

## A Riot in the System

What happened?

The people in England had a belief that the country is civilised. England used to be a culture known for its afternoon tea, civil order and polite society. Are those values now just a disappointed dream?

The riots in England shocked through revealing just how close our communities are to anarchy and chaos. Large groups of youths roamed the streets, openly carrying weapons, destroying property, setting fires, looting shops, threatening and attacking innocent passers-by and even committing murder. For day after day, the groups of youths seemed unabated in this orgy of unfettered violence and theft. Thousands joined them. Like a massive statement of freedom and power from the suppressed and disenfranchised.

We learn that most of those arrested were younger than 20 years and had previous convictions. Many even had 10 or more previous convictions. Even allowing for the police catching those known to them more quickly, this is strong evidence of criminal intent.

So what happened?

From a systems perspective, turbulence and chaos are natural phases in the cycle of change. The riots are a turbulence occurring in a complex system. So what is the system and where does this turbulence end?

Defining where the system ends, or begins, is probably part of the problem. The youths who have criminal convictions can easily become ostracised from normal society. Effectively marginalised or even rejected by the system. When their relationships with the community break down, what is there to restrain their behaviour? In effect, they have nothing to lose. As soon as they identify themselves as 'outside the system', they are no longer governed by its rules. Yet, they are still very much a part of the system.

Turbulence within a system derives from imbalances between the different parts of the system. Systems are naturally self-balancing and turbulence is an indicator of this process in action. Within human systems, there are many ways in which imbalances can occur. So turbulence, or conflict, is common and a normal characteristic in human society. Riots, however, are not common. So what was different with the riots and what does that mean for England?

We can understand more about what happened through observing what imbalances there might be between parts of the system?

1. The social grouping of criminalised youth is a marginalised sector of society. It is very difficult for them to get jobs, there is often little respect shown to them or a perception that this happens. They are disadvantaged in many ways and their voice is rarely heard, let alone listened to. This creates the group as a marginalised sub-system within society. When parts of a system are marginalised, there is an imbalance of energy.
2. Members of a human system will each have different powers and privileges, depending on their roles and connections within the system. A respected member of parliament, or the CEO of a large international company will have obvious influence and all the powers and privileges that go along with that. Youths and particularly those with criminal records, will also have powers and privileges, though very different. Youth might have benefits of time and freedom from societal inhibitions. The riots are a good example of the power that disenfranchised youth can claim. A CEO engaged in the riots would likely lose all of their previous power and privilege if they were caught, yet the criminalised youth has nothing to lose. In one BBC interview during the riots a youth stated, "what are they going to do, give me an ASBO? Well I can live with that!".

3. Another consequence created by the imbalance of power, or the abuse of it, is revenge. A primary social deterrent for anti-social behaviour is arrest by the police. Police are a symbol of the rule of law in the system, so where those arrest powers are used by the police with marginalised groups, perceiving themselves to be outside the system, this can be experienced as an abuse by the marginalised groups. Examples of revenge against the police were very apparent during the riots. There were many police attacked, injured, even an attempted murder of several police.

Imbalances in a system lead to turbulence. The greater the imbalance, the more likely the turbulence will lead to a change in the system. We have only considered a few of the possible imbalances here but what is trying to happen in the system is a neutralising of these imbalances. Systems will act to neutralise the imbalances until they find a more stable state. The participants in the riots, and their reasons for participating, give us an indication as to the specific imbalances which are driving the turbulence. Fortunately, we have numerous options for how we can respond.

The most important first step we can take is to change the perception of the marginalised group, that they are outside the system. We can do this in many small ways, a few are:

- Boundaries and the consequences of transgressing are important in maintaining a system. People are much less likely to want to cross boundaries when they feel they are participating in creating and defining the system. The more that all members of the system are involved in defining the society that we want to create in England, the fewer marginalised groups there will be.
- Listening to what members of these groups have to say and acknowledging them as belonging to the system. The more they feel that their voice is being heard, the more they will be able to feel they are part of the system.
- Avoiding blame. It is easy to say that the criminal youth are to blame, but it takes a whole system to put them there and keep them there. We all need to play a part in the solution.
- Avoiding contempt. Welcoming them as members of the system, showing them that they are members of society and not ostracising them by labelling or judging them.
- Increasing their awareness of their impact on the system, so facing them with victims and the consequences of their crimes. Helping them to step into the experience of the victims.
- Increasing awareness and understanding of their experience within the system by inviting other members of society to step into their experience.
- Supporting them in making some positive contribution to the community and acknowledging that they have something of positive value to contribute.
- When they have crossed a boundary in the system, or broken the rules, providing them with an appropriate and achievable path to get back in. This might be making some appropriate and proportionate retribution to the community or to the victims.

For those members of marginalised groups where they feel that they have 'nothing to lose', it is important to build up a sense of what they do not want to lose. In many cases this sense of hopelessness derives from a breakdown of relationships with the family and thence with the community. It has been commented that a high proportion of those involved in the riots did not have fathers present in the home. Youths involved in gang culture report common traumatic experiences in the home such as abuse, violence, rape and even murder. Building and maintaining positive family relationships gives people something that they do not want to lose and a connection with the community, so building positive relationships is critical to breaking a cycle of marginalisation.

Taking a systems perspective means considering the system as a whole. This means that all members of the system have a part to play. Those who are responsible for representing the system, i.e. people in leadership roles, are well advised to recognise the wholeness of the system in any proposed interventions, or risk increasing the imbalances with marginalised groups.

The people in England form a huge and very capable system. The police found a way to regain the peace. Communities reacted to redress the damage. Walls of love appeared expressing voices of care. Tens of thousands of people signed up to bring their brooms and participate in clearing up the mess. The media interviewed hundreds of people to find out what happened and what to do about it.

The dream of a civilised society in England is not fully disappointed. It may be that our interpretation of 'civilised' has to evolve. If there is one message of what was trying to happen in the riots, it is that groups are being marginalised in our society and that greater imbalance creates greater turbulence. Whilst turbulence is normal in systems change, there is much we can do to maintain balance within human systems. Listening to people and giving them a voice. Qualities of respect, compassion, curiosity and even having fun, are all important energies that increase collaboration, reduce conflict and maintain balance.

Was there a riot in the system, or was this an opportunity for communities to show that they really do care, or was this about society in England starting to talk about how we really want to be with each other? Who knows what is good and what is bad.

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