

## The crude moralism that characterises looters and rioters as 'scum' is evidence that space for political debate about the causes of things is becoming dangerously limited.

*This week's riots in London and beyond have sparked a frenzy of comment that characterises those who riot and loot as 'scum'. [Mary Evans](#) argues that this strict, emotional, moralism is overruling any chance for a meaningful political debate on the causes of the riots.*



Never has the LSE motto, *Rerum Cognoscere Causas*, been more pertinent. But if we can all agree that the 'things' are the riots of the last few days, the causes are a bit more controversial.

Hence the importance of the recognition of the *idea* that thinking about causes matters, an idea that seems to be vanishing out of the collective heads of many in the media and politics. It is not that there is much dispute that people should not have to jump for their lives from burning buildings or that people should not steal. That is the easy bit. It is doing the difficult thing – and being prepared to think about why these things happened – that seems to have vanished. It is not, therefore, that suggestions about the impact of various government cuts (for example of the [EMA](#) and provision for youth services) on communities has not been made. It is that these suggestions are somehow being ruled irrelevant, as if they belonged to a political and moral universe that has nothing to do with behaviour on the streets.

This refusal of the possibility of explanation, let alone understanding, empties politics of everything except a crude form of moralism. This moralism can only see the world and its inhabitants as good or evil, the 'scum' who need to be swept from the street or the looters who [should be shot](#). Suddenly, a whole new kind of sub-human person is created, a person whose greed or anger or avarice suddenly takes on a uniquely dangerous social form. In this conflation of our general fears about all these emotions with a political rhetoric that increasingly refuses any legitimacy to effective dissent it is possible that we are losing sight not just of the importance of identifying the causes of things, but of any sense that there are connections and continuities within the social world.

Such an account of the world, that we can only understand society in moralistic terms takes us towards the eradication of the social in a way that is far more radical than the mere abolition of society. Without straying too far into a consideration of the world views of members of the present government it would appear as if they are all engaged in a fierce battle with any form of material understanding of the world. David Cameron found a magic spell that allowed him to re-create himself as an 'ordinary person' and with this he did more than simply disguise his privileged origins, he made these origins not matter. Wealth had been politically both normalised and neutralised.

Since David Cameron's origins did 'not matter' and once that connection had been broken between at least considering the connection between individual circumstance and individual comprehension, then it seemed to follow that there was no need to ask questions about the impact of vastly unequal wealth on social values and behaviour, the extent to which people would go to defend this wealth and the place of those entirely outside any expectation not just of wealth but of adequate provision.

An absence of adequate provision is precisely what confronts far too many people in those parts of the UK most affected by riot. But to emphasise: this is not to identify poverty (or in a younger generation, the fairly certain expectation of poverty) as a single cause of street riots, theft and arson.

It is to suggest that political debate is becoming so furiously entrenched in a refusal of the material that what is emerging is a limited, and dangerously limiting, space for political debate and even negotiation. It may be that the present government has come across those terrifying references to the conditions of the collapse of capitalism in which growth cannot be maintained and material misery becomes more widespread. Whether this is or is not the case, it might be helpful to encourage those politics that allow at least the naming (and a discussion of the implications) of the material.