

The Role of Deviant Subcultures and Crowd Psychology in the Escalation of Riots

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Introduction

The purpose of the present paper is to assess the factors that seem to have sparked the riots in Los Angeles in 1992, in France in 2005 and in Greece in December 2008. The theory widely supported by the press and a few academics that "social injustice" was to be blamed for the destructive behavior of the rioters, does not explain adequately the phenomenon. A closer examination of the behavior of rioters in general seems to indicate the existence of other causative agents, related to deviant subcultures and crowd behavior. Prevention remains of pivotal importance and an interview with Lt. Stephen M. Hartnett of the Tampa Police has demonstrated the dimensions of the preventive mechanisms.

Federal, state, and municipal criminal law have defined riots as "mobs, mob action, unlawful assembly, and routs" or "gatherings of three or more people who share a clear intent to do violence, to terrorize, and to otherwise disturb the peace to achieve their ends" (Miller, 2000, 342). Therefore riots could be classified as acts of terrorism which the US Department of Defense has defined as "the calculated use of unlawful violence to inculcate fear, intended to coerce or to intimidate governments or societies in the pursuit of goals that are generally political, religious, or ideological" (2001, p.531). The FBI and the State Department have given similar definitions (Terrorism in the US..., 1999, Patterns of global terrorism, 2002).

Riots in Greece

The Greek riots of December 2008 were sparked after a 15-year-old boy was fatally shot during a confrontation between police and youth in the area of Exarchia, known mostly for its drug subculture and the clashes between far-left youth and the police. The total damage in lost business, damages insurance payouts and tourist cancellations has been estimated in the hundreds of millions while the cost of the damages in Athens alone where 565 shops were attacked has approached 200 million Euros (Greek riots..., 2008). After watching the scenes on TV and seeing the published photos of the destruction and the attacks in the Boston Globe (2008) one may conclude that the owners who suffered the losses were terrorized while the youth who set the policemen on fire had the clear intention of causing bodily harm.

Students of civil disorder look to such events for signs of an incipient tradition in the growth of urban terrorism, but the relation between these two forms of collective violence remains unclear (Monti, 1980). The Italian Interior Minister, Giuseppe Pisanu, in 2003 warned of a growing climate of "widespread political illegality" comprised by Islamic terrorist groups, endogenous left-wing armed groups, anarchist insurrectionaries, and right-wing groups. Pisanu argued that vandalism and looting resulting from civil disorders, although are "demonstrative" in nature, at the same time they show that "organised elements and groups" have chosen violence "as a means of political struggle" in order to "arouse insecurity and alarm among citizens, intimidate victims, openly challenge the authority of the institutions, ... impose the message that it is possible to infringe the law without being punished." Accordingly, Pisanu indicated that a "future interrelation between the milieu of political illegality and the terrorist-subversive milieu cannot be excluded" drawing a comparison with the relationship between Autonomia Operaia and the Red Brigades in the 70's and 80's (Interior minister..., 2003). Many shop-owners in Athens talked about

being terrorized and the desire to obtain guns for protection. However the media in Greece characterized the attacks as “protests” while at the same time the majority of TV commentators and the newspapers spoke of “public rage” against “police terror.” It was also added that social injustices, corruption and poverty were the fuel behind the protests whereas many spoke of an impending revolution set to rearrange the social order.

It is indeed true that the country’s ranking on the 2008 Corruption Perception Index is a dismal 57, with Malaysia and Costa Rica faring better (Transparency International, 2008). However it is also true that the Greek economy grew by 4.0% in 2007 while the unemployment rate dropped to 8.3% in 2007, from 10.4% in 2004 (Garganas, 2008). Furthermore 50% of the Greek economy appears to be flourishing underground, thus making it impossible to calculate the true income of those who grossly underreport it. Accordingly, in 2006 the Greek government was forced to revise upward its gross domestic product for the previous six years by as much as 25% in order to include parts of the illegal economy (Greece revises..., 2006). It should also be mentioned that tertiary education is free to students (they pay no fees nor the cost of texts), they are free to take as many years as they wish to graduate, while the university grounds enjoy a peculiar status of “asylum” which forbids the police from entering. The “asylum” status has allowed various rioters in the past to take over university buildings and wreck the premises, while demands for the nullification of asylum were treated as threats against the free flow of ideas and democracy itself. An attempt by Prime Minister Karamanlis two years ago to modernize higher education was foiled by three months of student protests, backed by professors unwilling to upgrade teaching standards and face peer reviews. The prime minister was also unable to win cross-party support to lift a constitutional ban on police entering university premises (Kerin, 2008).

Within this frame of events, the coverage by the foreign press used more accurate terminology as they spoke of “riots” and not a “social movement.” The main arguments however still focused on the fuelling contribution of “social injustices.” A simple correlation is often mistaken by the media as causation, and as social injustices have been considerable at the time of the killing and the riots, the co-existence was treated as a causal chain of events. But just because two variables co-exist or move together one errs to label the correlation as causation. To prove indeed that one variable caused the other one would have to control for all other possible variables involved, which in social settings is close to impossible. The repetition of the alleged causal relationship was strongly supported by the press and appeared to be a self-evident truth. The obvious question arising and questioning the logic of destroying somebody’s property as a form of protesting against corruption was not posed as it would appear politically insensitive.

Commonalities with the riots in France and Los Angeles

The issue of “public rage” has been discussed in other riots as well, more serious than the ones in Greece and accordingly a comparison appears useful. In the Los Angeles riots of 1992, after the not-guilty verdict of four white policemen who had been videotaped beating a black suspect, and in France in 2005, after the accidental death of two Muslim teens while they were chased by the police, the rioting and destruction that followed was attributed to “public rage.” At the same time issues of racism, poverty and lack of domestic equalitarian policies formulated the explanations of the destructiveness and aggression. Alec Hargreaves, author of “Immigration, Race and Ethnicity in Contemporary France” and a professor at Florida State University explained the riots in terms of “deep-seated social inequalities, problems of discrimination and it should be said, political neglect” (Rioting continues in France, 2005). The same ideas were put forward by Lorentzen (2005). However, not all agreed. Some researchers saw it through the gang-violence spectrum that was prevalent in the country. A week earlier, Interior Minister Nicolas Sarkozy had declared in the newspaper *Le Monde*: “Violence in French suburbs is a daily fact of life. Since the beginning of the year stones were thrown at 9,000 police cars and each night 20 to 40 cars are torched. For some years, vehicle burning has been a favorite way to celebrate New Year’s Eve. If only 30 cars are set ablaze on an ordinary night and just 300 on New Year’s, the French police consider the situation to be “stable” (Belien, 2005).

The situation is similar in many European cities where police officers and firemen are used to having stones thrown at them in high-crime neighborhoods. Andrew Osborn after visiting Borgerhout, the largely Moroccan suburb of the Flemish city of Antwerp, wrote that he was greeted with the following:

“Outsiders aren’t welcome. ‘Go home before we beat your f-----g white ass.’” At the same time police cars were hit with a barrage of expletives and spittle (Osborn, 2002). Both Osborn and Belien make the point of gangs grasping an opportunity to start a riot in order to demonstrate their power. When the rioters are joined by others, unrelated to gangs, crowd psychology should be applied for a better understanding. Back in France, the rioters appeared to have developed a “neighbourhood identity.” They were known by the name of the estates: *Cité des 4000* at la Courneuve; *La Madeleine* at Evreux; *Les Minguettes* at Vénissieux, near Lyon. The hard core was often involved in drug dealing and petty delinquency. The rest were often school drop-outs and unemployed youth. The whole group would join to protect the territory from intruders, like a rival gang, police but also journalists. Many youngsters although not affiliated with these gangs, went to school, might work part-time, but stayed in touch and could be mobilized. Fathers have lost social control because they did not work, were absent, or brought in less money than the youngsters. Poverty should not be exaggerated as these young people have often expensive clothes, iPods, and sometimes new cars. They considered the street their property and settled their feuds through a “coded” violence. “Attitude,” “aggressive manhood,” “rites of passage” based on violence and confrontations with the police constituted their social order (Roy, 2005).

Furthermore, the bulk of the rioters were second generation immigrants, more ethnically mixed than one could have expected as there were North Africans, some Turks and Africans, many non-Muslim Africans as well as people with French, Spanish or Portuguese names. The rioters were mostly French citizens with only 7% foreigners (Roy, 2005). According to Storper (2005) the riots evolved in three waves: the first, a spontaneous expression of anger in the Paris region; the second, an imitation in the rest of the country; and a third, involving organized riots “ordered” by gang leaders in certain neighborhoods, using their younger “staff” to burn public facilities as part of an ongoing war to get the State (education, police, anything involving public sector intervention) out of the neighborhood so as to facilitate their underground economic activities – the creation of “law-free, free trade zones”).

The events in Los Angeles in 1992 evolved along similar lines. The very first night TV viewers watched in horror as the cab driver Reginald Denny was pulled out of his car and beaten savagely on prime TV. Reverend Cecil Murray remembers low-class neighbors watching their house burn to the ground. During the three days, 55 people were killed, more than 2,300 injured and 1,100 buildings destroyed (Gutierrez, Feldman & McDermott, 2002). Again the debate on “public rage” dominated and although the unjust social conditions in Los Angeles were indisputable, they could not explain the depth and kind of destruction that mainly occurred in the poorer areas of the city, hit by high unemployment and attacked savagely by the rioters. To many, the unemployment seemed to have caused the rage, and the rage led to the destruction of the neighbor’s property. However, unemployment, poverty, racism and social injustice are conditions that have existed for centuries. Millions of unemployed, poor people do not resort to riots. Moreover, many riots follow happy events, like those after a football team’s victory. In Los Angeles, the joy on the face of the looters was evident. While at the same time, those who did try to stop the looters were also black, poor and often unemployed. For these reasons the theory that attributes the riots to unjust social conditions can only accommodate parts of the phenomenon. Therefore one should co-assess the interaction of deviant subcultures accepting criminality and crowd behavior as more encompassing causes.

Gangs, deviant subcultures and crowd psychology as causal factors

It should be noted that the city of Los Angeles in 1991 had over 100,000 gang members while 771 gang-related homicides were reported that year. Many police officers had admitted losing the streets years before with many neighborhoods dominated by rival gangs. Drug deals were often conducted openly, without even a pretense of cover-up. Gunshots and fires routinely occurred in certain areas that were carefully avoided by the rest of the citizens (Delk, 1994). The author has cited various confrontations with gang members during the riots.

Such groups exist in Athens as well while the anarchists play a pivotal role. Clashes with the police are common as is swearing at the policemen who patrol Exarchia (Anarchy in Athens, 2008), an area that has become the center for drugs and weapons dealings. In the previously mentioned article the anarchists

were blamed for breaking shop windows and throwing Molotov bombs inside as well as setting cars on fire.

The deviant subculture dynamics may be applied to explain the dynamics of growth for such groups. Albert Cohen (1955) assessed the forces behind the overrepresentation of young males in delinquent behavior and behind the growth of "non-economic" forms of crime (like vandalism and hooliganism). Cohen argued that a desirable social status was denied to a certain group of people because they invariably failed in the educational system, which led to failure at work that could be found in low-pay low-skill jobs. The status deprivation was resolved by the formation of primary groups like gangs that offered them new status positions through an alternative social setting. The rejection from both those in authority and the majority of their peers, led some boys to develop a deviant sub-culture that coalesces around an explicit rejection of things that appear "normal, decent and good". The rejection may lead to a reversal of accepted forms of behavior. Therefore the group may adopt rudeness to those in authority, lack of punctuality and adherence to school norms, petty crime, vandalism and violence.

Walter Miller (1958) shed more light in the dynamics of a deviant subculture by identifying the core values governing the members' lives. First, there was a pre-occupation with getting into or staying out of trouble. Second, there was an emphasis on toughness, which was expressed through acts demonstrating the ability to stand up to adversity, like confrontations with the police or other gangs. Third, there was an emphasis on street-smarts or the ability to handle oneself. Fourth, excitement played a pivotal role, as life was about the thrill of engaging in conflict and ripping others off. Fifth, there was a belief in fate, or inability to control one's future. And finally, there was a desire for autonomy, demonstrated through the intolerance of challenges towards one's being.

Having discussed the formation of the initial gangs, one may expect these groups to start the rioting after an incendiary event. All three riots started in a similar way. The event, known to cause violent behavior is used by an initial group belonging to a deviant subculture to start a fight and they call upon others to join. A British national who followed one of the demonstrations in Athens spoke of a "carnival atmosphere" as the demonstrators chanted slogans and invited young Greeks to put down their drinks and join the group... There were elements who wanted to cause trouble, but others on the demo were trying to stop it" (Brabant, 2008). Given the fact that often these protests lead to violent episodes, whoever conscientiously joins the demonstration is aware of the risk of a violent outcome.

How did the crowds gather? There seemed to be a system of internal communications. In Los Angeles the rioters were getting their cues from the TV broadcasting. In France and Greece the cell phones assisted the rioters greatly. An efficient system of internal communications helps the rioters raise their numbers to such an extent that they may outnumber the police. Their acts are usually characterized by speedy developments. Their security is dependent on their number. The higher the number, the lower the probability of arrest is. The use of personal cameras transmits the events to the local media. Media attention seems to be a significant boosting mechanism for gaining fame or showing their cause to the world. Use of alcohol, hatred of police, excitement, "importance of their cause," out-of-control horseplay, false rumors, and perceived unfair police action all encourage the volatile nature of the crowd (Beene, 2006). Anonymity plays a large role for the bottle or rock throwers. At one point the rioters have to be assured of their power over the police. Therefore, one throws the first stone or Molotov and the rest assess the reaction. Faced with a high number of rioters, the police may turn from insufficient to incapacitated. The word is spread over the first victory encouraging greater distribution of the riots. If TV coverage is already taking place at one spot, this spot is very likely to gather an even greater number of rioters. Central streets in Athens and central banks were looted on prime TV. In Los Angeles the police at some point withdrew totally when they realized they could do nothing constructive.

When the vandalism starts, the police may find it hard to restore order because of their insufficient numbers. This obstacle is not easy to overcome as citizens are not willing to foot the bill of a hike in hiring a greater number of policemen who would remain idle for the greater part of the year. Furthermore, even if everyone were arrested, there would be not enough jail space or enough prosecutors to process the cases. The rioters are aware of these deficiencies in the system and have realized that they may act under a state of immunity.

Description of the development of events and partial insights tell us little as to why, otherwise ordinary people with ordinary lives join the initial gang-related inciters, become “mobs” and proceed to vandalize, loot and throw Molotov bombs at policemen. The effect of crowd psychology is significant as it unfolds the power of group behavior and mentality. Gustave Le Bon, a French sociologist and social psychologist who lived in the 20th century contributed significantly to the enrichment of the field. His thesis became that the progress of a group of people is determined by their “character” that slowly takes a form of an unconscious “collective mind.” This collective mind may emerge in a crowd and shape its behavior in ways drastically different to the up to that point behavior of the individual members. Accordingly, crowd behavior is based on emotions and not on intellect. One should emphasize that a crowd is not any gathering of people, but a group whose ideas at that moment have turned to a specific direction while individual personalities have disappeared. A crowd is characterized by the lowering of the intelligence and the complete transformation of the sentiments, for better or worse than those of the individual members. Therefore, a crowd can be either heroic or criminal. The impulses directing the crowd are imperious enough to annihilate feelings of personal interest. Crowds do not admit doubt or uncertainty, and may easily go to extremes (Le Bon, 2002). Le Bon’s thesis has been widely adopted by advertisers and propagandists with quite successful results.

When the crowd mentality takes over in “protests” the results can be catastrophic. Given the little awareness of the crowd psychology among the analysts, often “public rage” is cited as a cause, indirectly justifying the events, intensifying the friction between certain groups and the police and perpetuating a mentality of inevitability, since unjust social conditions will always be with us. However, certain measures can be taken in order to diminish the possibility of joining the crowd when an incendiary event takes place.

Prevention

There have been numerous “incendiary” incidents around the country that did not evolve to riots however. Lt. Stephen M. Hartnett emphasized the role of good relationships between the police and the community and described a number of preventive guidelines (personal communication, 2008, December 27). Although protests can be initiated by any group with a common cause, the majority of protesters in the US have not been violent. The danger exists when the sensationalism of the initial wrong-doing escalates the protest. Officers are familiarized with crowd control and containment. The response may range from line formation to the use of less than lethal weapons, depending on how the crowd responds and whether the crowd is aggressive. The importance of a swift response can not be overemphasized. “You have to douse the flame as quick as possible. You have to be willing and ready to use your force. If the crowd believes you are not going to respond forcefully they will act more brazen.” The key is to get them off an area before they become too large to contain. An unpleasant scenario would be to have so many gatherings that you exhaust your police. Under horrific instances, the Governor will call for the National Guard. However, the use of the National Guard would be a last resort mechanism due to the unpleasantness of having the military of a country fighting against its own citizens. Lt. Hartnett also spoke of the ability of the police to deny TV crews from entering in certain areas if such entry compromises security. However, he clarified that broadcasting would probably still go on through alternative means of coverage. Disabling cell phones was not possible as the police did not have the right to deprive people of communications.

A very effective prevention mechanism is the cultivation of good relations with the community. Lt. Hartnett emphasized the importance of enlisting the support of people who are important in a community in order to calm down those who feel marginalized. The police reach out to pastors and that comes out to the community. Furthermore, the police are publicly accountable for their acts. As knowledge is power, the more knowledge the citizens have of what is going on, the more cooperation the police have with the public.

Also volunteer organizations are bridging the gap between police and public. The Citizens’ Academy allows citizens to get a portion of the police training and the different ways they may respond depending on the circumstance. Such programs may promote understanding of how and why a policeman may proceed to a particular type of apprehension and why may have to be defensively offensive at times.

There are Citizenry Advisory groups whose members are picked by the municipality to review incidents like shootings or police conduct. Citizens Volunteer Assistance Programs allow the public to assist the police with various tasks or to ride along with an officer so to observe from up close the reality and challenges of police work.

Conclusion

Prevention or successful containment of riots in Greece could be enhanced in various ways: One should study carefully the events that led to the looting and catastrophe of the December riots and formulate a set of guidelines that could contain future gatherings. Similarly one should study the police action adopted –in Greece and elsewhere- when incendiary events took place but riots were prevented. Stott, Adang, Livingstone and Schreiber (2008) evaluated the causes behind the “calm” at the Finals of the 2004 European Football Championships in Portugal. The quantitative study indicated the preventive significance of the non-paramilitary policing style adopted in cities hosting tournament matches. Evidence was presented suggesting that this style of policing supported forms of non-violent collective psychology that, in turn, served to psychologically marginalize violent groups from the wider community of fans.

A body of citizens-volunteers could be created and trained to assist the police with the initial stages of riot containment along the same lines a body of citizens-volunteers has been created to assist the regular firemen when need arises. Strong communication channels with the community should be cultivated by adopting programs similar to the ones in place by the Tampa police. Among the programs mentioned, the importance of a Citizens’ Academy and of the Citizenry Advisory Board may prove to be of pivotal significance in enhancing mutual understanding and ensuring police accountability.

Finally, Pisanu’s contention on the possible future interrelation between the milieu of political illegality and the terrorist-subversive milieu should be evaluated and assessed for events where the looting and vandalism gain horrific proportions and terrorize the population.

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