

**'Beyond the loot' : social disorder and urban unrest**

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## **'Beyond the loot'**

### *Social disorder and urban unrest*

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#### **Abstract**

The article looks at current explanations for the 2011 English riots. It critiques one dominant view that, beyond the micro-political protest in Tottenham, people primarily participated to loot lifestyle items they could not afford to buy. Empirical data is used to challenge the extent and nature of the looting in 2011, concluding that the proportion of riot events that were not focused on looting, directly contradicts the argument that criminal acquisition and consumerism were primary drivers of the unrest. Social disorder is more likely to manifest as looting in commercial areas, but it does not naturally follow that participants originally set out to loot, and economics may not be their primary motive. The article moves on to explore the role the police may have played in promoting 'contagion' and to reflect on the role of policing in preventing and limiting unrest, even where foregrounded by other precipitating factors.

**Key Words:** 2011 English riots; urban disorder; looting; consumerism; policing

#### **Introduction**

This paper outlines emergent explanations for the English 2011 disturbances, looking in more detail at those which claim they were mainly about the loot. The Government and a group of criminologists believe that, beyond the initial protest in Tottenham over the police killing of Mark Duggan, people took part in the disorders primarily for motives of greed and material gain. The Government suggests this was 'criminality, pure and simple' (Cameron, 2011), while the criminologists argue that the overpowering influence of consumerist ideology was the major cause.

The paper draws on empirical data to challenge key assumptions about the extent and nature of the looting in 2011, and refers to accounts of previous disturbances - in Britain, France and the United States - to

demonstrate that looting can have other purposes beyond the economic. Comparative analysis is then used to demonstrate how, across time and space, policing has played a more important role in fostering urban unrest, and may be responsible for the 'contagion' in 2011. Findings revealing the dynamic relationship between policing and unrest are then used to reflect on ways in which the police can prevent and limit disorder in contemporary urban settings.

### **A criminal underclass**

For four days in August 2011 there were widespread public disturbances in 66 locations across England and Wales. Generally referred to as 'riots', they involved an estimated 15,000 people, cost five lives and approximately half a billion pounds (Bridges, 2012). Despite the scale of these disturbances, there has been no major official inquiry. David Cameron claimed "this was not political protest or a riot about protest, about politics. It was common or garden thieving, robbing and looting. And we don't need an inquiry to tell us that" (cited in Newburn et al., 2011b).

The idea of the disturbances as a product of a 'Broken Britain' emerged strongly in the Government's commentary on the riots. This was a theme used by Cameron before the riots in justifying the agenda of the Coalition Government (Solomos, 2011), and afterwards to distance the events from any policies introduced by his administration, constructing them instead as the product of moral breakdown (ibid). The usual culprits cited as responsible for this breakdown were feral children whose parents had failed in their duty to socialise them, and criminal gangs. This political response was echoed by Australian sociologist, John Carroll (2012), who suggests the disturbances were a symptom of the 'spoilt brat mentality' that had developed in Britain and parts of Europe. He links this to welfare dependency, which has undermined the natural role of authority figures to transmit cultural beliefs and expectations down to new generations.

### **Social injustice**

In the UK, a number of academics have argued that advanced capitalism and neo-liberal policies have created a highly unequal society, producing marginalised groups who are angry and feel their only way to express this is through violent outburst. Lea and Hallsworth (2012) suggest the 2011 disturbances were an expression of this 'diffuse and generalised rage', which had no specific target (p.31). Others regard them as an 'uprising' against the perceived injustices of the state and other powerful elites (e.g. Newburn et al., 2011b; Wain and Joyce, 2012).

Milburn (2012: 402) suggests that the 2011 disturbances emerged from a 'context of crisis and austerity'. European data demonstrates that social unrest is invariably linked to recession, in anticipation of austerity measures rather than their felt effects, because in the majority of cases

unrest narrowly precedes the cutbacks (Ponticelli and Voth, 2009). This fits the situation in 2011, when the full weight of proposed spending cuts had not yet hit.

Taylor-Gooby (2013: 12) argues 'it is not so much the fact of cutbacks ... as the groups affected and the detail of the restructuring of the welfare state' that affects social order. Welfare cuts that hit the poorest groups hardest, and welfare restructuring that promotes a greater role for the private over the public sector, are most likely to undermine legitimacy (the extent to which citizens accept the authority of the Government), and in doing so are the most likely to promote social unrest.

Young people, representing approximately half of riot participants (Ministry of Justice, 2012), had already been hit particularly hard by economic decline and austerity measures. Youth unemployment had reached record levels, and cuts to youth provision had left some young people with little to do (Higgs, 2011; McVeigh, 2011; Wain and Joyce, 2012). Rioters interviewed for the Reading the Riots study invariably talked about a pervasive sense of injustice, with younger interviewees particularly likely to mention lack of opportunities, cuts, and the ending of the Educational Maintenance Allowance<sup>1</sup> (Newburn et al., 2011a).

The close proximity of disparities in wealth is one factor explaining why similarly deprived areas were unaffected. In London, where a great deal of the unrest occurred, the rich and poor live side-by-side (Stenson, 2012) and the 'status frustration' induced by this is palpable (Angel, 2012). Jeffery and Jackson (2012) refer to the highly visible disparities in Salford, where 'islands of gentrified affluence' exist 'in a sea of relative poverty'. These emerged under the banner of urban regeneration (ibid), but are actually the 'result of a free and politically uncontrolled play of market forces' where the poor are excluded from city centres in a bid to attract inward investment and appeal to wealthy consumers (Bauman, 2012: 12). Thus, a significant dimension to the disturbances was the struggle over place and belonging (Spalek et al., 2012; Jeffery and Jackson, 2012).

## **Over-policing**

Empirical evidence spotlights anger at the police as a key motivation for some riot participants. Adversarial styles of policing, such as stop-and-search, are widely reported to promote defiance rather than compliance (Sherman, 1993). Of those brought before the courts for riot-related offences, 78 per cent of males and 43 per cent of females had been stopped and searched in the previous year (Topping et al., 2011). It emerged that not only was the quantity of stop-and-searches an issue, but the disrespectful manner in which they were carried out (Reicher and Stott, 2011). Consequently, some participants claimed to have rejected opportunities to loot during the disturbances, to focus on the police (Lewis, 2011). These

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<sup>1</sup> Financial aid payable to young people aged 16-19, studying or undertaking unpaid work-based learning, where parents have a certain level of taxable income.

findings highlight the importance of policing grounded on principles of 'procedural justice' (see Hough, 2013).

Although Whites represented the largest group in the disturbances, Solomos (2011: 2) suggests that 'it would be wrong to leave to one side the role that ... race and ethnicity played in some localities'. Some Black rioters report feeling unfairly treated by the police because of their race (Muir and Adegoke, 2011). There is also the remarkable similarity between the events surrounding the shooting of Duggan, and the role this played in sparking the riots, and the events that led to the Broadwater Farm riots of 1985, following the death of Cynthia Jarratt, who died during a police search of her home. Despite policing reforms since the urban disorders of the 1980s, it seems that policing practices may not always be sensitive to the needs of ethnically diverse communities.

## **Bad behaviour**

Newburn (2012b) suggests that criminologists are not unaware of 'techniques of neutralisation' and have been enormously careful both in interviewing and analysis to weigh carefully what rioters have said, 'retaining a researcher's necessary scepticism at all times' (p.334). Nevertheless, there remains a great deal of suspicion that riot participants were simply making excuses for bad behaviour ( Treadwell et al., 2012; Waddington, 2012; Žižek, 2011). According to Žižek (2011: 3):

It's easy to imagine a protester who, caught looting and burning a store and pressed for his reasons, would answer in the language used by social workers and sociologists.

We are reminded of the inconvenient truth that disorder and rioting are fun (Rock, 1981). Some of the events were observed as being carnivalesque (Waddington, 2012). A proportion of participants offered no other motivation for their involvement than 'the buzz of doing things they couldn't or wouldn't normally do such as smashing things and being chased by the police' (Morrell et al., 2011: 27). The motivation of having 'something exciting to do' is likely linked to the everyday boredom experienced by some groups of young people, due to high youth unemployment and a lack of quality youth provision (Morrell et al., 2011). Boredom may have been heightened anyway, in August, due to the school summer holidays.

## **Consumerism**

There is a group of criminologists and sociologists (Bauman, 2012; Moxon, 2011; Tester, 2012; Treadwell et al., 2012; Žižek, 2011) who agree with Cameron, that the 2011 disturbances were primarily about robbing and looting, for material gain and not politics. They claim that despite

everything else - the relative poverty, unemployment, austerity and loss of youth provision – people participated because they felt unable to let this historic opportunity to grab something for free pass them by (Treadwell et al., 2012).

In contrast to the Government view, that family disintegration and the poor socialisation of children promoted the looting, these academics regard it as a product of the successful integration and socialisation of young people into a society that values wealth and consumables above all else. Rioters may have been angry and dissatisfied with their lot, but they 'did not begrudge the super-rich their success' (ibid, p10). They wanted the same for themselves. 'The ubiquity of the consumerist motivation is revealed by the fact that, after selling the goods they had stolen, they returned to the same stores to buy legitimate goods' (ibid, p.6).

Hence, 'this was not a rebellion or an uprising... but a mutiny of defective and disqualified consumers' (Bauman, 2012: 11). The police were only attacked because they got in the way of the shopping experience (Tester, 2012). The political context is recognised, but only to explain the impossibility of protest due to a culture of individualism, envy and intense social competition produced by late-capitalism and neoliberalism - which has made it 'almost impossible for a potential collective of marginalised subjects to construct a universal political narrative that makes causal and contextual sense of their own shared suffering and offers a feasible solution to it' (Treadwell et al., 2012: 3).

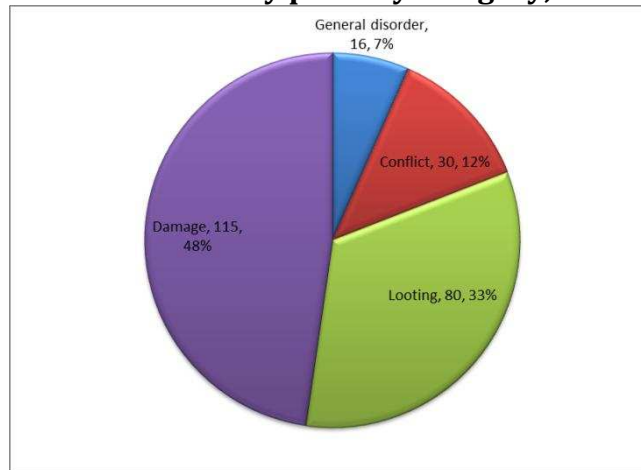
## **Scale and nature of looting**

None of the explanations so far have really looked at the scale and nature of looting in 2011. Based on The Guardian (2011) database of riot incidents (collated from a range of media sources including news reports, blogs and twitter) and the author's own categorisation of these – according to whether they were primarily about looting, criminal damage, conflict (with the police), or general disorder – it seems that looting was not as prevalent as many accounts suggest. The data indicates that two-thirds of riot incidents had little or nothing to do with looting (fig 1), and, in some local authority areas, looting accounted for less than a tenth of what occurred (fig 2). This database does not capture every public order incident, but more detailed analysis of events in Nottingham suggests that looting incidents are over-represented.

These findings undermine the explanatory power of personal greed or consumerism. The majority of riot participants were not thieving or 'shopping'. The data confirms what many participants have claimed, that a proportion was more intent on 'sticking it to the police'. This fits with the observations made by Davies (2012) during the Birmingham disorders, where '[t]heir only aim was to goad the police, challenging them vocally, attempting to provoke the police to charge', at which point they would run through side streets to escape, before returning to repeat the exercise till

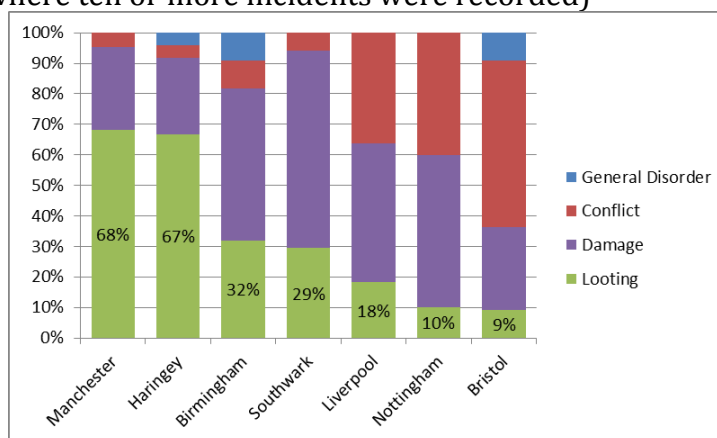
late into the night (p.16). There is also the fact that, in Nottingham, five police stations were attacked (One Nottingham, 2011), which does not fit easily with the consumerist thesis.

**Figure 1. 2011 Riot incidents by primary category, nationally**



Data source: The Guardian (2011)

**Figure 2. 2011 Riot incidents by primary category, by district (districts where ten or more incidents were recorded)**



Data source: The Guardian (2011)

The role of looting in 2011 may have been exaggerated due to the value of the goods taken. Campbell (1993) suggests that damage to and looting of shops was a key feature in the Meadowell riot, in Northumbria, in 1991. Yet, the looting there, which left the people of Meadowell without access to basic provisions for a long time afterwards, received rather less attention. One wonders whether this was because the looting here amounted to little more than stockpiles of shampoo and coffee in rioters' homes (ibid), rather than plasma televisions.

Mac Ginty (2004) suggests that 'looting' is a pejorative term. It is a negative label used by the powerful, usually to imply acts of criminal acquisition motivated by greed. This is the definition accepted within the

consumerism thesis. Yet, looting conflates a wide range of activities that can differ greatly in terms of organisation, scale and the object of looting. To counter the indiscriminate use of the term, Mac Ginty proposes a four-fold typology, which establishes that in addition to economic motives, looting can be symbolic, strategic, or selective.

Symbolic looting includes the taking of goods as trophies, fitting with some accounts that looting in 2011 was primarily used as a means to acquire street reputation, especially by those involved in gangs, and this took primacy over the material value of looted goods (Harding, 2012). Looting can also send a message about changing power relations, demonstrating a lack of consent for existing authority. This aligns with Angel's (2012) view that riots are inherently political events because they both provoke and are a product of what Habermas (1975) describes as a 'legitimation crisis', where the modern state, in its attempts to maintain profitability in a capitalist-based economy, fails to retain political legitimacy in the eyes of its citizens.

Collins (2008) has previously referred to the strategic role of looting, which can act as a 'mass recruiter and momentum sustainer', without which the riot would come to an end once the police chose to withdraw. From a Durkeimian perspective, looting is a 'symbolic expression of membership' (McDonald, 2012). Solidarity and integration was evident in the looting behaviour in 2011. Participants stood in the way of cameras, presumably to avoid fellow looters being identified, Looters taking goods from other looters was reported, but rare, and violence was generally targeted at non-participants (ibid).

Selective looting, often a feature of communal rioting, is where properties or whole areas are looted in a manner suggesting target discrimination. For example, in the 1992 Los Angeles riot, property damage for Koreans was disproportionately high (Min, 1996: 90), being targeted by African Americans due to long simmering tensions linked to cultural differences and the socio-economic success of Korean Americans relative to blacks (Kim, 2011). Advocates of greed and consumerist explanations might see the targeting of designer clothing and electrical stores in the 2011 riots as simple economics. An alternative explanation, voiced by looters themselves, is that these stores were targeted because they were perceived to be the most exploitative (Briggs, 2012).

Mac Ginty (2004) has identified four variables that must come together for looting to occur:

1. availability of potential looters
2. availability of lootable goods
3. absence of restraint
4. permissible socio-cultural environment

These factors focus on the circumstances in which looting takes place, over the characteristics or motivations of offenders, which is how the 'routine activity approach' seeks to explain crime (see Cohen and Felson, 1979). The



second variable spotlights the importance of place, suggesting that looting is more likely to occur where lootable goods are more easily available, such as commercial areas; and may explain the greater prevalence of looting in some places compared to others.

Quantitative research in the U.S. has shown that where there has been no pre-arrangement or planned event, people tend to gather at symbolic locations, such as a well-known public building or major road intersection (Haddock and Polsby, 1994). Arguably, a shopping centre is a 'symbolic location' for young people living in contemporary urban Britain. Shopping centres are where young people meet to 'hang out' with their friends. Hence, it is understandable that young people living in Birmingham should head to the Bull Ring shopping centre, where disorder occurred in 2011. The manifestation of looting here is perhaps unsurprising given the proximity of lootable goods, but it does not confirm that participants gathered with prior intention to loot.

### **Policing preventing unrest**

The disorder in 2011 is believed to have been triggered when a young woman, protesting outside Tottenham Police Station, was pushed to the ground and hit repeatedly by a police officer. Some say this event, rather than the death of Duggan, 'sparked' the disturbances (Reicher and Stott, 2011), thus, demonstrating the importance of strategies and techniques to effectively manage gatherings, to prevent them turning into major unrest.

People gather for many reasons, some simply as curious onlookers, but motivations can change, affected by the behaviour of other people at the gathering (McPhail and Wohlstein, 1983; McPhail, 1994). Research in the U.S. (Perez et al., 2003) has shown that the presence of a sizable, well-trained police force has a deterrent effect on riot escalation, whereas the violent deployment of the same officers has the opposite effect. The elaborated social identity model (ESIM) (see Drury and Reicher, 2000) explains how this can happen. Homogenous treatment of the crowd creates a common experience, promoting group identification and group behaviour. Once unified, an action against one member of the group is perceived as an action against the whole group. Collective conflict is more likely where the police-civilian encounter gives rise to a shared sense of police illegitimacy (Reicher et al., 2007).

Some areas of the country are reported to have avoided disturbances in 2011 specifically linked to the approaches taken by the police. In the St Pauls district of Bristol, the police had gained experience during the 'Tesco riots' earlier the same year. As a result they were 'very firm but very even-handed' calling on people to 'calm down', which had a relaxing effect on an otherwise tense crowd (Clifton, 2012b). Police arrests in the imminent or early stages of unrest, of people deemed to be doing little wrong by their peers, become symbolic of a society that treats them

unjustly. This was the situation that played out in Ely, Cardiff, leading to unrest in the early 1990s (Campbell, 1993).

Research has found that crowds are neither apolitical nor ahistorical, and that greater levels of excessive force are especially problematic where foregrounded with poor police-community relations (Perez et al., 2003; Rosenfeld, 1997). For example, the Chicago Bulls Riot of 1992 was widely defined as a 'celebratory riot' because it started as a celebration of a basketball victory. Rosenfeld (1997), however, evidences that it was political as well as celebratory, responding to a 'reservoir of grievances' including massive welfare cuts in Illinois and the televised drama of the Los Angeles riot of 1992, linked to the police beating of Rodney King. This demonstrates how an understanding of riots must focus on precipitating events and longer-term underlying causes.

There are usually signs that unrest is imminent before it erupts. Preceding the unrest in Oldham in 2001, the Asian community, expecting trouble after a football match, asked the police to re-direct fans from their area of residence. Had the police responded, the unrest might have been avoided (Bagguley and Hussain, 2008). Instead, Asian men gathered to defend the community themselves, leading to a large-scale confrontation. The police managed to drive back the White football fans and then attempted to disperse the Asians, who assumed that the police were taking the fans' side. The main disturbances that took place a few weeks later, characterised by extensive Asian violence against the police, were undoubtedly affected by these events. Thus, highlighting how 'under-policing', as well as over-policing, can contribute to the breakdown of social order.

Historical accounts demonstrate that a proactive approach by the police, with local partners, can prevent violence. Campbell (1993) describes how the joint efforts of the police and the Racial Equality Committee (REC) managed to avoid major unrest on the Elswick estate, Newcastle, in the early 1990s, by mobilising to protect the symbolic sites of its Asian residents, who were at risk of being targeted. The choice of policing partners seems important. In Chapeltown, Leeds, major unrest was averted in 2011 by the decision of West Yorkshire police to allow long-standing and respected community workers to conduct urgent outreach with potential rioters (Clifton, 2012a). As recognised in the HMIC review (2011), 'good community engagement' is 'pivotal' in effectively policing disorders (p.60); however, officers themselves may not always be the best placed to engage directly, depending on the situation and groups involved.

Communication and transparency are important factors in preventing disorder. In the absence of any announcement from the Metropolitan Police Service (MPS) or the Independent Police Complaints Commission (IPCC) confirming or denying the 'exchange of fire' or 'assassination' stories circulating in the press, Duggan's family and the community began to suspect police mishandling. The MPS review (2012) notes that inaccuracies in these media stories 'should have been positively rebutted immediately'. Had they been, people may not have gathered

outside Tottenham police station seeking information and answers. Again, the paucity of information, when no senior officer came to speak to the gathering, took events further towards unrest. Violence finally erupted when the police addressed the crowd not with information, but with force.

### **Policing limiting unrest**

A perception that the police could not contain the scale of the rioting was reported as a factor contributing to the spread of the disturbances. People felt they 'would be able to loot and damage without being challenged by the police' (Riots Communities and Victims Panel, 2011). One reason suggested for why the disturbances came to end was fear when the numbers of police officers on the street began to swell (Taylor et al., 2011). This supports 'rational choice theory' and an understanding of rioters', who decide whether to participate based on perceived costs and benefits. It converges with Jobard's (2009) explanation for contagion in the 2005 French riots, which he suggests was due to an initial policing strategy focusing on containment rather than arrest, as Sarkozy attempted to avoid any incident of police brutality that might undermine his government.

It is not wholly clear why the MPS did not take control when the 2011 disturbances began. The MPS reported being unprepared as unrest spread to 22 of London's 32 boroughs (Newburn and Prasad, 2012). Officers dealing with the violence first-hand said they felt not only unprepared, but untrained for the situation, overwhelmed and afraid (ibid). Perez et al. (2003) argue that a well-trained police force is crucial for dealing with unrest, due to the potentially disastrous outcomes that may stem from a single officer's transgressions toward a member of the public. They propose training officers to manage their emotions as well as the crowds they confront. Riots, such as the Watts riot of 1965, 'might well have been averted had the officers ignored taunts and insults from an angry yet innocuous crowd.' (Perez et al., 2003: 177).

Doubts remain whether the British police could have dealt any better with the 2011 disturbances, even with more and better trained officers. It is suggested that low morale, linked to job insecurity and recent controversies had undermined police resolve (Angel, 2012). In the aftermath of the Tomlinson case<sup>2</sup>, it is unclear whether a strategic decision had been made not to confront the crowds, risking another incident of police brutality. Officers did, however, report being more cautious about the level of force they used as a consequence (Newburn, 2012a). Prioritising the protection of life over law enforcement would have been supported by Lord Scarman, who conducted the inquiry into the 1981 Brixton riots, even if he would have been critical of some of the other police failures regarding community engagement (ibid).

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<sup>2</sup> A newspaper vendor, who died after being struck by police at the 2009 G20 protests

A report by the HMIC (2011) proposed that a new framework for resolving public disorder should include the rules of engagement for weaponry such as water cannons, CS gas, and plastic bullets. The Home Affairs Committee (2011), however, concluded that these would have been an inappropriate and dangerous response to events in 2011. However well-equipped the police force, society would still be impossible to regulate without its consent (Jackson et al., 2012; Klein, 2012). People are more likely to obey the law and cooperate with the police where there is moral alignment between the people, the law and enforcement agencies (Jackson et al., 2012; Tyler and Fagan, 2006). In the words of Chief Constable Alderson, following the 1980s' disturbances, the way forward is 'to talk hearts and minds, not CS gas and plastic bullets' (cited in Wain and Joyce 2012: 133).

Durodié (2012) claims that what was exposed by the 2011 disturbances was a crisis of authority, and authorities needed to work out how to inspire their citizens to be part of and engage with their own society. Research evidence supports this, reporting that a major brake on the disturbances was not any particular policing tactic, but the 'call for peace' from the father of one of the men killed in Birmingham. Rioters commented how the father's public speech made them feel remorseful, and this directly informed their decision to exit from the disturbances (Taylor et al., 2011). Parental pressure and concerns about bringing shame on their families were also found to inhibit young people's involvement (Morrell et al., 2011; Taylor et al., 2011). This demonstrates that communities have the ability to self-regulate, and perhaps suggests a role for the police as 'facilitators... rather than creators' of social order (Innes and Roberts, 2008).

## **Conclusion**

Unrest is usually foregrounded by social inequality, social injustices perpetrated by the state, business, or the police, and often the context of austerity. Protest against these seems to be a motivation for some rioters. There is also the 'generalised' anger of marginalised groups, who know not what to blame. However, a lack of understanding about the structural and processual causes of their suffering does not make political action impossible. Perhaps their actions are 'political' if they are rioting because something is definitely not right. Either way, the large-scale breakdown of social order is a political context.

There is evidence that some people took part in the 2011 disturbances for personal and material gain. However, the number of riot events that did not involve looting directly undermines the argument that criminal acquisition was the primary driver of unrest. Capitalist and consumerist ideologies undoubtedly influence many aspects of our behaviour, but clearly other factors were at play. It must also be recognised that looting can have non-economic motives. For example, with the police

looking on, unable to prevent it, looting can be a show of power that is overtly political.

There is significant evidence demonstrating the role of the police in fostering and limiting unrest. Treating people uniformly as a crowd, using unfair practices, can transform a gathering into a riot. Low police numbers in the early stages of unrest, using methods of containment rather than arrest, has also been found to escalate disorder, as marginalised and over-policed groups seize a rare opportunity to feel powerful.

However, even in unequal societies, police and policing partners have the potential to prevent and limit disorder by monitoring and proactively responding to tensions and by fostering good police-community relations, supported by sensitive community liaison and transparency. Styles of policing that treat people with respect ensure trust in the institution of policing and provide a better platform for maintaining social order over the longer term (see Hough, 2013).

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