

Why I Riot: A View on the London Riots

Written by Richard Jackson

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RICHARD JACKSON, AUG 11 2011

What must it be like in the minds of the rioters who looted, burned, and tore parts of London, and other English cities to shreds in the August riots? A personal opinion follows, written by Richard Jackson in the persona of a 'rioter'.

People are saying I am just a violent hooligan, a mindless thug, a criminal, an anarchist. They're saying I lack proper respect for authority and for people's property. They say I am engaging in wanton destruction and causing mayhem just because I'm wicked. People are saying I am part of a small, criminally-minded minority who should be locked up. Maybe they're right. Maybe I am just a worthless piece of shit. Maybe I should be locked away forever, punished, excluded. But what do I really care what 'people' think?

There are reasons why I riot. You might not like them, but they're mine.

I riot because I'm angry. Anger envelopes me like a blanket every day of my life. I'm angry because I'm poor, I've always been poor, and I know I will never be able to afford all those nice things people are supposed to have. I'm angry because my life is shit and I know it's always going to be shit. I'm angry because I know that there's no future for me; no one will ever give me a decent job or a hand-up in life. I will live in the same shitty housing that my family have always lived in, drawing down the same shitty benefits. I'm angry because I live in a shit place full of poverty, crime, vandalism, gangs, garbage, grime and neglect. Most days I take my anger out on myself; I engage in a wide and creative array of self-destructive behavior. But sometimes, like last night, I direct my anger outwards. I let my rage take over, and for a brief moment, I feel a profound sense of release.

I riot because I hate the police, and because I know that the police hate me. They're racist and brutal, and they treat me like scum every day of my life, always coming around blaming me for everything bad that happens, harassing me when I walk down the street. I hate them because they think they're God and they don't have to answer to anyone for what they do. I hate them because they show me no respect. In a riot, you can fight back against the police; you can stand up to them and tell them how you really feel.

I riot because I am nobody, nothing, less than nothing. I am invisible, a ghost in this city, this country, this world. People don't see me, and don't give a shit about me or what's going to happen to me. My parents don't care, my teachers don't care, the politicians don't care, the police don't care; no one gives a fuck about me and my life. If people do ever see me, they don't really see *me*; they just see an anti-social, worthless, feral teenager; they see a danger to society, a threat to the peace. If no one cares about me, why should I care about anyone else?

I riot because no one ever listens to me. No one has ever really listened to me; nobody hears what I have to say. But when I riot, it seems the whole world stops and listens. My riot is my voice. It is the expression of my feelings, the sound of inarticulate rage which I cannot express any other way. I don't expect anyone will understand what I'm saying, I cannot put it into nice words; but I feel the need to say it anyway. I have to let it out somehow, and right now, music, or drugs, or vandalism is not enough.

I riot because I feel powerless every day of my life. I'm not in control of what happens to me; other people are always deciding about my life, telling me what's right for me – teachers, cops, social workers, pastors, politicians, media commentators. When I riot, I feel powerful, I feel in control. It may only last a few hours, but for those brief moments

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when I smash something or burn something, I feel like a free person in control of my own destiny. I feel like somebody. When I riot, I feel like a real man.

I riot because it is the most exciting thing that has happened to me in forever. It's like being high, but way better: the adrenaline, the sheer thrill and terror of fighting with the police, burning shit down, smashing and stealing, running, hiding. What would I be doing otherwise? Watch the TV? Studying? Hanging out with my friends on the corner? Smoking dope? Fuck off! This is so much better than the mind-numbing tedium of my regular life where I simply exist from day to day with nothing to look forward to. In my usual life, I am like the walking dead, a real zombie; there's absolutely nothing exciting to do around here, especially when you have no money. I will live on this excitement for ages.

I riot because when I'm in a group with my friends, we sometimes egg each other on. I've done things with them that I would never have done on my own. It's a group thing; I feel braver and stronger when we're together. We try to impress each other; we give each other respect. It's how I get my esteem, the only way I get some respect.

I riot because it might allow me to loot a few shops. I know I could never afford all those beautiful things everyone else seems to have, but in a riot, you can just take them. I *need* some new trainers, a new phone, a laptop, clothes, money, games. It's a consumer society, my friend. We have all got to have these things, otherwise we won't be happy. I just want to be happy.

I riot because I have absolutely nothing to lose. You want to lock me up for it? Go ahead. It means nothing to a nothing like me.

Richard Jackson is Professor of International Politics at Aberystwyth University. His latest book is *Terrorism: A Critical Introduction* (2011; Palgrave Macmillan; co-authored with Lee Jarvis, Jeroen Gunning and Marie Breen Smyth). He blogs regularly on issues of terrorism, war and conflict resolution.