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# The psychology of crowd control – and why the UK may see violence escalate before lockdown ends

Mass gatherings are currently illegal. So when they happen, how can they be peacefully dispersed – and are they a trigger for more widespread unrest?

By Dominic Bliss

Published 15 Mar 2021, 17:56 GMT, Updated 16 Mar 2021, 17:22 GMT



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FOLLOWING the Premiership win of Scottish football team Rangers FC on 6 March, hundreds of supporters gathered outside the Ibrox Stadium and across the city in celebration. Packed together, climbing on each other's shoulders and letting off flares, though celebratory in nature the gathering was against the law – breaking lockdown rules and violating social distancing protocols. 28 arrests were made across the city for disorder offences, and the resulting headlines placed fans of the club, the club itself, the Scottish government and the police into a complication of



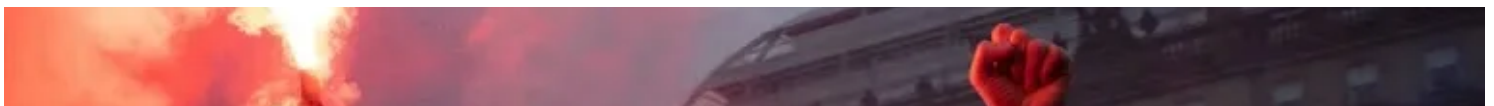
days following saw the football authorities and government enter crisis talks, ahead of potentially more explosive gatherings in the future.

The following weekend saw a flashpoint for a very different reason: a vigil on London's Clapham Common on 13 March for murdered 33 year-old Sarah Everard, which was broken up by police using methods that have sparked widespread criticism. This at the beginning of a week where UK Home Secretary Priti Patel sought to introduce new legislation that included added powers for police to stop demonstrations under the justification of 'noise', with an added clause of 'impact' – two factors which, many uphold, threatens the very purpose of any demonstration. The government claims the bill will “broaden the range of circumstances in which police may impose conditions on a protest” – but human rights groups have expressed dismay at what they see as an attack on civil rights, with Gracie Bradley, director of Liberty, stating the proposed laws “risk stifling dissent... making it harder for us to hold the powerful to account.”

## Crowds in the age of COVID-19

During the coronavirus pandemic, public demonstrations – with or without clashes with police – have been a recurring motif in international headlines. These have ranged from celebrations to vigils; from environmental activism to anti-lockdown protests; and from movements for change such as the Black Lives Matter demonstrations following the murder of George Floyd in 2020, to deadly acts of collective violence – such as the attempted U.S. insurrection in January 2021.

In the UK, the fiery destruction of the 2011 England riots are still fresh in the memory of many. Now, the leading UK expert on civil unrest is warning the tensions of a public fatigued by a lockdown – and those charged with enforcing it – may spill over into violence.



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“There is a significantly increased likelihood that serious rioting will develop. The question is not ‘if’, it is ‘when’.” Says [Clifford Stott, professor of social psychology at Keele University](#), and an expert on civil unrest to the British government’s advisory body [SAGE](#). Stott has been studying mass protests – both peaceful and violent – for decades. He suspects [COVID-19](#) and its cumulative hardships could create an escalating situation as spring continues.

By then, [vaccination](#) of society’s more vulnerable groups may start to make people perceive lockdown as redundant, [regardless of government advice](#). And as the weather warms up, people will gather outside in larger numbers.

“[People have been thrust into poverty as a function of lockdown](#),” Stott warns.

“People need to go to work and earn a living. The denial of these perceived rights is



feel the [lockdown] restrictions are illegitimate. If police try to enforce them, that could amplify people's perceptions of the illegitimacy of policing – one of the key dynamics we know drives people to riot.”

Rather than mass participation marches, Stott believes the unrest could start with illegal gatherings in public. Initially these might be unlicensed raves or street parties – or indeed celebrations of sporting victories – but he fears they could easily spill over into civil unrest. The question is whether unrest will spread across multiple British cities as it did during the 2011 riots, after the shooting of Mark Duggan, when peaceful protest descended into violence, looting and arson that lasted for days.

“We know COVID restrictions are amplifying inequality,” Stott adds. “So there are more people in urban environments who are being systematically driven into low socio-economic positions, and that's going to be shared across different cities. If a riot happens in one city, that could empower people in other cities to come out and confront the police as well. That's what we think happened in 2011.”

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## ‘Legitimacy, and power’

It was at the poll tax riots, in London in 1990, when scuffles broke out between protesters and police in and around Trafalgar Square, that Stott first experienced civil unrest close-up. There as both an anti-poll tax protester and a student of crowd psychology, he found himself in the thick of the action. “I had long hair, a big Mohican; I was a hippie, basically,” he remembers. “I took along this massive VHS video camera because I wanted to film the crowd. When the cops were charging into the crowd and striking out, I was stood in the middle of that. As the police ran towards me, I held up the camera, so that the police were running around me rather than hitting me. I was able to observe in close proximity what was happening.”

Since that baptism of fire, Stott has observed public dissent in multiple theatres of unrest, including the British riots in 2011, the Hong Kong protests in 2019, and hooliganism at football matches across Britain and the Continent. Born in Bedfordshire but now living on The Wirral, this 55-year-old has lectured on the psychology and dynamics of crowd behaviour at several universities, and has advised police forces in the UK, Portugal, Sweden, Denmark and Australia.

All this experience means he knows well how crowd emotions can boil over into public disorder. It all hinges on two key notions, he says: legitimacy and power. “From the crowd’s perspective, what they’re doing, they see as legitimate. And from the police’s perspective, what the crowd is doing, they see as illegitimate – indeed, criminal.”

Initially, the police hold all the power. They are organised, they have the resources,





the crowd is breaking the law, they can order them to disperse, or contain their progress (known as kettling).

The protesters themselves, however, often feel their actions are entirely legal. “So there’s a contrasting view of legitimacy,” Stott explains.

The protesters begin to view themselves as one entity in opposition to the police. “That sense of unity can be deeply empowering,” Stott adds. Should any police officer strike even a single member of the crowd, it is perceived as an affront to the entire crowd.

“All of a sudden, where the police had been the powerful group, they become disempowered. For example, if there are 15 cops and a crowd of 100, all of a sudden that crowd unites in opposition. For the police this is a very serious problem.”

This is where situations can rapidly develop. Worried the situation is spiralling out of control, the police might mobilise more personnel, dogs, batons or shields.

“Suddenly it escalates into a major confrontation,” says Stott. “There are other people in the crowd who haven’t done anything wrong, who haven’t confronted the police, who suddenly find themselves being treated as if they have.” What sometimes follows is full-blown combat between police and protesters.

## The dangers of mass psychology

The problem, Stott says, is that too many police forces operate according to an outdated theory that psychologists call “classical crowd psychology”. This was developed in the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century in an effort to understand French revolutionary forces, and suggests that individuals in a crowd lose their sense of individual self and personal responsibility, allowing ideas of sedition to take control.

The ideas spreading during the French Revolution were based on socialism. Stott says the establishment at the time viewed socialism “as a disease that was infecting



He says: “They thought a crowd could become irrational and could be swayed by orators – communist agitators trying to foment public disorder and violence.” The phenomenon became known as mob psychology.

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Stott insists it’s a grave error to view a crowd as an irrational mob. “If a crowd is irrational and mindless, its behaviour should be random. But it isn’t.”

He points to the Trump-supporting protesters who marched on Capitol Hill in Washington DC in January. “They were going for government. They had a particular notion of what they were looking for, and a rationale that legitimised [in their eyes] what they were doing. That was not meaningless behaviour.”

## A brief history of unrest

Britain's liberal traditions mean that this island has seen more than its fair share of civil resistance, riots, revolts and revolutions – with grievances ranging from suffrage, poverty, labour disputes, race, taxation and the environment, to animal rights, war, foreign policy, nuclear weapons and religion. From the Peasants’ Revolt in 1381, through to the Chartist movement in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> Century, the suffragettes in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century, and the Black Lives Matter demonstrations of 2020, protest has a history almost as long as history itself.





Sometimes this simply involves marching and chanting, or when antagonised, launching a few projectiles. But it has erupted into full-blown revolt, even electing to separate a king from his head, as happened in 1649.

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Nowadays, the new bill notwithstanding, the right to protest peacefully is protected by law. Unlike many other nations, British police officers police by consent, meaning that they exercise their powers over us with our implicit agreement.

The Public Order Act 1986 allows them to impose conditions on public assembly if they believe there's a risk of "serious public disorder, serious damage to property, serious disruption to the life of the community, or the purpose of those organising it is the intimidation of others".

In extreme cases, police can ban a public procession, but not a public assembly. They can also restrict the public expression of certain views if they, for example, cause harassment, alarm or distress, or incite violence or racial or religious hatred, or support terrorism, or threaten lives.

Right now, however, all of that is immaterial, since national lockdown means public gatherings are banned altogether. As a spokeswoman for the National Police Chiefs' Council explained to National Geographic UK: "The rights to protest are well



However, large gatherings are prohibited under current regulations to protect public health and we will take enforcement action where necessary.”

## Prevention is key

Stott has advised several British police forces in crowd control. Communication and negotiation are the most effective skills, he says. “It’s not about reacting to disorder once it’s happened. It’s about preventing it from happening in the first place. It’s the ability of a police officer to read a crowd, understand who is influential and build a relationship with them. It’s a very, very sophisticated skill.”

He says, of all police personnel, it’s often detectives who are the most adept in this area. Much of their time is spent building working relationships with marginalised communities in order to extract evidence, so that negotiation comes naturally.

Inevitably, given the nature of the job, a minority of police officers can be overly belligerent. “Full of machismo,” is the phrase Stott uses – but he admits it’s a reinforcement they occasionally need when under attack. However, in a public order



On the whole, Stott has a very favourable impression of UK police, especially since the reforms following the death of Ian Tomlinson, the bystander who collapsed and died after being struck by a police officer during the G20 summit protest in London in 2009.

“On an international scale, we are mid-tier,” Stott says, pointing out how police strategy towards protesters differs vastly around the world. “We’re a lot better than police in Hong Kong and Beijing, for example, but that’s a completely different political context.”

However, there’s “good and bad practice everywhere,” he adds. “Even within a single police force you will have different approaches to crowds from different commanders.”

A lifetime of marching with protesters amid the placards, the slogans and the occasional bout of disorder must have taken its toll on Stott. “Yes, I’ve been in countless riots,” he says. “When do I stop being a participant and become an observer? And what’s the difference? Above all else, I am a researcher of crowds. Whenever I am in the proximity of a crowd, I am observing it. It doesn’t stop me sometimes feeling an affiliation with the issues that are driving that crowd.”

Dominic Bliss is a freelance journalist based in London. Follow him on Twitter.

Additional reporting by Simon Ingram.

This article has been updated reflective of events since Clifford Stott was interviewed.

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