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How Does Protesting Cross the Line Into Rioting?

What part does "crowd psychology" play in riots?

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The current riots in London and other cities in England got me thinking: How does protesting an injustice turn into rioting? What is the "tipping point" that takes protesting into violence?

Not all protesting ends in violence--in fact, the majority of protesting is done in a non-violent manner. I would think that the chances of a peaceful protest do increase with the ability of people to protest freely in their country. If you live in an authoritarian or oppressive environment, frustration and anger may tip a protest into a riot. However, how do riots get so out of control?

"Crowd psychology" may also play into how protests grow into riots, and how those riots expand to other cities. When you are in a crowd, you are more likely to behave as others do, even if it is against your own personal belief system. And others' behavior can be contagious--people get "wrapped up" in the behavior. Those with ulterior motives (looting, for example) take an opportunity in the midst of chaos to commit an anonymous act.

Protests are usually triggered by a social injustice, whether that is an injustice towards an individual or a group. As a protest gets larger, there is an increased chance that there will be a handful of people resorting to violence and destruction. This is just a fact of our society-- there are always a small number of people for which antisocial behavior is the norm.

Taking into account crowd psychology, those few violence-prone individuals can trigger a crowd of violent behavior. Groups afford people the anonymity to engage in behavior they wouldn't engage in otherwise. A group's behavior is more likely to help an individual justify going outside of their moral code.

And there are always those who are looking for an opportunity to engage in antisocial behavior. Stealing a TV from a damaged storefront has nothing to do with social injustice. I did see a Facebook comment where a person wrote that he felt rioting and looting is somehow justified because of, he felt, mistreatment by the ruling class, or by those in power (for example, police). What is your opinion of that comment?

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