
Editorial

Not just Peterloo: policing popular protest since 1819

This issue appears amidst a sea of protest. Recent months have seen millions marching in Hong Kong and Chile, hundreds of thousands on the streets of Lebanon and Barcelona. In Khartoum, similar numbers camped out in the city forcing an end to Omar Al-Bashir's thirty-year dictatorship, a hundred were killed by the military in June. Tens of thousands have marched in Moscow demanding open elections, with hundreds arrested. In Haiti, police have joined anti-government protests. Scores have been killed on demonstrations in Iraq demanding human rights. In Britain, around half a million marched in London in October calling for a second referendum on Brexit. As in other countries, tens of thousands have been on climate change protests organised by school strikers and Extinction Rebellion.

Nothing signals democratic movements more clearly than mass demonstrations. Two hundred years on we recognise there was something new about the 60,000 who gathered in St Peter's Field on Monday 16 August 1819 that made history. Disciplined, inclusive, with clear demands, they were not the traditional 'mob'. While the largest group was the ever more impoverished handloom weavers marching in from surrounding villages, many were from Manchester, the 'shock city of the age':¹

As a stranger passes through the masses of human beings which have accumulated round the mills and print works ... he cannot contemplate these 'crowded hives' without feelings of anxiety and apprehension almost amounting to dismay. The population, like the system to which it belongs, is NEW; but it is hourly increasing in breadth and strength ... There are mighty energies slumbering in these masses ... The manufacturing population is not new in its formation alone: it is new in its habits of thought and action, which have been formed by the circumstances of its condition, with little instruction, and less guidance, from external sources ...²

How to control these 'mighty energies'? Peterloo showed how not to do it. The rioters on the day were not the demonstrators but the yeomanry, the drunk, ill-disciplined, middle-class, volunteer local militia. Worse still, the authorities lost the propaganda battle that followed. The

yeomanry were *seen* to be the rioters. It was the journalist John Tyas's 10,000 word report in *The Times* that has dominated subsequent historiography, always to be known with bitter irony as 'Peterloo'.³ In the words of Peterloo's most recent historian, the 'real "battle of Peterloo" was the long war of words, images, and ideas that followed, and this was the one that the authorities lost'.⁴

Stable, efficient and organised along military lines

The new force 'from below' required a new force 'from above'. Within ten years of Peterloo, a modern police force, 'stable, efficient and organised along military lines',⁵ was established in London and soon after in the provinces.⁶ It was not a question of whether the state possessed sufficient force to suppress disorder. Charles Napier, General Officer Commanding of the Northern District in the year of the first Chartist petition (1839), scoffed when told that physical force Chartists were planning uprisings

Poor people! They will suffer. They have set all England against them and their physical force: fools! We have the physical force, not they ... Poor Men! Poor Men! How little they know of physical force!⁷

Police 'efficiency' meant using the minimum force needed to maintain control on the streets of Britain. Imperial Britain used extreme violence on its subjects countless times.⁸ At Maini, the 1843 battle establishing British control of Sindh, forces under Napier's command killed 6,000 for a loss of 300. Compared to his fellow officers, Napier was a progressive, critical of the *status quo*. Attending one of the great meetings on Kersal Moor *incognito*, he wrote in his journal 'Good government consists in having good laws well obeyed. England has an abundance of bad laws, but is every man to arm against every law he thinks bad? No!'⁹ For him there was no question of suppressing such assemblies so long as they did not take to break the law.

'Minimum force'?

The minimum force needed to ensure control is an operational matter, difficult to establish. Observers may suggest that, as at Peterloo, those in command take the opportunity 'to put people in their place'.¹⁰ The summer of 1911 saw solidarity action in Liverpool by dockers, railway workers and others in support of seafarers taking part in a national dispute. Home Secretary Winston Churchill's response was to send

troops and the armoured cruiser HMS Antrim to the city. On Sunday 13 August, two months into the strike, 80,000 marched to a rally on St George's Plateau. The stonemason Fred Bower observed the solidarity uniting the Catholic and Protestant bands who accompanied the march, describing how

A wonderful spirit of humour and friendliness permeated the atmosphere. It was glorious weather ... All was going well, no signs of trouble ... a well organized mass ... ranged round the Plateau and surrounding approaches, all in their Sunday best, and many of them with their women folk with them, were set upon and brutally battered.¹¹

A recent description, written by retired Liverpool police officers, notes

The Head Constable had numerous police officers from Birmingham and Leeds concealed inside St George's Hall together with 100 soldiers. As soon as the violence started the Police emerged from St George's Hall and baton charged the crowd and the Mounted Department also charged the crowd. After a short period of time the steps of St George's Hall were cleared but many people were injured. Stuart Deacon, stipendiary magistrate then appeared on the plateau surrounded by troops ... [and] read the riot act ...¹²

One-hundred and eighty-six people were hospitalised and ninety-five arrested in the hours that followed. In any case, the violence continued. Troops had opened fire on both Sunday and Monday night; on Tuesday, 'Bloody Tuesday', vans accompanied by soldiers were taking prisoners arrested on Sunday to Walton Gaol. A disturbance caused them to open fire. Five civilians were injured, two fatally. The following Saturday (19 August), two more unarmed civilians were shot by troops in Llanelli. The 50,000 troops Churchill had despatched across the country could not contain the strike and Prime Minister Asquith got the railway owners to settle with the unions, a historic victory as workers in a key industry now won *de facto* union recognition.

Violence and non-violence

Today, planned attacks on police at demonstrations are rarer in Britain than elsewhere, perhaps because of the weakness of the anarchist, 'Black bloc', tradition.¹³ Deliberate attacks on police may trigger suspicions that *agents provocateurs* are at work. At the same time, blaming anarchists is an easy way to pass the responsibility for violence onto others as shown,

for example, by Home Secretary James Callaghan's remarks about 'The usual job lot of anarchists'¹⁴ in relation to the demonstration in Swansea against the Springboks.

The prime example of attacks on police, 'the most violent and extensive disturbance on Britain's streets since the war', erupted over ten days in July 1981 in Liverpool and London, soon followed in Manchester and then in dozens of towns and cities across England. Black, white and Asian combined to fight police, on occasion with petrol bombs. A number of police stations came under attack. Unable to contain the disturbances at first, the organised police response typically came when the rioting was subsiding. In Manchester the third night looked like the moment the police got their revenge with 'three times as many arrests on this night of very low level rioting as on the previous two nights combined'.¹⁵

Conversely, nonviolent direct action is also a time-honoured protest tactic. In the early 1960s, the peace group 'the Committee of 100' succeeded in bringing together thousands of supporters to sit down *en masse* outside the Ministry of Defence in Whitehall. While at first many were willing to face arrest, the Committee was unable to escalate the action beyond the high point (17 September 1961), when 1,314 were arrested in Trafalgar Square and 351 at Holy Loch, the nuclear submarine base.¹⁶ In recent months, groups like Extinction Rebellion have attempted to use similar tactics to draw attention to the environmental crisis.

Bans

Bans damage the image of police impartiality and may fail when large numbers want to protest. Despite permission being refused, the demand for Irish Home Rule and for increased relief for the unemployed brought ten thousand marchers to a meeting in Trafalgar Square organised by the Social Democratic Federation (SDF) on 13 November 1887. Two thousand police, some mounted, with troops in support, cleared the square. Two SDF leaders were arrested and given six-week prison sentences. Walter Crane remembered the day, known as 'Bloody Sunday',

I never saw anything more like real warfare in my life – only the attack was all on one side. The police, in spite of their numbers, apparently thought they could not cope with the crowd. They had certainly exasperated them, and could not disperse them, as after every charge – and some of these drove the people right against the shutters in the shops in the Strand – they returned again.

Losing control

The numbers and mood of those demonstrating can mean defeat on the day. The Forty Hours strike in Glasgow in January 1919, was a reasoned response to the prospect of mass unemployment as the war ended. Harry McShane of the Clyde Workers Committee insisted 'We didn't regard the Forty Hours Strike as a revolution. We saw it more as the beginning of things'. With revolution spreading from Russia to Germany, the War Cabinet took no chances, sending troops and tanks to the city. While the strike leaders were meeting the Lord Provost in the City Chambers, between 20,000 and 60,000 rallied outside in George Square. When the police charged with batons, the crowd fought back.

Finally the police ran for it and the strikers went after them. There were a lot of closes in Cathedral Street and they rushed up these closes to try and get over the back wall. But there were men catching them by the legs and pulling them down. Some of them got a terrible hiding. I think the best fight was up in Cathedral Street.¹⁷

That night Glasgow was occupied by troops, machine guns were positioned in George Square. The strike lasted a further ten days before settling for a forty-seven-hour week.

Loss of control may be only brief, yet may cause serious political damage. The anti-Poll Tax demonstrators who sat down in front of Downing Street's new security gates on 31 March 1990, triggered a baton charge which over the next few hours escalated to London's most serious riot in the twentieth century. It also persuaded many in the Conservative Party leadership that the poll tax had to go. This entailed despatching its most prominent supporter, Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, who was forced to resign eight months later.

The explosive London dock strike (1889) had seen a different approach. With an estimated 130,000 strikers, 6,000 pickets, daily marches of 20,000 in processions over a mile long and the strike spreading to other trades in London's East End, the police chose to cooperate with strike leaders. Control yielded to accommodation with few arrests and less violence. John Burns, one of the two SDF leaders imprisoned after Bloody Sunday two years earlier, found the police providing him with a hat to make him easier to find at strike rallies. These proceeded without disruption along with food distribution and women stopping landlords collecting rents.¹⁸

A willingness on the part of the police to be more accommodating could have avoided unnecessary defeats. Michael Foot's threat to trespass in Hyde Park if the Culture Secretary did not lift her ban on the Stop the

War demonstration rallying there on 15 February 2003 echoed an earlier conflict. Thousands attended the Reform League meeting in Hyde Park on 23 July 1866, demanding universal manhood suffrage, breaking the railings in three places after the Home Secretary declared it to be illegal. Two hundred thousand attended the Reform League meeting in Hyde Park the following May after the Home Secretary, having imposed a ban and sworn in special constables, backed down.

The fear of losing control was key to the 'paramilitarisation' of police in the 1970s and 1980s with the growth of units such as the Special Patrol Group, equipped with shields and helmets, and, more importantly, trained in the use of violence. The argument that such training and equipment leads to fewer injuries than use of traditional baton and mounted police can be countered with the view that it leads to an escalation of conflict.¹⁹

'Success' or failure?

Sometimes police 'success' is better understood as the failure of the march organisers, as with Chartism's final challenge to the ruling order, the 10 April 1848 demonstration. Just weeks after the revolution in Paris, now spreading across Europe, with 'new levels of political unrest' reported in Lancashire, the Chartist leadership was unable to agree on tactics, finally calling for supporters to assemble on Kennington Common, on the south bank of the Thames, ensuring that the authorities could control the bridges and so prevent any threat to Westminster. On the morning of the 10th, Police Commissioner Richard Mayne met Feargus O'Connor in the police control centre on the edge of the common, informing him the meeting was allowed but there could be no procession. O'Connor accepted the demonstration was a failure, telling the crowd they should disperse.²⁰

Strikes

The collective organisation of the workplace was present at Peterloo in embryo. Demonstrations by strikers have a particular strength. Nowhere was the right to assemble tested as in Manchester on the morning of 9 August 1842 as more than 12,000 strikers marched the six miles from Ashton demanding a twenty-five per cent cut in pay rates be reversed. Led by Richard Pilling and other Chartists, they were 'determined to meet the Masters as the Masters would not meet them'. At the edge of the city, they found Daniel Maude, stipendiary magistrate supported by police, infantry, cavalry and artillery. The Chief Commissioner of Police, Sir Charles Shaw, wanted to break up the strikers. Everyone present knew that 'a

company of foot-soldiers could disperse an angry concourse many times its size by opening fire on it', yet an attack on the strikers risked a rerun of the Peterloo Massacre with incalculable consequences. None of the senior figures present were prepared for that risk. Having placed himself at the front of the march to the city centre, Maude was unable to stop groups leaving the main procession to turn out at nearby mills. At midday, 20,000 listened to Pilling and resolved to escalate the strike. The turnout, the so-called 'Plug Plot', now spread across Lancashire to Yorkshire and further. At its peak, perhaps half a million took part. Napier's successor, Warre, had a mere 5,000 troops to which were added 2,000 troops brought from London on the newly opened railway line from Euston. Together with police and magistrates, these troops repeatedly broke up pickets. Only in Preston was there a major incident with four killed and seven seriously wounded.²¹ With few employers making concessions, it was hunger rather than repression that forced people back to work.

The general strike

The nine-day general strike of May 1926, called in support of the miners, is generally remembered for its peacefulness. The government had prepared carefully, aiming for overwhelming force. A strike breaking operation, the Organisation for the Maintenance of Supply (OMS), was set up, and an additional hundred thousand special constables were enrolled, doubling the existing number. Tens of thousands of troops were mobilised. 'Long files of armoured cars choked the country roads in Surrey. Troops continued to pour into town'.²² By contrast, the TUC, having made few preparations, issued strike bulletins insisting that every worker 'should be exemplary in his conduct and not give any opportunity for police interference'.²³ At a local level, George Lansbury, MP for Poplar, was typical:

Don't quarrel with the police. We can and will win without disorder of any kind. Policemen are flesh of our flesh and bone of our bones, and we will co-operate with them to keep the peace.²⁴

The mass picket organised by the Battersea Council of Action which marched round factories on the first morning, not all of them fully unionised, pulling them out on strike, one after another, was exceptional.²⁵ There were nevertheless about 4,000 arrests, 1,000 of them members of the Communist Party. In London alone, day six of the strike (Saturday 8 May) saw police baton charges in Wandsworth, Battersea, Lambeth, Deptford, Paddington and Camden. In Preston, a crowd of 5,000 tried unsuccessfully

for several hours to storm a police station to rescue an arrested striker.²⁶ It was however prime minister Baldwin's judgement that the TUC General would surrender that brought the strike to an end with relatively little violence. Given the failure of the OMS, it is hard to see how increased state violence could have saved the government and employers from being forced to make concessions if the strike had continued.

Protecting fascists

A new situation for the police arose with the opposition to Oswald Mosley's British Union of Fascists as police found themselves for the first time protecting marchers. The most important instance, the 'Battle of Cable Street' (3 October 1936), saw around 20,000 anti-fascists and local people block the route through a largely Jewish part of London's East End. A number of trams abandoned by their drivers were used as barricades. Six thousand police, including all of London's mounted police, failed to clear the route for a couple of thousand fascists to march. The Public Order Act 1936 followed soon after, giving the Home Secretary the power to ban marches in London. Chief constables could apply for bans in their own area. Though these additional powers were mainly used against the left not against fascists, it is arguable how much difference they made. The rise of the National Front in the 1970s brought similar confrontation, notably the 'Battle of Lewisham' (13 August 1977), when a similar combination of anti-fascists and local people broke through the police cordon to stop a National Front march through an immigrant area of the city. This was also the first time that riot shields were used on the British mainland. Police protection reached the point of absurdity when, two months later, 2,000 police accompanied the National Front leader, Martin Webster, marching alone through the centre of Hyde in Greater Manchester. As police protected a National Front election meeting in Southall, in April 1979, the anti-fascist demonstrator Blair Peach was killed by a member of the Metropolitan Police's paramilitary Special Patrol Group.²⁷

New movements

Not all mass movements involved protests threatening public order. The challenge to authority posed by the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU), came from direct action, arson attacks, letter bombs, hunger strikes, not public protest. What at the time was the largest demonstration ever, with estimates up to half a million ('Women's Sunday', 21 June 1908), passed off peacefully. By contrast, 'Black Friday' (18 November

1910), saw women on a WSPU protest outside the Houses of Parliament harassed by police and bystanders. By the end of the six-hour long demonstration, 115 women and four men had been arrested.²⁸

Unemployed marches seem to have attracted a heavy police response. The attack on the 1932 National Hunger March as it arrived in London saw baton charges by mounted police with many injured.²⁹ The reaction this caused contributed to establishing the National Council for Civil Liberties. The protests may not have been large but were frequently attacked. Four hundred members of the National Unemployed Workers' Movement were imprisoned in 1932.³⁰ Little had changed when the Right to Work march was attacked as it entered London (March 1976) with forty-three arrested.³¹

The idea that action by students can trigger working class action gained credence from the events of May 1968 in France where student protests in Paris led to a mass strike of ten million. Having been strike-breakers in 1926, students were now leading protests, notably the anti-Vietnam War demonstration in London (March 1968). Public order policing had not been an important issue for most of the 1960s, but this was to change. The challenges that faced the Conservative government, elected in June 1970, were of a different order. Within a year, as 100,000 struck and 50,000 marched in Glasgow against the threat to close Upper Clyde Shipbuilders (June 1971), the chief constable warned his superiors in Whitehall he was unsure of maintaining public order if the yards were closed.³² In the 1972 miners' strike, 800 police could handle 2,000 picketing miners, 'flying pickets', at the Birmingham Saltley coke depot. When the pickets were joined by upwards of 10,000 engineers marching to their support, the Birmingham chief constable ordered the depot closed.³³ It was not only at Saltley that the police were outnumbered. In Kent and elsewhere,

Police admitted privately that 'the widespread nature of the miners' offensive and the numbers of men involved had stretched police resources to their limit'.³⁴

Within a few months of Saltley, dockworkers were using flying pickets to spread solidarity in support of their colleagues imprisoned in Pentonville gaol. Building workers in their national pay dispute soon followed this. In all three union victories, policing played, at best, a limited role.³⁵

The police, however, were keen to regain control of public order in industrial disputes, and in the miners' strike of 1984-85, no effort was spared. In the course of the dispute there were over 11,000 arrests, and the miners' attempt to repeat the success at Saltley at the Orgreave coke

depot near Sheffield, on 18 June 1984, found 5,000 pickets confronted by 6,000 police.

[I]t would seem that the police intended that Orgreave would be a 'battle' where, as a result of their preparation and organisation, they would 'defeat' the pickets.³⁶

Roger Geary suggests that policing up to the Great Unrest had always been on behalf of the employer, as their private army. The growing strength of unions, monitoring of police behaviour and the strengthening of social democracy limited the scope of police violence. The 'mass pushing and shoving of the early 1970s can be seen as a solution to the problem of making picketing effective without resorting to violence'.³⁷ On the police side Geary noted the absence of riot shields, even the SPG were lightly equipped. None of this means that away from the picket line, those arrested and brought to police stations were not treated brutally. For all the centralisation of policing, reducing the numbers of police forces, strengthening bodies such as the Association of Chief Police Officers, now replaced by the National Police Chiefs' Council, some trends can be reversed at the local level. Since January 2017, Lancashire police have operated as a *de facto* private army for Cuadrilla at their fracking site near Blackpool.

Conclusion

While we need to remember the success of the police strike of 1918 and the naval mutiny at Invergordon in 1931, Napier's insistence that the state will always win any contest based on physical force still holds good. At the same time, no Home Secretary or Chief Constable wants to be remembered for a second Peterloo. If the numbers and determination of protesters are sufficient, it is possible Extinction Rebellion will succeed where the Committee of 100 failed, in paralysing Whitehall. If, as seems certain, there will be more police attacks on protestors 'to teach them a lesson', the self-denying ordinance 'No more Peterloos', means a limit to the power of the state. Home Secretary Maudling expressed it well when challenged on why troops were not used to keep the gates at Saltley open, 'Should they have gone in with their guns loaded or unloaded? Either course would have been disastrous'.³⁸ There is no reason to suppose that Maudling is the last home secretary to face this dilemma.

Geoff Brown

Notes

1. Asa Briggs, *Victorian Cities*, Harmondsworth 1968, p56.
2. William Cooke Taylor, *Notes of a tour in the manufacturing districts of Lancashire*, 1842, pp4-6, quoted in E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, London 1963, pp208-209.
3. Limitations of space prevent a proper analysis here of how the reporting of demonstrations *post-hoc* is almost always a contested matter if there has been any violence. For an allegation of media suppression by the authorities see the reference to Pathé news reporting <https://londonsocialisthistorians.blogspot.com/search?q=liverpool+transport+strike+1911>
4. Robert Poole, *Peterloo, the English Uprising*, Oxford, 2019, p393.
5. James Waters and Sheree McGrath, *Introduction to Law Enforcement*, Columbus, OH 1974, p7.
6. Municipal Corporations Act 1835; Rural Constabulary Act 1839.
7. William Napier, *The Life and Opinions of General Sir Charles James Napier G.C.B., Volume 2*, London 1857, p69.
8. See John Newsinger, *The blood never dried*, London 2006.
9. F.C. Mather, *Public Order in the Age of the Chartists*, Manchester, 1959, p154, quoting Napier, II, p63.
10. Poole, *Peterloo*, p381.
11. Fred Bower, *Rolling Stonemason: An Autobiography*, London 2015 [1936], p132.
12. <http://liverpoolcitypolice.co.uk/transport-strike-1911/4554644764>
13. David Graeber, 'The new anarchists', *New Left Review* 13 (January-February 2002).
14. *Guardian*, 25 November 1969, p1.
15. Chris Harman, 'The Summer of 1981: a post-riot analysis', *International Socialism*, (Autumn 1981), p1.
16. Richard Taylor and Colin Pritchard, *The Protest Makers*, Oxford 1980, p11.
17. Harry McShane, *No mean fighter*, London 1978, p106.
18. Joan Ballhatchet, 'The Police and the London Dock Strike of 1889', *History Workshop Journal*, 32-1 (1991), pp54-68.
19. Tony Jefferson, *The Case against Paramilitary Policing*, Milton Keynes 1990.
20. John Saville, *1848, The British state and the Chartist Movement*, Cambridge 1987, pp118-119.
21. Robert Gammage, *History of the Chartist Movement, 1837-1854*, London 1969, p221.
22. Patrick Renshaw, *The General Strike*, London 1975, p17.
23. *British Worker*, 'Message to all workers', cited in Christopher Farman, *The General Strike*, London 1972, p135.
24. *Bow and Bromley Strike Bulletin*, 6 May, TUC library box HD 5366, cited

- in Tony Cliff and Donny Gluckstein, *Marxism and trade union struggle, The general strike of 1926*, London 1986, p205.
25. Harry Wicks, *Keeping my head*, London 1992, p62.
 26. Farman, *The General Strike*, p239.
 27. The Special Patrol Group were also present in Red Lion Square (15 June 1974) when Kevin Gately was killed on a demonstration against the National Front. See Joanna Rollo, 'The Special Patrol Group', in Peter Hain (ed.), *Policing the Police*, Vol. 2, London 1980, pp178-181.
 28. Caroline Morrell, *Black Friday and violence against women in the Suffragette movement*, London 1981.
 29. Noreen Branson, *History of the Communist Party of Great Britain, 1927-1941*, London 1985, p81.
 30. McShane, *No mean Fighter*, p184.
 31. '41 policemen hurt in battle with workless', *Times*, 20 March 1976, p1.
 32. John McIlroy, Nina Fishman, Alan Campbell (eds), *The high tide of British trade unionism*, London 2007, pp182-183.
 33. Andy Beckett, *When the lights went out*, London 2009, pp72-84.
 34. Malcolm Pitt, *The world on our backs: the Kent miners and the 1972 miners strike*, London 1979, p144.
 35. It was a year after the return to work, October 1973 that the trial started at Shrewsbury Crown Court which found three pickets, Des Warren, Ricky Tomlinson and John McKinsie Jones guilty of conspiracy to intimidate, unlawful assembly and affray.
 36. Robert East, Helen Power and Philip A. Thomas, 'The Death of Mass Picketing', *Journal of Law and Society* (Winter 1985), p310.
 37. Roger Geary, *Policing Industrial Disputes: 1893 to 1985*, Cambridge 1985, p114.
 38. John McIlroy, Nina Fishman, Alan Campbell (eds), *British Trade Unions and Industrial Politics: The Post-war Compromise, 1945-1964*, London 1999, p111.