Boston Riots

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An article buried in the back pages of a recent issue of the *New York Times* described North African immigrants rioting in Strasbourg, France. They destroyed cars, burned bus shelters, and wrecked public telephone booths during a week of mayhem. The declared reasons for the violence were police brutality, racism, and poverty. A sociologist appointed by the French government to explain the actions of the rioters commented: "The violence is the violence of people who can’t otherwise express their feelings." Feeling stifled, repressed, and exploited in one of the world’s oldest democracies, these poor people chose violence to display their discontent. Breaking the law was a means for disgruntled immigrants to make known their unhappiness. However, those affected by pov-
erty and discrimination who feel hatred toward the authorities do not automatically riot. More often than not, the powerless poorer classes will acquiesce to their misery. Only on rare occasions, when circumstances are just right, will violence erupt. Whether mindless or purposeful, spontaneous or planned, the one demonstrable fact about rioting is its inevitable use by the dispossessed as a tool to articulate grievances.

This book focuses on the communal social violence that occurred in one city, Boston, Massachusetts, over the span of three centuries. Despite its reputation as the “Athens of America,” Boston was the most riotous town of the eighteenth century, and third in the total number of riots in the nineteenth century. In that century it led the nation in the number of nativist riots, with Philadelphia a close second. Like New York City, Boston had a draft riot in 1863, largely ignored by previous researchers (unlike the large number of books written on the New York draft riot). Boston was more peaceful than many other cities in the twentieth century. However, several major riots did occur, such as the Boston police strike riot of 1919, the ghetto riots in 1967 and 1968, and the violence revolving around the antibusing demonstrations of the 1970s. Although isolated events, they emerge as significant episodes in the history of the city.

This study aims to present the narrative of these Boston riots, identify the violent protagonists involved, highlight their desires, and determine whether the rioters attained their goals. Other questions to explore include: Who were the victims and in what ways did they suffer? How did the forces of external control (institutions of law and order) respond? What conditions of the era contributed to violence? And, finally, what was the significance of these events of communal social violence?

**Definitions**

This study uses the term communal social violence in the broadest possible sense. It applies to a self-identified collection of people sharing a common cultural heritage with others, but who have a stronger allegiance to their group than to the larger society. The group identifiers encompass many possible categories, including community values, religion, race, ethnicity, class affiliation, and economic circumstances. Pertinent local conditions also play an important role in producing specific factions of riotous citizens. Groups of ordinary and usually law-abiding citizens, on infrequent occasions, resort to communal vio-
VIOLENCE (riots). Feeling stifled, they might use violence to express themselves. Denied the right to achieve specific social goals by the political or legal structure, the powerless become lawbreakers.

Thus, those who perceive themselves as powerless, either momentarily or habitually, regardless of their class, sometimes become violent to rectify their problems. They might wish to restore lost prerogatives, maintain the status quo, or vent anger and frustration at governance structures that are either impotent or "unjust." Violence can be a tool to lash out at the imagined or real challenges of newcomers or minorities, or as an implement to attain specific community-oriented goals. It is often a vehicle for hate and prejudice, or it can even serve as a form of recreational amusement (e.g., sports riots). To combat the muffling of communal sentiment, breaking the rules offers the dispossessed a therapeutic quick fix. A sense of frustration based upon the notion of powerlessness was frequently the glue that held together the haphazard, emotion-laden collectivity attracted to rioting.

One definition of rioting is a "tumultuous disturbance" of three or more people, who "terrify" others and challenge the "public order" in "carrying out their private purposes." Rioters usually destroy property, and, on occasion, they harm or kill people. An interesting Massachusetts colonial law denoted as a riot situation a gathering of three people armed with sticks or weapons "who were disguised." Authorities could read the riot act if three or more unarmed persons assembled between sunset and sunrise, "lighting a bonfire within fifty yards of a dwelling." Another description labeled a riot as "an incident in which dozens, hundreds, or thousands of persons gather—either with or without prior planning—and use violence to injure or intimidate their victims." In September of 1849, Judge Charles P. Daley, of the New York Court of General Sessions, stipulated a definition that became popular with other jurists. Daley presided over a trial of accused rioters in the Astor Place theater melee. He wrote, "whenever three or more persons in a tumultuous manner use force or violence in the execution of any design wherein the law does not allow the use of force, they are guilty of riot."³

Many states passed antirioting laws, with three being the most common defining riot number. Others range from two to twenty rioters for the reading of the riot act. A nineteenth-century Massachusetts statute, Chapter 166, characterized a riot this way: "If any persons, to the number of twelve or more, being armed with clubs or other dangerous weapons; of if any persons to the number
of thirty or more, whether armed or not, are unlawfully, riotously or tumultu­ously assembled in any city or town.” A revised 1966 “Bay State” statute, Chap­ter 269, cited a riot when five armed or ten unarmed persons met in unlawful assembly. A general definition offered by a premier historian of American riots is “any group of twelve or more people attempting to assert their will immedi­ately through the use of force outside the normal bounds of law.” Another riot historian, while lowering the required number of rioters to six, adds the relevant point that most rioters are not revolutionaries, but those who employ force “to correct problems or injustices within their society without challenging its basic structures.”4 These definitions of rioting should suffice to provide a general un­derstanding of communal violent behavior.

Identifying the Rioters

Over three centuries in Boston, it was mainly the poor people who ex­pressed grievances through communal social violence. Although all classes in­dulged in urban collective action at one point or another, the lower and working classes, or the “laboring poor,”5 were more frequent users of this mode of collective expression. This was true simply because they were more powerless than other groups. In a few instances, both middle- and upper-class people joined in the violence when they felt thwarted by legal obstacles. For example, in the nineteenth century, the ruling classes initiated riots, such as the antiabolitionist attack upon William Lloyd Garrison in 1835. Both elites and working classes participated in the violence engendered over the return of fugitive slaves in the 1850s. Most often, however, it was the common people who rioted.

It is difficult to determine accurately the makeup of eighteenth-century crowds. The typical riot cohort consisted of a mixture of lower, middling, and elite classes. But a riot expert noted that they were “predominantly made up of the lowest levels of society.”6 They came from the ranks of a wide variety of struggling workers: slaves, indentured servants, mariners, common laborers, peddlers, shoemakers, rope makers, porters, tailors, coopers, weavers and spin­ners, apprentices and journeymen, cart men, seamstresses, domestic servants, and smaller shopkeepers. They lived on the margins of the economy and were the first to feel the brunt of economic downturns.

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the laboring poor made up most of the crowds that embraced communal social violence. The antebellum work-
ing poor were similar to their brethren of the previous century. Largely unskilled and semiskilled common laborers, they labored as truck men, sailors, stevedores and dockworkers, warehouse workers, domestics, day laborers, and assorted service-oriented small shopkeepers. Many worked in a host of new trades connected to a rising industrial system, including machine tenders, sewing-machine operators, railroad workers, bricklayers, and assorted construction workers. All were usually propertyless, and lived on the bottom rungs of society.

In twentieth-century Boston, various struggling laborers worked the docks, warehouses, and airports. They held the many lower-level service jobs in municipal government, were the doormen, unskilled construction workers, and seasonal workers, and occupied the bottom level of factory positions and transportation jobs of the city. They inhabited the traditional working-class neighborhoods of South Boston, the North End, Charlestown, East Boston, Hyde Park, and scattered areas of Roxbury and Dorchester.

Throughout, this work interchanges the term poor people with lower class, plebeians (for the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries), the poor, the laboring poor, and the working poor. These words characterize those workers and common laborers without any or much property or standing in the community, who made up the majority of the urban population for the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and a significant portion of the urban minorities of the twentieth century.¹

This segment of the lower working classes sought to realize explicit social and economic goals through rioting and other acts of group collective action. They acted thus either because they found normal political and governmental channels closed to them, or they wished to protect or preserve traditional rights, or they became angry at perceived injustices directed toward them. Violence became a release from frustration. Since these rioters did not demand changes in the political structure, their outbursts do not appear to be overt political actions. For that reason, this book does not include the riots of the American Revolution. The riots studied here are the work of the powerless, who are trying to find solutions to their peculiar problems within the parameters of the existing system. Boston’s lower-class rioters did not want to change governments, and did not express any revolutionary ideology. However, it is not inappropriate to judge such actions, at the very least, as people acting in a “primitive pre-political” fashion.⁸ Ironically, these riots occurred in a community that throughout its history led the world in the advancement of democratic political achievements.
Democracy and Rioting

Boston’s infamous antibusing riots of the 1970s took place in one of the most progressive political democracies in the world. Achieved by that time was universal suffrage for all those over eighteen, males and females of all races. Prohibitions on voting based on religion, property holding, paying of taxes, race, or gender no longer existed. In spite of a widespread system of participatory democracy, for three years, between 1974 and 1976, Bostonians engaged in numerous acts of communal social violence.

The extension of suffrage to every citizen was a long and slow process. Seventeenth-century religious qualifications in the Massachusetts Bay Colony were replaced by eighteenth-century property and tax requirements, which meant only the well-to-do could vote. It was not until the 1820s and 1830s that all white males could vote, if they paid a small poll tax. A nationwide struggle followed, which included a wide-ranging women suffragist movement, and much later, the civil rights movement. The resulting amendments to the Constitution eventually included all in the political process by the late 1960s.

Expanding the scope of voting rights bears little relationship to communal violence, or to popular indifference or apathy to the political process. Indeed, for the nation at large in the twentieth century, while more could vote, active voter participation declined. In comparison, during the so-called “golden age of American politics,” from 1800 to 1860, increasing numbers of white males entered the political arena and became highly politicized. Nonetheless, this pre-Civil War era of enlarged voter interest and involvement in politics was one of the most violent times in our history, with rioting rampant in our cities. According to one historian, the 1830s, 1840s, and 1850s “may have been the era of the greatest urban violence that America has ever experienced.” If discontented groups in a democracy feel that others control politics, they can launch reform movements, they can try to alter or modify the machinery of government to make it more heedful, or they can follow charismatic leaders who promise beneficent change. When frustrated by available legal or acceptable sources of conduct, whether they can vote or not, violence appears to be a form of communal expression chosen by the discontented that goes beyond normal political participation.

Throughout this evolving political process, a wide assortment of Americans who could not vote used violence to make known their desire for reformed con-
ditions. Once given the right to vote, the working classes found that higher classes controlled the political process, or that working-class interests were subordinate to capitalist subgroups, who manipulated politicians. In 1863, for example, Irish Americans rioted in Boston because of an unjust draft law passed with exemptions for the well-to-do, but not the poor. Though the Irish had secured the ballot, superior political forces imposed new rules of behavior on the ethnic community that its members rejected. Bostonians rioted again in 1919, 1967, 1968, and in the 1970s. Those who rioted did not lack engagement in lawful political discourse; yet they choose violence to signal their displeasure with a system that they judged ignorant of their needs. For these Bostonians, rioting became a substitute for meaningless suffrage.

**Purpose and Sources Used**

The questions to ponder relate to the differences in the demands of Boston's crowds over time, and the consequences of each of these violent communal affrays. The concern here is not some overall scholarly interpretation about rioting in urban America. Other cities have their historians, and only an arduous investigation could make feasible comparisons of rioting in urban America over three centuries. This narrative refrains from positing a new or original interpretation of crowd behavior. Crowd motivation among the laboring classes is difficult to determine accurately, particularly since lower-class rioters tend to be inarticulate and unconcerned with rationalizing their conduct.

Many historians and sociologists have put forth a substantial range of plausible theories about the causes of rioting, and controversies rage over the accuracy of each interpretation. One of the problems with formulating a general thesis about rioting is that each riot has its own historical subtext, its own peculiar origin, and its own array of individuals working to sustain their own inner drives. Nevertheless, an observer can describe with some certainty the circumstances surrounding those events in which citizens chose violence as an instrument for re-ordering their social landscape. This book searches for a possible uniformity in the motives, ideals, goals, and strategies by rioters over a three-hundred-year period in a community that underwent massive changes. The purpose here is rather to provide a readable narrative account of a broad area of the history of rioting, with the understanding that circumstances vary widely
during different time frames. This is essentially a synthetic work that draws
upon a number of historical events previously researched in depth by scholars.

Studying plebeian riots in Boston over the span of three hundred years is
fraught with difficulties. Few adequate records exist concerning the arrests, oc­
cupations, or status of the rioters. There is no real means of adequately judging
crowd size, or even the actual number of casualties or property damage incurred.
Rioters seldom write about their activities. While this author consulted many
published works (see the footnotes in each chapter), newspapers were the major
source of information.

Newspapers are sometimes factually unreliable, often biased, and usually
are controlled by the well-to-do classes, unsympathetic to the violence of the
poor. Nonetheless, they contain valuable information about the identities of ri­
ooters and accounts of their deeds. In the eighteenth century, early newspapers
did not describe daily events. The Boston papers were made up mainly of
secondhand European dispatches and events reprinted from texts about colonial
bureaucratic affairs. The advertisements took up the bulk of each paper.

One of the few areas valuable for the investigator of riots were the letters
to the editor and the official proclamations of the Massachusetts colonial gov­
ernment. Both of these sections provided evidence of actual current events. For
example, it was in the letter to the editor section that this author found the only
occasion when rioters articulated their defense for direct action, just after the
market riot of 1737. Three letters from rioters directed to the colonial govern­
ment, and printed in the newspapers, became priceless guides to popular expres­
sion. Other letters, such as those protesting Pope Day riots, fleshed out the
details of these events and gave meaning to their importance in the community.
Similarly, official governmental proclamations advising the public of calamitous
actions and warning lawbreakers to cease their activities provided useful infor­
mation. The official proclamations contained full details of the circumstances
surrounding riots and indirectly gave clues as to the rioters’ cultural identity,
while offering punishments and rewards for informers.

The nineteenth- and twentieth-century newspapers fit the mold of report­
ing to which modern readers are most accustomed. Reporters on the scene de­
scribed the rioting, those involved, and the circumstances that led to the
violence. Eyewitness accounts brought to life the language of the crowd, and
interviews with rioters provided a glimpse into personal reasons for involvement
in a riot. While sometimes bordering on the sensational, these journalistic ac­
counts brought home to the reader the sense of the “heat of battle” behind these violent affrays. The newspapers etched out the flavor of a riot’s circumstances, and portrayed the feelings running rampant. Limited as they are, Boston’s newspapers, over a three-hundred-year period, provided a fresh and vibrant perspective on communal social violence in that city.

Among the many published works consulted were those of scholars whose pioneering studies of particular riots proved extremely valuable for this synthesis. Their cogent analyses of such events as the Knowles impressment riot of 1747, the 1835 Garrison antiabolitionist affair compared to the 1834 Ursuline Convent burning, or the botched rescue of Anthony Burns in 1854 made it easier for this author to carry out his narrative design. Whenever they were available, the author relied on memoirs and recollections that presented colorful accounts of these melees from the viewpoints of writers and their class. For example, the memories of a woman who was a little girl at the Ursuline Convent, and the recollections, twenty years later, of a ringleader of the convent riot, contributed greatly to the author’s understanding of this event.

The broad historical sweep of the narrative precluded major use of archival resources. Such use would have provided for a deeper examination of riot events, but presented obstacles for the solitary researcher. Searching through a wide array of collections of papers that ranged over three hundred years, without specific knowledge as to their pertinence to the subject of riots would be too time-consuming. As it was, this project took over seven years for completion. Moreover, such archival resources tend, for the most part, to hold the papers of the well-to-do with little connection to the passions and beliefs of the poor. Observations by the articulate classes, whether unpublished letters and memoirs or their published writings, often are one-sided and jaundiced when it comes to the plight of the working people. Elites and upper-middle classes usually condemn these civil disturbances, and they are unsympathetic to direct action because they face no societal restrictions on making known their opinions. No one speaks for the poor. They left no archival records. It is the act of rioting itself that is a major mode of expression for the untutored plebeians. Thus, telling the story of Boston’s riots is the first step in unlocking the mysteries of why these riots occurred. This work is the beginning of that process, not the ending.

Left to the footnotes are scholarly theories about the motives of those involved in communal direct action, as are the citations for quotations and the sources used. Nonspecialists can ignore these tangential comments. The pur-
pose of this investigation of Boston's riots is to tell the story of a town/city and its violent episodes over time. This social history of Boston will speculate as to a crowd's motives during a riot, but only tentatively and when warranted by obvious evidence.

Like a painting, this historical portrait of an ever-changing community strives to create a sense-impression in the eye of the beholder—to generate a deep understanding of the motives that drove Boston's powerless people toward communal social violence. The purpose is to illuminate people's anger, aspirations, and frustrations, without any attempt to justify their unlawful actions. The story of communal violence in Boston is worth narrating on its own merits because it is both interesting and noteworthy, and because it happened. Such an excursion into Boston's violent past is a tale never before told in its entirety. This story of rioting in one city over three centuries is a unique endeavor that may prove of interest to those concerned with Boston and its social history.