part of his Socialist duty "to try and shake-up" the Union which "had become very respectable and deadly dull." Because his Union branch meeting did not allow for enough general educational matters to be considered, he founded the Battersea Progressive League or Society. It held its meetings in the weeks alternating between the fortnightly ones of the Battersea ASE, but was open to all trade unionists, not just members of the ASE. Mann re-called that the League "served as a feeder to the open-air propagandist efforts of the SDF at park gates and elsewhere."¹⁰

I made it my special task to urge the necessity for a reduction in hours, on the ground that, owing to the many improvements in machinery from the time the nine-hour day was established, this was a right step to take, irrespective of whether Socialism was approved or not. As the unemployed agitation was general at the time, I argued that a reduction in hours would be the most practical method of coping with the evil. But I declared no less emphatically that shorter hours would not cure unemployment, and that no restriction of the working class, however rigid, would meet the case. It was to be looked on merely as a palliative, pending the realization of Socialism.¹¹

Unlike the majority SDF leadership, which criticised the unions, Mann had hope in their ability to change. The eight-hour day was a key to this. The eight-hour day was a socialist demand in the early 1880s, but was not considered important enough to take political action on. Dona Torr, one of Mann's biographers, suggests that he "was the first British worker to see the legal eight-hour day as part of the battle for Socialism, and the first to organise agitation for it in London."¹²

At a crowded Battersea SDF meeting Mann argued the case for action, urging “the desirability of dealing specifically with the eight-hour question, as whatever else might be done, this would prove of permanent as well as immediate value.” He “stated that it was the practice of the SDF to make incremental reference to the reduction in hours, complained that no definite steps were taken to force the matter onto the front—and more on similar lines.”

Mann records Burns' opposition.

He at once expressed entire disapproval of what I proposed. He declared the time had passed for such trivial reforms as the eight-hour day, notwithstanding the fact that it was included among the palliative proposals of the SDF. Amid loud cheers he declared that the capitalist system was on its last legs, and that it was our duty to prepare at once to seize the whole of the means of production and wipe out the capitalists altogether.

John Ward supported Burns, but was “if possible more revolutionary. He was ready to take action for a physical force overthrow, certainly was not prepared to spend time over anything so paltry as an eight-hour day. When the vote was taken, the attitude of Burns and Ward was endorsed by an overwhelming majority.”¹³

Eight Hours League

Despite this divergence of views within the branch, and despite the strong personalities involved, Mann and his pro eight-hour day supporters were able to act independently without causing a split within the branch.

In April, after three hours of “vigorous discussion” at the General Moore public house in Stewarts Rd, the Battersea Progressive Society “voted in favour of an eight hour agitation and formed a committee of fifteen to take the matter up vigorously” and influence “those who are at present indifferent.”¹⁴ The committee was the Eight-Hours League. In June, Mann published a highly influential pamphlet called *What a Compulsory Eight-Hour Day Means to the Workers*.¹⁵

Unemployment

By now, Burns's outdoor oratory had earned him the nicknames “The Man with the Red Flag” and “The Orator of Tower Hill.” He became a bogeyman to the middle classes.

A major focus for SDF activity was the issue of unemployment which rose to over 10% in 1886. On February 8, 1886 the London United Workers

Committee, which argued that unemployment was caused by free trade and unfair foreign competition, planned a demonstration in Trafalgar Square. The Commissioner of Police agreed it could go ahead. Having heard that the committee feared an attack on the demonstration by the SDF, which regarded the Committee as Tory, the police prepared for a disturbance. Burns and other SDFers did exploit the gathering to make the case of socialism. He had an audience of about 13,000 people. After approaches by the police, he, Hyndman and Champion agreed to lead the demonstrators to Hyde Park. They were jeered at by Charlton Club members. In the retaliation that followed the SDF lost control. Windows were smashed and shops were looted in Pall Mall, St. James's, Piccadilly and Oxford St, people were assaulted, and carriages overturned. There were not enough police to take control. *The Times* said: "... the West End was for a couple of hours in the hands of the Mob."¹⁶

Queen Victoria was incandescent and wanted meetings in the Square made illegal. Under an 1844 Act of Parliament the square was owned by the crown, and responsibility for control and management lay with the Commissioners of Works. The government decided to prosecute the SDF leaders. In March, Burns, Hyndman and two others were arrested and charged with seditious conspiracy. Burns enjoyed his arrest. He saw an inspector en-route to his home on Lavender Hill to arrest him. He stopped him and introduced himself: "if you are going to Lavender Hill to arrest John Burns I thought I might spare you the trouble. I am John Burns and you had better take me now."¹⁷

The Times talked about "[t]he vagabondage of London, apparently associated by some mysterious sympathy, marched up Pall Mall," and that "the crowd continued under concealed leaders." A repeat of the day was expected the next day and West End shops were shut. Nothing happened. Similar panic occurred on February 10 with banks closing and precautions taken to prevent attacks on government buildings. Morris thought this was "the first skirmish of the Revolution," but Engels and others did not think the situation was revolutionary.¹⁸

On February 21 the SDF held a meeting in Hyde Park. With 2,360 officers, troops and a magistrate on standby, Tom Mann chaired one of the platforms.

Parliamentary enquiry

A Committee of Enquiry into the events of February 6 was held, comprising five MPs. They were amazed that the Commissioner of Police had been present on the day in plain clothes but did not issue any commands.

The Enquiry recommended reforms of the police to remedy the following defects: insufficient numbers of officers of superior rank and education, lack of an efficient telegraphic system, absence of an adequate force of mounted police, a defective chain of responsibility among the superior officers, want of published police regulations for dealing with large meetings, the position and duty of officers in charge of meetings, and absence of a proper system of communication with the Home Office in the event of emergency.¹⁹

Ironically, this was the period of Gladstone's third Ministry and the Under Secretary for Home Affairs was the trade union leader and MP Henry Broadhurst. His first job was the revenge of "law and order" upon the "rioters" of Trafalgar Square, "by no means a pleasant initiation for me into official life."²⁰

Burns' trial took place at the Old Bailey from April 7–10, 1886. Joseph Chamberlain, the President of the Local Government Board, was subpoenaed as an "expert in agitation." It was alleged that in his speech Burns had said "We must have bread, or they must have lead." He was able to prove he had not used those words. The judge summed up against the prosecution and the jury found Burns not guilty of conspiracy, but guilty of uttering seditious and inflammatory language. The trial and outcome boosted his reputation. His speech from the dock, which included explaining socialism, was printed as an SDF pamphlet.

Following a split the Liberal government fell in the general election of July 1886, and in came the Conservatives supported by the Liberal Unionists.

Agitation in Battersea

The agitation continued in the districts into 1887. In Battersea, at least a pre-revolutionary air seems to have been generated. John Ward "became a regular drill sergeant, preparing the comrades for possible physical-force eventualities."²¹ Burns himself stated that "he would rather take up a musket on behalf of his fellow workers if they thought they could win than see workmen having to walk the streets directly their hair showed the slightest sign of turning grey. If the local authorities in Battersea ... did not undertake local relief works, he was prepared to lead the people and sack the bakers' shops and send the bill to the local authorities."²²

One of the methods used to highlight unemployment in early 1887 was revival of the Chartist tradition of demonstrations of the unemployed on Sundays to the principal London churches, inviting the incumbents to preach sermons about the effects of unemployment, and hold meetings of their own outside the churches. Burns organised one in Battersea's parish church St Mary's Old Church in January 1887. Although there were disturbances at

such events, the SDF did not encourage them. In the church "loud and prolonged hissing" greeted the names of the Queen and the Prince of Wales."²³ But it was not just the working-class congregation agitating in church. For a while in 1887, Dennis Hird, the St Mary's curate, later Principal of Ruskin College in Oxford, preached socialism from the pulpit.

Sir Charles Warren

In the wake of the furore Police Chief Commissioner Henderson resigned. He was replaced by Sir Charles Warren, a former soldier in the Empire, with military ideas of discipline and public order, and a Gladstonian Liberal. The frequent use of Trafalgar Square for protest meetings put a strain on police resources. There was also a build-up in the numbers of the unemployed sleeping in the square. The SDF began to organise among them under the banner "Not Charity, But Work." Warren asked the Home Secretary to ban all meetings in the square. While the Home Secretary delayed, Warren posted up to 2,000 policemen around the square of weekends to "ensure public order." On October 14, the police dispersed a procession to the Lord Mayor, but a meeting in the square to protest against the sentence on the Chicago anarchists was allowed. On October 16, the unemployed were at Westminster Abbey. On October 17, Warren ordered the clearance of the unemployed from, and the temporary closure of, the square, which was done on that and the next two days, but which proved ineffective. Most days between October 21 and November 3 saw Socialist and unemployed meetings in the square. Warren was also under increasing pressure from those who wanted meetings to be stopped because of fears about "the mob." On November 3 a shopkeepers meeting protested against the use of Trafalgar Square by the unemployed. The next day Warren authorised the square to be cleared again.²⁴

By now he had the Home Secretary's support. After consulting the Home and War Offices and the Office of Works, he issued an order prohibiting meetings or gatherings in the square. The debate about the law and the use of Trafalgar Square prompted *The Law Journal* to state that the 1872 law allowing the use of Hyde Park and some other open spaces in London did not apply to the square. Because of this, "the common law remedy of dispersing the crowd is alone practicable as trespassers as the Crown had never dedicated Trafalgar Square to the public."²⁵

The SDF had planned to have a march of the unemployed behind the Lord Mayor's procession on November 9. Perceiving Warren's decision to be unlawful and provocative, they called instead for a mass meeting for the Square at 3pm.

By 2pm the square and the surrounding streets were patrolled by at least 6,000 police, with the Life Guards on standby. Fleet Street shops put up their shutters. Leading their contingent John Ward and George Bateman broke through the police cordon. Ward was arrested. In the scuffle that followed, Bateman and Tom Mann got to the plinth of Nelson's Column to start speaking. Mann was to modestly re-call that from the plinth he "reviewed the situation, telling why such action was taken, and dealt with the SDF proposals for the relief of unemployment."²⁶ After discussing the economic situation he recited some verses from Shelley. Reporting at the time, *Reynolds News* said that Mann, "who appeared to be great favourite with a large number of persons in the crowd, and who was loudly cheered, addressed his hearers as 'fellow citizens'. He in bitter but excellent language pointed out that, although their meeting had been prohibited, yet they were holding it, and at the moment they were masters of the situation. The cause of all the turmoil ... was that the Social Democrats had had the nerve to fight the battle of the unemployed."²⁷

Symbolically, the Shelley poem he recited was from *Men of England*, written after the military attack on the peaceful demonstration at Peterloo in Manchester in 1819. His bitter language was, according to another paper, that "poverty was caused by the robber band they had just seen and others like them ... and advising them to break up the robber band and to organise to make every man and woman in England really free."²⁸ Mann's speech ended with the arrival of the cavalry.

"Bloody Sunday"

Issued on November 8, the Home Secretary's and Police Commissioner Charles Warren's ban on meetings in Trafalgar Square was the culmination of months of perceived problems with the unemployed camping in the square, and a continual series of demonstrations, creating concern about disorder, actual disorder and straining police resources.²⁸

In relation to the ban, W. T. Stead, the campaigning editor of the *Pall Mall Gazette*, wrote: "We have reached a crisis in the political history of the metropolis when something must be done, and that at once, to defend the legal liberties of London from the insolent usurpations of Scotland Yard ... There is no means of defending popular liberties as efficacious as that of resisting at first ever their exercise."²⁹

William Saunders, of the English Land Restoration League, had already been arrested after notifying the commissioner of his intention. A journalist and Liberal, he had started *The Western Morning News* in 1859, then set up the Central News agency in 1862, *The Democrat*, in 1884, and had been MP

for East Hull in 1885–6.³⁰ He was prosecuted for his attempt to hold the meeting but was discharged by the Bow St magistrate.³¹

The Metropolitan Radical Federation, whose secretary was Battersea's James Tims, supported by the Law and Liberty League, which Stead had helped to set up, and the Social Democratic Federation, decided to use the demonstration to protest against the ban. Feeder processions were organised from several parts of London.

In preparation, the government took control of the bridges to prevent the processions from South London getting across. A cordon of 2,500 police closed thirty streets to all but buses and cars within a mile of the square, wherein 1,500 policemen were placed.

Before setting off from Clerkenwell Green the demonstrators were addressed by Annie Besant, Edward Aveling and William Morris. Morris talked about the duty to resist “by every means in their power” any invasion of the rights of free speech. But he was concerned about the likely response of the police when they arrived at the square. Before they reached the square they were charged from the side streets by mounted police wielding staves, followed by police on foot, as was the case with the contingent from Notting Hill and Paddington.

The South London processions joined together at Westminster Bridge. They crossed over and were charged by mounted police. Those who fought their way through into the square faced the police there. A group of between 200 and 400 led by the radical MP Cunninghame Graham and John Burns broke through the police into the square. In the subsequent fight they were both arrested. Two hundred Light Guards were sent up Whitehall with a magistrate to read the Riot Act. Grenadier Guards were sent in with rifles with fixed bayonets and live ammunition. Over 200 people were treated in local hospitals. Three were to die.³²

The police had their supporters watching from surrounding buildings. Graham later wrote:

The tops of the houses and hotels were crowded with well-dressed women who clapped their hands and cheered with delight when some miserable and half-starved working man was knocked down and trodden under foot. This I saw as I stood on almost the identical spot where a few weeks ago the Government unveiled the statue of Gordon ... We are so completely accustomed to bow the knee before wealth and riches, to treat it ourselves we are a free nation, that in the end we have got to believe it.³³

Morris commented:

It was all over in a few minutes: our comrades fought valiantly, but they had not learned how to stand and turn their column into a line or to march on to

the front ... The police struck right and left like what they were, soldiers attacking an enemy ... The band instruments were captured, the banners and flags destroyed, there was no rallying point and no possibility of rallying and all that the people composing our one strong column could do was to struggle into the Square as helpless units. I could see that numbers were to no avail unless led by a band of men acting in concert and each knowing his own part ... Sir Charles Warren has given us a lesson in street-fighting.³⁴

Eleanor Marx wrote:

I have never seen anything like the brutality of the police; the Germans and Austrians, who know what police brutality can be, have said the same to me ... I was in the thick of the fight at Parliament Street, and afterwards in Northumberland Avenue I got pretty roughly used myself. My cloak and hat ... are torn to shreds; I have had a bad blow across the arm from a policeman's baton, and a blow on the head knocked me down—but for a sturdy old Irishman ... whose face was streaming with blood, I must have been trampled on by the mounted police. But this is nothing to what I saw done to others.³⁵

“Bloody Sunday”: The Aftermath

Given the long period of dispute about demonstrations in the square, “Bloody Sunday” on November 13, 1887 should be seen not as an isolated incidence of a demonstration descending into riot or a state’s attack on its citizens, but as a convergence of a complex set of events, issues and personalities.

Nor did “Bloody Sunday” end the fight over the freedom to use Trafalgar Square. The Law and Liberty League provided legal aid and looked after the homes and families of the victims. Annie Besant reported on fund-raising for the defence fund in the columns of *The National Reformer*.

There was debate about the legality of the ban. The Friday after “Bloody Sunday” the *Pall Mall Gazette* published a piece on the law of meetings in the square. Charles Bradlaugh reproduced it in the *National Reformer* with the comment that he was astonished to see that the Home Secretary states that the use of Trafalgar Square “can be interfered with by the personal and direct veto of the Queen.” *The Gazette* had noted that Mr. Plunket in the previous Parliamentary Session, “no doubt speaking under legal advice, declared publicly in the House that he had no authority to interfere with the assembly in Trafalgar Square on even vagrant persons.”³⁶

The prosecution of William Saunders was dropped by the Government and was advised that he was entitled to sue the constables that arrested him.³⁷

The Death of Albert Linnell

The moral panic continued. Thousands of special constables were sworn in, 5,000 of whom were mobilised on Sunday November 20. That day Hyde Park was the venue of demonstration, but many people went to the square to see what was happening, given that police were posted there in case of a further attempt to defy the ban. The police attacked the assembled spectators and one of them, Alfred Linnell, who had not been at the Hyde Park demonstration, was so badly injured that he died on December 3. Commenting on his death, *The Times* said: "The mounted police were on the spot in the execution of their duties, while LINNELL, to put the matter on the lowest ground, was not."³⁸

As well as writing in *The National Reformer*, Annie Besant used her own journal *Our Corner* to write about the Trafalgar Square meetings. In the latter she accused the authorities of unsuccessfully trying "to hush up the cause of death of Alfred Linnell whose thigh was broken in a charge of the mounted police on November 20th." Commenting on the plan for a public funeral for Linnell, she wrote:

Many a public funeral has been given to statesmen and to generals, but London has not seen in our generation a public funeral given to a poor man killed by violence of the police. And the lesson of this funeral to each who sees it will be that Alfred Linnell's fate may be his or her own, unless the police terror is put an end to. For Linnell was not an "agitator", he was not a politician, he was not a Socialist, he was not moved to go to Trafalgar Square by any sense of public duty or desire to vindicate free speech; he was merely a harmless, indifferent, curious spectator, and he has been slain by the new tyranny. The lesson will not be lost of the thousands who will read it on Sunday next.⁴⁰

Warren banned the use of the Square as the starting point for Linnell's funeral procession on December 18. An estimated 120,000 people went from Great Windmill Street, via King Street and Covent Garden and the Strand to Bow Cemetery. Three flags were on the funeral car: the green of Ireland, the yellow and green of the Radicals, and the red of Socialists. Morris's "Death Song," composed for the occasion, was sung.

In his funeral oration, Morris talked about the ruling class "making this great town of London nothing more than a prison ... If the police knock us about and treat us ill, it is to a certain extent our own fault, but we have given the management of our affairs to other people." The marchers must now organise for a "holy war."⁴¹