

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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CAMBRIDGE
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University Printing House, Cambridge CB2 8BS, United Kingdom
One Liberty Plaza, 20th Floor, New York, NY 10006, USA
477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia
314-321, 3rd Floor, Plot 3, Splendor Forum, Jasola District Centre,
New Delhi 110025, India
79 Anson Road, #06-04/06, Singapore 079906

Cambridge University Press is part of the University of Cambridge.

It furthers the University's mission by disseminating knowledge in the pursuit of education, learning, and research at the highest international levels of excellence.

www.cambridge.org

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781108422406

DOI: 10.1017/9781108381659

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First published 2018

Printed in the United States of America by Sheridan Books, Inc.

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-1-108-42240-6 Hardback

ISBN 978-1-108-43403-4 Paperback

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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 Luechtenburg 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.

A cluster of scholars and public historians read or commented on my research on Cambridge, as published here or in much earlier forms, and/or provided me with public forums to present my findings, which in turn

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allowed me to garner additional insights, including Randall Miller, Stanley Harold, Josh Wright, Doug Rossinow, John McMillian, Paul Buhle, Patricia Anderson, and Joe Fitzgerald. From the time we first met as copanelists at Sarah Lawrence College in 2003 to the present, I have enjoyed an exceptional relationship with Fitzgerald. We have shared sources, exchanged and commented on each other's works, and endeavored to expand the public's knowledge about Gloria Richardson, and I look forward to the publication of his definitive study of her life.

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.

Over the past twenty-five years I have also benefited from the suggestions of numerous copanelists and commentators, too numerous to name (or remember). But I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge at least some of those who posed challenging questions and made important suggestions. In no particular order, let me thank Avital Bloch, Martin Klimke, Charles Ford, Lester Spence, Roger Simon, Barbara Tischler, James Banner, Roger Horowitz, and Alan Draper. Similarly, I have benefited from numerous opportunities to present my findings at public forums and to "classes" of my colleagues. So let me thank Niklas Robinson for his multiple invitations to address his students at Delaware State University; Josh Wright, for chances to interact with his classes at the University of Maryland, Eastern Shore; Terry Taylor, for repeated opportunities to share my research with Baltimore City teachers at the Reginald Lewis Museum of African American History & Culture; Jacquie Martino, Cindy Leiphart, and Frank Countell; and Gordon Freireich and Gary Lauer for invitations to address the York community at the Crispus Attucks Center and Rotary Club of York, respectively. I also wish to give a booming shout out to Dion Banks and Kisha Petticolas and the Eastern Shore Network for Change for allowing me to present my research during the fiftieth anniversary "Reflections on Pine Street" in Cambridge, Maryland, this past July.

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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completed this book. To Sue McMillan and Karen Rice, of York College's Schmidt Library, I owe nearly three decades of thanks. To the librarians at the Enoch Pratt Free Library in Baltimore, particularly those who staff the desks at the Maryland and African American rooms, and the Schomburg Center in New York City, likewise. The librarians at the Dorchester County Public Library and the Martin Memorial Library in York similarly helped me locate crucial material. To the librarians and archivists of the Manuscript Room at the Library of Congress; the Maryland State Archives in Annapolis; the National Archives in College Park; the Baltimore City Archives; the Kennedy, Johnson, and Nixon Presidential Libraries and Archives; the National Archives in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and Suitland, Maryland; the Pennsylvania State Archives in Harrisburg; the Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives and Rare Book Library at Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia; the Archives and Manuscript Department at the University of Maryland, College Park; the State Historical Society of Wisconsin, in Madison, Wisconsin; the Martin Luther King Jr. Center for Nonviolent Social Change in Atlanta, Georgia; and the Hoover Institution's Library and Archives at Stanford University – thank you as well. And let me give a special shout out to Lila Fourhman-Shaull of the York Historical Society for her years of lending a helping hand. Along the same lines, I owe special thanks to my editors at Cambridge University Press, especially Deborah Gershenowitz, who supported my work on this project from the first time we met to its completion, and Alta Bridges, whose very careful copy-editing made this a much better work.

In addition, I would like to thank my colleagues at York College, from my chairs, Phil Avillo, John Altman, and Mel Kulbicki, a coterie of fellow department members, especially Paul Doutrich and Corey Brooks, a succession of deans, most importantly Tom Bogart and Dominic Delli Carpini, and the members of the Faculty Development Committee. Without their support and encouragement this book would not have been completed. Finally, I must thank my family, which in my case goes well beyond the love and support they have provided. When I first conceived of studying Cambridge, Maryland, my daughter, Jessica, was still a toddler and my son, Brian, an infant. As I worked my way through completing a book on Cambridge's civil rights movement, researching and writing about Baltimore's revolt and then York's riot, and then bringing the three projects together, not only did my children mature into adults but my daughter grew into a scholar of the black freedom struggle and my son became a defender of the indigent in Baltimore and its environs. Put somewhat

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.