

Cincinnati's Black Rebellion Exposes U.S. Racial Injustice

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Cincinnati, Ohio—"When I heard about the murder of Timothy Thomas I got together with a few friends in the park to talk about what happened. More and more people began showing up and in less than an hour a few hundred were gathered around, talking and arguing. It was incredible, out of nowhere people came out and wanted to do something. Everyone is fed up with the cops, the racial profiling, the abuse. I was amazed at how fast this thing grew. It was like a spark went off in people's minds, all at once. It was like, this is enough, no more, we're going to do something."

This is what a 20-year-old Black resident of the Walnut Hills neighborhood of Cincinnati told me about his participation in the protests which erupted after the murder of 19-year-old Timothy Thomas by a white cop on April 7. Thomas was the fifteenth man gunned down by Cincinnati police in the last six years. Every one was Black. Thomas, who was unarmed, was killed when Stephen Roach shot him through his chest. Roach was trying to arrest Thomas for having 14 outstanding warrants—all of them for misdemeanor offenses, 12 for traffic violations, five of those for not wearing a seat belt.

Though racial profiling, harassment, and murder of Blacks by the police has become an everyday fact of life in this country, Cincinnati included, the events which followed Thomas' death were anything but normal. The ensuing events represented one of those unusual moments when the everyday becomes extraordinary, when what is considered normal suddenly becomes the object of discussion, argument, and critique. In response to Thomas' death, Black Cincinnati exploded in the most massive urban upheaval since the Los Angeles rebellion of 1992.

ANATOMY OF A REVOLT

Cincinnati is no newcomer to police abuse, racism, and disenfranchisement. It is one of the most segregated cities in America, and its mainly white police force is notorious for a

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long history of abuse against African Americans who make up 43% of the city's populace. Last November another Black man, Roger Owensby Jr., was strangled to death while in police custody. In mid-March the ACLU and Cincinnati Black United Front filed a lawsuit charging the police department with 30 years of illegally targeting and harassing Blacks on the basis of race. Still, no one anticipated the explosion which erupted after the killing of Timothy Thomas.

As news spread of his death, several hundred mainly Black protesters, including Thomas' mother, came to City Hall on Monday, April 9. It became a clash between two different worlds. Police Chief Streicher refused to apologize for the killing, saying the police thought that Thomas was armed. Mayor Charlie Luken acknowledged the city's "racial problems" but denied that had anything to do with Thomas' death. City Council members said there was little they could do since the city charter limits their power to hire or fire police chiefs.

Angered at these responses, the crowd proceeded to take over City Hall. Windows were smashed, the American flag was removed from the flagpole and turned upside down, and the mayor was forced to leave via the back door. Hundreds more protesters arrived at City Hall that night. As the crowd swelled to 1,000, they marched to the central police station. At midnight the police fired tear gas and beanbags filled with metal pellets to disperse the crowd.

The next day 20 youth held a protest at the corner of Vine and 13th Streets. The crowd soon swelled into the hundreds. Many then marched to Findlay Market, throwing rocks at police, breaking into stores, clearing out shelves. By the evening a full scale urban revolt (dubbed "riot" by the press) was underway. Though merchants who gouged the community were a target, most of the anger was directed at the police. At 10 p.m. the police substation at Montgomery Road and Woodburn Avenue was set ablaze.

Byron Jones, 30, of Bond Hill, who joined protesters as they made their way through downtown and Over-the-Rhine (the neighborhood in which Thomas was shot) said what happened Tuesday was "the only way to get their attention. We've asked and we've asked and we've asked. We're not going to ask anymore."

A Black youth who took part in the revolt told me, "I decided to do something because what happened to Timothy Thomas could've happened to every Black I know. How many white 19-year-olds have been stopped and ticketed five times for not wearing a seat belt? How many whites have to worry about being shot by a cop on their way home from buying a pack of cigarettes? We've got to tell them we are not going to let this continue."

VICIOUS POLICE REPRESSION

The police responded with brute force. Enya Kirksey, a 23-year-old and three months pregnant, was shot by police with rubber bullets as she was trying to get to her home near Washington Park. Leroy Pearson, 52, was standing outside his Elm Street apartment with his three grandchildren when police told him to move. When he refused, saying this was his home, he was shot four times with rubber projectiles. Dozens more were injured and hundreds arrested.

Yet the unrest continued. On Wednesday, April 11, it spread from downtown and Over-the-Rhine to other Black areas like Evanston, Avondale, Walnut Hills, and the West End.

Faced with this, Mayor Luken imposed martial law and an 8 p.m.-to-6 a.m. curfew on April 12. He stated, “The situation has become unthinkable; it’s like Beirut.” It would have been more accurate to say the West Bank or Gaza Strip. Hundreds of youth in red and blue bandannas throwing rocks at police...stores and shops ablaze...cops firing off rubber bullets and beanbag projectiles at 11- and 12-year-olds...whole areas sealed off from the rest of the city by a wall of shotgun-toting cops...it COULD have been the Middle East.

Yet the situation was distinctively “American.” It was a response to the constant racial profiling by police that has affected virtually every man, woman and child in the Black community. It was a response to a social reality in which 40% are unemployed in Over-the-Rhine, compared to 4% in Cincinnati as a whole. It was a response to the gutting of public housing, education, and welfare. Only blocks from where Thomas was shot public housing is being torn down. Recently the state sent letters to Ohio’s welfare recipients warning them that their benefits will be cut off in 36 months. This is the social context of the revolt which broke out in response to Thomas’ murder.

While the imposition of martial law and the curfew got people off the streets, it did not silence the revolt. Meetings, forums, and protests continue to be held. They have exposed not only the chasm separating the African-American community from the white power structure, but also the division of the Black masses from Black political leadership.

TWO WORLDS OF MASSES VS. LEADERS

At Thomas’ funeral on April 14, an array of Black political officials spoke of “restoring civil peace” in Cincinnati. Rev. Damon Lynch III of Cincinnati’s Black United Front called on several city officials to be fired, adding, “There is enough violence in our city right now without us adding to it.” Kweisi Mfume of the NAACP called for changes in the

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city's power structure but urged the youth to "remain calm." Jamal Muhammed of Louis Farrakhan's Nation of Islam said, "Don't get angry and tear up your neighborhood. Get angry and register to vote."

The youth who spearheaded the week of actions, however, had a decidedly different perspective. As one declared at a rally following the funeral, "These preachers and politicians are the same ones who a week ago were calling us undisciplined and shiftless. But if it weren't for what we did over the last few days, no one would even be here to listen to them. We're the ones who did something by taking over the streets, but you don't hear about us now. I'm tired of all their talk."

Darryl, a Black man living in Over-the-Rhine, said, "The Black leadership and civil rights organizations are trying to quiet everything down, but it's not working. You can't quiet this down so easily. Many here don't have a job. Almost everyone has had some run-in with the law. After you get out of jail, it's almost impossible to get a good paying job. Then they turn it around and say because you have a record, it's all your fault. There needs to be a change, because if it doesn't change, things are going to get a lot scarier than what we saw this week."

The separation of the youth from Black political leadership was reflected in the virtual absence of any established political organization in the street protests. All of the posters and placards at the protests that I saw before and after Thomas' funeral were handmade, by local residents. They included: "If my son runs, will you kill him too?"; "Stop killing Blacks or else"; "No peace and no police"; "Bush is part of this too—he belongs with the cops."

The chasm between masses and leaders came out sharply at a forum held April 16 at New Friendship Baptist Church in Avondale, after the curfew was lifted. Dozens of Black teenagers, emboldened by their actions of the past week, said the established community leaders don't speak for them. "The older generation could have prevented this," said Derrick Blassingame, age 14, president of the newly formed Black Youth Coalition Against Civil Injustice. "Our leaders are not leading us. Some of our Black leaders just want their faces on TV. They are in this for four things only: reputation, power, politics and money."

The emergence of such voices gives the lie to those who claim that the "riots" were "disorganized," chaotic, without reason or direction. As in Los Angeles 1992, we are witnessing the emergence of new forms of revolt, resistance, and self-organization which point us beyond the parameters of existing political structures.

When people move to tear up a world that doesn't belong to them, that is hostile to them; when they come together in collective action on the streets; when they take commodities from the shelves without paying—why is this not recognized as an act of liberation, as a drive toward something new, as a refusal to accept what is? It is that REASON which needs to be developed and discussed—not a condemnation of the masses' activity or a mere “solidarity” with it based on tactics.

Cincinnati shows that the struggle to be free is real, is as much a part of the actuality of this world as its opposite—the stifling oppression we all live under. The concrete content, the self-development gained through confrontation with oppressive conditions and internal contradictions, is the point of departure for any further meaningful development.

WHERE TO NOW?

The recent events in Cincinnati will not easily be forgotten. The power structure has been forced to at least pretend to listen to some complaints of the Black community, as seen in Mayor Luken's announcement on April 17 that he will form a race relations commission to explore problems in housing, employment, education, and police abuse.

Such commissions have been formed before, and it is very doubtful that much will come of it. But much can come from the new consciousness generated by the revolt. Its development can provide a new basis for opposing this oppressive system and projecting a genuine alternative to it.

In this sense, it is worthwhile to recall the last time major arrests of protesters occurred in Cincinnati. It was last November when 53 anti-globalization activists were arrested for “vandalism” at the Transatlantic Business Dialogue conference, a group which brought together 100 executives from the U.S. and West Europe to recommend lower trade barriers. That protest may seem a world away from the revolt in the Black community. And yet the revolt of Black masses is not so far from the globalization of capital as it may seem.

No sector of U.S. society has been more negatively affected by the globalization of capital than Black America. Capital's ability to migrate overseas in search of low wages goes hand in hand with deindustrialization and the mass displacement of Black labor at home. Capital's increased mobility has also led to the flight of industries from urban areas like Cincinnati to rural areas and the South. Moreover, the cutting of welfare and other social services in the U.S. is a form of “structural adjustment” long known to Third World countries.

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Racism is an integral part of this logic of capitalist accumulation. The gutting of jobs, public housing, welfare, and the growth of homelessness, prison construction, and police abuse all flow from the specific strategy employed by U.S. capital for the past two decades.

In hitting out against these conditions, the Black masses of Cincinnati have challenged a central dynamic of capital itself. Their actions call upon us all to deepen our consciousness of the nature of capital and the alternative to it. In lieu of that, anger at existing conditions risks consuming itself in opposing the many forms of oppression, without ever getting to articulate what the revolt is for.

As Marx wrote long ago, “We do not tell the world, ‘Cease your struggles, they are stupid; we want to give you the true watchword of the struggle.’ We merely show the world why it actually struggles; and consciousness is something that the world **MUST** acquire even if it does not want to.”

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