



The inchoate rage beneath our global cities

By Richard Florida

London's riots prompted commentators on the right to blame hooliganism, while those on the left cited frustrations with the [UK's faltering economy](#) and fiscal austerity. But the causes run deeper and are linked fundamentally to the changing structure of the world's economy. They are problems many of our global cities will soon face.

Globalisation has made our great cities incalculably richer but also increasingly divided and unequal. More than youth, ethnicity or even race, [London's riots](#) are about class and the growing divide between the classes. This dynamic is not unique to London but is at work in many of the world's great capitals. Instead of reducing and flattening economic distinctions, globalisation has made them sharper.

We make a big mistake when we look out across the peaks of privilege from our eyries in London, New York, Tokyo and Mumbai, and tell ourselves that the playing field is level. Our world, and especially its cities, is now spiky and divided.

Behind the headlines this is a tale of two great immigrations. On the one hand, the great global metropolises are [magnets for the international super-rich](#) on the lookout for tax shelters and shopping opportunities. On the other are less-skilled immigrants, hungry for better lives. In between are often caught local populations, left behind by fast-moving economic change.

London certainly has its rich and poor districts but in contrast to the physical divides of most American cities, its rich and poor often live right next to each other, often in its rapidly gentrifying enclaves. These neo-bohemian areas are frequently the most creative but rising housing costs and divergent life prospects are there for all to see. As the global super-rich go on seemingly unscathed by the economic crisis, the young and the less skilled are out of work for longer and longer periods, their prospects fading as the economy worsens and budget cuts take hold.

The riots are also a reaction to the unvarnished corporate remaking of London. Like so many other global cities, the vast majority of London's political energy is directed towards the needs and interests of an elite sliver of its population. The transformation of London into an "[Olympic City](#)", which involves not only the redevelopment of the stadium but also the physical relocation of groups and populations, fuels resentment. With the social compact eroding and a lack of viable mass political institutions to channel resentment, what comes out is not a coherent voice but inchoate rage.

Then there is this: our greatest cities are not bland monocultures but the very features that make them dynamic also contribute to their instability. Eric Hobsbawm, the Marxist historian, long ago noted that a combination of density and the poor being close to centres of political power transformed old-style cities into centres of insurrection. It is no accident that the [most innovative US cities](#) also have the highest levels of protest and among the lowest levels of social capital and cohesion. Much the same is true of London.

In short there is a real danger that such riots are a feature, not a bug, of cities in the global era. Instead of a shining city on the hill, our urban centres have become divided. Left to its own devices the unbridled operation of the free market will make these divides worse. Just upping the police presence is a recipe for greater disaster. So if our great cities are to prosper, they now need a new social compact.

That entails more than the old statist recipe of public housing, public medicine, dead-end make-work jobs and public welfare, which helped to create a more or less permanent underclass in the first place. Such an approach must recognise every resident as a source of creative energy.

This means early childhood development programmes and efforts to channel young people's talents into new urban enterprises and creative endeavours that benefit society. It must also focus on turning rapidly growing, currently low-wage, low-skill service jobs into higher-paying, more fulfilling and more productive work.

The prosperity of London and other global hubs requires extending the promise of the creative city beyond gleaming condominiums, sports complexes and cultural districts, to provide real opportunities for all residents. If not, the scenes seen in London last week will quickly become familiar elsewhere around the globe too.

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