I I  Conclusion

Anyone summarizing the general circumstances behind Boston's riots should bear in mind the incredible variety of these events. Although the lower classes were the major protagonists, others in the community sometimes participated or supported the violence. As for motivation, the crowd agreed that a crisis existed and threatened them. They felt either deprived from full participation in society, and therefore powerless, or that their future expectations bore little hope of realization. They believed legitimate channels to express or redress grievances were not available to them. The poor might riot when suffering under adverse economic conditions or from massive social changes, such as in-
dustrialization or modernization. They sometimes rioted for sport and amusement, or to coerce others to conform to their moral conventions. They reacted negatively to the arrival of large numbers of newcomers who were different from them in one fashion or another. They rebelled against forced compliance with legislation that was imposed on them. On occasion crowd action had quasi-official sanction. The crowd operated with precise objectives in mind and assumed that the act of rioting would achieve satisfactory results. Sometimes vandalism and looting occurred, sometimes not. Depending on the conventions of the century and on the ferocity of the crowd, rioting sometimes resulted in widespread injuries to people. The spatial situation of Boston, with its high concentrations of population, was conducive to crowd communication and assembling. A well-defined and long-term hostility against the ruling classes existed. Finally, a precipitating incident usually took place, such as an unlawful press gang, a rumored kidnapping or other distressful event, a flagrant symbolic public challenge, an arbitrary police action, or a court-ordered ruling.

Bostonians rioted for many of the reasons discussed, and also because violence was a convenient tool for coping with difficult problems. As one scholar noted, violence “is a form of social bargaining.” He continued, “Violence can be unambiguously defined as the most direct form of power in the physical sense. It is force-in-action. Its use is the continuation of bargaining by other means, whether employed by the State, by private groups, or by persons.” Another academic agreed: “It has been one of the widely employed methods used by groups competing for places in the structure of power. Americans often have eschewed the normal electoral processes and have taken their quarrels into the streets.” For the most part it was the powerless poorer classes who were Boston’s rioters.

Out of a total of 103 riots on record from 1700 to 1976, 89, or 86 percent, were lower-class events. Twenty-four, or 23 percent, of disorders involved a combination of lower orders plus others, usually middle level workers and merchants. The upper classes initiated only one episode of street violence, the Garrison riot in 1834. In the eighteenth century, Boston’s lower classes acted in their own interest when governmental authorities appeared impotent, tyrannical, or uncaring, as when plebeians destroyed the public markets in 1737. In 1747, the lower classes took British hostages to free impressed seamen; they felt deprived of their legal exclusion from impressment and wanted to express their resentment against their rulers. To maintain their prerogatives and traditions in the early eighteenth century, Yankee plebeians attacked grain hoarders; during the
market riot of 1737, they punished butchers for increasing prices. To express the people's will, in this case hate and prejudice, they held Pope Day riots. To control the social order and maintain propriety, they besieged and demolished brothels, as in 1737 and in the case of the Beehive in 1825.

To reverse threats to their identity by outsiders, and to express the superiority of their religious beliefs, in the nineteenth century Boston's lower classes resorted to nativism. Thus, they burned the Ursuline convent in 1834, and in 1837, laid waste an Irish neighborhood on Broad Street. Nineteenth-century nativist riots occurred because Yankee working classes believed that Irish Catholic immigrants presented an immediate threat to their fundamental religious beliefs, their pocketbooks, and their republican ideology. The actions of the lower orders seemed socially justifiable according to the anti-Catholic traditions of the Anglo-Saxon culture that spawned them. These Yankee plebeians lacked political power, and the upper classes controlling the lives of the poor ignored their vital interests. In a few instances relating to the fractious issue of slavery, upper and middle classes rioted as well. In 1863, after suffering years of Yankee humiliation, poor Irish Americans rebelled against a perceived unjust law. The natural plebeian response to social and economic threats, given the circumstances of their past, was direct action. In almost every instance, rioting in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries proved successful, enabling the rioters to realize their goals without punishment.

Rioting was not a successful tactic for Bostonians in the twentieth century. In 1919 and 1967/1968 poor Bostonians lashed out at a system that they believed ignored their needs. From 1974 to 1976, poor white working classes vented their wrath at an imposed court order that they conceived to be unjust and "socially harmful." In all these instances, the rioters failed to achieve their goals. Superior force, or institutionalized violence, overcame their protestations. The rioters failed to realize their goals. Instead, their violence proved fruitless, and they found themselves forced into submission.

As this narrative of Boston's riots shows, the politically dispossessed poor, feeling impotent and believing that an insensitive majority violated their rights and privileges as citizens, have repeatedly turned to communal violence as the only possible solution to their dismal situation. Thus, Boston's powerless lower orders made history "by defining their own cultural identity." Perceiving themselves as a community that shared values and beliefs, they agreed on action that would promote plebeian "justice." Historical judgment about whether rioting
was right or wrong is immaterial to the notion that the crowd as a group believed their actions to be justifiable. Boston crowd action did not occur in a vacuum, but was part of community culture, regional culture, national culture, and world culture as shared by western Europeans and their progeny in the colonies and later the United States. Historically, the lower classes' propensity to riot became an expedient means to redress grievances. Their acts of rioting clashed with American society's ideological/legal philosophy of civil order predicated upon the notion of the consent of the governed.

A democratic society abhors violent civil disorders and their unpalatable results. A nation believing that progress occurs through orderly social change does not tolerate violent protest, no matter how legitimate the motives. The concept of the consent of the governed is the bedrock of American democracy. It is expected that government will protect life, liberty, and property against unlawful actions. So long as the government, chosen by the consent of the people, protects these rights, then communal social violence is not a legitimate choice for citizens. Yet this notion of political redress through the political system is ambiguous when it relates to the rights of the powerless.

In a democracy "the consent of the governed" means the majority. The government must equally protect the rights of those in the minority who disagree with the views of the majority. The machinery of governance must provide for legitimate redress of grievances for the minority. Thomas Jefferson articulated this point in his first inauguration on March 4, 1801: "All, too, will bear in mind this sacred principle, that though the will of the majority is in all cases to prevail, that will, to be rightful must be reasonable; that the minority possess their equal rights, which equal laws must protect, and to violate which would be oppression." The question arises, does our society respect the legitimate demands of the minority? When the minority feels oppressed and ignored, might they not choose alternative means of expression? This conflict over minority rights was the critical issue in the most violent event in the nation's history, the Civil War. Communal social violence has never been an acceptable alternative to the political process in the United States. In addition to its dubious legal standing, rioting has baneful consequences.

Gauging the results of rioting is a necessary correlative of making judgments about the ethical standing of those involved. In riot situations the participants zealously believe that others unfairly wronged them. Endowed with a collective sense of righteousness, they perpetrate violence upon their enemies,
who are sometimes innocent scapegoats. The rioters may harm others and destroy the property of individuals who are not legally guilty of any crimes. Whether the attacks are directed at people or institutions, many victims are blameless targets. The rioters, seeing *themselves* as victims, use violence indiscriminately, creating new victims.

Violence against the innocent is morally repugnant and reprehensible, regardless of the justifications of the actors. The scholar who empathizes with the plight of the politically powerless ought to recognize that crowd action can harm innocent people. It is difficult to weigh the two positions of lower-class justifiability for rioting and the often horrendous consequences to the innocent from such acts. To choose requires a delicate balance of interpretation. The ghetto riots of the 1960s in Boston and elsewhere are examples of this conundrum.

According to current academic interpretations, Boston's and the nation's black ghetto dwellers had legitimate grievances, but supposedly, they were wrong to take direct action. In discussing the 1967 riots, one analyst wrote, "The riots are credited with calling attention to deprivation while they are simultaneously declared to have been and are regarded as if they were, entirely unjustified." Agreeing that the legal system unfairly treated Boston's blacks, then condemning them for challenging an iniquitous system creates a real societal dilemma. As one expert on political violence notes, "Any group whose interests are too flagrantly abused or ignored is a potential source of violent unrest." Another illustration of the complexity of judging violent actions is the situation whereby citizens willfully break laws and behave riotously because they reject the laws of the majority.

In the 1747 impressment affair, the attempted rescue of the fugitive slave Anthony Burns in 1854, the draft riot of 1863, and the antibusing violence of 1974–1976, people broke the law by committing direct action. In the 1747 impressment riot Bostonians kidnapped British officers and seamen and held them hostage. The rioters took the position that British officials' continued insistence on using impressment abrogated plebeians' legitimate rights. To protect themselves and uphold a legal interpretation, they broke the law. They did some violence to persons and property, but no deaths resulted. Boston elites, although sympathetic to their cause, ended up bowing to the British authorities and censuring the rioters. Nonetheless, plebeians received no punishment, and they ef-
fectively staved off future impressment ventures because they used communal social violence.

In the Burns case, radical abolitionists made up of both gentry and mechanics besieged a police station to free the fugitive slave held under the auspices of a national law. These “law breakers” violently attacked police and federal agents, resulting in the death of a volunteer federal marshal. The abolitionists justified their acts by denouncing the 1850 Fugitive Slave Act as immoral, and characterized their behavior as motivated by a higher moral imperative. Though condemned by many at that time, these radicals got off scot-free, even though their violence outraged others in the nation. The Civil War and the subsequent history of the United States through the civil rights movement finally vindicated their actions. Popular culture views them as heroes in the fight against the evil institution of slavery.

In 1863 the poor Irish of Boston defied a national law of conscription, assaulted police and militia troops, and looted hardware stores for weapons in order to continue their resistance to what they perceived was an unjust law. Institutional reprisals shattered their minirebellion. In this case, most killed were rioters, with one innocent bystander shot dead. The Boston community universally damned the violence of the Irish poor. It does appear, however, that the communal social violence in this event weakened draft efforts in Boston, thus indirectly rewarding the lawbreakers.

The prevailing view of the busing controversy is that the largely lower-class antibusers of the 1970s were bigots, pure and simple. They violated a court order, and some of them committed a succession of violent acts. The rioters defended themselves by declaring that the majority had trampled on their rights and their notion of a higher law—the right of parents to control the lives of their children. Their middle-class political leaders supported this rationale. The larger community, however, rejected the antibusers’ vision of a higher law as spurious. The higher law in this case was the rights of African Americans, denied equal opportunity by the middle- and lower-class white ethnics of Boston to equal education. The riots that followed caused many injuries, both physically and psychologically, but no deaths occurred. The only death by rioting was a white man killed by enraged blacks in retaliation for white depredations. The antibusers went down to legal defeat. Many believe that in the process, the Boston school system suffered irreparable damage because of white flight. Years
later antibusers still feel justified in their hard-line resistance to the busing order.

In all the discussed examples, rioters broke the law, committed acts of mayhem, and put the innocent in danger. Only the historical circumstances of each situation, colored by the light of the majoritarian values of the prevailing culture, excused or reproved the conduct of the lawbreakers. It is up to the reader to decide in each case the merits or demerits of using violence in response to "onerous" laws. The common denominator of all the incidents described was the intense need of the rioters to achieve their goals, no matter what the legal rules of society. The condition of being outside the system will reinforce the use of communal social violence. However, regardless of the justness of the cause, it is impossible to excuse those who committed deplorable acts, such as killing a federal marshall, or throwing rocks at children in school buses, or beating innocent passersby unmercifully.

The crucial factor for an enlightened community to know is that the powerless classes may turn to violence, rightly or wrongly, because this is a pragmatic response to what they view as social injustice. This three-hundred year narrative illustrates that rioting was no stranger to Boston and that the city has had a violent past. A journalist covering the desegregation riots agreed: "It is, and always has been a city torn apart by extremes, a city both liberal and conservative, both enlightened and parochial and stifling. At times in history, it has been very hard to be an Irishman in Boston, or an Italian, or a Jew, or a black or, lately, a Yankee. It has always been difficult to be a moderate." Boston's history of communal social violence is a reminder that ignoring the plight of the powerless can sometimes generate volatile conditions, which may well result in riots.