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Ferguson in Context

Anti-Police Brutality Organizing in 1960s St. Louis

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The sustained protests and direct action from people in Ferguson, Missouri have changed the debate on police brutality and received substantive responses from government. Street demonstrations and targeted property destruction have shook a white governing structure that has become alarmed by collective action amongst blacks. St. Louis – or Ferguson for that matter – is not well known for militancy, but it has created a spark for a burgeoning movement against police brutality and extrajudicial killings. Even the video-taped police murder of Eric Garner in New York City in July has not seen a strong collective response – Reverend Al Sharpton recently backed down on a plan to hold a march over a city bridge at the request of the police commissioner and Mayor.

But people in Ferguson have taken things to a new level. Piven and Cloward’s old adage rings deafening: “A placid poor get nothing, but a turbulent poor sometimes get something.”

The local police have officially been taken off the case, the FBI is investigating the situation, and President Obama – not a figure typically critical of cops – has condemned police abuses. The protests have also pushed conversations about the militarization of the police into mainstream news sources. Although it may seem surprising that unrest has grown in a suburb of a city like

St. Louis, it is not out of line with the city's rich history of collective struggle. Nor is the murder of Michael Brown without historical precedent. It is worth looking back on a long lineage of police violence and collective struggle in St. Louis to better understand what is happening now. Struggle during the Civil Rights era is case in point.

Police Violence During the Civil Rights Era

Police brutality in St. Louis during the 1960s was met with a vibrant movement of resistance. Throughout this period, black St. Louisans challenged police violence with myriad tactics that ranged from legislative change to direct action. Street demonstrations, legislation, community meetings, and confrontations with the police were an important part of defending African Americans from police violence. Shootings and death were the worst violence inflicted on these communities, but police harassment also took the form of beatings, arbitrary stops and racial insults. Police were enforcers of a white power structure in the 1960s and continue to enforce racial lines in highly segregated St. Louis.

“Down with trigger-happy cops” read signs at a demonstration convened to protest the shooting of a black youth by a 74-year-old white police officer in the all black St. Louis suburb of Kinloch in 1962. The protest in Kinloch took place in the same streets that had witnessed massive civil unrest just the night before, as mostly young adults demonstrated and rebelled. A 300-strong mob marched to city hall and the police station, starting fires along the way. Angered citizens shot at the police station and the police chief's home was set on fire. This condemnation of the police reflected many community members' feelings, and afterwards, Kinloch citizens adopted a six-point program to ease tensions. The program advocated for mandatory training of police officers and placement of citizens on the police board.[i] The immediate outrage, direct attacks on the police, picketing, and demands for reform in Kinloch mimicked the long-term strategies of the larger movement against police brutality in St. Louis during the 1960s. Activists and organizations tackled a multitude of issues facing African Americans in the postwar era, contributing to a vibrant Black Freedom movement.[ii] One pressing issue addressed by this movement was a police force that disrupted and destabilized life in the African American community through intimidation, racial slurs, restriction of movement, and violence. St. Louisans countered police abuse and sought to change the police force with a diverse movement that transformed as the decade progressed. Local chapters of the NAACP and the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) along with organizations specific to St. Louis, such as the Action Committee to Improve Opportunities for Negroes (ACTION) and the Black Liberators, addressed police brutality. In addition, unorganized community action that took the form of civil unrest, spontaneous demonstrations, property destruction, and attacks on officers were all an integral part of the St. Louis movement against police brutality. Many of these tactics have emerged in the effort to bring justice for the murder of Michael Brown.

African Americans were the victims of police shootings in 1960, 1962, 1963, and multiple instances in 1965. In 1965, the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) produced a troubling report after examining the preceding two years of police records pertaining to firearm use. The St. Louis Civil Liberties Committee was alarmed with the frequency with which police fired their weapons unprovoked, and particularly alarmed when officers did not have strong suspicion that a felony had been committed. The absence of disciplinary action against the police force for

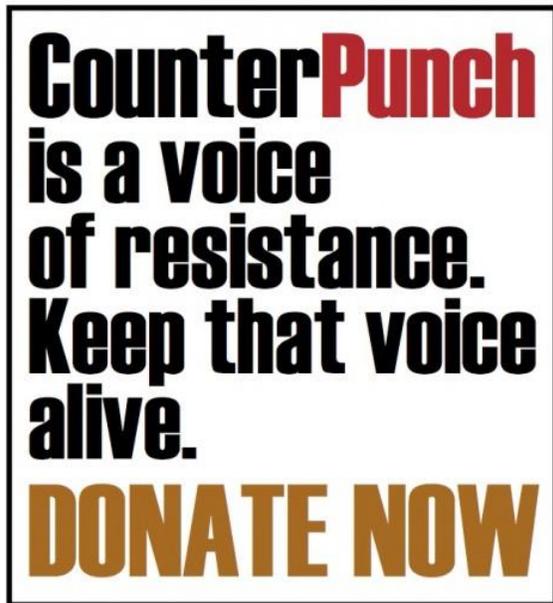
this violent lack of discretion was dangerous for the black community.[iii] A lack of disciplinary action against violent police officers continues to fuel a reckless police force and community outrage today.

While police shootings were the most visible transgressions against black St. Louisans, police abuse took many different forms, with everyday stops and intimidation. The police force introduced plainclothes officers in 1966, which resulted in a wave of street stops and interrogations and these new policing tactics enforced segregation and curtailed freedom of movement among black citizens.[iv] The president of the board of police commissioners, Col. Dowd, articulated exactly what the police were doing in black neighborhoods; at an NAACP workshop, he asserted, “everyone going home late at night is suspect by police,” as he justified racial profiling.[v] Racial slurs often accompanied stops and arrests.[vi] To African Americans, the role of the police was not one of protector, but as an enforcer of the segregated white power structure of St. Louis.

In response to this period of pronounced police violence and racial discrimination a diverse movement of St. Louisans began to organize, gaining steam among civil rights organizations in St. Louis as the decade progressed. Groups made substantial strides in the middle of the decade to bring widespread attention to the issue.

The shooting of Melvin Cravens in 1965 outraged Black St. Louisans. The 17-year-old youth was mercilessly shot while handcuffed at the 9th District police station. This prompted action from the NAACP as they formally protested to municipal officials and demanded investigations into the shooting, while CORE carried this response further by advocating for a civilian review board of the police.[vii] The NAACP and CORE envisioned a safer police force through civilian oversight and stronger community involvement. At the same time, ACTION led pickets at the Deer Street police station showcasing the model of disruptive action to bring change.[viii] The diversity of opinions and strategies between groups resulted in a stronger and more varied movement to advocate for the end of police brutality. ACTION and CORE responded to a third shooting in the fall of 1965 with a 250-strong demonstration at city hall and police headquarters. Leaders of the NAACP and other organizations rearticulated policy suggestions they believed would reduce tensions, while Mayor Alfonso Cervantes promised investigations into claims of brutality.[ix] The different groups coalesced as a multi-organizational attack on

racism and violence within the policing institution of St. Louis.



The increased militancy of the Black Freedom Movement coincided with the emergence of Black Power and Black Nationalist groups in St. Louis that fought police brutality to increase black community control. The Black Liberators were the most prominent Black Nationalist group of St. Louis, but half a dozen others also surfaced during this time.[x] The Liberators, similar to the Black Panther Party, patrolled their neighborhoods to protect the community from violence.[xi] Civilian review boards and black officers, the solutions advocated by CORE and the NAACP, were not enough for the Liberators, who believed that the way to regain community control was through removal of the police and their violence from black neighborhoods. The Liberators’ ten beliefs and five objectives demanded:

“2. We want every Black person to be free to live without being discriminated against for being Black. 3. We want an end to Negro and white policemen killing our people in the streets. 4. We want an end to policemen patrolling Black communities... (and they sought) 4. To establish a Black guard which will protect the Black community from racist cops.” [xii]

Their beliefs can be viewed as an organizational form of the indignity expressed during urban uprisings and protests against police brutality.

Civil unrest, along with spontaneous protests and attacks on police officers (like the uprising in Kinloch in 1962) also took place as a form of African Americans’ rejection of police brutality and an attempt to assert power in their community. Violence, disruption, and property damage is often regarded as an expression of power by the working poor and should be viewed this way in St. Louis.[xiii] Large-scale civil unrest exploded in June of 1964, this time in North St. Louis. After police officers beat two black youths, a crowd of 500 to 750 people threw bricks and bottles at police cars and police officers. Fifty people split off from the group and attacked the 9th district police station, directly targeting the institutional base of their anger. Over the course of the night, 15 officers were injured as the community demanded control of their

streets.[xiv] Area residents almost unanimously supported the actions taken against the police and even those that did not participate thought the neighborhood youth were justified in fighting back.[xv] Members of the community spoke to a local black newspaper and connected their struggle against police to fighting racism and the national Black Freedom Movement. Residents remarked, “all of us are getting tired of being shoved around by these white policemen,” and “this ain’t Alabama”, as they denounced the police.[xvi] Such a massive response, focused mainly on police, clearly names the tension between the African American community and police officers. The outrage witnessed in Ferguson resembles the same reflection of a community consistently confronted by police and their violence. This was not an isolated incident, but the worst culmination of a system that treats people of color as second-class citizens.

Smaller spontaneous outbursts were also part of the unorganized response to police brutality. Black St. Louisans attacked police officers on three separate occasions throughout July following the North St. Louis uprising of 1964. Each altercation occurred after an attempted arrest, as crowds gathered to survey the scene. To show disapproval of police behavior the groups struck police cars and threw objects at officers.[xvii] Large gatherings to oversee arrests and attacks on officers continued in 1965, as black St. Louisans expressed their demand for community control. On separate occasions, crowds of about 300 people attacked officers responding to disturbance calls.[xviii] The consistency of these actions demonstrates more than just anger, but an organic strategy to counter police violence.

St. Louisans addressed police brutality in a multitude of ways, as they contextualized the widespread police violence they were experiencing within the larger critique of inequality advanced by the Black Freedom Movement. At the organizational and grassroots levels, they managed to bring attention to police brutality through legislative campaigns, concrete suggestions for reform and accountability, increased media exposure, protest, community patrols, and direct confrontation with police. Looking at the history of St. Louis we can see that protests and disruption in Ferguson are an effort to stop police brutality and to seek justice for Michael Brown. The 1960s movement’s creation of a new and multifaceted space of contestation amplified a multitude of voices opposed to police brutality, and has allowed us to better understand methods of resistance to police violence in St. Louis.

Bryan Winston is a PhD student of history at St. Louis University, with an emphasis on 20th century U.S. history. This work is the result of extensive research of 1960s St. Louis and has been presented at the Missouri Conference on History.

Notes.

[i] Robert Jackson, “Pickets Label Kinloch Police ‘Trigger Happy’,” St. Louis Globe-Democrat, September 26, 1962, Negro Scrapbook, Vol. 2, Missouri Historical Society and Research Center (MHS); “Kinloch Calm after Mob Violence and Shootings.” St. Louis Argus, September 28, 1962, 1, 4A; “Aged Couple Flees Home to Avert Flames,” Globe-Democrat, Negro Scrapbook,

Vol. 2 MHS; Clarence Lang, *Grassroots at the Gateway: Class Politics and Black Freedom Struggle in St. Louis, 1936-75* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2009), 151.

[ii] For the Black Freedom Movement in St. Louis see: George Lipsitz, *A Life in the Struggle: Ivory Perry and the Culture of Opposition* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988); Kenneth Jolly, *Black Liberation in the Midwest: The Struggle in St. Louis Missouri, 1964-1970* (New York: Routledge, 2006); Lang, *Grassroots at the Gateway*.

[iii] “Youth Shot in Stolen Automobile,” *Argus*, September 23, 1960, 4A; “2 Police Cars Damaged When Autos Collide,” *Argus*, February 15, 1963, 1, 4A; “Policemen Shoots Youth,” *Argus*, September, 10, 1965, 1; Buddy Lonesome, “Youth-Handcuffed-Shot to Death By a Policeman Here: NAACP Demands Inquiry!,” *Argus*, June 18, 1965, 1, 4A; “NAACP Police Meeting turns into Lively Affair,” *Argus*, September 17, 1965; St. Louis Civil Liberties Committee to Board of Police Commissioners, November 23, 1965, ACLU of Eastern Missouri Papers, Series 2, Subseries 1, Box 2, Folder 2, University Archives, Department of Special Collections, Washington University Libraries (WU).

[iv] John W. Kinsella, “Police Dressed as Civilians Put into Crime Fight,” *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, January 19, 1966, ACLU of Eastern Missouri Papers, Series 2, Subseries 4, Box 4, Folder 2, WU; Frank Leeming Jr., “Anti-crime Unit Arrests 16 on First Night”, *Post-Dispatch*, January 20, 1966, ACLU of Eastern Missouri Papers, Series 2, Subseries 4, Box 4, Folder 2, WU.

[v] “Police Head Stop Frisk Will Continue,” *St. Louis Argus*, February 11, 1966, 1,4A.

[vi] “African says policeman was Insulting, Rude,” *Argus*, January 4, 1963, 1,4A; St. Louis Civil Liberties Committee, “Report on City of St. Louis Police Complaint Practices,” June 2, 1967, ACLU of Eastern Missouri Papers, Series 2, Subseries 4, Box 4, Folder 2, WU; “ACTION Members Say Police Beat, Harassed Them,” *St. Louis Argus*, June 16, 1967, 1,4A.

[vii] Buddy Lonesome, “Rights Groups Oppose Cop Slaying of Handcuffed Youth: Urban League, NAACP, ACTION, Alderman Act,” *St. Louis Argus*, June 25, 1965, 1,4A; Lonesome, “Youth-Handcuffed-Shot to Death By a Policeman Here: NAACP Demands Inquiry!,” *Argus*, June 18, 1965, 1, 4A.

[viii] Carol Thomas, “Pickets Protest – But Police Demonstration Fizzles: Less than 75 Appear at 9th District,” *Argus*, July 2, 1965, 1,4A.

[ix] “Call For Review Board After Police Shootings”, *St. Louis Argus*, September 24, 1965, 1,4A; “Policeman Shoots Youth,” *Argus*, September 10, 1965, 1.

[x] Jolly, *Black Liberation in the Midwest*, 71-96; For Black Panther Party concepts of community control see Philip. S Foner, ed., *The Black Panthers Speak* (New York: De Capo Press, 1970)

[xi] *Ibid*, 74-75.

[xii] Jolly, 73.

[xiii] For examples of everyday resistance and disruption as an expression of power in the United States, particularly among African Americans, see: Robin Kelley, *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class* (New York: The Free Press, 1994); Frances Fox Piven and Richard A. Cloward, *Poor People's Movements: Why They Succeed, How They Fail* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979)

[xiv] Lonesome, "NAACP to Meet Sat; League Acts," *Argus*, July 10, 1964, 1,4A; "4 Gas Bombs Hurlled into Negro Crowd," *Globe-Democrat*, July 7, 1964, *Negro Scrapbook*, Vol. 2, MHS.

[xv] Lonesome, "Youngsters Formed Hard Core of Gang," *Argus*, July 10, 1964, 1,4A.

[xvi] *Ibid.*

[xvii] "St. Louis Police Fight Off Crowds After Arrests" *Argus*, July 31, 1964, 8B.

[xviii] Lonesome, "Youth-Handcuffed-Shot to Death By a Policeman Here: NAACP Demands Inquiry!," *Argus*, June 18, 1965, 1, 4A.