

On 'Supporting' Riots and Looting

Revolutionaries are pious folk. The revolution is not a pious event.

— Alfredo M. Bonanno

I've come to set the earth on fire, and how I wish it were already ablaze!

— Jesus

My engagement with political protest has been limited to a few instances of peaceful protest and light civil disobedience. I was arrested during the Occupy movement while protesting the criminalization of homelessness and the corresponding murder of homeless men by police (see [“When Police Kill the Homeless”](#)). If I had to draw a single lesson from that experience to share with novice protesters, it would be to reject the naive notion that civil disobedience requires submitting to arrest. Even more overwhelming to the authorities than mass arrest is mass protest successfully avoiding arrest to re-convene in locations not controlled by police. Everybody already knows about the abuses of the criminal justice system, and many simply don't care. Your arrest will not change their mind. There is no social contract to uphold. There is no one with a conscience left to whom Thoreauvian tactics could hope to appeal. [Be water.](#)

As the past two weeks of [protest sparked by the murder of George Floyd](#) has demonstrated, vandalism and confrontations with police are a much more effective means than mere noncooperation for winning reforms. It might be tempting to discount the contributions of riots to the success of the current protests and attribute it instead to pre-existing favour for police reforms. However, as reflected in [recent Civiqs.com surveys](#) (see [snapshot of graph](#)), public support for the Black Lives Matter movement increased sharply *after* rioting began in Minneapolis (see also [“How Public Opinion Has Moved on Black Lives Matter”](#) in *The New York Times*).

As time goes on, especially if property damage continues, protesters can expect a decline in popular support along with some backlash from white nationalist groups and pacifying political concessions in the form of ineffectual or never-implemented reforms. But regardless of how the current unrest eventually winds down, these riots have already made important gains which would be difficult to overestimate: the new baseline action for future protests is now [burning down police precinct headquarters](#), and the new baseline demand is defunding or abolishing police departments (see [“How Much Do We Need The Police?”](#) which is one of many interviews with the author of *The End of Policing* now being published in mainstream media.)

So is “supporting” riots—unruly protest, vandalism, and looting—against police brutality justified? I use quotation marks around the word because my thoughts here are not about supporting protesters with food, drink, a place to rest, comfort and companionship, bail funds, legal counsel, or anything of that sort (but see ["Here's Where You Can Donate to Help Protests](#)

[Against Police Brutality](#)"). Instead it is about the much more pressing (□) issue of how to tell people like your facebook friends that you think the riots are justified without backing yourself into some moral corner where you are inadvertently praising circumstances where innocent people are being hurt or robbed.

The first thing is to establish the context within which we are using the words *riot* and *looting*. Everything in this essay is directly inspired by the black liberation protests against police violence in the United States, especially the [Ferguson unrest in 2014](#) and the George Floyd protests of 2020, including clashes with police and commercial property damage that occurred during those protests. The connotation of *riot* and associated looting meant here is that which takes place during those and similar uprisings. Looting in the classical sense is stealing from a civilian population during an armed conflict, and that is specifically *not* what is being discussed here. It is possible that political and vigilante violence committed during times of civil unrest may try to disguise or justify itself as riots, but such massacres are not what I mean by *riot* (see for example, the [Tulsa race "riot"](#)). Also not discussed here are sports riots, though those are an interesting corner case worthy of a future essay.

In short, it is possible to recognize riots and looting as justified reaction to racist policing and class society without supporting *every* act that occurs during or under cover of riots. Not only that, such a stance is probably the only defensible position. To deny that riots are justified is to elevate the relatively minor crimes that flourish during riots above the incomparably greater crimes of the police and prevailing politico-economic

norms (see [“On Camels, Liberal Myths, and Ferguson”](#)). But to pretend that riots and looting are completely blameless is to ignore the pain of real victims of property damage and opportunist assaults; it is to mistake looting as an end rather than a means and to mistake a mob mentality for autonomy.

In general it is unrealistic to expect revolutionary rigor from riotous anger as it is directed by police away from legitimate targets and seized upon by opportunists to commit their petty crimes of selfishness. But while the process at times is unnecessarily disordered, including actions that deserve no apology, it should not cause us to forget that the dis-ordering of current society is necessary.

Riots, people standing up against abusive police, are raw politics: when all of the safety valves and obfuscations of the superstructure fail, riots are the final recourse of a population facing intolerable oppression. Smashing storefront windows and other vandalism carried out during political protest is a non-violent way to illustrate the vulnerability of the existing regime (see [“You are not the Target Audience”](#) by William Gillis). Those boarded up retail shops currently visible in almost every major US city are proof that business as usual does not *need* to continue, a point especially underscored in riots taking place during pandemic quarantines which have revealed the pointlessness of so much of the work and rent that shackles many of us for a lifetime (see [“66 Days”](#) by Joshua Clover).

The act of looting itself is a challenge to the white supremacy historically intertwined with American conceptions of property and policing (see [“In Defense of Looting”](#) by Vicky Osterweil). More practically, and at the same time more theoretically, looting simultaneously satisfies material needs and breaks the

spell of an economic system ruled by commodities in which we are all trapped. A necessity obtained for free is invaluable to anybody, but probably nobody knows better than a looter that a luxury obtained for free is worthless.

People who destroy commodities show their human superiority over commodities. They stop submitting to the arbitrary forms that distortedly reflect their real needs. [...] Once it is no longer bought, the commodity lies open to criticism and alteration, whatever particular form it may take [...]

Looting is a *natural* response to the unnatural and inhuman society of commodity abundance. It instantly undermines the commodity as such, and it also exposes what the commodity ultimately implies: the army, the police and the other specialized detachments of the state's monopoly of armed violence. (See [“The Decline and Fall of the Spectacle-Commodity Economy”](#) by Guy Debord.)