RIOT WAR JUSTICE AND HISTORY

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(Programme Note for “The Riot Act” – a play devised by The Mayhem Company, a young people’s theatre group based in London)

History is the unending struggle for justice between races, classes and people. It is a war. If it ceased to be that we would cease to be human. It is abstract and concrete. Abstractly it means doing what is right. But what is right? Is it doing what God wants, the state wants, the country wants, the race wants, my neighbours want -- or what I, when I am my least selfish, want? If you consider these different aims, you find the meaning of justice changes for each of them. The struggle for justice is the struggle to define justice. What could be more abstract than that?

But it is also concrete because it touches all things. If your country goes to war with another country you can define the boundary between the two countries -- it is the frontline. But what is the boundary between right and wrong, justice and injustice, guilt and innocence? Justice concerns not just bodies on the battlefield or bodies on the streets in gang wars -- it occurs in all situations and relations, in the home, school, workplace, everywhere. In the struggle for justice there is no front line because the struggle is the way we live and so it is total. The question is not “are our acts just?”, but “are our lives -- is our way of life -- just?” And oddly the law courts are the place where there is least justice: because laws are not made to prevent and punish crimes but to protect injustice. Why? -- because all societies that make laws are unequal, unfair and unjust. The laws are made to protect the wealth and civil privileges of those who have power. We are not all equal before justice because we are not all equal before the bankers. And the law’s sanctions and punishments are at their most savage when they are used not to protect justice but to protect injustice. That is the big secret of politics. If for just once we could immediately grasp this truth we would instantly become perfect humans. Perhaps we accept injustice because it is so deeply buried in our way of living, our minds and emotions, that we don’t notice it anymore -- just as every morning when we get up we don’t look to see if the sky’s still there, it just is. But then, as this is so, in order to understand our society, our world, better we first have to understand ourselves -- not what shall I wear or buy or do today, but what does it mean to be human? A dog, a cat, a mouse never has to ask itself what it is. But for human beings it is always the question and if we get the answers wrong we suffer. That’s why justice is concrete -- it touches all aspects of our lives. And there is something even more startling: we now live in a more decent society because in the past people were prepared to die for justice. Justice is the highest human ideal -- and there is a glimmer of that ideal in all our activities, however mundane and ordinary. It is the dignity of being human. It is at the heart of the conflict between respect and deference, between self-respect and cowardice. Just as there is no “front line” in the war for justice, so there is no peace. The struggle is constant.

But surely a bad law is better than no law? How else could we manage to get on together? In practice, we manage this not through laws but through rough rules and customs and codes of conduct. These are wiser than laws. No law says we must be polite to each other -- for most of the time we just do it. It is how we survive each day and negotiate our way through society’s complex and stunting injustices. But societies change. And when in times such as ours the change is so rapid and far-reaching that the world of our parents all but vanishes, then the customs and rough-and-ready rules can no longer cope with the change. They break down. Then it becomes necessary to change the laws. But because we have never faced up to our situation -- which is, in a word, that the laws of society are unjust -- then we are trapped in our confusion. And it is precisely then that the old laws, and the obsolescent social structures they maintain, are enforced more stringently and the penalties for breaking them are made more savage. Cause and effect become circular and society becomes more irrational and more violent. Justice is not created by armies and police forces -- they are only the encumbrances and impedimenta of history. Justice is created when people
understand themselves and the life they are living.

We can give these abstract ideas a concrete illustration. Recently there was a radio discussion. A man said he had founded his business from nothing in a backroom. He was now rich and earned millions. He justified this by saying that his business gave work to thousands and so enabled them to earn too -- and to live. If you are a soldier in Afghanistan you may not live -- you may die and for that you and your surviving dependants will be paid what compared to the rich man’s millions is a pauper’s pittance. The soldiers die so that the rich man may be rich. Society is a whole, each part, each person, dependent on the others, each inextricably bound to the others and no person exists alone but each is part of the others. This is true of those who labour at the simplest tasks and those who innovate and contrive the most sophisticated, complex and intricate fabrications. If you want to tip the rich man a bit more for his enterprise, well and good -- but it does not justify you in equating pennies with millions. What the rich man said was barbarous, cruel, indecent, morally corrupt and offensive to all civilized standards. It was, in the word that dominates this paper, unjust. Yet no other speaker in the radio programme pointed out to the rich man that his unctuous self-congratulation was unjust. It was just there, a fact -- just as the sky is there every morning so you never have to bother to look at it to check. No society with so little self-understanding -- that is blind to the expression on its own face -- can be at peace. It is why the city neighbourhoods rioted.

Of course the rioters were not conscious that they were fulfilling the subtle but adamant mechanisms of history, working out the way in which injustices fester in and are filtered through the complexities of emotions, passions, desires, long-seething resentments and sudden outbursts of passion, half-understood notions, half-articulated ideas, half-dreamt ideals -- but it is certain that the rioters were the logic of history and that that logic is more enduring than man made laws. And because those laws are made, first and foremost, to protect the rich from the poor, the powerful from the weak and the unjust from the victims -- so when they are broken authority is harsher, politicians plot greater repression and minister demand more savage punishment. It is now a matter of time before police or troops fire on people in the streets -- and a question of speculation whether the plastic rounds will be replaced by live bullets. And you may go to Eton and other expensive academies of ignorance to learn to justify such savagery.

This is our situation and the wilderness into which we send the young. Societies reach a point where injustice and resistance become garish. Thatcher went far towards depoliticising resistance. The riots are the result. Blood will drip from her knife long after she is dead. It is urgent that we replace violence with understanding. The only way to be free of riots and violence and crime is to make society more just. For that reason I am against the riots but for the rioters.