

The London Riots: from greed to responsibility

Written by Adam Groves

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ADAM GROVES, AUG 9 2011

Yesterday, for the first time since moving to London, I felt scared. I left my office in Southwark at about 6pm, and arrived in Peckham twenty minutes later to find hundreds of masked and hooded kids running up and down my local high street.

I watched as one of them picked up a traffic cone and struck a motorcyclist coming in the other direction. Two more threw a bin at a passing car and when it collided with another vehicle, they began kicking the doors – trying to force them open as the lone man inside struggled to restart his engine.

I've witnessed violent scenes before – on protest marches, in pubs – but what really struck me last night was how menacing the atmosphere was. In an area where many young people lack basic opportunities and ambitions, suddenly an opportunity presented itself: rioters were empowered to do whatever they liked on the streets.

What became rapidly apparent – and what made the situation so scary – was that this power would be wielded almost indiscriminately. A locally owned store at the bottom of my road was petrol bombed; a bus was set alight at the other end of the street; scores of shops were looted. As this brave woman pointed out to rioters in Hackney, there was no sense that anyone was fighting for a cause – it was simply an opportunity which was ruthlessly exploited in pursuit of power and greed (distressingly evident in this video).

Thinking about the riots today, what has struck me is that so many young people clearly feel totally disconnected and disengaged from their communities – to the extent that they've leapt on the first opportunity to take advantage over others (even their own neighbours) by looting.

But maybe I shouldn't be surprised. After all, it's not just poor disenfranchised youths who are content to rape their own communities. We're living through the biggest financial crash in living memory; precipitated by corporate greed and fraud on a massive scale, and characterised by a sense that banking elites are totally disconnected from the rest of us. They represent another tiny minority in our society who are content to watch the majority suffer while they exploit every possible opportunity for profit.

Alison Charlton's succinct analysis rings true: "People are acting like the markets. Sensing a weakness in the establishment, they exploit it. They are 'shorting' the law."

The behaviour of greedy looters is inexcusable. And so is the behaviour of greedy financial elites. We need to begin talking about our responsibilities to communities near and far. That goes for rich and poor alike.

Adam Groves *co-founded e-IR*

About the author:

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Adam Groves has an MSc in Global Governance and Diplomacy from Oxford University and a BSc in International Relations from the University of Wales, Aberystwyth. Adam co-founded the website in November 2007.