

CURB occasional paper 2: Why?

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You are probably reading this piece looking for answers to the question of why Britain's streets have been filled with rampaging mobs, burning buildings and looted shops? Contrary to the views of the British Prime Minister and the Mayor of London, the answer to this question cannot simply be reduced to one of 'mindless criminality'. Disturbances which have led to over 1,400 arrests, £100m worth of damage, four confirmed deaths and significant public unease give us only a glimpse of a complex constellation of social and economic forces. We can ineffectually rail and condemn, or we can begin to think about why the disorder occurred when and where it did, and what the political and media response says about our social order and what this has done to make such events more likely to occur. Moving beyond emotionally charged headlines we need to identify the roots of social resentment and exclusion of those living in many parts of Britain's cities, and who are not represented in mainstream political life. While recognising the dramatic social costs, anxiety and cost of the riots we are also impelled to understand that these are not random events perpetrated by criminal gangs but an emotive outpouring of anger at a range of deep-seated social injustices.

The desire by the political centre to re-take control is understandable—to see these acts as a challenge to elite authority is symptomatic of a cross-party political position that has emerged in the UK in which law and order issues are seen as signal elements of a party's capacity to rule. Ignited by television images and newspaper editorialising it is arguably difficult for any government to provide a response that seeks deeper answers, rather than the kneejerk response of tougher penalties and more 'robust' policing that have poured out this week.

The week's events can be linked to three key factors (though there are many others). First, the UK coalition government is committed to disassembling many of the state funded youth diversion, job training and educational support mechanisms that are the very minimum required to stave-off unrest in deprived communities. Many areas like Tottenham (which also experienced major rioting in 1985) suffer massive levels of social exclusion, but also social stigmatisation that is attached to postcodes, to particular schools and to public housing more broadly. One out of three 16-24 year olds in the London boroughs that saw most of the rioting are unemployed, and this has led to significant feelings of disenfranchisement. Combine this with the further withdrawal of support for education and training, plus an abiding sense of discrimination and injustice, and the explosive ingredients for civil unrest only require the right spark.

Many commentators have this week made the essential point that what we are seeing is a violent rebuke to an increasingly unstable, self-serving and illegitimate British establishment. Wracked by crises of credibility in our economic (the financial crisis), political (the MPs expenses row) and media establishment (phone tapping and the Murdoch empire's political influence) our society has little sense of stewardship or relevant public standards. If this is the value system of our social elites then what are we to make of those who also choose to act impulsively or without impunity to get what they want? Those left reeling by the decline of the formal economy have seen proposals by the media-political establishment for massive public cuts and the excesses of finance capital propped-up and carried by low paid workers. This has bred a destabilising sense of insecurity and injustice that extends way beyond the estates and neighbourhoods affected by this week's troubles. Combined with feelings of deep resentment, hyper-masculinity and a search for respect by the most excluded, we can perhaps see how the death of Mark Duggan became the flash point for an unchecked rage at targeted forms of policing such as 'stop and search' that are the daily experience of young black and Asian people in Britain's inner cities.

Second, the economic crisis has produced a keen sense of double-standards that has fuelled massive public resentment at a political class, most of whom in the case of the current government, represent affluent constituencies that have been relatively unscathed by the new austerity. Again, a sense of the geography of social inequality is paramount to providing a more effective diagnosis of the situation. If it were really a simple case of individual criminal choice and 'gang culture' we would expect to see the riots extending to a much wider range of neighbourhoods. We need to enter this mindset to see how thirty years of corporate excess, housing market exclusion, gentrification and continued goading to consume without the resources to do so has left many sections of British society feeling alienated and embittered.

The final ingredient that we need to consider is the way in which information communication technology has impacted on disorder more generally. In fact this is not without precedent, and we can look at the Cronulla in Sydney (Australia) to see that new forms of social disorder may continue to emerge that lack hierarchy or co-ordination. The possibility for such 'flash mobs' to form, based on common interest, senses of injustice or raw forms of thrill-seeking are part of a new Pandora's box of possibilities that has sparked concern in countries such as the United States that similar events could occur there.

We should perhaps end by focusing on some of the positive results of the week's apparent chaos and disorder. In several apparently 'sick' and 'broken' neighbourhoods we have seen significant community bravery and social solidarity—particularly from migrant communities—in order to keep the streets safe from rioters and looters. This at least suggests that community bonds and senses of order and justice are, in fact, an essential part of the daily register of localities that are so often tarnished by the pronouncements of politicians. Another result of the riots has been a broader debate about public expenditure under the heading of police investments with the government seeing no link between public police presence and spending levels. This will be a highly charged and ongoing debate for some time to come, but at least the costs of public disinvestment are now being acknowledged, even by London's Conservative Mayor.

The complexity of forces underlying the riots this week can be seen in the variability of mob behaviours and in the broad range of urban contexts and socio-economic forces that made such events more likely. If the UK, and perhaps Europe more broadly, is to see calm restored to its civic spaces and urban centres it needs to recognise and tackle social injustice and to provide a deeper sense of order and human possibilities for a much wider range of social groups than is currently privileged by our existing political administrations. We are faced with a choice: to understand and to act on our insights, or take comfort in ritually condemning what many would prefer to see as random, mindless and chaotic events. The latter response will serve only to see the violent disorder of last week return to haunt the streets of Britain in the months and years to come.

Courtesy: De Zeit Online