

## Contributors

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# Controversy

## Perspectives on Rioting: Classroom v. Street

Dear Sir:

Louis Bolce perpetuates some old myths and creates a new one in his Fall 1982 *Policy Review* article, "Why People Riot." Such myths about riot causology are dangerous, witness the November 27, 1982 riot in Washington, D.C., of several hundred demonstrators summoned by professional Marxist engineers of social demolition to protest a Ku Klux Klan demonstration. Professor Bolce, the Justice Department, Federal Bureau of Investigation, and Washington police all seem to have missed or forgotten the painful lessons of the 1964-1971 urban and campus riots.

Professor Bolce propounds a theory that "a pervasive and intolerable sense of uncertainty" bubbled up like swamp gas for a decade among ghetto blacks and produced uncontrollable impulses to violence. He offers seven complicated charts as scholarly claptrap to gull the unwary, but way down in a footnote he reports the survey upon which his charts were based included just seventy-seven black respondents who reported actual riot involvement—a number he admits "was too small to allow for control procedures." How P. T. Barnum would have loved this performance!

Indeed, not only is such a number too small for any rational appraisal of black ghetto riots covering seven years, involving more than 125 cities and tens of thousands of rioters; but survey research itself is virtually useless in such an endeavor. Professor Bolce commits the same error as President Johnson's Commission on Civil Disorders ("the Kerner Commission") did in its 1968 report: both sought explanations and "causes" in the attitudes of large numbers of blacks, very few of whom actually rioted, and all of whom were polled long after the first-round violence had already enflamed and polarized the nation and set its articulate ideologues to gabbling with rainbow rationalizations, justifications, and "explanations."

After-the-fact survey data is useless for a simple reason. As one social scientist who wandered for several hours among Detroit rioters in July 1967 told me later, "What I saw convinced me strongly of the limitations of survey work. It was quite clear that in another thirty-six hours the impressions are all realigned as to 'why I threw that Molotov cocktail' and the like. Ask polling questions after twelve hours, and they will parrot reasons given by more articulate members of the community. All attitudes are realigned. But at the time the motivation was specific and wholly untheoretical."

Even data on riot arrestees can be deceiving, and indeed it did deceive many analysts of the 1964-70 riots, especially the Kerner Commission. This happened because usually in the early stages of a riot police are simply not on the scene and not making arrests. Even after the initial stage, police may remain inactive for hours, as happened in Newark. They may even be withdrawn from the riot