

University of Cincinnati sociologists describe conditions that triggered recent riots

A reporting team
24 May 2001

A World Socialist Web Site reporting team interviewed several sociology and history professors at the University of Cincinnati about social conditions that contributed to riots in the city last month.

Dr. Alfred Tuchfarber, director of the Institute for Policy Research at the University of Cincinnati, told the WWS: “Much of the media presented the riots simply as a confrontation between young black males and the police, but it goes deeper than that. There has been a growth of inequality within the city and the region, and many have not benefited from the better economy. Unemployment has fallen, but it is considerably higher for blacks than for whites. A real gulf has opened between the upper middle class, which has become much more affluent, and poor people who feel left out.”

Tuchfarber explained how the Over-the-Rhine neighborhood—the poorest area in the city—illustrated this process: “This used to be one of the most densely populated areas in the US. But it has been depopulated over the years, falling from 50,000 people in 1900 to less than 10,000, mostly poor black people, now.

“In the last five years gentrification has been going on and a lot of real estate was bought up because space was cheap. An area called the ‘Digital Rhine’ emerged along a broadband line set up by Cincinnati Bell for cheap Internet access. On Main Street a strip of entertainment spots, bars, art galleries and online cafes opened, which attracted affluent suburbanites to come in for an evening and then leave. Now the poor were realizing that they were poorer than they ever thought. As long as they saw nothing else but other people in poverty, they hadn’t had much to compare themselves to.”

Tuchfarber said Cincinnati has always been a conservative, law-and-order town. What changed, he said, wasn’t so much the behavior of the police, but the expectations of the poor, especially the minority youth. He continued: “When I came here from Chicago many years ago you found a pretty conservative, Southern black community. Blacks would put up with more, did not hope for much and therefore were not

disappointed with the regular mistreatment they received. In the late 1960s Cincinnati was hit by tremendous unrest. Today, people have come to expect much more again.”

Dr. Steve Carlton-Ford, a sociology professor at the University of Cincinnati, said, “Since the late 1960s we have seen the increasing concentration of poor living in specific areas. We are the eighth most segregated city in America—segregated by race, as well as by class. So the riots—or the disturbance, whatever you want to call it—took place in one of the poorest neighborhoods in Cincinnati, near downtown, called Over-the-Rhine, which has an African-American population, but also a significant Appalachian population.

“A whole number of things are coming together. Segregation largely by income and race comes together with the police actions over the last five years, and the sense that the police are using racial profiling to target the African-American community. In Over-the-Rhine and other high crime areas there is a heavy police presence. This combination of factors has sparked the current unrest.

“Over-the-Rhine is ripe for gentrification. There has been some discussion of layers of the middle class moving back into the city and doing some housing development downtown to come up with some mixed income housing. In the last five years there has been some business development there— theater, businesses, coffee shops, book stores, small restaurants that cater to dot.com companies, high-end video-editing—that has a kind of upscale arts and technology feel. A lot of those shops were targeted during the riot. There have been tensions over development that would eventually drive out folks who are poor.

“Cincinnati is very peculiar. It reminds me of Boston and St. Paul, Minnesota, in the sense that you have micro-neighborhoods that run up against each other, with very few thoroughfares that connect them. There is a big east-west split in Cincinnati, cultural and social. As you go out to the east side, you have Walnut Hills, East and West Walnut Hills, O’Byrnsville, Evanston. You can go from neighborhoods which are African-American, working class

and lower middle class, and then to chunks of Walnut Hills with \$750,000-\$800,000 houses. You don't really notice it when you are on the main cross streets, but if you get on the back streets that go through, you can go three blocks and go from a neighborhood that is really quite poor economically to one that is comparatively wealthy. The really wealthy live outside of the city or in areas of the city that are well removed from the very poor African-American sections.

“Even with this kind of neighborhood segregation, you end up with very poor and pretty wealthy neighborhoods right next to each other. A lot of this wasn't reported, but there were relatively affluent areas where youths went down the whole street turning over cars and smashing in all the glass they could. When I think about where the unrest is going to occur—it is going to occur where folks see that disparity, where it is in their face every day. There are these kinds of fault lines in Cincinnati where you have plenty of racial and economic segregation, but you will see these dramatic differences in two or three blocks.

“As sociologists we know the most segregated people are the very wealthy who can afford to live far away and have no contact with the poor. They go to theater and other venues and then leave. But there is still enough contact on those fault lines that people are painfully aware of the disparities.”

David Stradling, assistant history professor at the university, said, “One of the things that I read in the *New York Times* coverage is that they seem to think that Cincinnati is unusual and is behind the times in its race relations and the persistence of ghettos, which is of course not the case. What may be startling about this story is just how surprised many Cincinnatians are by the isolation of the African-American ghetto because they simply don't see it. One of the things that is possible in Cincinnati is to live your entire life in the suburbs and go to the stadiums or a show downtown and really experience Cincinnati in a completely segregated way. This is true for a lot of cities, but is very much true for Cincinnati.

“So for a lot of people who are watching this story from the suburbs they express surprise. But that is because they are completely unfamiliar with the way the city works. Of course when the police chief and the mayor express surprise of the intensity of the riots that is just incompetence. They had to have known that the problem in Cincinnati was this persistent ghetto with ongoing hopelessness. This ghetto has been there for 40 to 50 years without any significant changes. And it's not like Cincinnati's ghetto is out of the way either. It's right in between two vibrant parts of the city. These people must drive through it constantly.

“Another problem is that in Cincinnati—to the degree that it is still a vibrant economy—all the jobs are in the suburbs. It

cannot compete with its own suburbs. Time after time you read about the tax credits given by suburban municipalities to attract investment. Recently one employer moved from an old-line suburb into a newer suburb. Now the suburbs are competing amongst each other to the benefit of the employers. Of course, there are no net gains for the region and generally there are huge losses for the city itself. A company like Hewlett-Packard has to be in Cincinnati, but they locate in the suburbs and it is just a matter of what tax package they are able to get.”

David Maume is an Associate Professor of Sociology at the University of Cincinnati and a director of the school's Kunz Center for the Study of Work and Family. When asked about last month's riots, he commented, “I had an eerie sense that I had seen this before. I was a teenager in the 1960s. Some of the same problems have not changed much. Income and equality in Cincinnati in the 1990s doesn't look all that different from the way it was in the 1960s. The spark that lit the thing—a police-community confrontation—was similar to a lot of riots in the 1960s. I don't think this was just a police thing. I see this as much more an economic development and inequality issue. Police-community relations are really the spark that lights the bomb, but the bomb has been building up because of poverty and lack of opportunity, in the Over-the-Rhine in particular.

“Some of the arguments used to explain the riots were also the same as in the 60s. You heard the mayor, for example, arguing that these rioters were out there for fun and profit. That was the first reaction of the mayor. What may be a little bit different is that there isn't a sense yet that the society is coming apart at the seams, like it was in 1968.

“It is hard for me to read within the political establishment a commitment to deal with chronic social problems. You rarely hear talk of even enterprise zones anymore. If you read the Kerner Commission Report, issued after the riots, where they s poke about ‘separate and unequal’—that hasn't changed a whole lot. I bet you if you read the report a lot of the language would still apply today. And this is after an economic boom, with a tight labor market, rising wages and income—for some.”



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