

The Moral Ambiguity of Looting

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“The law, in its majestic equality,” wrote the 19th-century novelist Anatole France, “forbids the rich as well as the poor to sleep under bridges, to beg in the streets and to steal bread.”

If crushed bodies were the enduring images of Haiti’s earthquake, the most memorable ones of [Chile](#)’s have been of looting. Because of stricter building codes, far more people survived in middle-class Chile than in impoverished Haiti.

Nonetheless, a pattern that now is a cliché of disaster journalism broke out there as well: Early reports of people raiding markets for food and diapers were quickly followed by pictures of people carrying TVs and dishwashers off into a city with no electricity. Intact stores were broken into. A department store in Concepción was set ablaze. In a few places, roving bands robbed anyone they could. Residents who formed self-defense posses were quoted saying that the “human earthquake” was worse than the geological one.

Which raises the questions: When are desperate people entitled to help themselves? And to what? At what chaotic point between the diapers and the dishwasher may the police shout, “Drop that (*insert morally ambiguous item here*) or I’ll shoot?”

By midweek, with thousands of troops deployed, the pictures began shifting: young men spread-eagled on the ground with gun muzzles pressed behind their ears.

All in all, it sounded a lot like Haiti. Or like New Orleans after [Hurricane Katrina](#). Or like Dayton, Ohio, after the 1913 flood. Or like Rome in 410.

It is hard to name a single disruption in the social order, natural or man-made, that has not triggered looting somewhere. Thick snow? Chicagoans looted in a record blizzard in 1967. Montreal residents looted during a 1969 police strike. In 1911, Sicilians dodged lava flowing out of Mount Etna to loot homes abandoned in its path. And don’t forget the sacking of the National Museum in Baghdad, in the wake of invasion in 2003.

But it is also hard to predict when looting will erupt, and when it won’t. New York’s 1965 blackout was famous for the citywide bonhomie it produced. But July 1977 was different: When the lights went out then, if one lived in Greenwich Village it felt like

the big block party was back; but in poor black and Hispanic neighborhoods, hundreds of stores were looted and 25 fires still burned the next morning.

Though looting starts spontaneously, how quickly it stops appears to depend on how rapid and severe a response it meets. That, in brief, is the argument for using force decisively.

The worst rampage in New York's history was started not by a natural disaster, but by draft numbers being drawn. In 1863, poor laborers, most of them Irish, rebelled against conscription for the [Civil War](#); the all-Irish "Fighting 69th" had just been virtually wiped out at Gettysburg.

The mobs lynched blacks and torched a black orphanage, attacked the mansions of anti-slavery Republicans and burned the mayor's home. Most of the state militia was still in Pennsylvania, so it was days before Federal troops intervened in force, using artillery to disperse the mobs.

By contrast, in San Francisco in 1906, the earthquake struck at 5:13 a.m. In the Presidio, making decisions in a vacuum because telegraph and telephone lines were down, Brig. Gen. Frederick Funston ordered troops to march to the Hall of Justice and report to Mayor Eugene E. Schmitz. The first detachment arrived at 7 a.m., and by 3 p.m., Mayor Schmitz had officially authorized the troops "to kill any and all persons engaged in looting or in the commission of any other crime."

"Let it be given out that three men have already been shot down without mercy," he told reporters.

Historians disagree about how many were actually killed. Some witnesses claimed a few people trapped on the roofs of burning buildings or under flaming rubble were also shot — with their permission — to save them pain. In any case, looting was relatively minor, cavalrymen herded crowds away from huge fires, and the military was praised for the tent cities it hastily erected in the city's parks.

Legally, as Anatole France observed, the starving may not filch even bread. But academics who study looting parse it into three separate rungs on a ladder of moral ambiguity.

Stealing food to survive is accepted by most.

Stealing TVs slides into a grey area. Yes, a starving man could sell a TV for food, but it's never clear his motives are that pure.

And the third level — rampage and mayhem that is really ethnic or class warfare or the Hobbesian “war of all against all” — is universally condemned, even though many say the poor of every country have a right to be angry and ought to be forgiven for showing it during a crisis.

Tricia Wachtendorf, associate director of the [University of Delaware's](#) Disaster Research Center, objects to even the use of the words “looting” or “crime” to describe taking essential goods, noting that nobody objected to firemen taking water from stores near Ground Zero to rinse the World Trade Center's smoke from their eyes.

The ethics depend on the facts of each case, said James M. Glass, a politics professor at the [University of Maryland](#). “You can argue that hungry men stealing from stores is O.K., but hungry men attacking a woman with a bag of groceries for her kids is a moral quagmire. It's not a situation where anybody comes out in a good way.”

Given that context, one decision made last Monday by Chile's president, [Michelle Bachelet](#), was highly unusual in the history of disasters. She chose a rung on the moral ladder and placed her foot on it: While she condemned looting, imposed curfews and sent in 14,000 troops, she also asked the nation's grocers to give away food and necessities. And some authorities let the police look the other way at looters taking only basics.

It's not clear which factor was most important, but by Thursday, the looting in Chile had subsided. Some defiant merchants not only kept selling, but trebled prices, local reports said. But in poor areas of Concepción, soldiers handed bags of food out of dump trucks, and in hard-hit coastal towns, sailors distributed it from dinghies.

President Bachelet's decision, said Sergio Serulnikov, a history professor at the University of San Andrés in Buenos Aires, recalled an unusual aspect of Argentina's 1989 food riots, which lasted a month. No disaster triggered them; instead, hyperinflation had left the poor starving. At first, groups of shantytown women entered stores en masse, loaded baskets and left without paying — but also without touching the cash registers or breaking anything. Later, that discipline disappeared and mobs smashed their way into shuttered markets. With the government helpless

and the police wavering, Professor Serulnikov said, storeowners started bargaining, offering to give everything away if their stores were not damaged.

Those riots finally ended, he said, when there was nothing left to take — a fate Chile escaped.

This article has been revised to reflect the following correction:

Correction: March 14, 2010

An article last Sunday about the morality of dealing with looting in times of disaster incorrectly stated that a blackout in 1965, which did not bring disorder to New York, resulted instead in a baby boom nine months later. There was no baby boom. A widespread belief that there had been one originated with a New York Times article, nine months after the blackout, reporting that some New York hospitals were experiencing higher than normal numbers of births; later scientific studies, however, found no evidence of a statistically significant spike in the birth rate.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2010/03/07/weekinreview/07mcneil.html?pagewanted=all>