Name: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Psychology of Riots:

Adapted from the Psychology Today Article by Ken Reisold

We hear about riots in the news all the time. Terms such as “hooligans” or “criminals” are thrown around loosely to describe participants in this group behavior, but riots are complex events, hard to reduce to something as simple as that. It's no surprise that established authorities, feeling attacked; see the violent behavior of their citizens in such terms. They react by becoming dismissive and punitive. The Chinese [government](https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/politics) used the same language to characterize student protests in Tiananmen Square, as did a multitude of Arabic leaders in recent years when describing rebellions in their countries.

Often there is an element of truth in such descriptions. If you have ever been in mob that was agitated about some injustice, you know how contagious it can be. Ordinary people, normal citizens, you and me - we get swept up and do things that would be unlikely under other circumstances: shouting, shoving, throwing rocks, smashing windows, and, yes, even looting.

It usually takes an incident to get a riot started, such as a political injustice, natural disaster, or an example of a social injustice, such as the police attacking or killing an innocent bystander. But once it has begun, the raging mob has a life of its own. Deep-seated resentments, repetitive frustrations and long standing disappointments galvanize people into action. And the mob provides cover, an anonymity that makes it easier to overcome one's usual reticence or [moral](https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/ethics-and-morality) scruples. One is immersed, engulfed, and it can become an exuberant experience, a joyful release for long suppressed emotions. It can also become manic, driven, a means of restlessly seeking new outlets. [Leadership](https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/leadership) emerges spontaneously and changes rapidly. It offers a kind of intense belonging, not dissimilar to what spectators feel at a [sports](https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/sport-and-competition) event or fans at a rock concert. But because it isn't focused on a game or performance, it easily gets out of hand. [Freud](https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/freudian-psychology) described such "mass psychology" in 1924, in the tumultuous aftermath of World War One. Others have studied it since as a recurrent form of group behavior.

The Extended Social Identity Model, or ESIM, is currently the dominant approach among social psychologists for understanding crowd behavior (Stott 2009). According to this approach, we define ourselves both as unique individuals and as members of various groups. When we are with members of a group we experience a shift in our self-perception so that we identify ourselves less in terms of our own characteristics and more in terms of membership of the group we are with. We are therefore likely to act as part of the group. The ESIM can be useful in explaining riots. It is rare for large crowds to gather with a shared intention to be violent. Nor — according to modern social psychologists — do crowd members simply lose their individuality and join in with violence when it begins. According to ESIM, non-violent crowd members respond to a minority of violent individuals by categorizing crowd members as either non-violent (us) or violent (them). However, if the authorities respond with violence towards the whole crowd then the boundaries can quickly be redrawn, with the whole crowd becoming the in-group ‘us’ and the authorities the out-group ‘them’. This is likely to lead to a violent response from the crowd and cause a full-scale riot.

This is not to justify the behavior of the mob, but to recognize that we all can so easily become "hooligans" ourselves. To be sure, delinquents and petty thieves can easily join in under the cover the mob provides. However, it is important to know that riots do not rely on criminal behavior. Thinking that way, though, can distract us from the underlying conditions that give rise to such events. They can be appeals to be heard, when normal channels don't work. They can be eruptions of [rage](https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/anger), when frustrations boil over. They can be expressions of hope that things could change. And they could be all these things - and more.

A Newsweek columnist reminds us of something about the recent riots that many politicians and world leaders would prefer not to think: "If there's one underlying condition that these movements share, it has to do with unemployment and bitter poverty among people who desire to be part of the middle class, and who are keenly aware of the sharp inequality between themselves and their country's wealthy elite."

Distracted by the flames and the looting, we can easily forget that these are, as Newsweek put it: "social revolutions with a small ‘r,' protests against social conditions that have become unbearable.

Questions:

1. What factors allow people participating in a riot to engage in behavior they would normally avoid?
2. How does the author define leadership during a riot?
3. Name and define the current theory on group behavior.
4. Do you believe riots improve the fight for social and political justice or serve as a counterproductive tool? Explain your reasoning.