

# Why Aren't U.S. Cities Burning?

**Michael B. Katz**

**T**HE SUMMER OF 2007 marks the fortieth anniversary of America's worst season of urban disorder. The most famous riots happened in Newark and Detroit. But "nearly 150 cities reported disorders in Negro—and in some instances Puerto Rican—neighborhoods," reported the 1968 National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders. Today, the most intriguing question is not why the riots occurred but why they have not recurred. With the exception of Liberty City, Miami, in 1980, and South-central Los Angeles in 1992, American cities have not burned since the early 1970s. Even the botched response to Hurricane Katrina did not provoke civil violence.

The question becomes all the more intriguing in light of October 2005, when riots erupted in at least three hundred cities and towns across France. They were the worst France had experienced since 1968. Mass joblessness, isolation in ethnic ghettos, and cultural discrimination fueled anger at the police, which erupted after two teenagers of North African and Malian origins were electrocuted as they climbed a fence to escape what they believed to be police pursuit.

As in France, immigrants are transforming U.S. cities, which, already highly segregated by race, contain zones of exclusion characterized by poverty and joblessness. But American cities do not burn. Urban violence has not disappeared; it has been transformed. Anger and frustration turn inward, exploding in gang warfare, homicide, and random killing in drive-by shootings. But civil violence—burning, looting, sniping at police—actions aimed largely at symbols and agents of exclusion and exploitation remain part of urban history, not live pos-

sibilities in the urban present. What accounts for the absence of civil violence on American streets?

The question is puzzling because many of the conditions thought to have precipitated the eruption of civil violence in the 1960s either persist or have grown worse. Nationally, after the Second World War, income inequality decreased until 1973, when it swung upward. Even worse, the proportion of African American men out of the regular labor force rose sharply. The number incarcerated skyrocketed. On any given day, one of three black men age twenty to twenty-nine was either in jail or on probation or parole. Nor did allegations of police violence disappear. Police departments professionalized, waves of reform swept across urban schools, job training programs proliferated, new government incentives promised to recreate markets in inner cities. But city schools by and large continued to fail; the homeless haunted city streets; most public housing, when it was available, was awful; the police were still problematic; chronic joblessness increased; and inner cities remained bleak.

Other conditions that had contributed to the 1960s' civil violence also worsened. Racial segregation increased until the 1990s, reaching historic highs. Although African American poverty rates declined, within cities the spatial concentration of poverty intensified as whites moved to the suburbs. Ethnic transition added to urban tensions as immigration, primarily from Asia and Latin America, soared after 1980, accounting for one-third of population growth in the 1990s. Recent immigrants settled mainly in cities.

Cities confronted the problems that resulted from poverty, inequality, segregation, and ethnic transformation with fewer resources than in the 1960s and early 1970s. The federal government slashed direct aid to cities;

other programs—such as public assistance — took major hits; the real value of the minimum wage spiraled downward. The safety net created in the Great Society years frayed, heightening vulnerability and insecurity.

Poverty, inequality, chronic joblessness, segregation, police violence, ethnic transition, a frayed safety net: surely, these composed a combustible ensemble of elements, which a reasonable observer might have expected to ignite. Why did no one light the match?

No single reason explains why American cities did not burn. Rather, the relative absence of civil violence resulted from the interplay of factors that fall under three broad headings: the ecology of power, the management of marginalization, and the incorporation and control of immigrants.

### **The Ecology of Power**

Throughout the history of American cities, challenges to established geographic boundaries have often precipitated civil violence—when, for example, African Americans tried to breach racial segregation in Detroit in the 1920s and in Chicago in the 1940s. The Great Migration of African Americans northward after the Second World War was the greatest challenge yet to ethnic boundaries within predominantly white cities. To preserve existing boundaries, whites often turned to violence. The civil violence of the 1960s erupted at the height of urban boundary challenge, when huge numbers of African Americans had moved in and whites had not yet moved out. In the years following the Great Migration, whites left central cities for suburbs, where they found ways to erect new and effective borders, and many cities became majority or near-majority minority. By 2000, only 21 percent of whites remained in central cities. As a result, boundary challenges receded, and the ecology of urban power was rearranged.

As they decamped for the suburbs, whites ceded effective political control of cities to African Americans, retaining only a hold on commerce and finance and gentrified pockets of downtown. Between 1970 and 2001, the number of African American county and municipal officials rose 960 percent and 619 percent respectively. African Americans also made in-

roads into the police, the most visible and, often, hated agents of the local state. The irony, of course, is that African Americans inherited city governments at the moment when deindustrialization, cuts in federal aid, and white flight were decimating tax bases and job opportunities while fueling homelessness, street crime, and poverty. Newly African American-led city governments confronted escalating demands for services and the repair of crumbling infrastructures with shrinking resources and power curtailed by often hostile state governments. This kind of governmental power was truly, as a political scientist wrote in 1969, a “hollow prize.” Nonetheless, with so many whites gone, boundaries became less contentious, eroding one major source of civil violence.

In the 1980s, massive immigration from Latin America and Asia reignited urban boundary conflicts, particularly in the gateway cities where most immigrants entered. The civil violence that exploded in South-central Los Angeles in 1992 marked the first major boundary conflict since the 1960s. Despite widespread fear, however, events in Los Angeles did not light a long fuse stretching across urban America. Why did it prove so hard to ignite civil violence throughout the nation? The answer lies partly in a set of mechanisms that complemented the new ecology of urban power. Collectively, these mechanisms deflected civil violence by managing marginalization.

### **Management of Marginalization**

Usually, civil violence in American history has involved marginalized populations who have served both as objects of attack (in lynchings) and as active participants (in Watts in 1965, for example). By marginalized, I mean groups largely excluded from the prerogatives and rewards that accompany full citizenship, including employment, housing, consumption, social benefits, and equal justice. Before the 1950s or 1960s, nearly all African Americans remained marginalized in one way or another and far too many, along with Puerto Ricans and many immigrants, still do. Since the 1960s, however, deprivation rarely has translated into civil violence. Americans have learned to manage marginalization. Five mechanisms have

proved crucial: selective incorporation; ostensible, or mimetic, reform; indirect rule; consumption; and repression and surveillance. Together, they set in motion a process of depoliticization that undercuts the capacity for collective action.

**I**N RECENT DECADES, gateways to better education, jobs, income, and housing have opened to a significant fraction of African Americans and other minorities. This is what I mean by selective incorporation. As a result, African American social structure resembles the social structure of white America, albeit with a smaller middle class and fewer wealthy. This incorporation resulted primarily from government and private-sector sponsorship and depended heavily on public or quasi-public employment (that is, in private agencies largely dependent on public funds).

For the most part, selective incorporation constructed limited ladders of social mobility. African American men entering the professions, for example, clustered largely in the human services, not in law, medicine, or the top ranks of corporate America. African American women professionals worked disproportionately as technicians, the lowest rung on the professional ladder. Nonetheless, this limited mobility proved very important, fracturing African American communities along lines of class and gender (women fared far better than men) and eroding the potential for collective protest by holding out the promise of economic and occupational achievement and spreading a modest prosperity more widely than ever before—a prosperity that was extremely fragile because it depended so heavily on public sector jobs.

Ostensible, or mimetic, reform also dampened the potential for collective violence. By mimetic reform, I mean measures that respond to insurgent demands without transferring real power or redistributing significant resources. Such reform cools out insurgencies; it does not resolve the problems that underlie them. One example is provided by Ira Katznelson's account of how in New York City in the late 1960s the Lindsay administration redirected demands for community control of schools in northern Manhattan to conservative ends. Another is Rebuild L.A., which promised to reconstruct South-

central Los Angeles after the 1992 civil violence but delivered very little.

White abandonment, selective incorporation, and mimetic reform resulted in indirect rule. Like colonial British imperialists, who kept order through the exercise of authority by indigenous leaders, powerful white Americans retained authority over cities through their influence on minorities elected to political office, appointed to public and social service bureaucracies, and hired in larger numbers by police forces. Despite African American ascension to public office, real power lay elsewhere. By law, cities are creatures of state governments, and states exercise control over cities in many ways—most obviously by retaining effective control of city finances. Corporations also limited the autonomy of city governments by threatening to leave, taking with them needed jobs. City leaders remained trapped between constituents who elected them and the state, national, and corporate authorities who supplied funds for their campaigns and circumscribed their actions. But indirect rule meant that civil violence or other claims on city government increasingly would be directed toward African American elected officials, public bureaucrats, and police.

In the 1960s, corporate America discovered the newly urbanized black consumer. Corporations recognized a new market and quickly responded with massive advertising campaigns and new media ventures targeted at both adults and youths. With these strategies, the private sector helped dampen the potential for civil violence by incorporating potential insurgents into America's Consumers' Republic—in Lizabeth Cohen's definition an "economy, culture, and politics built around the promises of mass consumption, both in terms of the material life and the more idealistic goals of freedom, democracy, and equality." With more spare cash than ever before, targeted by advertising, many African Americans were able to purchase the material symbols of the good life. By 1993, for instance, the black consumer electronics market had reached \$2.5 billion. In the late twentieth century, African American spending patterns did not differ very much from whites (although blacks did spend less per capita on alcoholic beverages).

African Americans' entrance into the Consumers' Republic is full of irony. Consumption demands—equal access to public accommodation, entertainment, shopping, and transportation—were key goals in the civil rights movement. They also helped precipitate the civil disorders of the 1960s. The national welfare rights movement made full membership in the Consumers' Republic a major demand. But the Consumers' Republic also undermined black protest by shifting the focus of black demands to public accommodation and market access, thereby linking African American goals to mainstream American aspirations and subordinating alternatives based on black nationalism or social democratic visions of economic justice. Among both black and white Americans consumption masked widening inequality, environmental degradation, and heightened insecurity with a blanket of inexpensive goods available to nearly everyone through the magic of credit. The result was consumer debt and bankruptcy that reached previously unimagined heights, rather than mobilization expressed through politics or other forms of collective action.

By facilitating the rise of the Consumers' Republic, the private sector developed an indirect mechanism for deflecting the potential for civil violence. Public authorities also deployed more direct mechanisms. In 1968, Congress passed the Omnibus Crime Control and Safe Streets Act, which created the Law Enforcement Assistance Administration (LEAA). The LEAA, according to one historian, "provided a law-and-order alternative to the social, cultural, and economic perspective of the Kerner Commission." Operating mainly through block grants to states, the LEAA gave money to police forces and other parts of the criminal justice system. The legislation specified that no more than one-third of federal grants go to personnel—a requirement that excluded manpower-intensive programs, including those that focused on community relations and social service. But the police easily fulfilled the law's mandate by purchasing hardware such as antiriot tools, helicopters, and vehicles. Thus, until its abolition in 1980, much LEAA money supplied technologies of repression and control.

Despite the LEAA, state and local governments bore most of the responsibility and expense for law enforcement. Like the federal government, in the aftermath of the civil violence of the 1960s, they also ramped up spending, often on equipment and practices associated more with the military than with civil police. Although local governments paid most of the cost of police, state governments picked up the largest share of the escalating cost of incarceration, which, after the mid-1970s, became America's principal strategy for fighting crime.

**W**HAT IMPACT did increased funding and militarized policing have on crime? Most analyses claim that the LEAA failed to reduce crime. As for incarceration, even optimistic accounts show a meager return for massive public investment. Indeed, crime rates, which had been increasing during the early 1960s, soared *after* the episodes of civil violence. Nonetheless, with few exceptions, the civil violence of the 1960s did not recur. Did the militarization of policing and mass incarceration help authorities break up potential insurgencies, respond more effectively to ones that occurred, and prevent them from spreading to other cities? And, if they did, at what cost?

In Los Angeles, Mike Davis contends, police repression of black power undermined a promising gang truce, while the decimation of the Black Panthers resulted in a revival of black gangs, now permeated by a culture of violence and domination. In the early 1990s, public authorities again dismissed gang truces and summits, failing to capitalize on their moves toward conventional politics and requests for job training and other economic benefits. Were disillusionment, depoliticization, and a renewal of criminal violence one result?

Fewer black men, in fact, could participate in politics, even if they wanted to—because they were felons. Felony disenfranchisement laws had long been on the books in most states, but their consequences became more severe as aggressive law enforcement, including draconian drug laws, created unprecedented numbers of felons, who were disproportionately black. Together, the combination of incarcer-

ated felons and former inmates barred from voting means that about 1.4 million, or 13 percent, of African American men are effectively disenfranchised, a rate seven times the national average. Looking ahead to younger men, the situation appears even bleaker. If the current rate of incarceration continues, at some point in their lives 30 percent of the next generation of black men (according to The Sentencing Project) will face disenfranchisement, a fraction that rises to a possible stunning 40 percent of black men who live in states that permanently bar ex-offenders from voting. Many black men, moreover, evading warrants or just fearful of potential arrest, avoid the institutions and agents of the state, thereby eliminating themselves from participation in political action.

That public authorities contributed to the depoliticization of young African Americans and the surge in criminal violence remains a hypothesis—intriguing, explosive in its implications, and in need of much research. Indeed, the lack of research on the question, and on the social history of policing post-1960, remains stunning and surprising. Clearly, though, the turn from politics also reflected other influences, of which disillusionment with the achievements of civil rights liberalism and black power were among the most important, as Matthew J. Countryman points out in his history of civil rights and black power in Philadelphia. Similarly, in his ethnography of the informal economy in a Chicago neighborhood, Sudhir Alladi Venkatesh shows how, even at the height of the administration of Chicago's first black mayor (Harold Washington), poor Southside Chicagoans found their political influence and patronage cut off by an administration that depended increasingly on a coalition of black middle- and upper-class supporters. The result was the "gradual withdrawal of grassroots persons from the mainstream black political scene."

In the 1970s and 1980s, as the spread of black poverty turned vast areas of cities into reservations for the black poor, as fewer black men found work in the regular labor market, as mass incarceration locked unprecedented numbers of them away, young African Americans had reason to look with skepticism at civil

rights liberalism, black power, and politics in general.

Other factors already discussed—the Consumers' Republic, selective incorporation, mimetic reform, and indirect rule—also facilitated depoliticization, without which the management of marginalization would have proved far more difficult. In the 1960s, African Americans lacked channels through which to make effective claims on the state. They were underrepresented in Congress, state legislatures, city councils, police forces, and in influential positions in private corporations. Other than through collective action, whether sit-ins or violence, they had few ways to force their grievances onto public attention or persuade authorities to respond. This changed as the new demography of urban politics, the victories of the civil rights movement, and affirmative action combined to open new channels of access. As selective incorporation bifurcated the African American social structure, unprecedented numbers of African Americans became public officials, bureaucrats, and administrators of social service agencies. People who once might have led protests now held positions from which they could argue that civil violence was both unnecessary and counterproductive. Others remained in America's inner cities, struggling to get by, disenfranchised, wary of the state, disillusioned with politicians, lacking leadership or a vision strong enough to mobilize them once again to make claims on the state.

### **Co-opting and Controlling Immigrants**

I have been asking why the explosions that rocked African American ghettos in the 1960s failed to recur despite the persistence, in some instances the intensification, of the joblessness, racial segregation, unequal justice, and institutional failure that had helped fuel them. But these factors, important as they are, fit the past better than the present and future, are myopic in an international context, and are only partially helpful in contrasting American with European experience. For the civil violence that rocked Paris and frightens other Europeans is a product of recent immigration, not of the grievances and frustrations of historically marginalized citizens.

Both European and American cities have experienced recent massive immigration. Both have had to cope with infusions of low-skilled workers from different cultural traditions. But there the parallels cease as immigrant incorporation and control take different routes. The results have important implications for the turn toward civil violence.

**T**WO EVENTS framed the 2005-2006 academic year. In October, immigrants concentrated in Parisian *banlieues* and the working-class suburbs of other cities took to the streets for two weeks of collective violence. In April and May, immigrants across the United States, outraged by proposed federal legislation that would turn illegal immigrants into felons and criminalize efforts to assist them, also took to the streets—but their protests were coordinated, massive, and completely peaceful. On May 1, more than one million marched in protest rallies in cities across the United States. Most of the four hundred thousand marchers in Los Angeles waved American flags.

The two events—civil violence in France, peaceful protest in the United States—highlight divergent relations of immigrants to the state and economy. U.S. immigrants sought redress through government. Their protests assumed that they could realize their goals through the nation's political institutions. They approached government as a potential ally, not an enemy, wanting nothing so much as the rights of American citizens. Their faith in the ameliorative capacity of American government marked their assimilation more effectively than their ability to speak English or whether they sang the "Stars Spangled Banner" in Spanish—an important point lost on opponents who relentlessly prophesied the submersion of American nationality in an alien sea. They were also largely employed. Labor force detachment, by and large, has been an African American, not an immigrant problem. Paradoxically, the most exploited immigrants, the undocumented, have been the most closely attached to work. They risked crossing the border—too often at the cost of their lives—to work at jobs for which they had been recruited or that they knew were waiting, even though those jobs paid poorly and offered no benefits or protections.

In Paris, immigrants showed no such faith in the state, and the labor market lacked places for them. In the United States, distrust of the police did not automatically reinforce suspicion of the national state. In fact, with policing decentralized, insurgents tried to enlist the federal government as an agent of police reform. In France, conversely, where policing remained highly centralized, antagonism toward the police reinforced distrust of the national government. Many immigrants to France and their descendants were former colonial subjects with bitter memories of anticolonial wars, exploitation, and discrimination. The state, moreover, pursued a relentless policy of nationalization, rejecting even benign symbols of their culture, such as wearing head scarves in school—a prohibition unthinkable in the United States. Their protests, neither planned nor coordinated, reflected frustration, rage, alienation, and a lack of confidence in or access to official political channels. In this, they resembled African Americans in the 1960s more than immigrants to the United States late in the twentieth century.

The protests in France in the fall and the United States in the spring underlined differences in national immigrant incorporation. In the United States, protest also highlighted the split between immigrant incorporation and control. In the United States, references to the second generation contained a hyphen that joined an ethnic designation to "American," as in Mexican-American. In Europe, Mark Leon Goldberg has pointed out, even though born in Europe, members of the second generation are called immigrants. "The term 'immigrant' connotes different things in continental Europe than in the United States. Generally speaking, in Europe it refers not just to emigrants from foreign countries, but to their children and in some cases grandchildren as well." The United States, by contrast, takes some justifiable pride in its history of diversity and celebrates the contribution of its immigrants. The astonishing ascendance of immigration as a national political issue in the spring of 2006 centered on immigrants who had entered the nation illegally, not on the desirability of immigration itself, to which even xenophobic public commentators paid rhetorical homage.

Naturalization laws both reflected and reinforced divergent paths to immigrant incorporation. These differences in requirements for citizenship show up in naturalization rates, which are much lower in France. For individuals over the age of eighteen, the annual rate of naturalization is about 2.75 percent in France compared to 4.8 percent in the United States. After fifteen to nineteen years of residence, naturalization rates are twenty percentage points lower in France than in the United States, and, after twenty-five years, they are thirty points lower.

**I**N THE United States, however, not all immigrants are on a fast track to citizenship. For the huge numbers of the undocumented, the road to economic and civic incorporation is difficult, if not impossible to reach. As is well known, U.S. immigration policy is schizophrenic. Large segments of the economy run on cheap immigrant labor, as they once did on cheap black labor. Business interests demand and abet the flow of undocumented immigrants across borders. Undocumented immigrants are, after all, an ideal work force—hardworking, terrified, and exploitable. At the same time, public anger at undocumented immigration, long simmering, has exploded with stunning velocity, demanding still more border militarization and punitive policies toward immigrants themselves and those who employ, house, or assist them. The result, of course, undercuts potential immigrant protest. Threats of deportation and unemployment constitute an effective mechanism of social control that dampens the potential for both civil violence

and peaceful protest—an outcome reinforced by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) raids on undocumented immigrants this past spring.

Thus, discussions of the potential for collective violence, or its absence, in American cities must move beyond a black-white frame to include immigrants. Both European nations and the United States have experienced massive immigration, but they have responded differently, with immense consequences for the integration of newcomers. The argument about immigration needs to include both the positive elements that dampen the possibility of violence by facilitating incorporation and the darker story in which civil peace results from schizoid public policies that promote the vulnerability of a large fraction of the nation's newcomers.

The nation's avoidance of civil violence in its segregated ghettos has one other lesson for Europeans concerned about urban unrest. It is that in modern techniques for managing marginalization—for keeping the peace in the face of persistent, and growing, inequality—the United States is a world leader. ●

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