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The London Riots

Abstract

Ever since the riots happened, it has been making headlines. The riots are an important issue in British culture because it has brought to attention social issues that had been festering and now need to be dealt with. The problem, reaction, and solution are currently under heavy debate. The two main sides of the argument are that the rioters were upset with the government and that the rioters were just greedy criminals. Those that believe the former think the courts are being too harsh and those that believe the latter think the courts are justified in their sentences. Those that believe the former think the solution is redistribution of wealth and those that believe the latter think the solution is work. I do not believe in this either/or mentality. I think it is a combination of both sides. I have concluded that the rioters were acting out of greed, but their actions reflect social issues such as feeling disenfranchised, moral decay, welfare system, and social immobility. The courts were just. The Americans and British seem to be on the same page in regards to handling the situation, but perceive that they are not perhaps because of prejudices. The Prime Minister had good ideas, like Work Program and National Citizens Service, for solving the underlying problem, but it is uncertain whether he intends to follow through.

Thesis

The rioters acted out of greed, but their actions reflect social issues such as feeling disenfranchised, moral decay, welfare system, and social immobility.

Introduction and Importance

This paper will examine the London riots, specifically why the rioters behaved the way they did and if the situation is being handled properly. In order to do this, the chronological events of the riots must be explained and speculation on the causes of the riots followed by a discussion on the moral integrity of the rioters. The reaction of the government in relations to court sentences, revocation of welfare, and plans to solve the underlying problems behind the riots must also be examined. Then the British perspective will be compared to the American perspective and finally, my conclusion on the riots.

Ever since the riots happened, it has been making headlines. The riots have brought to attention significant social problems within the community because communities are seeking an explanation for such behavior, but there is debate over what the problems are that spurred the riots. It is important to identify the problems and causes of the riots in order to assess the moral integrity of the rioters and if the government is handling the situation correctly. The fates of many convicted rioters are at stake, many business owners have had their hard work destroyed, and people in the community are shocked at the moral disintegration within their communities.

I have concluded that the rioters were criminal and should not be excused for their actions; however, some understanding should be afforded because of the underlying causes of social frustration. The underlying causes are that the government fosters this negative behavior through the welfare system. I believe the government acted opportunistically and complied with the public's desires and I question their ability to follow through. I thought their plans did address the underlying problems, but whether or not they carry them out is another question. The social problems of Britain today are the problems of America in the future.

What Happened Exactly?

On August 4, 2011, Marc Duggon was shot and killed by the police in Tottenham, London when he was in the passenger seat of a car that had been pulled over (“How Riots Spread”). He was a known drug dealer and evidence shows at the time of his death, he was unarmed (Blighty). Police are rarely armed with guns, but on this day, they were and they shot and killed Marc Duggon (Blighty). Two days later, a small protest gathered outside Tottenham police station with more disturbances the following day (“How Riots Spread”).

By August 8, 2011, the riots had spread to Hackney and major cities outside of London (“How Riots Spread”). The next day, 10,000 police were sent to London, but riots had broken out in Manchester, Birmingham, Nottingham, Wolverhampton, and Liverpool (“How Riots Spread”). Some examples of events that took place during the riots are as follows: 16 year old murders 68 year old man, 2,772 arrests by 7 police stations by Monday, 1,179 have appeared in courts and 65% charged; Gordon Thompson burned Reeves furniture, an 140 year old local business, to the ground (“Broken Society”). A group of teenagers were caught on camera helping a bleeding boy to his feet, and then stealing from his backpack (“London’s Long Burn”).

One of the saddest tragedies of the riots was that the rioters attacked their own communities, mainly local small business owners that had poured their lives and all their savings into their businesses (Barford). It was very difficult for them to see their life work destroyed in such a senseless act (Barford). Three young men could not bear to watch their businesses go down in flames; Haroon Jahan, Shazad Ali, and Abdul Musauir were murdered while defending their shops; three people have been charged with murder for their deaths (“Birmingham Riots”). Although this was an example of the worst of the riots, it was also an example of the goodness in

people. 20,000 people attended their funerals and their father thanked the young people for their support and calmness (“Birmingham Riots”).

Why Did This Happen?

In the Prime Minister David Cameron’s speech addressing the riots, he attributes the behavior to organized crime and “pure criminality” (Goodman). He claimed it was not about race, government cuts, Parliament, or poverty, but that the rioters were “indifferen[t] to right and wrong”, that they had a “twisted moral code” and lacked self-restraint (Goodman). He admitted some guilt when he claimed politicians were too afraid of upsetting the media and the public to say what needs to be said, which is that “moral neutrality” is not all right (Goodman).

He called the riots a “wake-up call” that had been “fester[ing] for decades” that has “exploded in our faces” due to “slow motion moral collapse” (Goodman). According to Cameron, the problem of their “broken society” could be attributed to individual irresponsibility, selfishness, actions with no consequences, children without fathers, schools without discipline, communities without control, rights without responsibilities, and crime without punishment (Goodman). Despite these individual faults, Cameron accepted the government’s responsibility for having “tolerated, indulged -- sometimes even incentivized” such behaviors (Goodman). Ironically, in the same speech Cameron says that the government needs to stop rewarding failure, and then he pledged to turn around the worst 200 schools (Goodman).

Thornburgh, a Time Magazine writer, attributes the riots to class warfare and references the UK’s low Gini coefficient. The Gini coefficients measure the equality, or in this case the inequality, of distribution of income. The UK has a coefficient of 0.34 with 30% of income going to the top 5% of earners and according to the Organization for Economic Co-operation and

Development, “the U.K. has the worst social mobility of the developed nations: those born to a certain class tend to stay there” (Thornburgh). The USA is just a bit higher with 33% of income going to the top 5% of earners. The key difference between the USA and the UK is not the distribution of wealth, but the optimism of the people. About 68% of Americans believe they can move up if they really try whereas only 40% of those living in the UK believe that hard work pays off (Thornburgh). Thornburgh believes that this, as well as the “broad disaffection” with the police is what turned “law abiders into lawbreakers”.

Thornburgh’s use of the Gini coefficient as an argument is invalid because the higher the Gini coefficient, the more unequal the distribution of wealth is and the UK is not even the highest and there is little range between the highest and lowest. The UK’s was 0.34, the highest was Portugal at 0.36, and the lowest was Sweden at 0.26. Thornburgh also cited “broad disaffection” with the police as a cause, but the riots really had nothing to do with the police. In fact, only one police station was attacked in comparison to the hundreds of stores looted.

Lalancette, writer for the Montreal Gazette, agreed with Thornburgh and attributed the riots to the peoples’ deep seated frustration with continual cut into social programs, the income gap, lack of the American dream, and even included the royal wedding to causing discontent amongst the people because it highly publicized the lavish life they do not live. On the other hand, Justice secretary, Ken Clarke, attributed the riots to the broken penal system because a staggering $\frac{3}{4}$ of rioters had previous convictions (“Moral Maze”). He did not believe they were discontent with the government and like Cameron, he thought they were “criminals on a rampage” (“Moral Maze”). Right Reverend Nigel McCulloch, Bishop of Manchester, also did not attribute the riots to discontent, but claimed they were a “result of a me-first, ultra consumerist culture”.

In Cameron's speech, he referenced organized crime (Goodman). Christian Guy, policy director at the think tank for the Centre of Social Justice, agrees with Cameron because of the speed in which everything happened (de Castella). He claimed they used blackberries to choose targets like Foot Locker, JDs, and Currys. Gangs temporarily suspended their territories in order to maximize damage, young people were seen looting stores and taking the goods to people waiting in cars; this shows that they were not looting for their personal use, but for a greater scheme organized by older gang members (de Castella). Professor John Pitts, a criminologist, did not believe that formally organized gangs were behind the riots, but rather young people influenced by gang culture, meaning games like Grand Theft Auto and "gangsta aesthetic" (de Castella).

Gavin Knight went undercover to write about gangs and from his perspective, the rioters were just friends looking for fun (de Castella). He believes that rioters were just members of society and references teaching assistants, graphic designers, and university students as taking part. The only generalization about the rioters was that they were young and poor, not that they were gang members. Professor Pitts also argues that gangs did not incite the riots because riots are bad for their business model meaning they cannot sell drugs with police constantly patrolling the streets (de Castella).

The fact that many of the rioters were criminals does give some credence to the belief that the riots were a result of organized crime, however, the evidence against this belief is strong enough to convince me otherwise. Knight has had a unique perspective as an undercover writer in gangs and he believes that the rioters were just kids looking for fun. He claimed that there were a variety of people participating in the riots. Many articles reference a graphic designer. I think there was probably only one graphic designer and this is an example of how the media

focuses on the most extreme cases, just like how many articles focused on the college student sent to jail for 6 months for stealing water. The most compelling argument that gangs were not involved is that it is bad for their business model and they would lose money from not being able to sell drugs with all the police patrolling the streets.

De Castella claimed that gangs temporarily suspended their territory to cause maximum damage, but gives no credence to this claim. He also used an example of young gang members loading TVs into the cars of older gang members, but it could just have been a family who wanted a TV in every room of their home. The arguments for gang involvement are not credible, however, I do agree with the idea that “gangsta aesthetic” has influenced the youth by making it seem cool to steal and to hate the police.

Good People, Bad Environment?

There is great debate about whether to even call the riots, riots, because Cameron and others are calling the riots acts of “pure criminality” without any attack on government (“Riots Debate”). Maxie Hayles, Chairman of Birmingham Racial Attacks Monitoring Unit, resented blaming gangs because he believes there are serious social issues that need to be dealt with (“Riots Debate”). The riot was first sparked by police brutality in the murder of Marc Duggon (Blighty). Charlie Williams notes that there had been 400 deaths by the hands of the police and not one of them have been convicted and argues that the riots were in response to police brutality (“Riots Debate”). Youth worker, Shaun Bailey, called the welfare system a noose and attributed the riots to the social issues that Hayles had referenced (“Riots Debate”).

Kidulthood actor, Adam Deacon, claimed that young people simply needed a voice and that is why they acted out (“Kidulthood Actor”). Wolchover, Life’s Little Mysteries Staff Writer,

believed the riots were caused by young people feeling disenfranchised and quoted Martin Luther King:

"There is nothing more dangerous than to build a society with a large segment of people in that society who feel that they have no stake in it; who feel that they have nothing to lose. People who have a stake in their society, protect that society, but when they don't have it, they unconsciously want to destroy it." (Wolchover)

Wolchover is attributing the riots to underlying problems within society and believe that the rioters were not consciously attacking the government, but their actions showed they were unconsciously unsatisfied.

Pure Criminality?

There are many arguments supporting Cameron's assertion that the riots were purely criminal. The rioters were greedy, not angry because they attacked their own community. They destroyed hundreds of businesses and attacked only one police station ("Riots Debate"). Economist, Ruth Lea, says this is the social price of big cities ("Riots Debate"). Ken Clarke claimed the riots had been carried out by the "feral underclass" of Britain to which Dr. Angie Hobbs, a philosopher from Warwick University, argued against labeling the rioters. She did not excuse them or support them, but admitted that society rewards greed ("Riots Debate"). David Cameron also agreed that the government rewards bad behaviors (Goodman).

Only one bookstore, like the one police station, was attacked. Most of the looters focused on high fashion clothing and technology stores, which again indicated greed and not anger (Prospero). A Waterstone's, British bookstore, employee humorously tweeted, "If they steal some books, they might learn something" (Prospero). This tweet really exemplifies the view of

the public, which is that the rioters were poor and uneducated and that they acted out of greed and not ideals.

Dr. Angie Hobbs holds the rioters morally responsible because they understand that society thinks looting is wrong, but she urges understanding because they do not understand why looting is wrong because they lack critical reasoning skills that are not being taught at home or at school (“Moral Maze”). For a functional society to exist, the people need to believe that the laws are there for their protection (“Moral Maze”). The rioters lacked rational behavior, honor, and had materialistic greed, all of which are perpetuated by the government (“Moral Maze”).

How did the Government React?

In David Cameron’s speech, he identified courses of action the government would be taking. His solution to the “slow motion moral decay” was to building strong families and communities, put more police on the streets, declare war on gangs, swift justice without the drawback of red tape, intervention in families, and encouraging strict school (Goodman). He pledged to change the welfare system, which currently encourages the worst of people and drains responsibility (Goodman). He has devised a work program to get people on welfare working so that they can take part in the ownership society and feel that they have a stake in their environment (Goodman). He wants to create a National Citizen Service, which is a group in which youth can volunteer for their communities (Goodman). He even addressed the recent MP scandals and stated that both rich and poor need to mend the morals of their broken society together (Goodman).

Courts are sending rioters to jail for much longer than in a normal situation where a first offender would only have community service (Casciani). So far, 1 in 10 people have been

convicted (Casciani). For example, a college student, Nicolas Robinson, was jailed for 6 months for stealing a pack of water worth 3.5 pounds (Holt). The local police also sent up a tip off scheme, called Shop-a-Looter, to identify looters, but many people turned themselves in, which goes to show that the rioters were not entirely morally depraved (“Police Inundated”).

Were these Reactions Appropriate?

Courts

Gerry Holt, BBC News writer, believes courts are being too harsh in their sentencing because the impact of a criminal record is severe. It can impact employment, education, travel, housing, and insurance (Holt). Most of the charges are for burglary, theft and handling, violence, and violent disorder offences, however, the people that got the longest sentences, in one case 4 years, were those that did not actually participate in the riots, but encouraged rioting via social networks (Casciani). The liberal democrats agree that these sentences are questionable, but the Prime Minister is defending the courts and encouraging tough sentences (“PM defends”).

Frasier, who has been working in the penal system for 25 years, also agrees that the sentences are appropriate (“Moral Maze”). In fact, he believes that our society needs more prisons and longer sentences to punish and deter crime. Criminals are only jailed after appearing in court many times and given many warnings and this system makes crime too easy and safe. People will steal if they think there will be no repercussions (“Moral Maze”).

Welfare

The Tories and Liberal Democrats are split on the issues of revoking welfare of convicted rioters and evicting the families of rioters (“IDS considers”). Cameron and the welfare secretary agree that these actions are appropriate. In normal circumstances, a person who is convicted of a

crime has their benefits taken away. However, Simon Hughes, Liberal Democrat deputy leader fears this will only make things worse (“IDS considers”). He believes the solution is redistribution of wealth (Helm).

Plans

MP David Lammy believes the government should guarantee jobs to young people who have been unemployed for more than a year. He believes this will prevent future crime because they will be too busy working and they will understand what it means to work for something (“David Lammy”). The PM did address some of these issues in his speech with the work program and National Citizen Service (Goodman).

Brendan Barber, TUC chief, believes the PM is “profoundly wrong” (“Brendan Barber”). He claimed that Cameron is reaching for simplistic clichés rather than seeking the underlying problem, which is the financial system and unequal distribution of wealth. He claims that Cameron is biased and attributes the problem to the undeserving poor, but mentions nothing of the moral disintegration of the rich (“Brendan Barber”). Barber claims Cameron has disregarded the rich, but he has not. He addressed that exact problem in the last part of his speech. Ed Miliband, leader of the Labour Party, too accuses Cameron of looking for “superficial answers” instead of lasting solutions. He called Cameron’s actions “knee jerk gimmicks” because in times of social unrest, it is very typical to appoint new advisors and put on a show as if they are really trying to solve the problem (“Broken society”).

British v. American Perspectives

As part of Cameron’s so called “knee jerk gimmicks,” (“Broken society”) he appointed Bill Bratton, American hero for fighting gangs in LA and NY and for calming LA after the

Rodney King riots, to give advice for their “war on gangs” (“supercop”). Ian Hanson, of Greater Manchester Police Federation, found this political move to be insulting and claimed that the American style is to lock everyone up and that Britain “doesn’t have the heart to do that” (“supercop”). In the same article, Bill Bratton said in reference to the riots, “[you] can’t arrest your way out” (“supercop”). This shows that Hanson clearly has not listened to Bratton and has an incorrect bias that Americans are mean and tough, but in reality, it seems that Bratton and Hanson are on the same page in that there are deeper social issues that will not be solved simply by arresting the rioters.

Thornburgh compares the UK and the USA in terms of distribution of wealth and optimism of social mobility. The distribution of wealth is very similar in both countries, however people in the USA have significantly greater optimism about climbing the social ladder. In general, Americans believe that if one works hard, one will succeed. The British do not seem to share this mentality, which understandably leads to frustration. With this mentality, one will not see the potential benefits of hard work.

The London riots are very similar to a rising problem in the USA, flash mobs. Flash mobs are when young teenagers, organized by social media, rob a store (Ryan). A lot of the social issues discussed in this paper are prevalent in the US. The young people who participate in flash mobs are experiencing the same moral collapse. The problems in the welfare system in the UK are the same as the problems in the US. The problems of the UK today will soon be the problems of the USA so it is important that we pay attention to how they handle the situation.

Conclusions

There are two causes of the riots: the conscious motivation of the rioters and the unconscious underlying issues that the riots brought attention to. Martin Luther King's quote most accurately describes the cause of the riots: "a society with a large segment of people in that society who feel that they have no stake in it (...) [and] when they don't have it, they unconsciously want to destroy it." Cameron correctly identified many of the causes of moral collapse including admitting fault that the government encourages the worst in people by rewarding failure. The welfare system's biggest problem is that it creates the mentality of rights without responsibility and the lack of swift justice fosters crime without punishment and actions without consequences. Additionally, social immobility encourages the idea that there is little benefit in working hard. All these things together create a "workless core" in which people feel they have no stake in society ("David Lammy"). Those who have never known work, as is the case with some people on welfare and some of the rioters, makes them feel unimportant and the riots were in response to feeling ignored and wanting fancy things.

Cameron said the riots were not about the government and that is true. The rioters did not have a chant or slogan; they simply pillaged local businesses for their personal profit, but the riots did bring to attention problems with the government. As Ken Clarke had stated, $\frac{3}{4}$ of rioters had previous convictions once again indicating that the rioters did not have a political message, and that they were mostly greedy criminals with unconscious frustrations about government cuts, the income gap, and social immobility. It also showed the ineffectiveness of the prison system. Bishop McCulloch says the riots were the result of a me-first minded society and this is fostered by the welfare system. The rioters were clearly acting out of greed because only one police station and one book store was attacked. The rest of the businesses that were looted were high

fashion clothing and electronics stores. These businesses are businesses that tend to make the most money and perhaps the rioters were unconsciously attacking the upper class. This is the lifestyle they most desire, but feel they can never attain by working hard so instead they steal.

The courts are right to administer harsh sentences because the rioters did horrible things and should not be excused. They should be held morally responsible because they know that society thinks stealing is wrong even if they do not understand why stealing is wrong. They breached their contract with society therefore they should be punished (Talbot). Holt's argument that the courts are being too harsh because the impact of a criminal record is severe is redundant because the point of a criminal record is to deter crime. Casciani was suggesting that 4 years in prison for inciting the riots on facebook, but not actually participating, was severe. I do not think it is because the mastermind, not the minions, should be punished more. Frasier, who has great experience in the prison system, believes in longer sentences. From his experience, longer sentences are more effective and should be given sooner. Criminals are encouraged to continue their lifestyle because they receive many warnings before any actual consequences so they think they can continuously get away with illegal activity.

Revoking welfare is fair because under normal circumstances, someone who is on welfare and is convicted of a crime loses their welfare. However, there is no benefit to evict the rioter's families, who more often than not, had nothing to do with the riots. Simon Hughes believes the solution is redistribution of wealth, but he does not even explain how that would help. I think redistribution of wealth is what caused the problems in the first place. There are people that take advantage of the welfare system and Hughes wants to take more money from hardworking people and give it these undeserving poor.

Barber said the PM is seeking simplistic clichés and Miliband call his speech, “knee jerk gimmicks,” but neither of them offers solutions. I think all of Cameron’s solution would effectively handle the problem. The question is whether or not he will go through with these statements or if he was just saying these things to appease the public, as he is very opportunistic (Holmes). The work program and NCS are both good ideas because they help the disenfranchised understand what it means to work for something and what it means to contribute to society. If they have contributed to society, they certainly would not want to destroy it.

The explicit cause of the riots was simply greed. The implicit causes of the riots are not so simple. The underlying social issues include feeling disenfranchised, moral indifference, social immobility, and feeling trapped by the welfare system. Even though I understand and sympathize with the rioters, their actions were wrong and the courts are acting appropriately in their strict sentences. The Prime Minister had a lot of good idea and solutions to the aforementioned problems. Now the question is if he will follow through.

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