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## For Professor Fuist, Protests and Riots Dissimilar but not Unconnected

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WGLT Interview with Todd Fuist, June 10, 2020

Charlie Schlenker: What happened in Bloomington - Normal is not unique. It's been happening around the country and it has happened in a number of contexts over a number of decades when anger is out there and when there is discontention over a social justice issue. What goes into igniting such a... what most people would consider a counterproductive outburst.

Todd Fuist: Typically with regards to something like riots there is an inciting incident. So we can go all the way back to you know the Boston massacre, was a riot began with the perception by colonists that, well it was really a riot of opportunity. There was only one guard at a particular station and they all began kinda ganging up on him. But that's a part of it. So you have this inciting incident. There's typically an existing kind of emotional store of energy around a particular issue. So there's already a contingency of people who feel there is an inequity or feel that there is a social problem that's not being addressed. There's an inciting incident and because of the stored up kind of emotions around this particular issue. It ignites into something that from the outside might look spontaneous but to people within often feels like it's been building for a while. And then you also tend to see that things like this happen when there's some kind of breakdown of a social script or some kind of breakdown of social control. So one of the things that we tend to find in criminology for example, is that people will do what they feel they can do with regards to illegal behavior. This is why lots of people will pirate a record online but most of them wouldn't walk into a store and swipe a CD. You feel you can get away with pirating the record online more because you can. So, at times when there is an opportunity because there is kind of a dissolution of whatever the social script governing a particular situation is you are more likely to see something like a riot or other kinds of extreme protest occur.

Schlenker: So there's two different things operating there. It turns from an unscripted protest into an exploitation of the "haves" by the "have nots"

Fuist: Ah, right, I think you can say that. I mean, one of the things that's hard about looking at any particular event like this... So one thing that we tend to find is that they tend to happen with what we might call "non hierarchical organizations". In other words, you know, if your social movement has a president and CEO and you are out in a protest and they are giving a speech and they can kind of say "Hey everyone listen to me, stop doing this" that is a movement where you are less likely, or in a situation where you are less likely to see something like a riot erupt. So it's more movements where there's no particular leader. You can think of something like um, the Arab Spring, as an example of this as well. Right? Lots of movements don't have specific leaders, or are kind of clusters of groups, and you are more likely to see outbursts like this but then it also means that it makes it very difficult to know who and why is doing the rioting... who is doing the rioting and why they are doing it.

Schlenker: In the present case around the nation, it appears to be that middle aged and older leaders of social protest movements are saying one thing and the younger members are doing another. Is that... Your protest movement is your parents' protest movement is not my protest movement or what?  
(Laughs)

Fuist: There is definitely generational and stylistic divides between activists. Right? You definitely have generational divides where some people tend to protest in one way, people who are younger protest in a different way. One thing we do see is a shift in social movements, from... if you think of like the old left, they tended to be more hierarchical. You can think of unions which had a union boss, to movements which are not hierarchical, increasingly. Another thing that we tend to find, kind of a classic finding with regards to protests like this, is that it's often by people who lack either a) body into the system more broadly or b) feel they like institutional channels with which to make their voices heard. So you can understand why something like this would result in a riot. It's largely a population who is feeling marginalized. Like we said it's younger people, younger people often lack the institutional channels that older people have. People who are from marginalized groups. People who are poor often lack the institutional channels that people who are richer or social dominant have. So it becomes this situation where when you lack or you feel that institutional channels aren't working. Right? Like the Black Lives Matter Movement has been around for many years at this point and if you feel the problem isn't being addressed through institutional means, if you're not seeing your grievances taken on through what is kind of traditional methods of peaceful protest, you become more likely to see something like this.

Schlenker: That doesn't altogether explain though why the protests are so broad in so many cities. There certainly have been protests at deaths of people in police custody or going into police custody in different major cities before.

Fuist: Right...

Schlenker: But this is on a more unified level across the nation that we've seen for some decades. Why is that happening now? Why are, as you put it, people not feeling like they have an outlet within channels to address their grievances or their concerns now.

Fuist: So one thing... A classic finding about the 60s riots was that they actually tended to be you saw actually a similar thing. It wasn't riots with clusters in a place, it was more like you'd have this kind of big cluster in time. You'd have this explosion of riots across the country. It turned out from interviews with people who participated later on, that what we found was that it was often an act of solidarity almost... at least in the initial kind of understanding. So something might happen in the city that not your own but when you see that there was this kind of extreme protest going on in that city, people feel kinda given license to enact those kinds of protest in other places. So essentially it gets spread through the media and I don't mean like... I'm not blaming the media here because you are in the media you have to cover something like a riot, that is a newsworthy item. But, by virtue of people becoming aware that this is the response to the issue on the ground in a particular place that often creates this sort of contagiousness of riots that you see... you know when they kind of spread around. As of right now... it's still preliminary, they are happening right now. I'm sure we will get a better sense as we are able to talk to people who participated or review the news on it. But it won't surprise me if some of what we are seeing here has to do with even something like Covid. You know people right now are currently on edge about a number of sociopolitical issues. So I could imagine that given the kind of larger frustrations going on in the society right now around a number of things that this is a particular potent kind of cocktail for when we have an inciting incident causing kind of mass globalizations all over the place.

Schlenker: Liberals would like to point to presidential atone of communication as another inciting factor. How much does the way leadership responds to a moment exacerbate or minimize a violent response in a populace?

Fuist: It's very hard to say cause it kind of hard to directly connect what a president said to what happens on the ground in ways that don't get methodologically slippery. There's definitely some evidence that leaders are part of kind of promoting what is considered an acceptable response of kind of modeling behavior for citizens.... kinda providing that either sense of social control or the breakdown of the social script like we were talking about when there is a sense that... you know, there's weak leadership at the top. This is kind of a larger finding on social movements as well. Kind of perceptions of weak leaderships at the top or perceptions of divisions among leadership tend to be something that cause more aggressive social movement activity or at least in gender more social movement activity. Because you can sort of take advantage of not feeling like you have to worry about repression or feeling like you'd be able to achieve your goals because you don't have someone to fight back against you in the same way or you can partner with someone who might be looking for a movement to back them up against another politician. So, I would say it's a little hard to kind of directly move from one to the other. Definitely there's some evidence that leaders help to prime and give a sense of what it's socially acceptable in a particular situation or how you should be thinking in a particular situation and it's definitely a thing that we find that movements are often looking at the power and whether or not leaders are weak or stronger divided in kind of how aggressive they are with their tactics.

Schlenker: You mentioned the pandemic as a possible stressor that may be being displaced into the George Floyd context. Are there other historical examples of stressors being transferred to a different issue?

Fuist: You know, I'm sure there are. None are leaping immediately in mind as I'm thinking about it. What I would say is that there is a larger finding that disruptions in everyday life, actually a co-author wrote a paper that talks about this, disruptions in everyday life are something that tends to be a major trigger of social movement activities. So, if your everyday life it's just kind of going normal. Like you get up, you go to work, you go to school, whatever you do; you tend to just follow that routine. When routines are broken, it is something that makes the social movement more possible views your job. Or you are put in a situation where the things you take for granted about how daily life works go away and things like that can include shortages, people losing their jobs, and it's all happening right now. We are in a situation of daily life being disrupted in a number of different ways. People are in quarantine, job loss, economic problems, shortages of things. So all that, is the kind of disruption of everyday life which we have found in a lot of different circumstances seems to be something that it's correlated with movement participation or the triggering of movement activity.

Schlenker: What else do we need to know to understand the mob mentality in the present moment or the potential for destructive protests rather than constructive protests?

Fuist: So I think one thing to think about is that you tend to see things like riots happen in situation of hierarchy in the sense that once again people who have buy into the system or who feel that

institutional politics works for them are unlikely to riot. If you have money, if you feel your voice is heard, if you feel that you can enact change through the system then you are less likely to see something like this happen. It's when you have people who feel that they're stymied from doing that, that you're more likely to see something like this happen. And on top of that, a finding that we sometimes see is that riots are actually effective in the sense that, you know, they draw attention to a cause, they tend to be associated with lots of putting pressure on authorities. This is not saying that people should riot or that any particular or specific riot is justified but just there is a finding that if you look at successful movements often at least in the early phases of the movement one way they draw attention to themselves is through a kind of intense protest of this nature. So, there were riots during the 60s civil rights movement. I mentioned the riots in the Arab Spring. We just saw riots in Hong Kong so they are something that draws attention to a cause, particularly in situations where people feel the normal channels of politics aren't working for them. So I think that's kind of part of the recipe that you see kind of thinking about all these things together. You know, do you have a non-hierarchical movement, do you have people who feel the institutional system isn't working, do you have these sort of ambiguous moments of feelings of breakdown, and do you have this kind of emotional timing for something like this already existing when there's that inciting incident? These are all things I would say the evidence points to showing the potential for something like this to happen.

Schlenker: So part of that is essentially the argument that Malcolm X was necessary to help Martin Luther King succeed.

Fuist: Absolutely. This might be an apocryphal quote, when I teach social movements I often say to my students that supposedly Malcolm X said "if American doesn't get with Martin, they're going to get Malcolm". So you often have in movements the radical wing, and the streets and the sweets. You have the wing and the sweets and the wing and the streets. You have the people who are shaking hands with politicians but then you also have the people outside the system putting pressure on the system. Different movements would have that in different degrees but you see a similar dynamic with the environmentalist movement. You see a similar dynamic with movements with both the left and right. There's kind of the folks who can do TV appearances and things like that, and there's the folks in the streets and those two groups kind of opposed each other in a lot of ways as you're saying.

Schlenker: There was an interesting behavior with the looting that happened Sunday night and Monday morning in Bloomington-Normal with the group of potential vandals and looters going from retail out to retail out attracting the police presence and then moving on until they finally had to stand off at target. Does that sort of thing happen in other contexts as well? I mean they coordinated through social media so they would all arrive and even join at the same time so that was how they communicated but is that sort of thing common?

Fuist: Absolutely. There's a really great book called twitter and tear gas by Zeynep Tufekci who is a scholar who studies this sort of thing. The title is intentional, twitter and tear gas, she talks a lot in that book about how social media has facilitated very quick... so she isn't talking about social movements in particular, but she is talking about the Arab Spring, very intense protest. Social media or digital technology allows for that sort of thing to happen quickly, to happen in a way where you are having this

sort of on the ground coordination, digital technology really did exacerbate that kind of protest. But, having said that, you saw similar things going on in the urban riots of the 1960s. They just weren't using social media, they were using personal connections so you know, ... who do you know? How could you get a message to them? It happened slower obviously because there was no facebook or twitter to use but you saw a kind of similar thing going on where people would send messages back and forth with personal connections. So I think social media facilitates a thing that has always existed among humans which is that we are creatures who have social networks that we share information through. Social media certainly ramps up the dynamic, makes it faster, makes it kind of something where you can coordinate larger groups of people. But it's just taking an existing dynamic that happened even before social media in events like this. Like I said the kind of movements in the 1960s and giving sort of a new way of doing it.

Schlenker: Over the arc of this kind of event or this kind of movement, where are we now and what will likely happen next?

Fuist: That's hard to say. I mean, I'm a little bit low to kind of predict how things are going to go. I would say that I expect that such a large, um, outburst like this will necessitate some, some political mobilization. You're already seeing in different places, there's already been some introduction to different laws about policing, about things like that. I saw this morning that there's already kind of national laws being national policy being proposed to kind of shape how policing is done in the future and I know there's different kind of local versions of that happening. So I do suspect that such a large outburst will put pressure on the situation to kind of do something, but yeah... It's hard to say where this goes too far into the future. You know, it's going to depend partly on what happens with the presidential election. It's going to depend in part on who is controlling congress, what groups have the ear of whatever the next administration is going to be, that sort of thing.