

Riots create irrational behaviour

April 30 2013, by Christian Borch



Credit: Wikimedia Commons

Participants of group riots have since the end of the 1960s been viewed as rational individuals driven by a sense of injustice. But in today's world this is misleading, concludes sociologist and PhD Christian Borch in a newly published doctoral thesis, and he encourages the police to take the destructive behaviour of some participants into account when dealing with groups of rioters.

During the so-called 'UK [Riots](#)' in the summer of 2011, discontented young people set the streets of London alight and looted shopping centres. The initial strategy of the police which was to communicate with rioters soon failed. Instead they resorted to using batons and containment. Within a Danish context, the violent reactions to the clearance of 'Ungdomshuset' in 2007 show that a revolt can develop into

serious criminal actions.

According to Christian Borch, these examples illustrate that group rioting are not solely based on righteous indignation and considered planning:

"The notion of the 1960s that social movements happened as a legitimate response to [social injustice](#) created the impression of riots as being rational. Crowds however do not have to be rational entities," says Christian Borch.

In a new doctoral thesis "The Politics of Crowds: An Alternative History of Sociology" from University of Copenhagen, Christian Borch analyses the historical development of the concept of crowds in a sociological context.

"The riots in London demonstrate the existence of a lack of rational thought processes as the events had an entirely spontaneous and irrational character. People looted for the sake of looting, for many this was not necessarily born out of a sense of injustice," says Christian Borch who has analysed the strategies of the Metropolitan police in connection with the London riots.

Danish riots attracted violent supporters

The riots surrounding the clearance of "Ungdomshuset" at Jagtvej 69 in Denmark illustrate that demonstrations are capable of creating a self-perpetuating sense of dynamics which accentuate the irrational elements. Thus, setting cars alight and breaking windows became part of the rioting.

"During the Danish riots there existed on the one hand a sense of rationality within the young people's protests, in so far as they were driven

by a political motivated interest. However, other people who were normally not affiliated with 'Ungdomshuset' became a part of the conflict and participated in the riots without any shared purpose. They were having fun and the adrenalin kicked in," says Christian Borch.

It is inner group dynamics which fuel pointless behaviour.

"Riots can assume self-perpetuating dynamics which is not driven by rational motives. When individuals form a crowd they can become irrational and driven by emotion which occur as part of the rioting," says Christian Borch.

Inspiration to police tactics

Thinking of crowds as rational entities has since 2000 affected the way in which the British police have handled riots. The UK Riots serve as an example of this. The police worked on the promise that they were dealing with rational individuals with sensible objectives which is why their plan of action was based on communication rather than containment. This however, did not work in practice.

"The interesting aspect of the London riots was to ascertain that it was pointless to address the crowds through a communication strategy. The rational way of regarding the crowds came to nothing whereas the traditional form of containment did. This shows that at certain times a successful solution is not to handle crowds based on dialogue-orientated efforts," says Christian Borch.

In addition to the police, Christian Borch encourages town planners, sociologists and economists to apply a more critical approach when dealing with the concept of [crowds](#).

Provided by University of Copenhagen

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