

Riots

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RIOTS

RIOTS. A riot involves relatively spontaneous and temporary illegitimate group violence. While a riot may share many social and psychological factors with (and indeed grow out of, or give rise to) other forms of mass behaviour, such as panic, craze, or an expressive crowd, it differs from them in the outwardly hostile and aggressive action taken. Unlike a rebellion or insurrection, a riot usually does not involve an intent to overthrow the government. It differs from peaceful protest demonstrations and civil disobedience because it involves violence.

Riots throughout the ages have been disproportionately urban phenomena. In modern times, the social contexts in which they have occurred most frequently are factories, governmental centres, ghettos, universities, prisons, recreation centres, and colonized or occupied areas. Perhaps the most important general statement to be made about riots is that they can both reflect and cause social change and cannot be understood apart from the main sources of cleavage and social conflict in a society. Among the most important kinds of riots have been those involving political, economic, racial, religious, and nationality issues. Of lesser historical significance are revelrous crowds and the large number of instances where a specific incident such as overselling seats at a performance or inappropriate police handling of parade spectators or demonstrators leads to a riot. As a legal concept, riot is a criminal offense against public order involving a group, however small, and the use of violence, however slight (see also Riot).

Riots in Europe.—Europe since the 17th century has seen much collective violence in the form of brawls between rival guilds and communes, food riots, tax rebellions, mass forest and field trespassing, attacks on châteaus, machine breaking, pogroms, political rebellions, and strikes. Some periods have been more violent than others, such as the late 17th, the latter part of the 18th, and the first half of the 19th century in Great Britain and from the middle of the 18th to the middle of the 19th century in France.

Among some of the better known riots in Great Britain were the Wilkite Riots (1760s and 1770s), against the British government's treatment of John Wilkes (q.v.); Gordon Riots (1780), against Catholics; Luddite Riots (1811–12; see below and Luddites); Rebecca Riots (q.v.; 1839; 1842–44); and the Plug Pot Riots of 1842 (see Chartism). Among important mass disturbances in France were the Grain Riots of 1775, and the violence associated with the revolutions of 1789, 1830, 1848, 1851, and 1871.

The right of resistance, or right to riot, was a part of national tradition in England, and it touched those active in the American Revolution. European riots in the 17th, 18th, and well into the 19th century were rather conservative. Rulers were seen to have obligations to their people; among the most important was providing them with a livelihood. If the ruler met his obligations, the populace was prepared to defend him. If he failed to do his duty, the populace rioted, not to overthrow him as would be the case later but to compel him to do his duty. Riots thus became quasi-institutionalized and perhaps as a result were rather patterned and restricted in their destruction. They represented a

means, understood by the people as well as their rulers, by which those with few political or economic rights might gain concessions.

The traditional rural and urban food riots illustrate this. The main thrust of food riots was a demand to buy food at a "just price." Food riots tended to be associated with periodic famines, and increases in prices and unemployment. Demonstrations would be mounted against those presumed to be profiteering through the shipment or hoarding of grain. If the authorities failed to act and impose a just price on merchants, millers, farmers, or bakers, grain and its products would be seized and sold at a lower price with the proceeds going to the owner. With technical improvements in the production and distribution of grain in the 19th century, food riots disappeared.

Artisans, as well as peasants, participated in food riots, and the artisans also were engaged in industrial disputes. Workers' demands—pursued through attacks on industrial property, workshops, mines, mills, machinery, and "pulling down" employers' houses—were common in the 18th and 19th centuries. E. J. Hobsbawm has called this "collective bargaining by riot." Violence was used by workers as a means of dealing with wage cuts and price increases or to protect their livelihood against the threat of new machinery.

Among the best known of the machine breakers were the British Luddites. Luddism occurred in a context in which war, bad harvests, and the collapse of the export trade raised prices to famine heights and seriously hurt the textile trade. Parliament had repealed paternalistic codes and imposed a laissez-faire economy on the workers. New machines and the factory system disrupted traditional ways of life. Independent artisans were displaced by unskilled factory workers operating new machines for much lower wages. Luddism of the early 19th century moved from a seemingly spontaneous demonstration of stocking workers "clamouring for work and a more liberal price" to a well-organized movement whose small disciplined bands moved swiftly at night. Attacks were selective and restrained, and frequently preceded by a letter warning the employer to change his ways or face the consequences. Machines rather than people were attacked until the authorities began attacking the Luddites. Luddism was short-lived because of increased efforts at social control.

In the mid-19th century, as the modern labour movement emerged and workers gained rights, the classical city mob tended to disappear. In its place emerged more organized demonstrations, strikes, and more sophisticated revolutionary efforts. Violence became more ideological, more associated with the political left, and concentrated more on institutions than on particular individuals. Instead of protesting some change or action that seemed to deprive them of rights they had once enjoyed, rioters came to protest the absence of new rights they felt entitled to. Workers' organizations, however, also meant greater control over potential rioters. To an important extent the amount of violence that occurred came to depend on how violent the authorities were in responding to large demonstrations.

The tolerance for, and amount of, public disorder declined as the nation-state increasingly gained a monopoly on the means of violence. This was related to new value patterns stressing national integration, new bureaucratic forms of police organization, and technical advances, such as the railway and telegraph, that greatly aided efforts at control.

Riots in the United States.—In the United States, with its diverse population, riots have involved issues of race and ethnicity to a much greater extent than in Europe, taking the form of pogroms, communal riots, and the type of uprisings characteristic of colonized or occupied countries. Lynching, a form of mob violence somewhat restricted to the United States, originated in the middle of the 18th century. (See Lynching and Lynch Law.)

Among prominent examples of ethnic violence were early attacks on Indians and Quakers; anti-Mormon and anti-Catholic riots in the 1840s; occasional slave uprisings; the New York City 1863 anti-draft, anti-Negro riots; the 1871 anti-Chinese riot in California; major race riots involving whites and blacks at East St. Louis in 1917, Chicago in 1919, and Detroit in 1943; the anti-Mexican riot in Los Angeles in 1943; and anti-Negro riots at the

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University of Mississippi, the burning of freedom buses, and attacks on Negroes participating in nonviolent demonstrations in the 1950s and 1960s.

Starting in 1964, racially inspired violence appeared in new form and on a scale unprecedented in American history. More than 200 American cities experienced black ghetto riots, with the largest disturbances occurring in the Watts area of Los Angeles in 1965 and in Newark, N.J., and Detroit, Mich., in 1967. By the late 1960s, approximately 200 persons, mostly Negro, were killed, 8,000 injured, and 50,000 arrested.

These riots followed a period in which black aspirations had been raised and promises to end racism and inequality went unfulfilled. A decade of nonviolent protest demonstrations had been relatively unsuccessful in changing the life situation of the average black. Earlier racial violence, such as that in East St. Louis, Chicago, and Detroit, was not restricted to ghetto areas, tended to be initiated by whites and involved white civilians attacking blacks (pogroms) or battles between white and black civilians (communal riots), with authorities often playing a passive role. In contrast, black riots of the 1960s, often growing out of a police incident, were restricted to ghetto areas and involved blacks striking out at the authorities, property, and symbols of white society, rather than at whites as individuals.

Other kinds of riots have not been lacking. During and after the Revolutionary War, riots such as those over the Stamp Act (1765-66), and accompanying Shays's Rebellion (1786) and the Whisky Insurrection (q.v.), tended to be political. As the country industrialized in the period from the Civil War to World War I, economic conflicts involving efforts at unionization and strikes were an important source of riots.

The 1960s saw the emergence of widespread student demonstrations, starting with the Free Speech Movement at the University of California at Berkeley in 1964. Many demonstrations ended in violence because of police provocation or a strategy of confrontation. The issues involved in student protest have been highly diverse, depending on the place and the country. A theme often present has been the demand for (or a reaction against encroachment upon) greater student power and participation in the affairs of the university or the larger society. The impersonality of the mass bureaucratic university and university traditionalism and imperviousness to change are conducive to student disorders.

In many universities there are long traditions of student activism. Historically, students have played important roles in movements of political change as in the French Revolution of 1848; the Russian Revolution; the Fascist movements in Italy, Germany, and Spain; and nationalist struggles for independence in the colonized countries of Africa and Asia. Youthful idealism, ambiguities and frustrations in the student role, lesser commitments to familial and occupational roles, and the setting of the university which gathers together large numbers of people in a common situation, help explain the ease with which students can be mobilized for demonstrations. Some of these causes also explain why youth in general seem to participate disproportionately in riots.

Communal Riots in Asia and Africa.—Outbreaks of communal rioting in countries such as India-Pakistan (1947), Ceylon (1958), and Nigeria (1966–67) followed the demise of European colonial empires. New countries were often artifacts of arbitrary colonial boundaries and did not correspond to traditional group divisions. The fragile unity that had often been present in a common anti-colonial struggle gave way to bitter conflicts. Various racial, ethnic, tribal, religious, and linguistic groups, often with long histories of hostility, fought among themselves for autonomy. The weaker group feared domination by the stronger.

The most violent examples of such communal rioting involved Hindus and Muslims during the partition of India in 1947. Approximately a half-million people died, many in hideous massacres while trying to reach safety in their new country (Pakistan for Muslims and India for Hindus). Fighting was most pronounced in areas of mixed population such as Bengal and the Punjab. Communal riots such as these, in which the lines of cleavage flow out of racial, religious, or ethnic differences and where the essential humanity of the opponent can be denied, seem to have

a much more violent and macabre potential than riots involving strictly political or economic issues.

Analysis of Riots can usefully be divided into factors in the pre-, actual, and post-riot situations. The first deals with the causes that increase the likelihood of the occurrence of a riot. The second deals with the precipitating incident, the role of ideas and rumour, leadership, the nature of participants, the interaction between rioters and authorities, and the patterning of the riot. Analysis of the last considers the consequences of the violence.

The Pre-Riot Situation.—A riot can potentially occur anytime people are together in a group. Riots, however, do not occur randomly in time, place, or social setting. For example, 20th-century American race-linked riots have occurred when whites felt the segregatory status quo was threatened or when Negroes developed new equalitarian aspirations. Such riots have occurred especially during war periods, in urban areas, in summer, on weekends, and on main transportation routes. Certain conditions greatly increase the likelihood of rioting.

A group's predisposition to riot may be analyzed in light of the intensity of its grievances, the extent of opportunities to gain redress through normal channels, its cultural traditions regarding the use of violence, the extent to which its members are available for mass action, and the coercive power of the authorities to control outbreaks. To an important extent a riot is a function of these five factors. A riot is most likely to occur when a group has an intensely felt grievance, when it believes normal channels of protest are closed or ineffective, when its traditions favour violence, when it can easily come together for mass action, and when authorities are perceived as unable or unwilling to exercise strong control over violence.

An important impetus to many riots is some disruption, particularly if abrupt, of a group's traditional or anticipated way of life. When the expectations that previously guided action are no longer relevant, instrumental as well as expressive mass behaviour is made more likely. Riots have occurred disproportionately in periods of economic crisis, war, mass migration, catastrophe, and technical change, when normal routines of living are upset. When such changes are widespread they may not only engender dissatisfaction but also weaken traditional external and internal sources of control. The likelihood of violence from traditional as well as new strains may thus be increased.

Epidemics of plague in the Middle Ages greatly disrupted the European social order and gave rise to pogroms as well as dancing manias. Economic crises have been closely associated with a wide array of violent outbursts including European food and machine-breaking riots, American nativism, and Japanese peasant uprisings. The two periods in which American race riots against blacks were most prevalent were associated with large wartime northward migration and black entry into new areas of employment. The American prison riots of the early 1950s were associated with new administrative techniques that destroyed the informal inmate system of social control and reward distribution.

Riots are more likely not only when groups feel deprived of rights they once enjoyed but also when they come to feel that new rights are due them. Here the role of ideas, or what Neil Smelser (see Bibliography) has called a "generalized belief system," is particularly important. Such a belief system prepares people for action. It redefines an unstructured situation and fixes blame for the existing order which is considered intolerable. A better world seems possible if only some person or group of persons is destroyed, injured, removed, or restricted. Examples of well-developed generalized belief systems that have figured in riots include anticlericalism, anti-Semitism, Marxism, anarchism, Fascism, and various nationalisms. Scholars disagree as to whether riots are more likely when people have a sense of despair or hope, and when things are getting worse or improving. Each of these factors, under not very well understood conditions, has been linked to outbursts. Disorders seem especially likely when periods of gain are interrupted by periods of decline. The important cause is not so much the amount of objective deprivation but how a group evaluates its position relative to other groups and the kinds of expectations it has.

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Not all riots, however, involve a generalized belief. Recreational riots or expressive rampages tend to be relatively issueless with respect to the larger society. The Saturday night brawls frequent in some lower status communities, ritualized disorders following school athletic events, Easter vacation riots of American students, and motorcycle riots have more of a playful tension-release character, with slight implications for social change. They are not much affected by the predisposing factors considered above. A pronounced weakening of authorities may also lead to relatively issueless rioting as was the case in the 1919 Boston police strike and some European riots as World War II ended.

Given a generalized belief that calls forth and explains dissatisfaction, it becomes important to ask what alternative means to violence are available. In colonized, occupied, or totalitarian countries, or highly authoritarian situations such as the American slave system, the early factory system, prisons, and many schools and universities-where there are no effective channels for the redress of grievances-violence may be seen as the only way of pressing a claim. In other situations the formal democratic process may be inoperative, either because a group is denied participation, or because its leaders are not seen as effectively representing the group. In many American cities that experienced riots in 1967, black political underrepresentation was pronounced and a feeling existed that all legitimate channels had been exhausted. Riots may also appear as a result of the closing off of previously accepted channels of protest, and disappear as new channels become available.

The likelihood of a riot is also increased to the extent that various social cleavages (e.g., racial, national, linguistic, religious, tribal, regional, generational, economic, and political status) overlap rather than cut across each other. Where this is the case, as in many colonized countries, mutually reinforcing grievances on the part of the subordinate group are likely. In the United States race and class overlap. New dissatisfactions may be buttressed by traditional hostilities. In this context riots are likely to involve group conflict over power, income, and prestige.

The Riot is usually foreshadowed by a series of events that arouse the relevant public and focus attention on the source of dissatisfaction. In this context of heightened concern, a given incident, often innocuous, may confirm previous fears, expectations, and beliefs and come to be symbolic of all a group feels is wrong. Rumours, which reflect tension more than cause it, may selectively focus the group's attention and help create a polarized and oversimplified conception of the situation. Intense feelings of self-righteousness may develop. As with other kinds of mass behaviour, some crowd members may feel a sense of solidarity and heightened emotional ties to each other. As collective excitement builds up, an agitated member of the crowd may take some violent action, setting a pattern that others then follow.

Sometimes a single event can precipitate like disorders in many places. Following the assassination of Tsar Alexander II in 1881, Russian mobs in more than 200 cities attacked Jews, although the assassin was not Jewish. Following the killing of Martin Luther King, Jr., in 1968, more than 100 American cities experienced racial disorders. Food, prison, and university riots have tended to cluster together in time, often radiating outward. Some observers see in this a pattern of conspiracy; perhaps it is more likely that it represents a response to similar conditions and the provision of a role model. There are parallels to the spread of behaviour in fads, crazes, and panics that clearly do not involve an organized system of control by a leadership group. The mass media, especially television, have greatly facilitated the process.

Early conservative theorists such as G. LeBon, E. D. Martin, and E. A. Ross emphasized the emotional character of crowd behaviour. For them the crowd evoked lurid images of destruction where the basest of human impulses were expressed. They wrote of "herd instincts," the "group mind," the "atavistic vulnerability of civilized men," "dirty people without name," and the "dangerous classes." The crowd was thought to be like-minded, destructive, irrational, fickle, and suggestible and made up of social misfits, criminals, and riffraff.

In extreme form such ideas are now generally rejected. There

is great variation both within and between crowds. There are types and degrees of participation. These may change as the riot develops. Individuals may engage in the same activity for different reasons. In many riots, a small active nucleus, often made up of younger men, can be differentiated from a large body of spectators. The characteristics of rioters, the degree of selectivity in their activities, and the amount of violence depend on the specific issues and the period of history. Yet much research suggests the classical image of the crowd to be incorrect.

G. Rudé, using police and judicial records in his studies of the crowd in France and England between 1730–1848, finds that criminal and lumpen proletariat participation was slight. Riot participants were not those at the margins of society; rather they tended to be well integrated into local settings and had specific grievances. The mob consisted of the ordinary urban poor, the menu peuple—small workshop masters, shopkeepers, apprentices, craftsmen, and labourers: employed people with settled abode and without criminal conviction. Similarly, research on black riot participants in the 1960s suggests that in many ways rioters were broadly representative of Negro youth. They were not disproportionately unemployed, criminal, or recent migrants, and had a strong sense of indignation over the place of Negroes in America.

The personally disorganized, those with pronounced antisocial tendencies, criminals, and individualistic looters may take advantage of the general confusion in a riot to further their own ends. There are many historical examples of such people being drawn into a riot, unconcerned and perhaps even unaware of the broader issues. Riots clearly offer a cover for normally prohibited behaviour. Yet such people are always present, while riots occur infrequently and are very much related to broader social, political, economic, religious, and racial issues. An explanation that seeks the source of riots in the nature of man, or of certain men such as those of the lower social classes, cannot explain their variation.

The mechanisms by which people come to act differently in a crowd are not well understood. One relevant cause is interaction that leads to the emergence of new norms redefining the situation and justifying previously forbidden behaviour (e.g., "Merchants have been exploiting and stealing from the people for years so we are not looting, but taking what is rightfully ours"). An individual may feel group pressure to conform to the new norm since not to do so may label him as a coward, a fool, or an enemy. Another cause is the weakening of external control that may permit the expression of deviant tendencies present in most people. The failure of authorities to act (either because they are undermanned, in sympathy with the crowd, or afraid of provoking it further) leads people to think they will escape punishment. The crowd offers anonymity. The possible rewards may seem to greatly outweigh the negative consequences.

The importance of the leader or agitator has long been a subject of dispute and clearly depends on the particular situation. In some countries, such as those of the Middle East, street rioting has been a recognized means of conflict that leaders effectively use. It is doubtful, however, that large numbers of people can be made to riot without grievances.

Where speech-making and planned demonstrations are involved, leaders may play important early roles. Where the crowd has a clearly defined end, and cooperative action is required as in a lynching or forcing entrance into a building, a clear leadership structure may be present and even restraining. The leader may lose all control, however, as the specific purpose is carried out, and the crowd may even turn on him if he tries to restrain them. This situation led early observers to characterize the crowd as vacillating and immoral. In other, more diffuse riots involving small congeries of people behaving in roughly parallel ways, such leadership will be lacking, though some men out of extreme ideological commitment or personal disorganization may set daring examples that others follow. The extent to which a crowd is open to suggestions of leaders is limited to those consistent with its mood; suggestions that the crowd disperse are often ineffective.

A riot, as with any kind of collective behaviour, has an emergent quality to it and over time may change greatly. Its norms are more spontaneous, and this gives it an important element of un-

predictability. Important to the course of a riot is the interaction between control officials and rioters. Authorities face the dilemma of under- or overreaction. To underreact may permit the riot to spread as people see they are not being censured. To overreact may create martyrs and lead to the involvement of many who had been passive spectators.

A pattern that has sometimes emerged involves the escalation of the riot to include new and more general issues or the triggering of traditional hostilities unrelated to the original issues as new participants with other concerns become involved. Hostility may move from being focused on a single object or class of objects to a wide array of objects. It may move from involving the crowd as a unit to individual or small group actions that are roughly parallel. An early period of milling and chaotic violence may give rise to more planned and focused attacks. The level of violence may escalate from verbal insults to rock throwing to gunfire as authorities increase efforts at control. The riot may end when the crowd obtains its objective or realizes it is impossible to obtain it, when some shocking event occurs, when the crowd becomes fatigued, or when superior force is brought against it.

Post-Riot Consequences.—Whatever the varied personal motives and characteristics of rioters, and the degree of instrumentality and spontaneity involved in their behaviour, the event they collectively help create often comes to have a meaning that far transcends their individual psychology and actions. The consequences of riots have been varied. Some have resulted only in brutal repression; others have been merely tolerated and had no important effects; while still others have been instrumental in directly or indirectly bringing about change.

Riots themselves often do not directly involve action rationally calculated to solve the issues which arouse the crowd. Indeed, the crowd's inability to deal with the issues it is concerned with can be an important stimulus to riotous action. Riots can heighten political consciousness and solidarity, however, and can serve as catalysts for more organized protest efforts carried out illegally or legally. They have often served as a prelude to broader movements of social upheaval.

Though he was unsympathetic, Gustave LeBon noted that crowds serve to destroy the old order in preparation for the emergence of a new one. An initial outburst may take on a symbolic meaning and give rise to new groups, heroes, and leaders. In ancient Greece and Rome the mob frequently led to the fall of governments and had important effects on the course of world history. The American, French, and Russian revolutions were preceded by riots. In the 1960s, student uprisings toppled governments in a number of countries. Where a riot does produce change, at a more general level, it may often be analyzed as part of a broader series of historical and social events conducive to both riots and the given change.

Riots can have a communications function and sensitize those with power to problems they previously were unaware of or had neglected. Grain riots often produced a reduction in prices and new efforts by local officials to assure an adequate grain supply at a just price. Negro riots in the 1960s visibly and forcefully brought racial problems to the forefront of domestic issues. American student disorders have triggered reanalysis of the nature of higher education. Where other means are lacking, riots can serve as a bargaining device by which powerless groups put forth their claims. This negative power to disrupt society and the threat of rioting have tempered the actions of many rulers.

In some riots a life cycle model-breakdown, chaotic violence and mass unrest, organized protest, social change, and the disappearance of violence-may be noted. U.S. labour violence and various nationalist movements have undergone this cycle. Probably a majority of riots, however, do not show this pattern. Sporadic violence may accompany, or never lead to, more organized efforts at change. Rioting may also inhibit social change by offering leaders an excuse for bloody repression or by channeling mass anger onto a scapegoat, such as Jews or Negroes, and away from the basic source of discontent.

Other effects may be more limited or subtle. Fear of riot generated by the Chartist disorders was an important factor in the creation of a national police force in England. Fear of revolution influenced the planning of Paris, Vienna, and Washington, D.C. Following American ghetto riots some new buildings have been constructed without street-level windows. Some psychiatrists have theorized that through striking out, individuals who feel oppressed obtain a sense of dignity and catharsis.

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