

The Harlem Riot: A Study in Mass Frustration

*Kenneth Goldsmith*

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The gathering of crowds, the rise of looting and its relapse.

The mantle of being sub-human savages unworthy of being treated as human beings.

Sunday night is an ordinary one in Harlem, but hot: windows are wide open, the sidewalks are full of men and women, strolling or idling; children play on the streets, mothers wheel their babies.

Soldiers, respectably dressed men with jackets and ties, men and boys with open collars or polo shirts, youths in zoot suits, women, girls, and children. Young men and boys predominate.

Many persons smile when their pictures are taken.

A bottle is thrown toward the hospital and falls on the sidewalk. Other bottles follow.

Of 40 liquor stores in the district, 30 are cleaned out completely with not a bottle left in place.

Favorite articles of loot are: food-groceries, meats, fruits, vegetables; clothing-fur coats, sweaters, suits, corsets, dresses; furnishings, rugs, linoleums, lamps, mattresses, radios, second-hand chairs and coffee tables; and liquor and jewelry.

Every piece of furniture, even cheap pictures hanging on the wall, is carried off (except for a torn sofa left standing on the sidewalk).

The cellar is emptied, office files upset, and the telephone ripped from the

wall.

Refrigeration systems of meat shops are ripped out.

Bread is stamped on in the street.

When the riot begins, Negro store-owners place signs reading "Colored" in their windows. These stores are left intact, although others nearby, owned by whites, are totally destroyed. Negro stores without signs in the window are also generally not molested.

"Wherever somebody had told the mob this was a Negro place, they leave it alone. Sometimes a brick is thrown into the window before the word got around, but that is as far as it went. Despite the broken window, not a thing is touched, not a box out of place."

Negro families peacefully sleeping through the night.

Lights are on in all the apartment houses. People sit in windows watching.

Better-dressed members of the middle class.

More *substantial* residents.

Children do much of the food looting. Three boys about 10 years old load their arms with shoes from the shelves of a store. Other children take clothing, cheap candies, and toys.

At 6 a. m. the kids come out to search within the rubble. I see one little boy with a handful of candy bars and a penny whistle.

Women take: dresses, hats, sweaters, fur coats, corsets, jewelry, small pieces of furniture, mattresses, blankets, linen, children's clothes, milk, groceries, meat, fruit, vegetables, and household furnishings such as lamps and electric bulbs.

Boys and older men take: food, meat, suits, hats, shoes, luggage, jewelry, carpets, furniture, typewriters, radios, musical instruments, liquors, and goods from pawnshops; some boys try to make off with automobiles.

The fact that electric light bulbs are listed under women and girls does not mean men or children did not take any, but that the only instances mentioned in the press were of women.

Children do not take cases of liquor.

Women do not take penny whistles.

Girls do not take men's suits.

One man is arrested for stealing two pairs of ladies' silk hose.

In looting, each person takes what he or she wants but is denied or limited in obtaining. The poorer classes protest against property because they have been denied it, and against authority because that is the constant and palpable instrument of denial and suppression; and, of course, the Negroes protest against whites because the most pervasive and omnipresent fact of Negro life is a denial of the status and privileges of whites.

A person wants something, say, grapes. Assume the grapes are denied him. But he still wants them. What can he do?

"The grapes are sour anyway, I don't really want them."

There is every reason for believing that young Negro girls are as frustrated racially and sexually as young Negro boys.

If we have exact measures of the bitterness, and know the strength or weakness of inhibiting factors, we will be able to predict just when another riot will occur.

Frustration is fairly common in normal times, and the resentment accumulates.

For the most part, people are stealing food, for they were hungry.

The increased distance between the Negro's goal and reality induced by wartime conditions.

He is a servant in the Navy.

And, a crowning indignity, he is not even allowed to give his blood.

He must wait until all the white passengers are accommodated before he can get transportation. He may even hold his tongue when he is forced to get out of the bus in which he is seated in order to make room for white passengers.

Violent and unreasoning reprisals.

Rumor will not spread in Harlem that penguins have killed an Eskimo thief, because no one is concerned with the matter.

Older women taking armfuls of loot and come back for more.

Unless police are around, there is often no rush about looting.

Women while ransacking a clothing store, stopping to judge the size of dresses.

In one grocery a teen-aged boy stands behind the counter passing out articles of food to a small crowd of people waiting almost as if they had been customers.

The riot as a colored man's New Year. As on any holiday, people got

drunk, made noises, and had a good time.

After the looting, many new suits, hats and shoes were in evidence.

Negro boys who put on stolen dress coats, silk hats, and blond wigs, dancing in the street.

One old man says, "It's a disgrace. We should pay for the goods."

Homosexual or effeminate factors are also involved.

Some boys even make threats at stores that had escaped the damage: "You'll get yours yet" is often hurled at these storekeepers.

I'm glad they got that highway robber. You can go in to buy a container of milk and one time it's 14 cents and a few minutes later it's 18.

The rioters' excessive mutilation of manikins: Clothing store dummies are stripped naked and thrown onto the sidewalk, arms, legs and heads are sometimes broken off, and the body is often kicked around (*The Amsterdam News*, catching something of this meaning, referring in a picture caption to the "raped" dummies).

Most of the white merchants in Harlem are Jews. Although most of the land is owned by white Christians -- banks, insurance companies, estates and churches the fact is that the landlord agents are, for the most part, Jews. It is they who have the unpleasant task of collecting rents, refusing repairs, keeping expenses down for the landlords, and even bringing about evictions. Similarly, the Jews predominate among the principals of the public schools in Harlem. On them is the onus of having to discipline children.



For the past five years, I have been working on a rewrite of Walter Benjamin's "The Arcades Project" set in New York City in the twentieth century called "Capital." As of this writing, January 19, 2010, the book is about 500 pages long, about half way to the 1000+ pages that constitutes Benjamin's book.

The idea is to use Benjamin's identical methodology to read-through and notate New York in the twentieth century as Benjamin did with Paris in the nineteenth. Thus, I have taken each of his chapter headings and, reading through the entire corpus of literature written during as well as about New York in the twentieth century, have chosen what I consider to be the most relevant and interesting parts and placed them into sheaves identical to Benjamin's.

My structuring of the book has deep parallels with Benjamin's: Baron Hausmann is Robert Moses; Baudelaire is Robert Mapplethorpe (my Mapplethorpe chapter begins with the citation: "Mapplethorpe was the 1970s leather-clad equivalent of the great dandies and decadents of the nineteenth century -- Beardsley, Oscar Wilde, Huysmans, Baudelaire. What made his personality so intriguing were the same qualities found in his work -- the chilling contrast between the viciousness of his sexuality and the grace and finesse of his personal style. Mapplethorpe embodied both Dionysian and Apollonian qualities -- Dionysus being the 'god of frenzy' and Apollo 'the god of proportion and form.'"). Instead of the arcades, I have the two World's Fairs -- 1939 and 1964 -- mimicking the historical trajectory of NYC during the twentieth century, from the utopian to the corrupt, from the local to the global; plumbing becomes air conditioning; and so forth. While I began with the identical set of Benjamin's sheaves, over the course of time, only a few remain as relevant. Most of them -- say, The Barricades or Marx -- have been replaced by or updated as more relevant ones to NYC: "Excitement, Restlessness, Fame, Ambition" or "Shopping, Mall, Consumerism." Like Benjamin, the entire act consists of copying passages, sorting them into folders and cross-referencing them.

The piece included here, "The Harlem Riot: A Study in Mass Frustration," is all the notes taken from a book of the same title, documenting the famous Harlem Riot of 1935, which was Harlem's first race riot, a precursor to the greater social riots of the 1960s in America. As language is never neutral, the depictions of the events of 1935 are encoded with subjectivity, bringing to question how history is written, constructed and recalled.



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