THE RIOT AS POLITICS

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In the 1960s America’s cities were shaken by a series of urban riots. The most severe disorder that took place in Detroit in the summer of 1967 resulted in more than 40 deaths—primarily blacks at the hands of the authorities—and in excess of $40 million in property damage. The major riots provoked a number of attempts to explain intercity differences in riot experience. These studies generally agree that region and total population (or numerical black population) are important in the explanation of intercity differences—i.e., that riots are more likely to occur, and to be severe, in northern cities with large numbers of people (or Blacks in particular). Beyond this there is little agreement among the studies, although perhaps the modal finding is that controls for region and total population negate the explanatory power of any other variable. Explanations of riot variation based on political structure, per capita spending, relative deprivation, absolute deprivation, social disorganization, and segregation all fail of confirmation.1

This study will offer a political explanation of the major urban riots of the 1960s. It is argued that the grievances underlying the major riots of 1964-68 were not directly produced by the problems, be they conceptualized as relative deprivation, social disorganization, or what-have-you. Rather what is required for a major riot—an uprising of the nature of Watts, Detroit, or Newark—is the belief among the politically oriented segments of the black population that the government will not respond to demands for change.2 I am not arguing here that all of the rioters were politically motivated. Obviously the rioters may have been individuals of varying degrees of political interest and motivation. Robert M. Fogelson, in his analysis of arrest records from 19 cities, found that the arsonists were the most likely to be under 25, employed, skilled, and born in the North—
factors generally associated with militance in the black community. The looters were the most likely to be over 25 and unemployed, and second most likely to be unskilled and born in the South—a pattern that suggests greater economic motivation. The assailants—throwing stones, obstructing policemen, and carrying weapons—fell between the two extremes. A major uprising requires the support of the politically oriented rioters, who would turn to arson or battling with police rather than looting and would thus play a major role in breaking the control of the authorities. As long as the politically oriented segments of the black community refrain from participation, the ingredients for a major upheaval are missing.

It might have been possible prior to the riots to survey black attitudes toward local government responsiveness in a set of cities and then correlate attitudes with eventual riot experience. In practice, of course, surveys of this nature were conducted after the riots had begun. While these surveys did find greater dissatisfaction in riot cities, it seems likely that these attitudes were as much a product of the riots as a cause. Thus, for this study it will be necessary to infer the attitudes from the actual public policies of the cities—i.e., to assume that Blacks have more confidence in local government responsiveness when local government has actually responded to their demands for change. While it may seem questionable to infer black attitudes toward local government response from the actual response, certainly the inference is as defensible as the common practice of inferring relative deprivation or grievance levels from census data.

A question that arises, however, is: Does greater response lessen disaffection or might it actually increase disaffection? One hypothesis, associated with Alexis De Tocqueville, is that public policy response generates higher levels of expectations and thus eventuates in greater dissatisfaction. This latter hypothesis is based explicitly on the notion that government action or inaction will significantly influence the level of expectations. This may be true in many instances, but it was probably not true of large cities and their black citizens in the 1960s. It seems more reasonable to assume that the expectations of Blacks were influenced by forces that were national or international in scope—the activities of the civil rights movement, the policies of the national government (including the Supreme Court), and the independence of African nations.

If black expectations were not significantly influenced by local public policy, then local government response could only increase satisfaction by narrowing the gap between expectations and performance. Thus, the hypothesis of this study is that the more responsive a city to black demands the less likely it was to have a major riot (assuming that factors such as region