

The Looting Epidemic: Uncovering the Tastes and Desires of Rioters



by Theodore Dalrymple

Tell me what you loot and I will tell you what you are—or at least, what your tastes are.

During the latest, but certainly not the last, riots in France, looting was widespread (unlike the riots of 2005, which were more purely destructive). And what the rioters looted, mainly, were sneakers and smartphones. These were their highest aspirations in life, the *summum bonum* of their existence.

During the riots in London in 2011, in the main shopping

street of the suburb of Clapham Junction, every store was looted except the bookstore, which was left untouched. It's unlikely that the rioters have developed a taste for reading since then; almost certainly, their tastes will have been fixed like a prehistoric fly in amber. They, too, sought sneakers and the electronic apparatus of entertainment, as if such entertainment were the main business of their lives.

Although all sneakers look more or less the same to me, the young inhabitants of modern slums are able to distinguish between brands and models with as much pedantry as a philatelist examining an early postage stamp for the number of its perforations. I have known a murder committed over a quarrel about sneakers, a young man "accused" of wearing an unfashionable brand after its apogee had passed.

I try to enter the mental world of those for whom such things are important, for it seems to me that their lives must be very impoverished, mentally and spiritually so more than economically. I try to sympathize, or find extenuation, because their lives are very far from being enviable, but I find it difficult.

They have no prospects, no real source of pride that even an unskilled person doing a socially useful job once might have had. In a mental world of celebrity culture, only celebrity counts, and humble though useful employment counts for nothing. "Give me fame or give me death" explains the tagging that one often sees in places or on sites that are very dangerous to reach. As the slogan on the side of Nigerian buses used to say, "Why die in silence?"

Our increasingly difficult human need to distinguish ourselves from one another accounts for an intense concentration on matters such as the brand of sneakers that we wear (if we wear them at all). What Freud, whom I don't often cite, succinctly called "the narcissism of small differences" is inflamed in a society of uniformity without privacy. The looters of

sneakers, not coincidentally, come often from housing projects that are like battery chicken farms for humans. "A house," Le Corbusier famously (or infamously) said, "is a machine for living in"—machines of which the inhabitants are spare parts. It's the architecture of bureaucratic contempt for humanity disguised as concern for its welfare.

At least in France and elsewhere, looting is still theoretically illegal, even if the laws aren't applied with any determination or rigor. Part of the problem of applying them rigorously in the latest circumstances is that so many of the rioters were legally minors, some as young as 12. It's possible, likely even, that they were put up to it by their elders and, in the matter of criminality, their betters, who knew that their young age would create yet another problem for "the system." Possibly, the looting this time was Fagin's method on a large scale, adapted to modern circumstances.

But in San Francisco and other similarly enlightened places, looting has in effect been legalized. Perhaps the authorities there prefer a slow, chronic riot to an acute one, and by permitting looting as an everyday activity avoid the scenes in France that so astonished and alarmed the world. If people are allowed to loot, they don't need to riot. Thus, looting becomes a guarantee of public order rather than a symptom of its breakdown.

I doubt, however, that the authorities had this in mind when they decided to permit people to steal at least a theoretical \$350,000 worth of goods a year. This policy, so staggeringly stupid that even the wildest satirists would not have thought of it beforehand, probably derives from that mixture of sentimentality and resentment that it's the business of the left to stoke.

The resentment is that of people who are members of a group that, on average, is worse off than the rest of society. They come to feel, and are politically encouraged to feel, that

they have been deprived of something to which they're entitled by the mere fact of drawing breath. They believe that what others have and they don't have has in effect been taken from them, either directly or by exploitation.

The sentimentality is that of the fortunate or well-off who pretend to believe that all those who are less fortunate or well-off than themselves are victims. This pretense assuages their guilt at being more fortunate or better-off than others, and persuades them that they're generous in spirit, compassionate, and good-while, of course, they pass on to others the costs of the implementation of their ideas.

A coalition of the resentful and the sentimental leads to the acceptance or encouragement of chronic looting as a kind of restitution for past wrongs. When people remove goods from stores without paying for them, they're only receiving their due. The long-term effects of this are obvious, but as Madame de Pompadour, Louis XV's favorite, put it, "Après nous, le déluge"—after us, the flood. Long-term effects do not matter so long as the current crop of politicians and apparatchiks prospers sufficiently to secure its own comfortable existence until death.

No one can honestly and unreservedly believe in the fastness of his own mind that looting is restitution for past wrongs rather than mere greed for goods that haven't been earned. In this connection, I recall a conversation with a prisoner in a prison in which I once worked.

"Do you think my burglary has anything to do with my childhood, doctor?" he asked.

"Nothing whatever," I replied to his surprise.

"Why do I do it, then?" he asked.

"Because you're lazy and stupid and want things for which you're not prepared to work."

He laughed, relieved at last to be spoken to like a real human being with free will like everyone else.

But it was true that he had had a terrible childhood.

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