



The Politics of Violence in America

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1. A Brief History of Race and Violence in the U.S.

Race relations in the United States during the 20th century continues to be viewed from the perspective of power differentials between blacks and whites. The conflict that has resulted from the power differentials manifests itself in racial confrontations.

During the first four decades of the 20th century, racial confrontation in the U.S. is described by Morris Janowitz as white aggression against the black community, in the form of communal riots. Communal riots are characterized by entire white communities, collectively, attacking whole communities of blacks. White casualties in these disturbances are few, since the violence originates with and is controlled and directed by whites¹. The one-sided character of communal violence led Gunnar Myrdal² to point out that the so-called race riots were more a "one-way terrorization" than a race riot. The communal riots were fueled, in part, by the rapid growth and transformation of American cities at the turn of the 20th century. Large numbers of white immigrants and black migrants moved to the more industrialized cities and settled in segregated enclaves under conditions that could not accommodate them. There were housing shortages, high levels of unemployment, and poverty. Competition for jobs created conditions necessary for conflict³. This pattern of

¹ Morris JANOWITZ, "Patterns of Collective Racial Violence" in Hugh Davis GRAHAM and Ted Robert GURR (Eds.) *The History of Violence in America*, New York, The New York Times Company, 1969, pp. 414-15.

² Gunnar MYRDAL, *An American Dilemma*, New York, Harper and Brothers, 1944, p. 567.

³ M. JANOWITZ, *op. cit.*, p. 415.



racial conflict dominated the urban landscape up until the nineteen forties.

The migration of blacks from rural areas to major cities, and the subsequent urbanization of blacks in the U.S. during the first four decades of the 20th century was marked by the growth of a more militant response by the black community to communal violence. By the 1940s, black communities were established, comprising higher concentrations of long-term residents. This militant response is referred to as counter-violence. The counter-violence is most likely to be set off by an incident involving the police in the black community where some actual or believed violation of usual police practice has taken place. This type of violence is manifest by outbursts against property and retail establishments. The emphasis is on destroying property, looting and arson, thereby, giving rise to the notion of commodity riots⁴. According to Martin Luther King, Jr.⁵, property was targeted because it was viewed as a symbol of the white power structure. Likewise, there is another symbolic aspect related to looting in the riots. Robert Fogelson contends that looting can be considered a political act because it is a direct attack upon the concept of private property rights⁶. As Russell Dynes and E.L. Quarantelli note⁷, the looting that occurred in the riots is a bid for the redistribution of property. Finally, the rioters directed their anger not against white citizens but against the police and military, white merchants and white absentee landlords as symbols of white authority and privilege. As a result, the vast majority of injuries and deaths were inflicted on rioters by the police and military⁸. In comparison to communal-type rioting which is characterized by the scarcity of handguns and rifles, Janowitz characterizes commodity-type rioting as having a greater dispersal and much more intensive use of firearms. According to

⁴ Robert FOGELSON, *Violence as Protest: A Study of Riots and Ghettos*, Garden City, NY: Doubleday and Co., Inc., 1971, p. 22.

⁵ Martin Luther KING, Jr., "Showdown for Nonviolence," in James M. WASHINGTON (ed.), *The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1991, p. 70.

⁶ R. FOGELSON, *op. cit.*, p. 81.

⁷ Russell DYNES and E.L. QUARANTELLI, "Looting in American Cities", *Transaction*, May 1968.

⁸ R. FOGELSON, *op. cit.*, p. 84.



Janowitz, "they are escalated riots because of the more extensive but still scattered use of weaponry"⁹.

In his examination of political systems, David Olson contends that most political scientists view political violence as irrational and pathological behavior outside the boundaries of orthodox political behavior. Olson argues against this narrow definition of the term "political"¹⁰, which requires that political violence be linked to public issues and must contribute to a stable democracy. Olson explains that because political violence is an empirical question requiring research, most political scientists assume *a priori* that public issues are absent from civil violence, civil war and revolutions¹¹. But according to Olson the opposite is true:

...civil war raises public issues of nation integration; revolution involves generalized authority issues of who is to govern and how; and rioting involves public issues insofar as established power relations are challenged...Similarly, the model of a stable democracy is not particularly serviceable as a framework for assessing possible functions served by civil violence¹².

2. Political Models for Social Change

In the social science literature, there are two general competing perspectives (or general models) of political reality. One perspective is referred to as a *consensus* model, the other is a *conflict* model. The conflict model emphasizes the inherent conflict of interests between different groups in society, and the consensus model emphasizes the mutuality of interests. The conflict model stresses the role of the state in expressing the interests of a particular group (especially elites), but the consensus model presents the state as a value-neutral entity. In the latter setting, interest groups share a more or less equal footing and balance is reached through a process of bargaining, compromise and

⁹ M. JANOWITZ, *op. cit.*, p. 419.

¹⁰ Edward GREENBERG, Neal MILNER and David OLSON, *Black Politics: The Inevitability of Conflict/Readings*, New York, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1971, p. 273.

¹¹ *Ibidem*, pp. 273-274.

¹² *Ibidem*, p. 275.



negotiations. While much of the theoretical debate has centered on each model's theoretical commitments (*i.e.*, the methodologies and basic tenets), the purpose of the models in this essay is to inquire into the logical implications that flow from them for African Americans and other national minorities. The primary concern is the utility of violence from either a consensus or a conflict perspective. More specifically, each model is considered for its ability to achieve certain desired goals (*i.e.*, due process and equal protection under the law, and equities in employment, income, housing, and education).

In the political science literature, one classical (consensus) model proposes a stable and effective democratic system through consensus and harmony between a multiplicity of competing groups. Demands and grievances are met peacefully and successfully through a process of negotiation, bargaining, and compromise. This model is referred to as incrementalism or pluralism¹³.

The incremental decision-making model offers one set of competing prescriptions for change. This study does not propose to advance an alternative set of prescriptions but, rather, to suggest incrementalism - pluralism as a viable vehicle for meaningful political and social change, and to evaluate the role of violence in a pluralistic society. In reference to the assumption of the inevitability of change in the consensus model, Robert Dahl (a pluralist) points out that "in the entire history of political institutions, no political system has ever been immutable"¹⁴. The incrementalist position maintains that political change in the U.S. takes place in small steps, and a mutual adjustment of interests occurs so that widely differing values and objectives are balanced for the common good. Furthermore, incrementalists argue that change in these "small steps" avoids large mistakes and good policies are made by "going through a trial and error process"¹⁵.

¹³ *Ibidem*, pp. 3-15 and pp. 274-275.

¹⁴ Robert A. DAHL, *Modern Political Analysis*, Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1970, 2nd edition, p. 46.

¹⁵ Charles E. LINDBLOM, "The Science of Muddling Through", in Fred A. KRAMER (ed.), *Perspectives on Public Bureaucracy*, Massachusetts, Winthrop Publishers, Inc., 1973.



According to Parenti (a conflict theorist), the United States is not a pluralistic society. That is, a wide variety of groups representing all sectors of society do not participate in decision-making, nor is the power of elites checked by the competing power of other elites. Community power studies, which discuss the "indirect power" (usually referring to voting) of the poor, often do not include the poor within their studies. Pluralists argue that the ability to be heard (through voting) is an example that pluralism works. Parenti counters that the ability to be heard within a political system is not the same as sharing political and economic power. Parenti's "view from the bottom" illustrates that power is acquired by those within society who already have the most power and influence, and as this political order continues large numbers of the population are ignored¹⁶.

In contrast with the pluralist model, an elite model represents a conflict perspective that provides an alternative understanding of ways in which competing groups in society process demands that is appropriate for this discussion. In short, the elite model concentrates decision-making power in the hands of a few (elites) and emphasizes the inherent conflict of interests among different groups in society. Nieburg, a conflict theorist, argues that the pluralist model for social change enables "potential violence to have a social effect and to bring social accommodation with only token and ritual demonstrations, facilitating a process of peaceful political and social change"¹⁷. Robert Dahl, a proponent of the pluralist model, supports moderate conflict in a pluralistic society. According to Dahl, "... in a democracy moderate political conflict is both inevitable and desirable"¹⁸. Dahl, however, interprets "... severe political conflict as undesirable, for it endangers any political system, and not least a democracy"¹⁹.

¹⁶ Michael PARENTI, "Power and Pluralism: A View from the Bottom", *The Journal of Politics*, n°3, 32, August, 1970, pp. 529-530.

¹⁷ H.L. NIEBURG, *Political Violence*, New York, St. Martin's Press, Inc., 1969, p. 159.

¹⁸ Robert A. DAHL, *Pluralist Democracy in the United States: Conflict and Consent*, Chicago, Rand McNally and Co., 1967, pp. 270-271

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, pp. 270-271.



Without financial resources to mobilize ghetto residents and lacking access to power and influence, the poor and other excluded people are unable to effect public policy despite the seriousness of their grievances. Deprived of the opportunities to create "issues" of their plight through conventional political channels, the grievances of the poor are often turned into non-issues by those with opposing political interests. Rules, procedures, qualifications, and bureaucracies are designed from upper-middle class perspectives which work against people of color (the poor and national minorities) through institutional forms of racism (or discrimination). Institutional racism denies opportunities and equal rights to individuals and groups in the daily operations of society (through established laws, customs, and practices). In the U.S., institutional racism refers to the covert (intentional and unintentional) discrimination against African Americans (as a nationality or minority group) that produces racial inequities in American society²⁰. Within this structure, which is exclusive and blocks conventional means of redress, violence (*e.g.*, the 1965 Watts riots) becomes the functional equivalent of legitimate political activity. Thus, violence in urban riots is a legitimate form of protest to voice grievances; participants and non-participants within the 1965 Watts curfew zone concurred with this view²¹.

The participants in the 1965 Watts riot, however, did not fit the traditional definition of revolutionaries. In their protest, they did not plan to fundamentally change American economic relationships but, rather, they sought to be included in the system which excluded them. In fact, their optimism for the feasibility of this was a strong factor leading to the 1965 riots. One conclusion from these views is that political violence may take place within or without the "pluralism" of American democracy²². That is, violence is not in itself revolutionary.

²⁰ *Ibidem*, pp. 525-529.

²¹ David O. SEARS and John B. MCCONAHAY, *The Politics of Violence: The New Urban Blacks and the Watts Riot*, Boston, Houghton Mifflin Company, Inc., 1973, p. 53, pp. 138-146, and pp. 170-186.

²² *Ibidem*, pp. 47-50 and pp. 189-96.



3. Political Violence

According to Donatella della Porta, there is no discontinuity between protest activity (politics of disruption) and political violence²³. Both are "collective attacks within a community against a political regime." She further argues that "movement-families emerge during periods of turmoil, when protest activity intensifies, new repertoires of collective action are created, and unconventional action spreads to different social sectors: these periods represent the peaks of protest cycles"²⁴. Della Porta's point is that political actors evolve through a process of "gradual radicalization"²⁵, as they participate in a range of movement-family activities. Martin Luther King, Jr., echoes this same point. He argues that when nonviolent protest is rudely rebuked, "it is not transformed into resignation and passivity ... The cohesive, potentially explosive Negro community ... has a short fuse"²⁶ and will respond violently to social injustice if necessary. Doug McAdam argues that the urban riots during the latter part of the 1960s can be seen as the final extension of the politics of protest activity²⁷.

Janowitz argues that there was a decline in "commodity riots" by the summer of 1968, replaced by a more selective, terroristic use of force against whites (primarily the police) by small, organized groups of blacks with unsolidified ideological motives²⁸. The tragic assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., was seen as a prelude to a new type of violence that was emerging. A few blacks felt that the "expressive orientations" (manifested by mass rioting) achieved too few tangible

²³ Donatella DELLA PORTA, *Social Movement, Political Violence, and the State: A Comparative Analysis of Italy and Germany*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995, pp. 2-3.

²⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 3.

²⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 7.

²⁶ Martin Luther KING, Jr., *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?*, Boston, Beacon Press, 1967, p. 21.

²⁷ Doug MCADAM, *Political Process and the Development of Black Insurgency, 1930-1970*, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1982, p. 221.

²⁸ Morris JANOWITZ, *op. cit.*, p. 429.



benefits. This new type of racial violence appeared to be more goal directed and, thus, closer to a type of political violence. This is descriptive of a change in the nature of rioting, that is, a shift from expressive outbursts to a more instrumental use of violence. Those involved were persons who came to believe that white society cannot be changed except with violence²⁹. Peter Lupsha characterizes such an orientation as "instrumental," reflecting the existence of a leadership cadre which is hopeful of achieving its goals, and which possesses a conceptualization of desired ends³⁰.

Dramatic manifestations of "instrumental" political violence are regarded by Terry Ann Knoft as having begun on July 23, 1968, when a group of black men killed three policemen in Cleveland, Ohio (The Glenville shoot-out). The motivation for this attack was the deep resentment felt by blacks toward their treatment by the police. The police were viewed as the operant enforcers, and perhaps even more importantly as the symbol of white authority over the lives of black people³¹. A *New York Times* article described this political violence as "the first documented case in recent history of black armed and organized violence against the police"³².

The riot commission reported that "it is uncertain who fired the first shot," yet within an hour and a half, seven people lay dead. Four of the fatalities were blacks, three were white policemen. Three more blacks were killed later that evening by white vigilantes outside of the Glenville area. On July 24, another black was killed by a white vigilante group outside of the Glenville area. A black Cleveland minister declared, "... once the first shot had been fired, every Negro would have been fair game". Violence continued in Glenville and other East Side neighborhoods for the next five days³³.

²⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 433.

³⁰ Peter LUPSHA. "On Theories of Urban Violence", in *Urban Affairs Quarterly*, n. 4, 1969, p. 273.

³¹ *The New York Times*, July 28, 1968; Terry Ann KNOFT, "Sniping ... A New Pattern of Violence," in Peter H. ROSSI (ed.), *Ghetto Revolts*, New Brunswick, NJ, Transaction Books, 1973, pp. 96-100.

³² *Ibidem*, pp. 96-100.

³³ Louis H. MASOTTI and Jerome R. CORSI, *Shoot-out in Cleveland*, New York, Praeger Publishers, 1969, pp. 5-22.



Because black Mayor Carl B. Stokes succeeded in preventing violence in Cleveland after the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in April, 1968, "Clevelanders looked upon him as a positive guarantee against future racial disturbances in their city"³⁴. Indeed, Stokes' decision to pull out white policemen and National Guardsmen from the black community and to entrust the responsibility for the maintenance of order to the city's 165 black policemen and to hastily-organized black citizens' patrols positively reduced the severity of the violence and channeled the violence to the negotiating tables. In the opinion of most Clevelanders, "... Mayor Carl Stokes saved a lot of lives, both black and white, by keeping whites out of the Negro area the night after the shoot-out"³⁵.

Five blacks were indicted by a Cuyahoga County grand jury August 26 on charges of first-degree murder in the July 23 shooting of the three policemen and a civilian. Neither the police nor the white vigilante group were brought to trial for the killing of the seven blacks³⁶.

Moreover, shoot-outs with the police continued during the summer of 1968 in New York City, Pittsburgh, Oakland, Los Angeles, and elsewhere. Indeed, *U.S. News and World Report* stated that at least eight policemen were killed and 47 wounded in such attacks during the summer of 1968³⁷.

The "peaking" or "triggering incidents" that characterized the political violence during the summer of 1968 did not particularly involve an extraordinary escalation of hostilities, nor a traumatic event. It was simply the breaking point in a long chain of precipitating incidents, because hostilities had reached a point where simply the appearance of authority figures acted to precipitate violence³⁸.

³⁴ *Ibidem*, pp. 5-22.

³⁵ *Ibidem*, pp. 5-22.

³⁶ Thomas F. PARKER (ed.), *Violence in the U.S., Volume 2, 1968-71*, New York, Facts on File, Inc., 1974, p. 27.

³⁷ *U.S. News and World Report*, October 7, 1968, p. 29.

³⁸ P. LUPSHA, *op. cit.*, p. 291.



Conceiving of urban violence as politically meaningful acts in a struggle between powerholding group and the emergence of blacks on the urban scene appears to be a promising and suggestive framework for interpreting political violence. "... political violence increases when new challengers fight their way into the polity and old polity members refuse to leave"³⁹. Approaching political violence from a political framework points out that the phenomenon is not one-sided. According to della Porta, political violence can be examined in view of the interactional effects between emerging minorities and the existing powerholders and governmental agents representing them⁴⁰. Moreover, a political perspective "... provides a more satisfactory perspective on the role of the governmental authorities in fostering and channeling the emergence and development of violent protest"⁴¹. Thus, violence by blacks in the U.S. can be viewed as political acts designed to register an impact on the political process through extra-legal means, under conditions in which regular channels for the articulation of group interest are substantially blocked.

³⁹ D. DELLA PORTA, *op. cit.*, p. 9.

⁴⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 8.

⁴¹ Joe R. FEAGIN and Harlan HAHN, *Ghetto Revolts: The Politics of Violence in American Cities*, New York, MacMillan Publishing Company, 1973, p. 42 and p. 50.