

The Whole World Is Rioting as the Economic Crisis Worsens -- Why Aren't We?

by Joshua Holland via rialator - Alternet Tuesday, Feb 3 2009, 8:16am

international / social/political / other press

Explosive anger is spilling out onto the streets of Europe. The meltdown of the global economy is igniting massive social unrest in a region that has long been a symbol of political stability and social cohesion.

It's not a new trend: A wave of upheaval is spreading from the poorer countries on the periphery of the global economy to the prosperous core.

Over the past few years, a series of riots spread across what is patronizingly known as the Third World. Furious mobs [have raged](#) against skyrocketing food and energy prices, stagnating wages and unemployment in India, Senegal, Yemen, Indonesia, Morocco, Cameroon, Brazil, Panama, the Philippines, Egypt, Mexico and elsewhere.

For the most part, those living in wealthier countries took little notice. But now, with the global economy crashing down around us, people in even the wealthiest nations are mad as hell and reacting violently to what they view as an inadequate response to their tumbling economies.

The *Telegraph* (UK) [warned last month](#) that protests over governments' handling of the crisis "are widespread and gathering pace," and "may spark a new revolution":

A depression triggered in America is being played out in Europe with increasing violence, and other forms of social unrest are spreading. In Iceland, a government has fallen. Workers have marched in Zaragoza, as Spanish unemployment heads towards 20 percent. There have been riots and bloodshed in Greece, protests in Latvia, Lithuania, Hungary and Bulgaria. The police have suppressed public discontent in Russia and will be challenged again at large gatherings this weekend.

Consider a snapshot of a single week of unrest, courtesy of the [Guardian](#):

- Greece: "There are many wellsprings of the serial protests rolling across Europe. In Athens, it was students and young people who suddenly mobilized to turn parts of the city into no-go areas. They were sick of the lack of jobs and prospects, the failings of the education system and seized with pessimism over their future.

"This week it was the farmers' turn, rolling their tractors out to block the motorways, main road and border crossings across the Balkans to try to obtain better procurement prices for their produce."

- Latvia: "The old Baltic trading city had seen nothing like it since the happy days of kicking out the Russians and overthrowing communism two decades ago. More than 10,000 people converged on the 13th century cathedral to show the Latvian government what they thought of

its efforts at containing the economic crisis. The peaceful protest morphed into a late-night rampage as a minority headed for the parliament, battled with riot police and trashed parts of the old city. The following day, there were similar scenes in Vilnius, the Lithuanian capital next door."

- France: "Burned-out cars, masked youths, smashed shop windows and more than a million striking workers. The scenes from France are familiar, but not so familiar to President Nicolas Sarkozy, confronting the first big wave of industrial unrest of his time in the Elysée Palace.

"France, meanwhile, is moving into recession, and unemployment is going up. The latest jobless figures were to have been released yesterday, but were held back, apparently for fear of inflaming the protests."

- Iceland: "Proud of its status as one of the world's most developed, most productive and most equal societies, Iceland is in the throes of what is, by its staid standards, a revolution.

"Riot police in Reykjavik, the coolest of capitals. Building bonfires in front of the world's oldest parliament. The yogurt flying at the free market men who have run the country for decades and brought it to its knees."

- Britain (via the [Times of London](#)): "Wildcat strikes flared at more than 19 sites across the country in response to claims that British tradesmen were being barred from construction jobs by contractors using cheaper foreign workers."
- Russia (via [Al-Jazeera](#)): "Thousands of protesters have rallied across Russia to criticize the government's economic policies and its response to the global financial crisis.

"Russian police forcefully broke up many of the anti-government protests on Saturday, arresting dozens of demonstrators."

At least in Western Europe, cries of "burn the shit down!" are being heard in countries with some of the highest standards of living in the world -- states with adequate social safety nets; countries where all citizens have access to decent health care and heavily subsidized educations. Places where minimum wages are also living wages, and a dignified retirement is in large part guaranteed.

The far ends of the ideological spectrum appear to be gaining currency as the crisis develops, and people grow increasingly hostile toward the politics of the status quo.

The *Financial Times* [quotes](#) Olivier Besancenot, a young leader of "France's extreme left," promising "to reinvent and re-establish the anti-capitalist project." "We want the established powers to be blown apart," Besancenot said. Europe's far right is gaining momentum, too, using [the economy and populist outrage over immigration](#) to gain a legitimacy it hasn't enjoyed in some time.

Notably absent from the list of countries where the economic crunch is rending the social fabric is the good ole US of A, a state with the greatest level of economic inequality in the wealthy world.

Outside of a few scattered and quickly contained protests, the citizens of the U.S. -- a country born of revolution, but with an elite that's been terrified of that legacy since immediately after its founding -- have been calm, despite opinion polls showing that Americans are more dissatisfied with the direction in which the country has been headed since they began measuring such things.

It's a baffling disconnect, considering that real wages for all but the top 10 percent of the economic pile haven't increased in 35 years.

It's more bizarre still when you consider that while European governments have handled their own bailouts relatively transparently, the U.S. government has [doled out close to \\$10 trillion](#) in bailouts, loan guarantees and fiscal stimulus -- if there were a million-dollar bill, that would be a stack of 10 million of them -- with a stunning lack of oversight or accountability.

Even the congressional commission charged with overseeing key parts of the banking bailout [can't get answers to basic questions](#) like "who's getting what?"

Americans are [rightfully angry](#) about that state of affairs, but with a few small exceptions, quietly so. Why? It depends on whom you ask.

In a 2006 [interview with Harper's](#), Barack Obama shared a subtle, but rather fundamental observation about America's political culture: "Since the founding," he said, "the American political tradition has been reformist, not revolutionary." If there is to be positive change, Obama has argued, it must be gradual; "brick by brick," as he put it in one of his final campaign speeches.

Mark Ames, author of *Going Postal: Rage, Murder, and Rebellion -- From Reagan's Workplaces to Clinton's Columbine and Beyond*, argues that Americans have been beaten down to a degree that they're now a pacified population, largely willing to accept any economic outrage its elites impose on them.

In a 2005 [interview with AlterNet](#), Ames said the "slave mentality" is stronger in the U.S. than elsewhere, "in part because no other country on earth has so successfully crushed every internal rebellion."

Slaves in the Caribbean for example rebelled a lot more because their oppressors weren't as good at oppressing as Americans were. America has put down every rebellion, brutally, from the Whiskey Rebellion to the Confederate rebellion to the proletarian rebellions, Black Panthers, white militias ... you name it. This creates a powerful slave mentality, a sense that it's pointless to rebel.

Anyone who has witnessed the brutal police riots that have become so common since the infamous "Battle in Seattle" protests against the World Trade Organization in 1999 can tell you there's some merit to the argument.

It's also the case that European societies tend to be more homogenous than the mishmash of tribes we call the United States. Whereas Americans are divided by religion, region, ethnicity, urban-rural tensions and all the other trappings of the "culture wars," the primary split in most European countries is *class*.

Thomas Frank argued eloquently in *What's the Matter With Kansas* that those wedge social issues that the American right nurtures with such care obscure the fundamental differences between the rich and poor, the powerful and the disenfranchised.

Indeed, any hint of discussion of economic inequality in the U.S. is shot down with cries of "class warfare" -- exactly what is playing out in the streets of much of the world today.

As the crisis deepens, as virtually every analyst predicts it will, that may well change. As *The*

Nation's Bill Greider told *Democracy Now's* Amy Goodman, "you can't do this to people year after year -- that is, upturn their lives, take away what they thought they had earned, and so forth and so on, without provoking rather intense political reactions. ... We're just, just beginning to see a few bubbles like that around this country. I don't say we're going to have riots, but I think ... people, out of their own distress and anger, will organize their own politics, and they will make themselves seen and heard around this country."

Stay tuned.

[Joshua Holland](#) is an editor and senior writer at *AlterNet*.

© 2009 Independent Media Institute

<http://www.alternet.org/story/124836>

Cleaves Alternative News. <http://cleaves.lingama.net/news/story-1425.html>