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Cities of Protest: Urban Movements, Policing, and Change in 20th Century America

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Introduction

Cities of Protest examines how American cities became central arenas for social, political, and institutional change across the twentieth century. Far from passive backdrops, urban environments—densely populated, economically stratified, and racially segregated—produced conflicts that repeatedly forced municipal governments, police departments, community organizations, and national institutions to confront questions about justice, order, and the distribution of resources. This book centers episodes of unrest, housing struggle, and reform campaigns to trace the mechanisms by which local crises produced policy innovations, retrenchments, and enduring legacies for urban governance.

The chapters that follow use a case-study approach. Some chapters offer close readings of particular events—the uprisings of the 1960s, citywide tenant strikes, and landmark police reform efforts—while others place those episodes in longer arcs of demographic change, economic restructuring, and legal contestation. Methodologically, the book draws on municipal records, contemporary press coverage, oral histories, and secondary scholarship to reconstruct both the immediate dynamics of protest and the institutional responses that followed. My aim is to connect micro-level episodes—street confrontations, neighborhood organizing meetings, council hearings—to broader structural shifts such as deindustrialization, suburbanization, and the changing role of the federal government in urban affairs.

A central argument of this book is that protest and policing are mutually constitutive: patterns of policing shaped the form and intensity of urban protest, and protest in turn reshaped policing practices, public perception, and municipal politics. Yet outcomes were uneven. Some reform efforts produced meaningful institutional change; others were symbolic, incomplete, or reversed by shifting political winds. Housing struggles demonstrate a parallel dynamic: organized tenant actions and legal challenges sometimes won protections or prevented demolitions, but large-scale processes—redlining, highway construction, and market-driven redevelopment—often produced displacement that individual campaigns could not fully halt. Reading these histories together reveals how power is negotiated at the neighborhood level and institutionalized in city policy.

This book is intended for multiple audiences. Urban planners and municipal officials will find concrete case studies about governance choices and policy trade-offs; activists and community organizers will find historical precedents for strategies and pitfalls; scholars and students will find cross-cutting analysis of race, class, and institutional power in the American city. Throughout the book I emphasize lessons that are practical and historically grounded: how oversight mechanisms formed, why

certain reforms faltered, and which coalition strategies produced durable gains. I also highlight unintended consequences—how well-intentioned planning or law-and-order responses sometimes exacerbated marginalization.

Organization of the book follows the life cycle of urban conflict: diagnosis (why unrest occurred), confrontation (how communities and police clashed), institutional response (reform campaigns, litigation, and governance shifts), and reflection (lessons for future policy). The first chapters contextualize the major waves of twentieth-century urban upheaval and trace policing's evolving role. Middle chapters focus on thematic struggles—housing, labor, immigrant activism, and fiscal crisis—while later chapters analyze reform efforts and distill comparative lessons across major city case studies. The final chapters synthesize what these episodes imply for contemporary policy debates about equity, accountability, and democratic urbanism.

By grounding policy recommendations in historical narrative, *Cities of Protest* refuses both romanticization of unrest and naive confidence in technocratic fixes. The book recognizes protest as a catalyst for change and policing as an instrument of municipal power, and it urges readers to see the city as a contested and remade commons. My hope is that this history will equip practitioners and citizens alike with sharper tools to assess policy choices and to imagine more just configurations of urban life—ones in which safety, dignity, and democratic participation are not zero-sum but mutually reinforcing.

CHAPTER ONE:

The 1960s in America were a time of tremendous upheaval, a decade when the placid surface of post-war prosperity cracked open to reveal deep fissures of racial inequality and economic injustice. While the Civil Rights Movement was making significant strides in dismantling legal segregation in the South, a different kind of struggle was brewing in the urban centers of the North and West. Cities, once seen as beacons of opportunity, became stages for widespread unrest, often referred to as riots, rebellions, or uprisings. These events were not isolated incidents but rather explosive manifestations of long-simmering frustrations.

The roots of these urban conflagrations were complex and deeply intertwined, reaching into decades of systemic discrimination. African Americans, who had migrated in large numbers from the South to northern and Midwestern cities seeking better lives, often found themselves trapped in overcrowded, dilapidated neighborhoods. This residential segregation, reinforced by discriminatory practices like redlining, limited their housing options and concentrated poverty. Meanwhile, the very industries that had drawn them north were beginning to decline, leading to widespread unemployment and underemployment among Black workers.

Imagine a city like Detroit in the mid-1960s. It was a city of stark contrasts, a booming auto industry alongside deeply segregated neighborhoods where Black residents faced pervasive discrimination in employment, education, and housing. The city's Black population had grown significantly, yet political power remained largely in the hands of the white establishment. This created a fertile ground for resentment, a sense of being perpetually marginalized despite contributing to the city's economic engine.

In many of these cities, the daily interactions between Black communities and predominantly white police forces were particularly fraught. Police brutality, harassment, and racial profiling were commonplace occurrences. To many Black residents, the police were not protectors but rather symbols of white authority and repression, embodying the very systemic racism they experienced. These encounters often served as the immediate catalysts, the sparks that ignited already volatile situations.

One of the earliest and most impactful of these uprisings occurred in the Watts neighborhood of Los Angeles in August 1965. The immediate trigger was a seemingly routine traffic stop. A white California Highway Patrol officer pulled over Marquette Frye, a 21-year-old Black man, on suspicion of drunk driving. An argument escalated, his mother and brother became involved, and a crowd of onlookers quickly gathered. Rumors spread, including that the police had kicked a pregnant woman. This

confrontation spiraled into six days of intense civil unrest.

The Watts Rebellion, as many refer to it, was fueled by deep-seated anger over the racist and abusive practices of the Los Angeles Police Department, coupled with grievances concerning employment discrimination, residential segregation, and pervasive poverty. The violence resulted in 34 deaths, over a thousand injuries, and more than \$40 million in property damage. The National Guard was called in to quell the disturbance, and a curfew was imposed. The Watts uprising made it undeniably clear that racial tensions and the struggle for civil rights were not confined to the American South.

Two years later, the "Long Hot Summer of 1967" saw an explosion of unrest in over 150 cities across the United States. The most destructive of these occurred in Newark, New Jersey, and Detroit, Michigan. Newark, like many older industrial cities, was grappling with deindustrialization and suburbanization. Its white population had significantly decreased, while the number of poor African American and Puerto Rican residents had risen, many seeking industrial jobs that were rapidly disappearing. The city suffered from high unemployment, substandard housing, and a municipal government that largely excluded its growing Black majority.

In Newark, the spark came on July 12, 1967, when two white police officers arrested and beat John William Smith, a Black taxi driver, for a traffic violation. False rumors circulated that Smith had died in police custody, drawing a large crowd to the Fourth Precinct station house in protest. What began as a protest quickly escalated into widespread looting, arson, and violent confrontations with police and the National Guard. The unrest lasted for five days, leaving 26 people dead, hundreds injured, and millions of dollars in property damage.

Just two weeks after Newark erupted, Detroit became the site of the bloodiest uprising of that tumultuous summer. In the early hours of July 23, 1967, Detroit police raided an unlicensed after-hours drinking club, known as a "blind pig," on the city's Near West Side. They expected to find a few dozen people but instead encountered 82 Black patrons celebrating the return of two Vietnam War veterans. Officers arrested everyone present.

Witnesses and local residents, accustomed to what they perceived as inexplicable police actions in their neighborhood, reacted with anger. The situation quickly spiraled out of control. The Detroit uprising lasted for five days, involving thousands of residents and resulting in 43 deaths, over a thousand injuries, and widespread destruction. Governor George Romney deployed the Michigan National Guard, and President Lyndon B. Johnson sent in U.S. Army troops to restore order.

These uprisings, whether in Watts, Newark, Detroit, or the dozens of other cities that experienced unrest, shared common underlying causes. They were deeply rooted in

pervasive discrimination and segregation in employment, education, and housing. African American unemployment rates were consistently double those of white Americans, and Black workers were largely confined to the lowest-skilled and least well-paid occupations. Poor housing conditions, de facto segregation in schools, and biased school boards further exacerbated these inequalities.

The Kerner Commission, formally known as the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, was established by President Johnson in July 1967 to investigate the causes of these widespread disturbances. Its report, released in February 1968, famously concluded that "Our nation is moving toward two societies, one black, one white—separate and unequal." The commission unequivocally identified white racism as the fundamental cause of the riots, attributing the unrest to a combination of systemic discrimination, segregation, and socioeconomic disparities faced by African Americans.

The report highlighted that the "explosive mixture" accumulating in cities since the end of World War II was essentially due to white racism. It noted that pervasive discrimination and segregation in employment, education, and housing had excluded large numbers of Black Americans from economic progress. The commission also explicitly stated that police were not merely a "spark" factor but had come to symbolize white power and repression for many Black individuals, an atmosphere reinforced by widespread belief in police brutality and a "double standard" of justice.

While the immediate incidents sparking these uprisings often involved police actions, the Kerner Commission found no evidence of an organized plan or conspiracy behind the disorders. Instead, the report portrayed them as spontaneous outbursts of frustration and anger, a collective cry from communities that felt unheard and unseen. The commission's findings challenged the prevailing narrative that blamed "outside agitators" or criminal elements, instead placing the responsibility firmly on systemic societal failures.

The uprisings of the 1960s were a stark and painful revelation of the deep racial divides that permeated American society, even after landmark civil rights legislation had been passed. They forced a national reckoning with the realities of urban poverty, segregation, and police misconduct. These events profoundly influenced public discourse, policy debates, and the trajectory of urban movements for decades to come, laying bare the urgent need for fundamental change in how cities were governed and how their residents were treated.

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