

The Looting Riots: August 2011



It really is like a horror movie come to life: whole buildings on fire, gangs of feral kids, mass looting and vandalism. One Chief Constable said tellingly, “This was not an angry mob, it was a greedy mob”.

I see these riots as a deeply alarming sign of systemic decline: the power of raw, selfish materialism, goaded on by incessant marketing pressure, devaluing qualities like consideration, community and care.

This devaluation is undoubtedly among a small minority, but these riots also show us how very vulnerable our kind of society is to the acts of a small minority. Even 1% of our society amounts to something like 600,000 people. That would be a lot of rioters, even scattered across the country. The total number in the Police Force, which includes all the admin and top brass, is less than 250,000. We can see all too painfully that the number of Police or others you need to control people against their will is far higher than this: in Tunisia, there were rumours that 1 in 8 of the population was in the Police or Army.

As well as materialism, I sense that another major factor behind the riots is deep cynicism about the system: not only about Government, but business and institutions generally. I have some sympathy with this: there are plenty of reasons why any of us could feel that business and the Government consider their own interests, or the elite's, not the people in general. There is an excellent piece by Peter Osborne, commenting that moral decay is bad at the top of our society, as well as the bottom, see <http://blogs.telegraph.co.uk/news/peterosborne/100100708/the-moral-decay-of-our-society-is-as-bad-at-the-top-as-the-bottom/>. However, instead of waiting on action from the top, I believe we urgently need to strengthen the qualities of community and mutual support at a local level. Just because the big players are not going to look out for the man in the street, doesn't mean we have to start rioting.

Many crises provoke progress, and let's hope fervently that this one does. One systemic insight comes from *The Spirit Level*, a recent UK book by Williamson and Pickett. It shows that developed countries with higher levels of financial inequality have considerably higher levels of violence and other social problems. Such countries include the UK and US: they also show that relatively small worsening or improvement in the level of inequality can have big effects on the levels of violence and other social problems.

If you have read my earlier blog about the Hubbert Curve, you will know that I am deeply worried about the future outlook anyway: the impact of major, long-term global economic recession and soaring prices for fuel and most other things is likely to create massive social upheaval: and if these riots arise from the recession so far, heaven help us when things get seriously bad economically.

The burning question is, now what? Here are a few of my ideas:

- ☞ We need a local network of voluntary groups to provide civil support: helping with the impact of riots, floods, and the range of major challenges ahead. Such groups will need organisation and equipment, but ideally they should be rooted in their locality, not seen as an arm of government. They will need some independent guidelines and monitoring so that they do not become sectional or vigilante groups.
- ☞ Aim to teach children at school, probably at 8 – 10 years, why mutual support locally matters, and how to give it to each other; why respect for property and the law matters, even if you feel unfairly treated; and where wellbeing comes from – it's not about money, and this is a researched fact. Somehow, this needs to be done without sounding like Establishment propaganda.
- ☞ Get creative about community training and work experience for teenagers. Work placements and gap years are now common: there must be a way to get youth involved in constructive work which engages them with wider social needs, and gives them positive skills.
- ☞ Given the high re-offending rate, and steep cost, of prison terms, use community service and meetings with victims as the preferred option for the less serious offenders in the current troubles.