

LOOTING

Looting

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Looting (which derives via the Hindi *lut* from Sanskrit *lunt*, to rob) is the indiscriminate taking of goods by force as part of a military or political victory, or during a catastrophe or riot, such as during war [1] (http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle_east/2941733.stm), natural disaster [2] (<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/americas/262848.stm>), rioting [3] (<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/americas/1722584.stm>), or terrorist attack [4] (<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/americas/1558574.stm>).

The term originally referred primarily to the plundering villages and cities not only by victorious troops during warfare, but also by civilian members of the community (for example, see War and Peace [5] (<http://www.gutenberg.org/etext/2600>), which describes widespread looting by Moscow's citizens before Napoleon's troops enter the town, and looting by French troops elsewhere; also note the looting of art treasures by the Nazis during WWII [6] (<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/entertainment/arts/2291481.stm>)).

The inability of the authorities to protect its citizens and their property can have many causes. It could be that the authorities themselves are incapacitated, especially in case of major natural disasters or terrorist attacks. It is also possible that citizens cannot contact them for help, in case phone lines break down, security systems fail, etc.. Especially in case of a natural disaster people find themselves forced to take what is not theirs to survive. How to respond to this is often a dilemma for the authorities [7] (<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/asia-pacific/136582.stm>).

The term is increasingly used metaphorically to denote theft by corrupt individuals in positions of authority who exploit their financial or political power. An example is the theft of US \$600 million from Tyco International by its senior executives [8] (<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/business/2848913.stm>).

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Reasons behind looting during disasters

Looting is often opportunistic, the lapse in authority fostering belief that one can commit crimes with impunity. Looting also cascades through a group of people as one person believes that his contribution to the crime is lessened because someone else is looting. People may also believe that if the goods are not stolen, then they will simply be wasted, and see their act as a lesser of two evils. Finally, a looter may believe that if he doesn't steal the property, it will simply be stolen by someone else and he will gain nothing from his obedience. Looters are usually locals of the site of the disaster, and as such, may have lost a lot of their own property. This further encourages them to steal as it is reducing the negative impact of the disaster.

In extreme circumstances such as New Orleans after the Hurricane Katrina disaster, looting may be the only way for a person to procure necessities for themselves and their loved ones. Many see this as an act of survival rather than taking advantage of unfortunate events. Looting during Hurricane Katrina was carried out by many individuals who were essentials for survivals as well as those who sought to get "free stuff" such as DVD players and alcohol. Police were required to "loot" gasoline out of "abandoned" cars in order to continue to operate their squad cars, and doctors have had to obtain medical supplies from abandoned drugstores under armed police guard.[9] (<http://counterpunch.org/henderson09012005.html>) The media in Hurricane Katrina have come under criticism for portraying identical acts as justifiable "finding" or deplorable "looting"

depending on the race of the perpetrator.[10] (<http://counterpunch.org/floyd09012005.html>)

In many countries, even in Western democracies that otherwise ban the death penalty, extraordinary measures may be taken against looters, during times of crisis. Looters may be summarily shot by the police, army, or property owners. Extraordinary measures, combined with an impressive show of force, help to discourage looting and to disperse crowds that would now find a normal show of force non-threatening. This is also common police practice in discouraging potential riots, which are often associated with looting, from escalating.

The shooting of looters may also prevent further damage to the economy. However, this also shows the relative value of economy vs. human life in some societies.

Looting around the world

Without a police presence, looting will nearly always occur in large scale disaster situations.

Following the death of Valentinian III in 455, the Vandals invaded and extensively looted the city of Rome.

Another example of looting occurred during the American Civil War. The New York Draft Riots (July 13 - July 17, 1863) began as protests against President Abraham Lincoln's Enrollment Act of Conscription drafting men to fight in the ongoing war. Considered by some to be the worst civil unrest in American history, the riots included 50,000 participants and lasted several days, claiming hundreds of lives and destroying millions of dollars in property. The violent demonstration could not be contained by the civil police force, and required the intervention of regiments of the New York State Militia, who marched back to NY from the battlefield of Gettysburg, to restore civil order.

In 1992, during the Rodney King riots, widespread looting occurred in Los Angeles, California. Some store owners guarded their stores with personal firearms.

During the Asian Financial Crisis in 1997/1998, lootings occurred in many parts of Indonesia.

During the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 many ATMs were robbed in New York City.

After the United States occupied Iraq, the absence of Iraqi police and the reluctance of the US to act as a police force enabled looters to raid homes and businesses, most notably the Iraqi National Museum. During the war, many hospitals were stripped of nearly all supplies. However, upon investigation many of the looting claims were in fact exaggerated. Most notably the Iraqi National Museum in which many curators had stored important artifacts in the museum vault and then flooded the entrance. [11] (<http://www.museum.upenn.edu/new/iraq/update.shtml>).

Looting as an act of warfare

In the Persian Gulf War there was massive looting by Iraq in Kuwait. [12] (http://www.kuwait.kw/diwan/emain/Story_Of_Kuwait/Occupation/Iraqi_regime_Crimes/theft.html)

See also

- Anarchy
- Ramraiding
- Looting (gaming)

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