

Riots as the Mirror of Society

It is said that the Chinese leader, Chou en Lai, when asked for his assessment of the French revolution, responded: 'it is too early to tell'. Perhaps his caution was excessive. But it would help if a little of it were to rub off on those countless pundits who have been rushing to give their explanations of the English riots of the last week. For some the problem lies in a culture of greed. For others it is due to the lack of parental responsibility. For yet others it is down to the rise of 'rap' and 'gangsta' culture. These claims are generally based upon a comment overheard, an anecdote passed on, or - most usually - on the personal prejudices of the author. In virtually no case is the argument based in a systematic observation of what happened.

At this stage, there is so much that we don't know. Who exactly took part in the various events? To what extent were their actions spontaneous or organised? What were the targets? And if we can't even be sure what the phenomenon is, what sense is there in purporting to explain the phenomenon?

But if the accounts currently on offer are excessively flimsy, some are trying to limit our ability to arrive at more thorough and more considered explanations. 'This is criminality pure and simple' stated the Prime Minister, David Cameron. That is all there is to be said about it.

Certainly this is an accurate *description* of acts which are self-evidently against the law. But is isn't any sort of *explanation*. And if anyone should try to probe further and ask *why* people are acting in this way - and why now - then the response is furious. 'You are justifying the rioters' they are told. To explain is to excuse, as Michael Gove, the Education Minister, asserted furiously on the BBC.

In one sense all this is very familiar. There is a politics of blame going on, and those in power want to avoid any accusation that they might be responsible in any way for what has happened. After all, the first duty of any government is to secure the social order and a government which fails to do - or even worse, which is seen to create social disorder - thereby cedes some of its legitimacy. So Governments throughout history have tended to root riots in the nature of rioters themselves and to deny any meaning to what they do. Crowds are crazed. Mobs are mad. Those who say anything else are themselves enemies of the State.

But if there is one thing which historical studies of the crowd have shown us - and which our own systematic research into crowd psychology over the last 30 years has revealed - it is that crowd events are almost always highly meaningful. Certainly crowd events are messy affairs. Often opportunists take advantage of the cover of crowds in order to settle old scores or commit criminal acts. What people do collectively generally reveals something critical about their ways of seeing.

Take, for example, the food riot. One might think that this is the simplest of events. People get hungry, they see food, they grab it and eat it. Not at all. As the great British historian, E.P. Thompson has shown, food riots tend not to happen at periods of the greatest dearth. They happen when people feel that the distribution of food is illegitimate. And rather than being inchoate events, the riot itself reasserts how things should be; food is redistributed and in many cases a popularly decided 'fair price' is paid for the food. In this way, riots provides a profound glimpse into the world view of those who often leave no records to history. In Martin Luther King's eloquent phrase 'riots are the voice of the powerless'.

One of the implications of this is that it is quite wrong to suggest (as has again been asserted over the last week) that rioters lie outside the community and occupy the margins. As a huge body of research into the US urban riots of the 1960's and 1970's revealed, the typical rioter is generally more integrated in local community structures than most. - and also *less* likely to have been previously involved in criminal activity than most.

Equally, it is wrong to suggest that rioters act selfishly and are just interested in their personal self interest. Generally, they see themselves as acting in terms of group values and acting for the group interest. In urban riots this is often a matter of challenging and ejecting those who are seen as enemies of the community – generally the police. In this way, the targets of crowd action 'glitter in the eye of history' (to cite the historian William Reddy) and illuminate who is seen as 'us' and who is seen as 'them'. Characteristically, crowd members don't collectively attack those they see as part of their own community - though they may attack those they see as outsiders in their midst. More graphically, as one of the urban rioters of the 1960's put it, 'you don't shit on your own doorstep'.

We can encapsulate all this by saying that collective action is based on shared understandings of ones group in society – of 'social identity', that is. Thus far I have emphasized the element of understanding. But it is equally important to stress the element of sharing and of its consequences.

No-one riots alone. To do so would indicate that ones actions are not legitimate and that others do not share ones sense of enmity and of grievance. Moreover, anyone who went ahead and tried a one person riot would quickly be picked off by the police. Riots are only possible when large numbers of people both share *and see each other as sharing* the same antagonisms and grievances. Then one becomes a soldier rather than a deviant. Then one expects sufficient support from others to act with impunity. Shared social identity, then, is not just about perceptions, it is about becoming empowered to act on those perceptions.

In riots everyday social relations are inverted. The powerless who characteristically take part live in a world controlled by others; they are anonymous, insignificant and do what others say. But in the crowd they can literally run riot. They can do what they want, break all bounds, force others to do their bidding. For once the rich and the powerful are fearful and the police

have to retreat. For once, invisible people become visible in the world. They are the ones making the news headlines. They can see themselves on TV. For once they, the powerless, make history.

This freedom, this power, this sense of transgression and of agency is exhilarating. That is why crowds are such passionate affairs – not because (as often assumed) because emotion substitutes for reason, but because people can finally express their own meanings. As people ran rampant in London and elsewhere, many commentators noted the glee and laughter and concluded that there could be no serious point to the events. They miss a crucial point. Crowds are nearly always carnivalesque. Riot and revelry go together. It is because crowds finally allow the silenced to do and say what they want that participants experience such fun.

With these insights about crowds in mind, we can now return to the English riots and ask what they tell us about English society in 2011. We might not yet have the evidence on which to base conclusive answers, but we can at least ask some pertinent questions:

First, and critically, we need to enquire into the understandings of the rioters. Clearly events started with a racial dimension when a young black man was shot by the police and a largely black protest was seemingly ignored by the police. But as others heard of the event and watched the ensuing looting on television, to what extent did they see themselves in what was happening? In other words, are we seeing the emergence of a category of young people, exemplified but not limited by 'race', who see themselves as locked into a position of deprivation in our society and who see not only the police but authority and privilege in general as the enemy?

Second, even if people do feel deprived, what has led to a strategy of antagonism and confrontation? To what extent has the recession and the politics of austerity led to a sense that alternative strategies (such as working hard to improve ones lot) won't bear fruit? To what extent has the perception that powerful groups break the rules with impunity (bankers in the financial crisis, politicians in the expenses scandal, journalists in the phone hacking scandal) legitimated the notion that the powerless should do likewise?

Third, how have ideas become shared and hence served as a basis for the riots? Much has been made, for instance, of the role of new social media in letting people know that they would not be alone taking action. But similar claims were made of the Arab Spring – and the emerging evidence suggests that, in reality, people got most of their information from conventional sources: television and word of mouth. So we need to exercise caution.

Throughout history, it has been claimed (and subsequently disproved) that 'a hidden hand' has been involved in organizing riots, and this seems a modern technological twist on an old old story. The reality is that when, over a long period, people have a set of common experiences and gradually built up a shared sense of grievance, then the response of even a single person who is seen as 'one of us' can be seen to speak to and for 'all of us'. People who

share a common worldview don't need agitators or facebook or twitter to tell them what to do in crowds.

In sum, crowds always hold up a clear mirror to society. We might not always like what we see – and many respond by denying that there is anything to see. But if we take the trouble to observe we will discover invaluable information about who we are and how we need to change. Right now, we need to stop imposing our views on the riots and to start looking and learning from them. We must take the time to develop *informed* explanations of the riots. If not, we are most likely doomed to repeat them.

Stephen Reicher
Professor of Psychology at the University of St. Andrews
Fellow of the Royal Society of Edinburgh
Academician of the Social Sciences