

Can breaking the rules change the world? – By Emily Rimmer. 10 pearl. Tolworth Girls' School

We are taught from an early age that we must obey the rules. These include say please and thank you, don't walk on the road, cross at the pedestrian crossing, eat your greens and so on. If we do this, we are told, we will stay safe and nothing bad will happen to us. The implication of this is that rules protect us, and more significantly, that the rules by which we are expected to live benefit everyone, whatever their circumstance. As one gets older one realises that this is only half the story. Another way of looking at it is that rules are there to maintain society's status quo. Rules are there to maintain and extend the power of the 'haves' and keep the 'have nots' in their place. How else is it that the rich get richer and poor get poorer; left to fend for themselves? When you look at it this way, breaking the rules isn't so bad is it? Breaking the rules is about challenging an unfair system. Breaking the rules is about creating a more equal society. Breaking the rules is about changing the world. Breaking the rules is better than accepting the wrongs in this world.

I came to realise that the 'rules of rules' were complex after conversations with my grandad and grandma. They were both born just outside Liverpool and neither came from a 'well to do' background. They always talk about social justice and particularly how the rich exploit the poor. Maybe it's because of where they live and the values of their community that they have this perspective? They told me a story which fascinated me; they called it the 'Tale of the Toxteth Riots'.

Toxteth is in Liverpool. Liverpool, if you don't know, is a city in the northwest of England. It has a long and colourful history, which can be traced back to 1190 when the place was known as Luierpol. By the start of the 19th century, it was a thriving trading port. All sorts of people were attracted to the booming city. The first passenger railway was opened in 1830 which brought people to Liverpool from Manchester and other part of North England. People also migrated from Ireland. The population of Liverpool grew rapidly as people were attracted to the work created by the docks and other manufacturing industries. Many merchants got very rich from the ill-gotten gains of the slave trade and exploitation of the working people.

For a time, Liverpool was a very rich city but it's wealth was always founded on the exploitation of the 'have nots'. However, from the mid-20th century Liverpool and its traditional manufacturing and docklands industries went into a sharp decline. The post-war years were difficult for Liverpool. England began to import more goods than it exported, and most was imported through London. Although this increases England's economy, Liverpool's many workers were fired with little to no certainty of getting a new job, furthering the divide between the haves and have nots. In this example, much like many before it, the rich believe that to stay rich they must keep that divide as big as possible and the segregation and inequality can be seen in society.

As well as the differences between the rich and the poor, there were also differences based on religion and latterly race and ethnicity. The prosperity of Liverpool had attracted migrants from the Commonwealth to settle there. These were men and women from a range of places including the Caribbean and south Asia. These communities were not always welcomed in post war Britain and as times hardened, they were seen as part of the problem. For them living in a discriminatory society, they had to deal not only with poverty but also racial discrimination from fellow city dwellers as well as from the police force and other public bodies.

During the 1970s and 1980s, unemployment soared to one of the highest rates in Britain. It was the poor and minorities that suffered the most. During this time, Grandad was working the clubs and pubs of Liverpool. No, he wasn't a singer! He mended fruit machines. Doing this job meant he saw the poverty first hand. For example, one trip into Liverpool, he was approached by a young boy around 10 years of age for money, to "mind his car". Grandad told the boy that he had Kate, his German shepherd, in his van. The little boy said: "Can your dog put out fires?", implying he was planning to set his van alight. This brought home to Grandad the troubles of the area. While writing my essay, Miss Kemp asked me to get a quote from my Grandad. I wasn't really sure how I was going to ask him, but I did. It gave me the insight to a world that the articles and stories don't give you. He described Liverpool during his working life: "Many of the pubs/clubs I worked in were in socially deprived areas such as the Toxteth district of Liverpool. At the time of the rioting, parts of the

area were no-go areas due to the tension between the residents and the police. As I saw it on the ground, the build up to the trouble emanated from the conditions people were having to endure on a daily basis over a long period of time. Slum housing and a lack of employment opportunities caused racial tension between the authorities and the residents from ethnic backgrounds, who could see no way out of the situation they were forced to endure.” (John Rimmer, 2019). He continued by talking about the people he met, “Many of the people I came into contact with were decent people who just needed some help to change their desperate living conditions.” (John Rimmer, 2019).

How did the rioters break the rules? Which rules did they break? And why? It is clear that rioting gave the disenfranchised a voice in society - a voice loud enough to be heard. The Toxteth riots lasted for 9 days. It started with a stop and search – a common occurrence for black men in the streets of Toxteth. On this particular July evening in 1981, Leroy Cooper was stopped by the police. The watching crowd intervened, and the incident turned into a disturbance. Tension mounted and that night the first wave of rioting began. Over the next week Toxteth became a no-go area as battles erupted between the community and the police. The rioting crowd threw bricks at any police vehicle that entered the area. A rioter Darrin Rawkins recalled “we started by bricking the police station and then bricked every police car that came into Liverpool” (quoted in The Independent dated 1st July 2011). He continued “rioting was emancipating . It is on my list of 10 things that you should do before you die.” (The Independent, 1st July 2011). During the riots 70 buildings were demolished and hundreds of cars were torched. There was £11million worth of damage, but the cost to community relations was higher.

The media blamed the rioters for the damage and in a lot of the newspapers they were portrayed as the bad guys in the a black and white world. The right-wing press labelled them as ‘race riots’ with black people, and black young men in particular , characterised as hooligans – uncivilised and looking for trouble. They neglected to understand that the unrest was to do with poverty and discrimination, and not about race. This media coverage acted to criminalise the black youths in Toxteth and made the people visiting Toxteth and Liverpool cautious of what they might find. A lot of the black population were affected by these accusations as people’s fears of them continued to grow.

Of course, it is not simple as to say that one side was in the right and was abiding by the rules and the other side was wrong, because they were both breaking the rules. As the common saying goes “ the truth lies somewhere in the middle”. Of course, the media often presented it as much more black and white. How can the police be let off after they stood in their dozens banging on their shields howling monkey noises at the rioting crowd, continuing to mock the rioters as they fought for rights that the police didn’t even have to think about?

Some may ask why the ‘have nots’ had enough and made the conscious decision to riot in the streets of Toxteth? A police officer working in those days would have told you that they did it to stir up drama, but the truth is they had nothing left to lose. With no support and no hope the citizens of Toxteth took the problem into their own hands. What else could they have done? It was an act of desperation. They were not seeking destruction. How can they be blamed for wanting a better life for themselves and their families? Who decides that the ‘haves’ deserve more than the ‘have nots’?

Many laws in England, just like in other countries, were made by the haves to benefit them and only them. This left the minorities, like the black population, defending themselves. The definition of a law is “the system of rules which a particular country or community recognizes as regulating the actions of its members and which it may enforce by the imposition of penalties (defined by the Oxford dictionary). The idea behind a law is to protect people. For example, the law against murder is to protect society from potential deaths and although the laws don’t completely deter people from murder, the correct penalty can be given for the act. However, the laws in the 1970s and 1980s did the opposite. Not only did they segregate the minority, it made them vulnerable. Vulnerable to the toxic haves and vulnerable to unfair treatment from the police. A poem (from the tale of two tribe’s documentary – aired on ‘bt sports’ on the 30th March 2019 described how the social disadvantaged felt

about Toxteth: “Political unstabilized, economically destabilized, people dehumanised, youth criminalised, mental vandalised, housing ghettoised, political unrecognised, and you wonder why we up rise”.

This is a feeling that no one wants to feel. This feeling had to stop and the only way that the people of Toxteth felt they could do anything was to break the rules. Breaking the rules was the first step to changing them. However, rioting wasn't the only way that the people of Liverpool fought back against the discrimination. A lot of comedies and TV series were written and performed which contained satire. This satire mocked the way that society was run and showed the government and the audience how people felt that they were being treated as animals. These were examples of small rules that were broken that made people aware of the things that were happening in Liverpool and inspired thousands to try make a change. Broken rules like these caught the media's attention and it was this attention that worried the Government. A fear that other cities will do the same – make noise and riot for rights – and small changes could be seen, although they were only minor.

There were some short-term gains from people's fights back. In 1983, Liverpool elected a hard-left city council jointly led by Derek Hatton. Derek Hatton said: “He came to power because Liverpool was looking for change and to fight back” (quoted in ‘the tale of two tribes’). The noise and fuss that they made caused the government to realise the importance of investing in people and their needs; at least in the short term. They learnt that we all have rights that the they are responsible to ensure that people get decent chance.

However, as much as I would like to sit here and say that life is better and more equal now, this is not the truth. Many people are still living in poverty, and unequal living conditions are commonplace. Society is still racist, although on the surface it is less acceptable now. It is still very clear that the divide between the rich and poor can often define how people are treated, and the first impression people get of them. Tensions between the residents and both the police force and the government are still very high; these tensions still cause some problems. To this day, Toxteth is one of the most culturally diverse places in Liverpool but the discrimination is still very clear, and changes still need to be made.

My Grandad described his view of Toxteth as it is today: “There are still problems today due to the changing commercial opportunities. Containerisation of the port, and the loss of heavy construction industries have changed the face of the region. Lack of high-tech industries in the area is also a factor. Overall, conditions have improved greatly but there are still many problems to solve, such as drug abuse, unemployment, inequality in education and health care, in what are still socially troubled areas.” (John Rimmer, 2019)

While working in Liverpool years after the riots, my Grandad was stabbed. He was stabbed after chasing a robber down the street. When he tells people, they still ask if it was a black man he was chasing. The truth is that my grandad was stabbed by a white man. He was saved by a black man - the surgeon who saved his life. A man who I am so grateful for. So you see, even today, after rules have been broken, discrimination is rife. Breaking the rules does make a difference, but this needs persistence and commitment. We need to keep challenging the status quo in whatever way we can and recognise that breaking the rules is sometimes needed – but that we all need to change.

Because in Liverpool you will never walk alone.

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