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The popular understanding of the term 'looting' in today's political climate is mass action by individuals–during times of civil unrest–who steal from various businesses and other private institutions. The term has complex origins and a variety of meanings depending on the context, but can be most readily traced to the imperial and colonial conquest of the rest of the world by European nations, whereby resources, land, and even certain people (defined as property in the system of chattel slavery) were 'looted' from non-European localities. Vicky Osterweil points out, in *In Defense of Looting*, that this history is rooted in the very word itself, as loot comes from the Hindi word *lút* ('plunder' or 'booty') and was adopted into English in the context of the British colonization of India. And alongside continual neo-colonial extraction, this form of looting is still maintained via the highly colonial forms of archeology–the spoils of which can be seen today in such institutions as the British Museum. However, today the term has gone on to mostly be used in line with the aforementioned popular understanding. Osterweil traces this alternate definition in a North American context to the post-Reconstruction era South when it became a major tool of struggle by both freed slaves and ex-Confederate white supremacists in the struggles around racial hierarchy and early civil rights for African Americans.

Looting (as in the first definition provided) has been placed at the center of the discourse of mainstream politics and media in the 21st century and especially the year 2020. This is evident in the discourse in such public spheres as Twitter in response to protests around the murder of George Floyd by Minneapolis police officers. For example, then-president Donald Trump wrote, "Just spoke to Governor Tim Walz and told him that the Military is with him all the way. Any difficulty and we will assume control but, when the looting starts, the shooting starts." This is very much in line with Trump's identification of himself as the president of 'law and order,' but even his then-opponent Joe Biden went out of his way to

condemn looting, such as with this statement in a speech delivered in Pittsburgh:

> I want to be very clear about all of this: Rioting is not protesting. Looting is not protesting. Setting fires is not protesting. None of this is protesting. It's lawlessness, plain and simple. And those who do it should be prosecuted.

Additionally in 2020, certain states broadened and harshened laws, regulations, and statutes in order to specifically combat looting. One such state was Florida, where a law was introduced to make it a "3rd degree felony when 7 or more persons are involved in an assembly and cause damage to property or injury to other persons" and a "2nd degree felony to destroy public property during a violent or disorderly assembly." Thus, in general not only is the state obviously opposed to looting but condemns it either explicitly or implicitly as not a legitimate form of protest. and therefore, punishable in line with any activity considered an apolitical public menace.

And yet looting has a fundamentally political character. Tim Newburn and other researchers have reviewed the various studies and think pieces on the looting that took place during 2011 riots in England and identified that most see the looting at said riots as "created by a combination of consumerism and rising social inequality. From that perspective, they were not political–in the sense of seeking social change–but were rather "a misguided and doomed" attempt to enter the realm of the consumer market. However, Newburn et al. counter-argue that though

> [a] great many involved in such activity in the 2011 riots were undoubtedly intent on participating in 'shopping for free'… [and] some were simply taking advantage of the disorder to secure mundane material

"'When the looting starts, the shooting starts': Trump tweet flagged by Twitter for 'glorifying violence'" from CBS News

that gifts create obligations and relationships between individuals in a manner that all-purpose cash within a consumer market cannot do because the latter is fundamentally impersonal. As such, whether one condemns looting or not, it is difficult after an unbiased review of the evidence and research to conclude that looting is apolitical and entirely destructive. Instead, one begins to recognize looting as a genuine form of decentralized political protest and that it works to, at least temporarily, redefine property relations and, consequently, relationships amongst people.

Sources

A People's History of Riots, Protest and the Law: The Sound of the Crowd by Matt Clement

"Biden condemns violence and asks if Americans 'really feel safe under Donald Trump'" by Eric Bradner

"Governor Ron DeSantis Announces the 'Combatting Violence, Disorder and Looting and Law Enforcement Protection Act'" from flgov.com

In Defense of Looting: A Riotous History of Uncivil Action by Vicky Osterweil

"Shopping for Free? Looting, Consumerism and the 2011 Riots." by Tim Newburn, Kerris Cooper, Rachel Deacon, and Rebekah Diski from The British Journal of Criminology

"The Decline and Fall of the Spectacle-Commodity Economy" by Guy Debord

The Elementary Forms of Religious Life by Emile Durkheim

"The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies" by Marcel Mauss

"What Looting in Civil Disturbances Really Means" by Russell Dynes and E.L. Quarantelli from Trans-Action

> goods that their disadvantaged socio-economic position meant they often found difficult to afford and the riots offered them a brief opportunity to acquire… [F]or some, their involvement was an expression, at least in part, of a generalized discontent, part of a broader 'political' protest and one means of articulating their resentment of and anger towards the powerful and wealthy.

Implicit in the exclusion of this possibility that looting can be political by academics, politicians, and lawmakers is the idea that human beings can only ever be motivated by individual self-interest (a line of thinking rooted in capitalist hegemony and neoclassical economics). In this way looters are ultimately seen as violent consumers; simply self-interested consumers who act outside of the parameters set by private property but are ultimately still governed by the dominant rule of profit-maximization.

And while self-interest is certainly one of many constant motivations in the human psyche, this reduction of looters to bad 'consumers' denies the emergence of what Matt Clement, in *Protest and the Law*, calls "crowd consciousness." By this, Clement means that the people that make up 'riots' may not individually have explicit political motives but they form a kind of stigmergy or swarm intelligence that, from a macro as opposed to micro view, is a quasi-conscious form of mass politically-motivated action. He argues that "[t]o expect that protestors are all fully conscious Marxists or anarchists with an incisive grasp of not only the problem causing their actions but also the solution is surely asking too much of any group of strikers, demonstrators or protestors in history." But this does not ultimately reduce the political nature of looting, which challenges power relations that assert rules upon acceptable forms of resistance. Clement's idea can be closely related to Émile Durkheim's sociological concept of "collective effervescence," whereby communities come together

with the same simultaneous, often focused around specific objects, "which are destined to excite, maintain or recreate certain mental states in these groups" and ultimately unify them–sometimes literally or sometimes in a symbolic reproduction of unity. However, Clement's idea is much more immanently political in its application: for example, whether or not protesters in the 2020 riots in response to the murders of George Floyd and numerous other POC by police officers have a broad understanding of the history and theory of anti-racism by no means reduces their broader consciousness that the establishment powers must be resisted in favor of the valuation of human life.

Not only is looting a collective rejection of existing power-relations, but more specifically it defies dominant capitalist 'rules' around private property and its inherent violence. As Osterweil puts it succinctly:

> [W]e have all been raised and trained to hold, follow, and reproduce those beliefs every day. Looting rejects the legitimacy of ownership rights and property, the moral injunction to work for a living, and the "justice" of law and order. Looting reveals all these for what they are: not natural facts, but social constructs benefiting a few at the expense of the many, upheld by ideology, economy, and state violence.

And beyond just undermining "legitimacy of ownership rights and property," Guy Debord of the Situationist International goes as far as to say, in response to the 1965 riots in Los Angeles, that looting sabotages the capitalist commodity form and the state violence that underpins its production and legitimacy. He writes:

> 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. What is a policeman? He is the active servant of the commodity, the man in complete submission to the commodity, whose job it is to ensure that a given product of human labor remains a commodity, with the magical property of having to be paid for, instead of becoming a mere refrigerator or rifle — a passive, inanimate object, subject to anyone who comes along to make use of it.

And more than just destroying this commodity form, looting often even takes on a positive reconstruction of these objects outside of the consumer market.

In their study on the meanings and motivations behind looting, Russell Dynes and E.L. Quarentelli conclude that, particularly in the riots of the 1960s in Newark and Detroit, the phenomenon represents

> widespread social support for the new definition of property… [I]n contrast to the stealthy looting that occasionally occurs in disaster situations, looting in civil disturbances is quite open and frequently collective. The looters often work together in pairs, as family units, or in small groups. Bystanders are frequently told about potential loot. And in some instances, [such] as [the 1965 Watts riots in Los Angeles], looters coming out of stores hand strangers goods as "gifts."

The emphasis placed by Dynes and Quarentelli on "gifts" is especially important in understanding this non-consumer reconstruction. Marcel Mauss identifies in his famous essay "The Gift"