

The Great Uprising

Between 1963 and 1972 America experienced over 750 urban revolts. Considered collectively, they comprise what Peter B. Levy terms a “Great Uprising.” Levy examines these uprisings over the arc of the entire decade, in various cities across America. He challenges both conservative and liberal interpretations, emphasizing that these riots must be placed within historical context to be properly understood. By focusing on three specific cities as case studies – Cambridge and Baltimore, Maryland, and York, Pennsylvania – Levy demonstrates the impact that these uprisings had on millions of ordinary Americans. He shows how conservatives profited politically by constructing a misleading narrative of their causes, and also suggests that the riots did not represent a sharp break or rupture from the civil rights movement. Finally, Levy presents a cautionary tale by challenging us to consider if the conditions that produced this “Great Uprising” are still predominant in American culture today.

Peter B. Levy is a professor of history at York College, Pennsylvania, where he teaches US history classes. His books include *Civil War on Race Street: The Civil Rights Movement in Cambridge, Maryland* (2003).

The Great Uprising

Race Riots in Urban America during the 1960s

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Acknowledgments

Looking back I can see that the seeds of this study were planted decades ago in a graduate seminar on recent American history at Columbia University taught by William Leuchtenburg. Fortuitously, I was assigned to lead our seminar's discussion of William Chafe's *Civilities and Civil Rights*. Ever since, Chafe's insights into the progressive mystique and the limits of liberalism as well as Chafe's method of uncovering the past, namely via a case study, has stuck with me. Hence I would like to thank Chafe and Leuchtenburg for setting me on the long path that resulted in this book.

Several years after I completed this graduate seminar, thanks to Jan Lewis, Clem Price, and the New Jersey Council for the Humanities, I had the opportunity to teach a course and convene a speaker's series on the civil rights movement at Rutgers University, Newark. This allowed me to interact with Clayborn Carson, David Garrow, and J. Mills Thornton, three pioneers in the scholarship of the black freedom struggle. Though I didn't know it at the time, Thornton's examination of the protests in Montgomery, Birmingham, and Selma, provided a model for my own comparative consideration of the race revolts of the 1960s. In addition, I owe special thanks to one of my guest speakers, Ken Gibson, Newark's first black mayor, and, even more importantly, to one of my nontraditional students, Mary – whose last name I have unfortunately forgotten. Their personal recollections of Newark's 1967 rebellion prodded me to challenge orthodox interpretations of the "riots" as unconstructive and apolitical acts.

While teaching this course, I determined to write a community study of the civil rights movement in Cambridge, a decision cemented by my move

from New York to Maryland in 1989. How I happened on Cambridge, a city that I knew virtually nothing about when I began my research, I do not know. I do know that a panoply of men and women convinced me that its story was worth telling and helped me tell it in a more effective and meaningful manner. At the top of this list was Gloria Richardson, arguably the most important but least known leader of the modern civil rights movement. From early interviews to more recent interactions, she has been and remains an inspiration. Her argument, which she made in 1963, that human rights are human rights, not white rights that can be given or taken away, made an indelible impression on me in terms of understanding both Cambridge and the broader black freedom struggle.

In 2003, I participated in a conference focused on black women and the movement at Sarah Lawrence College, which in turn begat a long-term relationship with two scholars who have had a profound influence on my thinking and on this work, Komozi Woodard and Jeanne Theoharis. Two years later, Komozi and Jeanne included a piece of my research in their path-breaking collection, *Groundwork*, and over a decade later invited me to participate in their NEH (National Endowment for the Humanities) seminar on Jim Crow North and West held at Sarah Lawrence College and the Schomburg Center in New York City. More so than anything else, this NEH seminar, particularly its participants' careful reading of a draft of one of the chapters of this work, encouraged me to complete this book and made it a better study, and I would like to personally thank all of them for offering their constructive feedback: Laura Hill, Kris Burrell, Crystal Moten, Say Burgin, Mary Barr, Shannon King, Ayesha Hardison, Balthazar Becker, Verdis Robinson, John Portlock, Tahir Butt, Aliyah Dunn-Salahuddin, Natanya Duncan, Hassan Jeffries, Lynnell Thomas, Ujju Aggrarwal, and Stephan Bradley. Out of this seminar, five of the group – Hill, Burrell, Moten, Burgin, and myself – formed the North East Freedom North Studies Writing Group and during our quarterly gatherings at Laura's home in Binghamton and via our virtual meetings I garnered from them nonpareil feedback and, just as importantly, incomparable collegial support. I also owe special thanks to Brian Purnell. In the fall of 2016, Brian sponsored a follow-up session to the NEH at Bowdoin College, where I had another opportunity to gather feedback from my colleagues. Brian also read my entire manuscript, offering invaluable and insightful ways to frame my questions and to structure my book.

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Serendipitously, my work on Cambridge garnered me an invitation to participate in the University of Baltimore's "Baltimore '68: Riots and Rebirth" project. First as a consultant and then as a semester-long-scholar in residence, I worked with its codirectors, Jessica Elfenbein, Thomas Hollowak, and Elizabeth Nix, to undertake a study of Baltimore's 1968 riots and to share our findings with the public via a website, a public conference, and a collection of essays. They won many well-deserved public history awards for their efforts; I benefited from their collegiality, lunchtime discussions, and dedication to recovering this and by inference many of the national uprisings that took place in the wake of Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination from virtual oblivion. While at the University of Baltimore, I also had the luck to bounce my ideas off a separate set of researchers, including Clay Risen, John Breihan, Howell Baum, Deborah Weiner, and John Schwallenberg. They helped me refine my understanding of Baltimore's revolts and provided me with key leads and resources. I also need to give special thanks to Kathryn Kulbicki, who helped create a set of GIS maps on Baltimore's revolts.

I arrived at York College in the fall of 1989, knowing little about the place and nothing about York's 1969 revolt. Over twenty years later, my then Dean, Dominic Delli Carpini, gently prodded me to make a presentation on York's revolts at the Crispus Attucks Center as part of its Black History Month lectures. Fortunately, I was able to build on a set of senior theses about the riot or related events, including Karen Rice's 1992 oral history with members of the Newberry Street Boys, Jeff Warner and Jacob Whiteford's studies of the near riot of 1968, Olysa Townsley's consideration of other movements in York, Mike Mountz's examination of the region's rightward political shift in the late 1960s and early 1970s, and Greg Bivona's analysis of York's recent financial crisis. I also benefited from the research of Deb Noel, another one of my former students, whose thirtieth anniversary stories on York's riots which appeared in the local newspaper had a transformative impact on the course of York's history. Subsequently, several of my other students, most importantly Brandon

MacDonald and Caitlyn McEachern, aided me by creating GIS maps and transcribing oral histories, respectively. Jim McClure, of the *York Daily Record*, deserves special thanks as well.

My understanding of York's revolts and my understanding of the black freedom struggle was deepened even further by my participation in a separate NEH seminar, directed by Patricia Sullivan and Waldo Martin, held at Harvard University's W. E. B. DuBois Center during one of the hottest summers on record. This seminar provided me with the opportunity to interact with an exceptional array of scholars, including Peniel Joseph, Steven Hahn, Ray Gavins, Gerald Early, and Blair Kelly, all of whom indirectly shaped this book. While all of my classmates at the Harvard Seminar sharpened my thinking, several have read and/or commented on my manuscript since, including Jeff Littlejohn, Reggie Ellis, Joshua Wright, and Erik Gellman. Gellman's reading of my entire manuscript proved especially important.

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While I have done my best to document all of the books, articles, and manuscript collections I have used, I have done a poor job of recording the names of all of the librarians and archivists who have provided priceless aid in locating these sources. So let me thank a few by name, and many others anonymously, without whose support I could not have

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differently, they literally contributed their knowledge and expertise to my work. Meanwhile, my wife, Diane, has listened to my conversations about the struggles for racial equality for decades, while helping me put food on the table, a roof over our heads, and a little spark in our lives. Even when we have traveled to faraway places, I have brought my work with me, such that she has had to listen to me make comparisons between Jim Crow in the United States and apartheid and the post-apartheid system in South Africa, the caste and post-caste system in India, and the racial and class hierarchies in Brazil, Peru, and Chile. I thank her for her patience and I pledge to pay a bit more attention to some other subject matters at the dinner table in our future journeys together.