

COMMENT

Ten Riots That Challenged Injustice and Changed U.S. History

Mike Isaacson

Department of Economics
The New School for Social Research
New York, NY

Oriol Vallès Codina

Department of Economics
The New School for Social Research
New York, NY

Ian Scott Howland

Department of Economics
The New School for Social Research
New York, NY

Erjola Zotkaj

Department of Economics
The New School for Social Research
New York, NY

Editor's note: This comment originally ran as a blog post on the NSER website in 2014. In the wake of riots over the police killings of more black folks in 2020—Breonna Taylor and George Floyd among them—the article became newly relevant. It has been updated and lightly edited.

Introduction

There has been a lot of discussion on social media denouncing the property destruction and looting that happened after the very public string of murders and shootings of black folks by police in 2020. Most comments have centered on the lack of productivity of riots in obtaining justice. For the most part, the argumentation goes something like, “destroying your own community will do nothing to bring justice or positive change.” Yet if history is any precedent, these arguments are entirely unjustified. The United States has a long history of riots bringing change that no amount of kumbaya hand-holding or “working within the system” was ever able to accomplish.

The following list provides examples of riots that were particularly important to U.S. history. It is by no means complete.

1. Anti-Rent War

In 1839, tenant farmers began organizing against the injustice of the perpetual servitude they had been trapped into by their long-term rental agreements. They had been lured by false promises of bountiful land and a term of free residency for seven years. When they arrived, they found stone-covered land with thin soil. All construction of barns or homes were the responsibility of the tenant, who received no compensation upon vacating the property. Although feudalism had been outlawed in 1782, the Van Rensselaer family maintained the institution by labelling the perpetual wheat-for-land contracts an “incomplete sale.” Confronted with these injustices, the tenants banded together to do what they could in the legislature, and to sabotage the ruling class’s efforts to stop them.

This last point meant the establishment of brigades—taking their cues from the Boston Tea Party and disguising themselves as overwrought caricatures of American Indians—to disrupt auctions of tenants’ land or property. Upon the death of Stephen Van Rensselaer III, the Van Rensselaer family decided to collect all owed back-debts, leading to a protracted war between tenants and the agents that the Van Rensselaer family hired to evict non-paying tenants. By 1845, the conflicts forced the New York Governor to declare a state of insurrection and (among other things) to make it illegal for any individual to appear in public with “his face painted, discolored, covered or concealed.” Following the killing of the Delaware County Undersheriff during a livestock auction in 1845, the anti-rent movement made strong gains in the state and local legislatures. By the 1850s, through both legal pressure and a protracted militant rent strike, all the plots were sold by the landlords to the tenants at reasonable prices.

2. The Raid on Harpers Ferry

In 1859, seeing that the U.S. would not wage a war to free the people held in bondage in the South, John Brown enlisted the help of 21 mostly white men to wage a war of his own. On the night of October 16, Brown and his men took over the armory at Harpers Ferry in what is now West Virginia. The plan, foiled in the end, was to take the armory while scouts went to nearby plantations to encourage them to revolt and join the line. With a projected 200-500 men in tow, they planned to march south and free plantation after plantation en route. In the end, reinforcements for the raid were not forthcoming, and after two days of holding what came to be known as “John Brown’s Fort,” a Marine platoon broke down the barricaded door and killed John Brown as well as many of his compatriots. Though unsuccessful in its intended goals, the action reignited the debate over abolition, galvanizing the Lincoln campaign for presidency and the Civil War which would end the institution of slavery in the United States for good.

3. The Haymarket Massacre

According to labor studies professor William J. Adelman, “No single event has influenced the history of labor in Illinois, the United States, and even the world, more than the Chicago Haymarket Affair. It began with a rally on May 4, 1886, but the consequences are still being felt today.” A rally on May 1 had been called for by the American Federation of Labor as the beginning of a nationwide movement for the eight-hour day, and several workers had been killed by the police. As a reaction, another rally was held on May 4. One of the speakers, August Spies, is quoted as pointing out the “warlike preparations” of the police, before a bomb was thrown at them (according to Howard Zinn, by an agent provocateur).

Four workers and seven policemen, who in the night shot at each other, were killed in the ensuing massacre. Five activists, among them Spies, were sentenced to death after a show trial in which none of the accused was proved to have thrown the bomb at the police. In sum, the Haymarket massacre represents well the long-lasting and harsh repression of the labor movements in the U.S., but also their success, since

trade union activities persisted in growth and vitality afterward. Emma Goldman stated that the Haymarket affair had awakened the social consciousness of “hundreds, perhaps thousands, of people.” The riot is still celebrated to this day in worldwide May Day marches.

4. Zoot Suit Riots

In 1943, then-First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt identified the Zoot Suit Riots as “a racial protest,” calling it, “a problem with roots going a long way back.” For this, she was called a communist in the *Los Angeles Times*. The riots started against the backdrop of the 1942 Sleepy Lagoon murder trial, which saw 600 Mexican and Mexican-American youth rounded up for the murder of one person—the largest mass trial in U.S. history.

The rebellion kicked off when 11 soldiers filed a likely-false police report that they had suffered minor injuries in a scuffle with Mexican-American teenagers who were praising Hitler while attacking them. In response, 50 sailors went into Los Angeles and began stripping anyone in the street they saw wearing a Zoot Suit and beating them up. The violence on the part of sailors and other service members continued for a number of days, and the teenagers, most younger than their armed forces counterparts, organized and fought back. Eventually, the failure of the Los Angeles police to do essentially anything compelled the Mexican government to use diplomatic pressure on Washington to intervene. In the wake of the Zoot Suit Riots, race riots sprung up across the country, drawing unions—particularly the United Auto Workers in Detroit—closer to the burgeoning civil rights movement. This solidarity between Black folks, Latinx, and unions would carry the struggle of racial and economic justice through the McCarthy Era into its legislative apex in the 1960s.

5. 1968 Riots

Following the murder of Martin Luther King, Jr., Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee activist Kwame Ture (then Stokely Carmichael) led a cohort of students from Howard University in Washington, DC to the city’s U Street corridor. The procession went through the business district asking shops to close for the day out of respect as they had for the assassination of John F. Kennedy. As several businesses refused, the crowd began breaking windows. By 11 p.m. that night, full-scale looting had broken out. By Friday, Columbia Heights, the H Street NE neighborhood and parts of Southeast DC were in flames. Over the course of the two weeks after the murder of King, 110 cities erupted into riots. Although the country took a right turn in that year’s presidential elections, the riots made the segregationist platform of the likes of George Wallace all but impossible to campaign on.

6. Stonewall Riots

“My biggest fear was that I would get arrested. My second biggest fear was that my picture would be in a newspaper or on a television report in my mother’s dress!”
—Maria Ritter, Stonewall participant

The Stonewall riots of 1969 are widely considered the single most important moment in the history of LGBTQ rights activism. “Stonewall” refers to the Stonewall Inn, a gay tavern and recreational bar in Greenwich Village in New York City, which was subjected to a raid by undercover police officers who were attempting to make arrests for bootlegged alcohol.

The initial plan by police was to line up the bar’s patrons, check identification, and have female police officers escort customers dressed as women to the restroom, where their sex would be identified—any men

dressed as women were to be arrested. The bar patrons presenting as women refused to cooperate, while others were uncomfortably and inappropriately touched by police officers to determine their sex. The police ended up deciding to take virtually all patrons of the inn to the police station. Outside, patrons and bystanders began to lash out against the police, throwing bottles and various objects at the officers and their patrol wagons. Violence was used against the men and women of the inn by the police officers, and, subsequently, garbage cans, garbage, bricks, and bottles were thrown at buildings and rioting broke out in the neighborhood with extraordinary escalation.

This was the first massive public display of the New York gay community fighting back against authoritative oppression of its people. Exactly one year later came the first-ever Gay Pride march in U.S. history. It began on Christopher Street, home to the Stonewall Inn. The riot is now commemorated nationwide in the form of Pride Parades.

7. Kent State Riots

*Tin soldiers and Nixon coming,
We're finally on our own.
This summer I hear the drumming,
Four Dead in Ohio.*

These words were sung by Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young in their song “Ohio,” written shortly after the Kent State shootings of 1970. What started out as a student-led protest of the bombing of Cambodia by United States military forces turned to 67 shots being fired on students by National Guard soldiers, wounding nine students and killing four, two of whom had not participated in the protests. The outcome of the Kent State shootings led immediately to a nationwide increase in student-led protests, resulting in the closing of many schools as well as the bombings of several Reserve Officers’ Training Corps buildings. Following the nationwide student strikes, the Cambodia campaign ended the next month.

8. White Night Riots

The White Night Riots of 1979 were a series of protests in the city of San Francisco that were ignited by the biased sentencing of an ex-cop and Supervisor, Dan White, for the killing of San Francisco Mayor George Moscone and City Supervisor Harvey Milk. Milk had moved from New York to San Francisco’s Castro District to start a film shop, but the legal and social discrimination he faced motivated him to run for the City Board of Supervisors.

Following Harvey Milk’s election, Dan White resigned from the city’s Board of Supervisors due to his dissatisfaction with city’s politics and personal financial difficulties. After talking to the police officers’ association and the Board of Realtors, he decided to ask George Moscone for his job back. The mayor decided not to reappoint Mr. White, in part due to his regressive attitude toward the city’s LGBTQ community. The next day, White entered City Hall through a basement window with a revolver and assassinated Milk and Moscone.

Following White’s infamous “Twinkie Defense,” the jury returned a conviction for manslaughter rather than murder. The decision was announced to a crowd of 500 people who began a marching vigil, imploring the patrons of a local gay bar to get “out of the bar and into the streets.” As the crowd grew, the thousands of angry demonstrators marched to City Hall smashing windows, throwing objects, and burning police cars. The protests continued for days and the police force retaliated by raiding bars and spots where the gay community gathered. Following the riots, Harvey Milk’s replacement on the Board of Supervisors announced:

Harvey Milk’s people do not have anything to apologize for. Now the society is going to have to deal with us not as nice little fairies who have hairdressing salons, but as people

capable of violence. We're not going to put up with Dan Whites anymore.

The riots inspired a wave of LGBTQ self-defense organizations including ACT UP and Bash Back!

9. Mt. Pleasant Riots

On Sunday evening, May 5, 1991, following a Cinco de Mayo street celebration in Washington, DC, a rookie police officer tried to arrest a Salvadorean man for disorderly conduct in the Mount Pleasant neighborhood. He was shot and left paralyzed while handcuffed. When the news spread throughout the neighborhood, crowds of youths, most in their teens and twenties, formed and started to attack the police. Around 400 youths fought running street battles with the police for several hours, late into the night. Police cars were torched and several stores looted. After two days of rioting, when it was obvious that the disturbance was not going to end, the mayor declared a State of Emergency and put a curfew into effect, which successfully curbed the rioting.

The Mount Pleasant riots focused the city's attention the racial tensions endured by the Salvadorean community in the U.S., most of whom sought refuge from the full-fledged civil war that had devastated their country for 12 years. Enthusiastically supported by the Carter and Reagan administrations with generous military aid, the governing military junta implemented state-of-siege declarations, the suspension of civil liberties, and systematic use of torture, death squads, forced disappearance, and extrajudicial killing against the opposition. The conflict displaced 500,000 people to other countries.

After the riots, the city agreed to add more bilingual officers and 911 operators and to station more Spanish-speaking officers in heavily Latino areas. They also agreed not to ask witnesses or crime victims about their immigration status, so that more people would come forward to cooperate with authorities to make the community safer. Then-mayor Sharon Pratt, the first African-American woman to become a mayor of a major U.S. city, stated:

Painful as they were, the riots helped us to stretch and accommodate people of different cultures. Washington, D.C. is a city that had struggled so much to deal with issues around traditional race, that we had not stopped to pay attention to other communities and their desires. I think Washington just began to grow up.

10. Battle of Seattle

In 1999, the World Trade Organization initiated the millennium round of ministerial trade negotiations in Seattle, WA. On the heels of the NAFTA treaty and the subsequent Peso crisis in 1994, the mantra of free trade had increasingly drawn the ire of unions, third world politicians, and radical activists. After months of planning by unions and anarchists (largely separately), the protests kicked off with the hanging of the banner above from a nearby crane on November 29. The organizing on the part of the mostly anarchist Direct Action Network was so well-planned that it actually compelled radical leftists to show up on time in the morning when the talks began on November 30.

By 9 a.m., Black Blocs marched through the mostly empty streets pushing newspaper boxes into the streets and taking over key intersections using sleeping dragons. By noon, riot police were firing tear gas, stun grenades, and pepper spray at protesters. Although mainstream media initially reported that the cops were not using rubber bullets, pictures of officers firing rubber bullets on protesters made their way onto the newly minted Indy Media website forcing media outlets to change their tune. The protests gave new courage to delegates from developing countries, who assumed that they would once again be railroaded by

the international interests of the IMF, World Bank, UN, etc. By the end of the talks, no “progress” had been made and the labor unions began taking a more active role in opposing free trade agreements.