

Janet L. Abu-Lughod. *Race, Space, and Riots in Chicago, New York, and Los Angeles.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2007. xiv + 344 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-532875-2.



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A Refined, Deepened, and Updated Kerner Commission Report

Just in time for the fortieth anniversary of the Kerner Commission Report, Janet Abu-Lughod, a luminary in the field of urban sociology, has published a compelling comparative analysis of twentieth-century race riots in the nation's three largest cities. In *Race, Space, and Riots in Chicago, New York, and Los Angeles*, she argues that sociological and historical works on race riots in the United States have either been so broad that they fail to account for distinctive local spatial, historical, and political forces or they have been so narrow that one cannot draw larger generalizations. In contrast, she pursues a mid-range study, comparing six different race riots in three different cities. Her method allows her to address national and international historical context while simultaneously examining site-specific features of the three cities under consideration.

Comparisons of race riots (which are confusing, non-linear events in and of themselves) across time and space make for a complicated narrative, but Abu-Lughod shuttles adeptly from city to city and backwards and forwards through time. The result is an intricate and fascinating tapestry, albeit one with some pattern imperfections.

Abu-Lughod views race riots in these three cities as politics by other means, as moments when people with legitimate complaints come into conflict with the dominant power structure. As such, local political culture (including the relationship between minority communities and police), intensity of spatial segregation, demography, and economics play crucial roles in the size, length, and violence of race riots. She concludes that while all three cities have seen significant racial tension and violence, New York, overall, has seen less intense race riots.

In her section on Chicago, Abu-Lughod tells the familiar story of the 1919 race riot, which was sparked when a white rock thrower hit and drowned Eugene Williams, an African American boy who was swimming in Lake Michigan. As with all of the riots examined, deeper issues were at stake, notably in this case a power struggle between African Americans and ethnic whites over politics, housing, and especially employment. She notes that following the riot, the boundaries between white and black Chicago hardened as the city pursued an "Atlanta Solution," cordoning off black ghettos on the South and later the West Sides. After World War II,

these two ghettos expanded into areas formerly occupied by ethnic whites and also grew denser, due to all-black public housing projects built during the 1950s and early 1960s.

The failure of the civil rights struggle to change segregation in Chicago housing and schooling and the assassination of Martin Luther King in 1968 gave rise to a second large-scale riot, this time on the poorer West Side. Abu-Lughod argues that unlike the response to an earlier 1966 Puerto Rican riot in Humboldt Park and unlike even the response to student radicals at the 1968 Democratic National Convention, Mayor Richard J. Daley took a draconian approach to black civil unrest, notoriously ordering police to kill arsonists and maim looters.

Abu-Lughod holds that despite greater mobility for some middle-class African Americans and despite the promise of Harold Washington's tenure (1983-87) as mayor, little changed in terms of the city's racial/spatial divide. The 1968 riots enabled the city to reclaim land on the near West Side (closer to the downtown), spurred the police to develop more effective riot suppression techniques, and fueled white flight, which enabled the West Side ghetto to grow westward to the city line. Instead of addressing the roots of black urban unrest (unemployment, lack of educational opportunities, the ongoing spatial and psychological rift between the races), the city has opted to destroy public housing projects without providing adequate amounts of compensatory housing, thereby forcing many poor African Americans out of the region. At the same time, the city has sent large numbers of young black men into yet another sort of racial quarantine: the prison system.

Los Angeles, Abu-Lughod contends, has an equally sad track record when it comes to addressing African American alienation, spatial isolation, unemployment, and lack of opportunity. She tells the story of how, during and after World War II, large numbers of African American migrants moved into South Central and especially the poorer Watts neighborhood. By 1960, these neighborhoods merged, resulting in a nearly forty-square-mile suburban black ghetto with few jobs, poor mass transit, limited highway access, inadequate schools, repressive police, and, unlike Chicago, little public housing. Abu-Lughod argues that Los Angeles' failure to address longstanding black grievances (coupled with the 1964 passage of Proposition 13, which overturned the Rumford Fair Housing Act) set the scene for the massive 1965 Watts riot.

Abu-Lughod contends that, like Chicago, Los Ange-

les failed to address legitimate black grievances. Despite the election of a black mayor (Tom Bradley), Los Angeles never pursued even the very modest reforms suggested by the McCone Report, the official post mortem issued following the Watts riot. In particular, Los Angeles never reformed its police department. As such, the beating of Rodney King and the later verdict absolving the police officers involved suggest clear continuity between 1964 and 1992. But Abu-Lughod cautions us to pay careful attention to dramatic changes that occurred in South Central during the last part of the twentieth century. After the Watts riot, many whites and middle-class blacks moved out of the area, only to be replaced by large numbers of impoverished immigrants from Mexico and Central America. As a result, South Central grew denser, poorer, and much more Latino. In 1965, South Central was 81 percent African American, but by 1992, blacks made up only 45 percent of the population and Latinos were in the majority. Unlike in 1964, African Americans and Latinos jointly participated in the 1992 riot, and both groups were arrested in roughly equal numbers. Participants from both groups did not loot the stores of Jewish merchants (as during the Watts riot), but the shops of Koreans and Korean Americans.

Abu-Lughod maintains that in the wake of the 1992 uprising, the city again did little to address systemic problems or restore burned-out neighborhoods. Meanwhile, the poor black community had to contend with relative loss of political power, the ill effects of economic globalization, increasing competition with new immigrants for existing jobs, and a justice system overeager to incarcerate black men. Los Angeles, she suggests, remains a powder keg. For her, the only light at the end of the tunnel was the 2005 election of Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa and the new black and Latino political coalition, although she notes the alliance is fragile and will continue to be tested by the issue of immigrant rights.

Abu-Lughod argues that New York is an aberration. In contrast to Chicago and Los Angeles, New York, with its less intense spatial segregation in housing, more ethnically varied black population, accessible mass transit system, abundance of public spaces, and greater tolerance for diversity, fostered a unique "political culture" far more responsive to African American grievances. This can be seen in the short-lived Harlem riots of 1935 and 1943. Unlike in Chicago and Los Angeles, the mayor of New York, Fiorello La Guardia, actually responded to black complaints. After the 1935 riot, La Guardia convened an interracial committee and actually followed through on some of the committee's suggestions. Fol-

lowing the 1943 riot, La Guardia intervened quickly, deployed police, fire, and medical resources skillfully, secured the riot zone, provided food, utilized black volunteers, and reached out to the black community through the medium of radio. La Guardia also responded to complaints about housing discrimination in a tight rental market by instituting rent control and promising to build more public housing on a nondiscriminatory basis. Both riots came to a quick end.

Despite a well-organized African American political leadership, a relatively responsive city government, and the erection of abundant public housing open to all, New York, Abu-Lughod concedes, did suffer one major riot during the 1960s, the Harlem/ Bedford-Stuyvesant riot of 1964. The riot started after a plain-clothes police officer shot a black high school student, but the deeper cause was anger at systematic police brutality as well as frustration with the continued legacy of racial inequality and the slow pace of change nationwide. The heavy-handed response by the police as well as the absence of Mayor Robert Wagner, Congressman Adam Clayton Powell, and Governor Nelson Rockefeller made matters worse. The riot lasted for six days.

After John Lindsay replaced Wagner as mayor in 1966, New York seemingly returned to its old ways. Lindsay implemented a civilian review board for the police, and after Martin Luther King's assassination in 1968, he walked the streets of black neighborhoods offering condolences, all the while criticizing Mayor Daley's heavy-handed approach toward African American rioters in Chicago. As a result, Abu-Lughod suggests, New York was one of the few major cities that did not see large-scale rioting in 1968. Nor did the city see rioting after the Rodney King verdict in 1992.

Abu-Lughod does not argue that New York is a racial utopia—far from it. Throughout New York's history and up to the present, there have been serious provocations, most recently the shooting deaths by police of Ahmadou Diallo, Patrick Dorismond, and Sean Bell. But these and other incidents, she maintains, have not resulted in riots, because most African Americans in New York feel that they can effectively pursue their political objectives by organizing, marching, boycotting, and pursuing traditional electoral politics. With the one exception of 1964, African Americans in New York have not had to resort to widespread rioting to express themselves politically.

In her conclusion, Abu-Lughod, in effect, refines, deepens, and updates the Kerner Commission's 1968 findings. She notes that the black population is now

divided. Many African Americans have benefited substantially from the civil rights movement and are moving ahead educationally and economically. But there are many others who are trapped in "hyper ghettos" characterized by spatial isolation, anomie, high rates of incarceration, eroded government social programs, and unemployment and poverty due to the effects of globalization (p. 286). "The virtuous cycle," she writes, "is working only incompletely, and only for those who have escaped the intensifying vicious cycle" (p. 290). She makes a passionate case for investing not in prisons (the most expensive and least productive "solution" to the problem of urban unrest), but in education, jobs, hospitals, and transportation. Drawing on her own analysis of New York, she also calls for "more open and representative government structures" that can "nurture productive and shifting coalitions" (p. 295).

In *Race, Space, and Riots*, Abu-Lughod adroitly synthesizes enormous amounts of historical data from the three cities in question, and her comparative method is illuminating. But in making her case for New York's exceptional record on rioting, she sometimes downplays or ignores important complicating evidence. For instance, while quick to point out the early existence of racism in nineteenth-century Chicago, she paints Dutch and English New York as surprisingly liberal. While she notes the existence of slavery, she does not mention incidents such as the European American response to the Revolt of 1712 or widespread black persecution following suspicion of insurrection in 1741. And while she does address the Draft Riot of 1863, she unconvincingly downplays its racial significance.

In her analysis of more recent New York history, I would have liked her to address the looting and arson following the 1977 blackout and the situation in the South Bronx throughout that decade. In addition, I would have liked her to better square her assertions about New York's responsive political culture with some of the realities of Rudolph Giuliani's tenure as mayor.

I also thought her spatial analysis could go farther. While she does an excellent job examining the shifting boundaries of ghettos and the use of highways, railroad tracks, public housing projects, and other structures to isolate African American communities, she does not address fundamental differences in topography and its effect on the scope of race rioting. Chicago, Los Angeles, and New York were built, respectively, on a prairie, in a basin, and on an archipelago, and these three different environmental foundations have clearly shaped ur-

ban unrest. In 1943, for instance, steep cliffs, the Harlem River, and the northern border of Central Park undoubtedly contained rioting and made the task of securing the area far easier than in a relatively unimpeded space, such as South Central Los Angeles or the South Side of Chicago.

While I am not convinced that New York is aberrant because of a more open and responsive political culture, Abu-Lughod does make her case that local demographic

patterns, economic conditions, spatial organization, and political culture play an important role in the violence, size, and duration of riots. I also wholeheartedly agree with her timely call for more federal aid to education, transportation, health, and jobs programs in cities. Unfortunately, with an economic downturn looming and little manifest political will to address the concerns of the urban poor, we may very well see Abu-Lughod's thesis tested in the years to come.

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