Riot or protest?

The young men who took part in the firebombing of a pub in Leeds earlier this month are not, claims Max Farrar, the vicious, organised gangsters portrayed in the press.

The burnt rubble has the smell of the morning after Bonfire Night: it may well be the smell of this summer in the English inner cities. The focal point for a night of urban protest, The Newlands pub in Hyde Park Road, Leeds, was completely gutted by firebombs on 10 July. As the soggy, smoky ruins of this recently refurbished and renamed Victorian pub are demolished, a small crowd gathers to witness the spectacle, and a bunch of young men pose delightedly for my camera in front of the gutted building. There’s a fierce excitement in the air. For those of us who witnessed the 1981 urban rebellions (in 38 towns and cities, from Tunbridge Wells to Wallasey, with 2,235 arrests), there is a worrying smell of déjà vu.

If “protest” implies conscious and legitimately channelled complaint, and “riot” implies mere criminal violence, neither word quite captures the meaning of this event. Useful understanding of the contours of the inner cities in the mid-1980s will come when we move on from the blunt instruments of politics and journalism. The young men I talked to who are at the heart of this action only barely disguise their engagement in crime, but they are not the vicious, organised gangsters, violently objecting to a police crack-down, that were conjured up by the Yorkshire Evening Post.

earlier this month.

There were some dangerous men drinking in The Newlands. But they weren’t organising these youths. These young men, who are being actively constructed by the press and the police as pariahs, want decent jobs; they want somewhere for their children to play; they want to be treated with respect. They hate the police, and they blame the government. But they say the SWP leaflet distributed locally in the aftermath of the firebombing is “bolshevik”—“It’s got nothing to do with fucking Tony Blair,” says Danny—the only one who allows his real name to be used.

It is unbearably hot in the small room in Benson Court where members of a local residents association are holding their regular meeting. It is trying to turn itself into a discussion of the roots of the protest, and the Reverend Annie Jenkins is talking a lot of sense. An interdenominational church group has just produced some research on the area: 34 per cent of its population are unemployed and the young people are deeply alienated. The Reverend Jenkins’ appeal for council support for the group’s proposal to employ two detached youth workers falls on deaf ears. Councillor Dale is only able to provide long-winded homilies on the virtues of the local authority.

As usual, the young people about whom everyone is such an expert are conspicuous by their absence. Outside, Tony, aged 22, stands alone. “I’ve been thieving since I was seven—I started with bananas from the shop over there—but I’m sick of it. I’m 22 and I’ve got three kids, I’d love to have a job and go out on a Friday and spend my money like everyone else.” He’s got a man’s name crudely tattooed on his arm, but he’ll only talk to me if I promise not to use it. He’ll talk to the TV camera if he can wear a mask because, he says, if he’s seen criticising the police, they’ll beat him up.

From around the tightly packed modern council houses, a group of his mates appears and Tony’s mood lightens. Danny is willing to talk to the camera and he says the riot is about police oppression. They pick you up for nothing, they stop you in your car, they shout your name out as they drive past. Everyone is now feeling good about having their say, but the bubble is pricked by another youth screaming, “You, you fucking nonce, yes, you in the white T-shirt, you bastard.” He flings a half-full can of pop before disappearing. Glen Brady, distinguishable from the other young men by his expensive canvas boots, flash white “Atlanta 1966” T-shirt and the new-style baton slung casually over his shoulder, says: “He’s wanted, I’ll arrest him later.”

We walk up the hill to watch the demolition of the shell of the pub. Every urban conflagration needs its emblematic spaces, and they are always precisely
located in the early, heady moments of the conflict. This pub was destroyed, with all the primeval symbolism of fire, because it had become too hot to handle for Tety's, its owners. With its reputation as a place in which criminals assembled and, allegedly, traded in drugs, they sold it to a company that specialises in "problem pubs". This company promptly engaged in architectural engineering, in the hope that the hard men would be deterred by floodlights and soft furnishings. The new landlord had a close relationship with the police—who won't comment on the allegation that they used the place as an observation post—and sealed the pact by renaming it The Jolly Brewer.

There's no doubt that the arsonists (who managed to burn out eight cars as well) enjoyed themselves that night. Being thoroughly engaged with the age of photography, they'd got their films through the one-hour processor by midday and they show the evidence of their handiwork. A local cameraman man is there for the demolition. These are spectacular events, with the energy and spontaneity of carnivals. But there is something morbid inside this joyfulness; the enthusiasm is forced and short-lived.

If revolutions are festivals of the oppressed, these upheavals, a friend of mine suggests, are carnivals of the depressed.

Sitting next evening with a group of 19 year olds outside a pub that survived, I get a feeling for their anger, their honesty and their yearning. The hatred for one local police constable is intense. Whether or not he is a "nonsense" who put his hands down the trousers of a 12 year old to search him for drugs is now contested—the lads might have made this up, they say—but there's no letting up on the allegation that he's brutal. They say that during a recent house raid, an unnamed policeman sat in the face of one of their mothers and called her a slag. "How can anyone do a thing like that," asks Jason, in genuine amazement.

But 19-year-old David is alive with enthusiasm at his memories of the good times they used to have at the youth club before the council closed it down. They'd go camping and ice-skating, visit Alton Towers, all sorts of trips. The youth workers were there to help them out. "I used to love the Boys' Brigade as well, and that's all that's left round here, but times have changed and that's not the place for today's youngsters to go," he says. Jason says he'll do anything to get the money to put food on the table for his kids. He'd prefer to work—real work, says David, with a skill that people respect, so they don't lose you around all the time. David's just picked up the prospectus for the courses at the Leeds College of Building.

Later that night I'm sitting in Danny's mother's house at the back of the now demolished pub, talking to "the older generation"—men between 20 and 30 years of age. "We've all done time," says Alan. "I was locked up between the ages of 15 and 19, and none of us are angels." But there's no need for the police to treat us like scum, they say, Terry, aged 30 and looking a good deal older, says that they borrow a van from time to time, round the kids up and take them swimming in a river outside Leeds. "These are the things young workers used to do when we were kids—but no one's doing it now. Look around here any day. People are just sitting on the walls hour by hour, doing nothing."

The room suddenly empties at the sound of Pat, Danny's mother, shouting at a policeman. Two transit vans have arrived in this tiny back street because, they say, one of Pat's younger children called them "robbers". "Why can't you just leave us alone," she's asking at some volume. Masculinity, the story that has bubbled along all through my conversations in Hyde Park, now comes into full view. Danny's out at full pitch defending his mother, who is already calming down. The tallest of the group of ten or more policemen who have engaged with Pat looks very like he's going to take a swing at Danny. Male egos, one in an official uniform and another in the illegitimate garb of sculpted dreadlocks, confront each other with venom.

"Turning the music back on again"

"Jimmy" is 21, never had a job ("I don't count McDonald's"), never even thought about voting, doesn't have particularly strong feelings about the police ("They don't like us, and we don't like them—that's it"), and for three nights earlier this month he was involved in the Marsh Farm estate riots, in Luton, which, after a first-night news blackout, dominated the national news until the trouble in Leeds edged them out of the public eye, writes Steve Platt.

"Jimmy makes no bones about the fact that the riots were "fun"—"a good laugh". "They weren't local police," he says, "so they didn't have a clue about their way of rounding. We ran rings round them."

Until recently, Jimmy and other young residents of Marsh Farm found some of their summer "fun" in other ways. He is one of several thousand people who regularly attended dance parties put on by Luton's radical housing and music collective, Exodus (see NBS passim). The collective's squatted farm on the edge of town has been the location for free, unlicensed parties for three years. When police raided the farm, arresting collective members and seizing PA equipment, in January 1993, some 4,000 supporters besieged the local police station to demand their release. And back in April, the local council tried with only oneathy against) for a public inquiry into "Bedfordshire police and others' activities" against Exodus. Thirty-one different charges against Exous members have collapsed or been thrown out of court since 1993, and the inquiry—if funding can be found for it—would investigate serious allegations of police corruption, including the planting of drugs.

Over the years, though, Exodus has developed a good relationship with some local police officers. One has even gone on record as saying that crime falls in Luton when Exodus parties are taking place; and there is widespread recognition that bored young people seeking "fun" on a summer evening are better off going to Exodus's all-night raves than being drawn into violent confrontation with the police. Some observers, including Jimmy, say that it is no coincidence that the Marsh Farm riots happened after a number of weeks without an Exodus party taking place. Ironically, Exodus had called a temporary halt in order to confront police at the time when negotiations were going on about future parties in approved venues. Someone had better turn the music back on again, quick.