



## The phenomenon of the crowd

It may not immediately be obvious, but there is a connection between the recent sharp fall in stock markets and the concurrent riots in UK cities: it is the phenomenon of the crowd. The stock market fall was driven by fear (and a panic-stricken running away); the riots were driven by greed and envy (and a purposeful moving toward). However, both were energised by emotions; both were characterised by the impotence of rational, left-brain, thought processing amongst crowd members; and both destroyed wealth. Once the crowd has become active, the neo-cortex is suppressed, the fight-flight hormone *adrenalin* is pumped into the body, and individuals look to the behaviour of others to determine what needs to be done in the moment. Very little attention is therefore paid to the relationship between current cause and future effect; responsibility is handed over to others (whether a crowd leader or the crowd itself); and conduct may involve behaviours that would not even be countenanced under different circumstances.

Belonging to a crowd eliminates feelings of isolation and brings a sense of safety. Neuro-science suggests that, on merging into a purposeful crowd, members are flooded with the bonding hormone *oxytocin*; so there is a personal feel-good pay-off. The research also suggests that 'mirror neurons' in the brain (which enable the neonate to learn emotions from its mother) cause non self-aware individuals to experience others' emotions as their own; so emotions become uniform. Finally, Darwinian evolution has programmed us to accept the behaviour of others as information about what needs to be done in the event of danger; so behaviour becomes homogenised. And the experience is enhanced to the degree that members can look the same (eg, wearing urban sportswear).

A crowd has a power that is greater, but an intelligence that is less, than the sum of its parts. First, it is a *self-organising system* that persists through time. It accordingly organises and controls its members. Second, a crowd is a *super-organism* whose members are individually dispensable. Ironically, members may die for the crowd rather than suffer the pain of being separated from it. Third, the crowd is held together by a set of beliefs, known as *self-replicating memes*. These beliefs are very simplistic, highly contagious, and act as a glue in holding the crowd together. Fourth, the crowd has a very simple mentation (or 'thinking') process that allows information to travel quickly through its *neural network* of members. In the past, shouted slogans were the primary means of communication; these days, crowd members use mobile phones. Finally, crowds are triggered into existence by power issues, whether real or imagined. Any conflict may start with an apparently trivial incident, but large numbers of otherwise uninvolved people then get sucked into the maelstrom.

The crowd is, however, a time-limited and extreme version of the universal phenomenon of group behaviour. Everybody participates in groups to some degree – whether as a member of a family, a nation state, or a particular civilisation. The important point is that a crowd or group is essentially a psychological phenomenon. It may be physical, but it need not be. Physical crowds that have been triggered into existence by a once-off catalyst will not quickly re-emerge once the initial stimulus has been removed. Countervailing forces are activated, and those who have been released from the crowd's thrall may well be horrified and ashamed by what they have done. On the other hand, rioting crowds that persistently re-emerge over time – such as happened during 'the Troubles' in Northern Ireland – will be part of a bigger, more coherent, grouping whose beliefs are aimed at change. The theoretical point is that the lower levels cannot change higher levels unless the lower already has sufficient mass to confront the (thereby weakened) higher. The dynamic involves seeking to ascend the hierarchy of power through a persistent testing, and eventual overthrow, of opponents. Arguably, this dynamic is now affecting Arab nations.

Crowd episodes are an extreme version of universal collective behaviour. They do not, however, arise out of nowhere. The equity collapse and the UK riots, each in their own way, provide information about underlying realities. The implications need to be faced.

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