

David W Fletcher, Spring 2002

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JOHN M. WERNER'S *REAPING THE BLOODY HARVEST:
RACE RIOTS IN THE UNITED STATES DURING THE AGE OF JACKSON 1824-1849*¹

In *Reaping the Bloody Harvest*, Werner provides a case by case narrative of about forty different riots from Jacksonian America during the second quarter of the nineteenth century. He systematically explores riots in three major cities—Cincinnati, New York, and Philadelphia—but he does not neglect to discuss the breadth of racial violence as it affected Boston (MA), Providence (RI), Hartford, New Haven, and New London (CT), Buffalo and Palmyra (NY), Detroit (MI), Columbia and Pittsburgh (PA), Newark and Trenton (NJ), Evansville and New Albany (IN), and even Maysville (KY). He gives immeasurable detail to outbreaks in Cincinnati, New York, and Philadelphia (chapters three, four, and five, respectively), and he weaves all the rest together in one summary chapter he calls “One Great Bloody Hecatomb” (chapter six, 230-264). He goes beyond simple narrative of these events, though, as he uses the data as case studies to assess different hypotheses about causation (chapter seven, 265-297). His work, he believes, offers “a useful antidote” to the “tendency by social scientists to formulate generalizations about causation . . . based upon only studies of recent race riots” (preface).

By way of developing the context for these riots, Werner summarizes the social unrest of the Age of Jackson with its political agitations, migratory displacements, and unsettling reforms (“The State of Society Is Awful,” 15-49). Fear of “a drift toward violent solutions to society’s

¹American Legal and Constitutional History: A Garland Series of Outstanding Dissertations, edited by Harold Hyman and Stuart Bruchey. New York, NY: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1986. 333 pages with preface, endnotes, two appendices, and select bibliography.

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problems” filled the populace everywhere (17). The President’s own violent personality, typified in his ready summons to the duel—a violent means of settling disputes—set the tone for its parallel in society (21). But Werner avoids any uncomplicated picture of Jacksonian America. Instead of a simple explanation, he shows a society troubled by irresponsible politicians, slavery and the quest for abolition, rapid urbanization, ethical and moral weaknesses, economic injustices, the rise of nativism, tactless journalists, an influx of immigrants, and racial ideology. He concludes, “These turbulent times, in which these kinds of violent behavior seemed to be legion, were the milieu of the Jacksonian race riots” (37).

Werner’s real interest, though, lies in the internal mechanisms of racial strife in urban areas. He labors to find a suitable definition of “race riot,” but he concurs with the three varieties of racial violence outlined by Lieberman and Silverman [“The Precipitants and Underlying Conditions of Race Riots,” *American Sociological Review* 30 (Dec 1965)]: ghetto riots, white assaults, and interracial warfare. He classifies the race riots of antebellum America as strictly white assaults. But he concedes, “There were a few which did take on aspects of interracial warfare, [but] even in those cases, the whites were always the initial aggressors.” He also dismisses any identification with ghetto riots: “Modern ghettos had their origins before the Civil War, but there were no ghetto riots in those days” (5). More importantly, he highlights possible contributing problems, such as the method of law enforcement in the cities, which he labels anachronistic (7).

Werner illustrates well the unique problems of urbanization that contributed to and defined the numerous outbreaks of racial violence in Cincinnati, New York, and Philadelphia (i.e., city codes, settlement patterns, and political divisions). Typically, local authorities lacked effective means to deter unrest and deal with actual violence. But by the 1840s urban governments began to control mob violence more effectively by means of three successful changes: the shifting of responsibility for riot damage from state and county to city governments; the strengthening and professionalization of municipal police forces; and the increasing use of militia units to stop civic disturbances (251). Werner also generalizes other aspects common to most antebellum race riots. First, deaths rarely occurred, since rioters carried clubs, bricks, and stones rather than firearms. Second, rather than “outside agitators” (what Werner calls a myth), the perpetrators were from the lower-middle or lower classes—artisans, laborers, rivermen, sailors, and small merchants. They “rubbed elbows” with blacks on a daily basis and “felt the greatest amount of black pressure for equality.” Third, free blacks submitted to white hostility with little militancy or counter violence, so that “the very nature of the black protest during this period was far different from today.” To explain this passivity, Werner suggests that blacks knew they had very little legal protection; they understood their situation in the North to be far better and preferable to what existed in the South; and their leaders emphasized nonviolent means of improving their “respectability” among whites in society, i.e., education, hard work, and sobriety (254).

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Finally, Werner sees racism and racial prejudice (and its accentuating factors, such as “slavery, skin color, a belief in black inferiority, language, and stereotyping,” 268) as the critical factor in the antebellum race riots. But he wishes to take the matter beyond the foundational level, as he analyzes models of understanding postulated by H. O. Dahlke [“Race and Minority Riots—A Study in the Typology of Violence,” *Social Forces* 30 (May 1952)], Alfred M. Lee and Norman D. Humphrey, *Race Riot* (1943), Allen Grimshaw [“A Study in Social Violence,” *Racial Violence in the United States*, ed. Grimshaw (1969)], and John Spiegel [“Hostility, Aggression and Violence,” also in *Racial Violence* (1969)]. In this assessment, though, he arbitrarily imposes a sociological framework on his data about the riots taken from newspaper and magazine accounts, contemporary journals, city and county records, eyewitness descriptions by travelers, diaries and personal papers, societal archives, government publications, and various interpretive sources. Nevertheless, he argues for important precipitous social phenomena, i.e., negative attitudes and actions against minority groups, the treatment of minority groups as scapegoats by demagogues who court the popular will, adverse reaction of the majority group to real or perceived threats upon “the accommodative structure,” and sundry preconditions to include social control, disrupted communication between groups, hostile and uninformed beliefs about adversaries, and the lack of equality between dominant and subordinate groups. In addition, Werner even mentions a plausible environmental cause—“the Fahrenheit factor” (288).

As a corrective against simplistic causation, Werner suggests “levels of causation” (280). But he really hits the mark, in this reviewer’s opinion, when he elaborates “the real or perceived

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assaults on the social structure” (281). Here he can draw from his substantial evidence, his “case studies,” in respect to white fears about amalgamation or miscegenation, blacks who improved themselves personally or socially, job competition from blacks, and the consequences of abolition. Just as valid is Werner’s assessment of what whites hoped to achieve by rioting—to punish blacks collectively for the offences of one or a few, and to expel blacks from the community (286). In his conclusion, Werner sums it up nicely, “The race riots of the Age of Jackson occurred against a background of pervasive white racism. . . . Among generalized causes . . . were a rising level of all kinds of violence, a history of violence toward blacks, inefficient and unresponsive law enforcement agencies, groups and individuals who were openly hostile toward blacks, biased newspaper reporting, and real or perceived assaults on the white conception of a proper social order” (289). Werner’s *Reaping the Bloody Harvest* illustrates well this particular type of racial violence (i.e., white assaults on blacks) in urban areas in Jacksonian America. But such a well-defined study lacks the material necessary to make comparative judgments with other negative racial phenomena either in Jacksonian America or other periods of American history. In this respect, Werner’s book remains primarily descriptive and fails to meet his expectation as “a useful antidote” to modern sociological interpretations of race riots.