

Editorial: Fire This Time

It was only in last July's issue of *Philosophy* that we wrote of the 'volatility of swirling crowds on the streets', of the shifting sands on which the apparently smooth surface of settled political order rests, and of the use of so-called social media by those orchestrating events on the street. We also speculated about the unpredictability of history, little imagining that this would come so close to home with what would happen in London and other *English* cities as soon as August 2011.

Various causes have been adduced for the burning and looting at the heart of the oldest democracy in the world: the 'brokenness' of society; crass materialism, high and low; greedy bankers or feral children, or both; timid and indecisive policing or, alternatively, heavy-handed policing; government cuts and their demoralising effects; chronic educational under-achievement (this explanation often from the very same politicians who like to claim that educational standards are higher than ever); even rap and bling somehow jumping, meme like, from minds in black ghettos to those in the skulls of the white working, or even middle, class.

There may be some truth in some of these analyses, however much or little confidence one might have in those proposing them, some of whom have to bear responsibility for the very conditions they so publicly deplore. The sight of an eruption of British parliamentary moralism is never a pretty one.

But amid all the commentary attendant on what we are instructed to see as sheer or mere criminality, no one to our knowledge has adverted to the intoxication and intoxicating pleasure there can be in pure violence and destruction. Once unleashed, almost any pretext can serve as cover (so the observation that the people we saw trying on and looting trainers and HD televisions may not be personally inconvenienced by the curtailment of public library hours or the raising of student fees, while amusing, is slightly beside the point).

We are not all responsible for the English riots (sorry, criminality) of August 2011. But their roots are in us all, as Euripides showed us long ago, deny it as we will. And in *The Bacchae* it was precisely when right-thinking and enlightened people – the quiet voiced elders of ancient Thebes – tried to deny the destructive aspects of our nature that havoc and murder ensued. Broken society, perhaps, but underlying that, a broken nature we find so hard to come to terms with.