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Paul A. Gilje. *Rioting in America*. Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1996. xi + 248 pp. \$39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-253-32988-2.

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Synthesizing the vast secondary literature on rioting, Paul A. Gilje, author of *Road to Mobocracy: Popular Disorder in New York City, 1763-1834* (Chapel Hill, 1987), has written a comprehensive survey of close to 400 years of American rioting. No American historian should be put off reading this concise, well-crafted study because of its repellent subject matter. "The fragile gains of American democracy", he states, "have come at a gruesome cost" (p. xi, 181). Those of us who teach social history, criminal justice, crime and violence, or urban history are familiar with many of the episodes discussed in this study and can appreciate what Gilje has sought to accomplish. Precisely because it provides such a comprehensive treatment, this book, a volume in the *Interdisciplinary Studies in History* series, will become the point of departure for all future discussions and analyses of rioting in America and I think teachers of various disciplines and subject areas will be assigning it, in whole or part, as soon as they become aware of its existence or certainly once an inexpensive paperback edition is available.

Gilje states, at the outset, that rioting has been a very important factor in the shaping of American life and culture: "In the story of America, popular disorder has expressed social discontent, altered economic arrangements, affected politics, and toppled regimes. Without an understanding of the impact of rioting, we cannot fully comprehend the history of the American people." (p.1). Or, "to tell the story of rioting in American history is in large part to rehearse the story of *all* American history." (p. 177; Gilje's italics). Despite some lessening in the frequency and violence of riots by 1940s, he writes "rioting is an American phenomenon that is still with us" (p. 3) and after the 1992 Los Angeles rioting there is the possibility of "new and more physically violent patterns of popular disorder in which different races and ethnic

groups engage in armed conflict." (p. 181) The single-minded focus on four hundred years of rural and urban mobs rampaging does tend to exaggerate the role and impact of public disorders, but since Americans seem to have rioted over every conceivable issue, I was left with the distinct feeling that he was basically correct about their significance in American life.

Gilje's operational definition of riot differs only slightly from the generally accepted view. Whether planned, partially planned, or unplanned: "A riot is any group of 12 or more people attempting to assert their will immediately through the use of force outside the normal bounds of law" (p. 4). Rioting is "rational" and the "mob's behavior is directly connected to grievances of those involved in the riot". Although a "certain element of the irrational is present in any given tumult", the mob is "not capricious, nor random": mob actions are "dictated by specific grievances, specific historic circumstances, and had important meanings to the individual and the community" (p. 7). Gilje excludes from consideration a few categories of popular disorder, such as organized crime, most instances of Indian-white conflicts, and slave rebellions, while dealing with incidents like the Paxton Boys' massacre, activities by gangs of street toughs, and by African Americans in a free society. Included in this survey, then, are a very wide array of well-known and not so familiar episodes of rural uprisings, vigilantism, lynching, and urban riots, ranging from the small, limited, and non-violent to the major, seemingly unlimited, and very violent actions that seemed to hold large communities in thrall. Of course, it must be emphasized that Gilje's survey does not treat all types of violence in America, only collective action by crowds.

"Riots are moments when the people in the street—le

menu peuple (“the little people”)—make themselves heard and reveal how they interact with others in society” (p. 6; Gilje’s italics), although in many of the instances of collective popular disorder he describes, upper class men were the leaders of these activities. Gilje does not offer a broad explanatory theory about the causation of rioting, rather he presents an organizational framework – four chronologically-based phases or “patterns of public disorder” – within which to mention or survey dozens of the (at least) 4,000 varied episodes of riotous behavior he claims to have in his files. He structures the six chapters around the “four major phases of rioting” and how they are related to “key changes” in American society. “By studying changes in those patterns of rioting”, he states, “we can gain an understanding of how the ideas and beliefs of the Little People shifted and how, too, the interaction between different groups within society became altered” (pp. 6-7), although he concedes that this framework is only “one angle from which to view American history.” (p 9) This framework and many of his basic positions are familiar because they draw upon a series of well-known and important works by Bernard Bailyn, Richard Maxwell Brown, Pauline Maier, Edmund Morgan, Gary Nash, George Rude, Charles Tilly, E. P. Thompson, and Gordon Wood, among others, cited in the voluminous notes.

The first two “patterns of popular disorder” emerged during the Colonial and revolutionary eras, covered in the first two chapters. The third phase or shift is detailed in the next three chapters spanning the early 19th century through the mid-20th century, and the final phase is examined in the sixth and final chapter. An Epilogue, two page Appendix (“Counting Riots”), and fifty pages of notes complete the volume.

Reacting to turbulent social conditions in England and the colonies, Englishmen and colonists, as described in “Disorder and Order in Colonial America”, sought to recapture the ideal corporate community by rioting. During the 1600s mobs used a variety of common rituals and a minimum of violence or, at the other extreme, outright rebellion to ensure social stability. This latter group included such familiar eruptions as Bacon’s, Leisler’s, Coode’s, and Culpepper’s rebellions that fractured whole colonies in the 1670s, 1680s, and 1690s, although the “nastiest” 17th century riot was in Marblehead, Massachusetts in 1677 (p. 19). Social stability had been arranged in the colonies, by the late 1600s and early 1700s, with the emergence of an Anglo-American aristocracy and the imposition of social patterns of hierarchy and deference. The crowd (“plebeians”) often led by

the highborn (“patricians”) asserted itself to protect this newly defined community or corporate identity; these actions, especially between 1700 and 1765, mainly relied on ritualized behavior, rather than violence against persons, as they sought to maintain community solidarity in the face of challenges from a market economy by outsiders (English officials) and violators of local morality. So frequent and generally non-violent were these public disorders that they became almost an acceptable or legitimate part of the social system. So much so, that mobs became a “necessary ingredient” in the Revolutionary crisis with England.

The colonial elite, seeking to resist British power, mobilized their countrymen, extensively using mobs (there were 150 riots between 1765 and 1769 and at least an equal number during the 1770s), to propel the movement; but as Gilje argues in “Rioting in the Revolution,” the plebeians started to get out of hand as the revolution idealized the sovereignty of the people and the concept of individual and equal rights. As more men participated in public life and a more universal definition of rights emerged, the political and social order was altered and the patricians shrank back from social upheaval, quickly seeking to eliminate mobs and public disorder. Though there were some very important riots and instances of public disorder between the 1780s and 1820s (Shays’ Rebellion, 1786-87, the Doctors’ Riot in New York City, 1788, and the Whiskey Rebellion, 1793), widespread and frequent rioting did taper off.

Chapters 3, 4, and 5 detail the new pattern that emerged in the early 19th century resulting from a “new aggressive, cutthroat egalitarianism” coupled with dramatic demographic changes. Rioting resumed in the 1820s as the ideal of the corporate community dissolved, but these riots were “increasingly violent and bloody as different social groups, divided by politics, ethnicity, class and race squared off against each other in brutal conflicts. Americans could kill each other because they did not identify with each other” (p. 10). Chapter Three, “Democracy Unleashed”, provides both a broader and more concentrated discussion of popular violence than is usually available either in texts or journal accounts of Jacksonian era ethnic, cultural, political, religious riots, and vigilantism, while Chapter Four, “The Tragedy of Race”, draws together all the secondary research work on racial violence, spanning the 1820s through the 1940s, and presented in this very focused fashion it is a mighty horrible tale. As is the fifth chapter, “Brink of Anarchy”, which does much the same for the period 1865-1940 by focusing on management-labor violence as well as the

continuation of destructive class, ethnic, religious, and cultural conflicts.

In Chapter 6, "Democracy Entrenched", Gilje details the final phase, characterized, after 1940, by ritualized rebellion rather than violent bloodshed. This last phase of American rioting, he states, was the result of the gradual and hesitant exercise of national government power early in the 20th century not only to step in and mediate disputes but also to guarantee long delayed equal rights. Equally of importance, the emergence of a national media spotlighted events, as did the acceptance of the strike as a bargaining tool and the rise of the civil rights movement after 1950. Riots became rarer and took different form, with sit-ins, marches, and boycotts replacing gunfire and deaths. Even racial rioting changed, starting with the Harlem "Ghetto Riots" in 1935 and 1943, in which confrontations between residents and the police escalated into a frenzy of looting and property destruction. The "Ghetto Riot" became the norm during the riotous 1960s and even those that occasionally erupted in the 1970s and 1980s seemed to follow this pattern, although the 1992 Los Angeles Riot was possibly a dramatic departure.

Gilje does not completely deliver on what he promises at the outset. There are several larger issues or questions he did not raise or probe sufficiently:

Why is collective disorder an American phenomenon or is it? His carefully written descriptions of rioting and some collective violence demonstrates more clearly, perhaps, than any one professional historian has recently, how pervasive this form of popular disorder was and is, but not what makes it an American phenomenon. Is it actually unique to America? Is it simply that America is and has always been a very heterogeneous society, comprised of competing religious, cultural, racial, ethnic and economic groups loosely bound together within the same territorial nation by shared dreams of a rising living standard and some vague, common historical and institutional bonds? What role does the governmental system play, either before or after the revolution? Is it federalism? To what extent is the each-against-all economic system and the dominance of its value system of individual success at almost any price a contributory factor?

Gilje, I think, is much more successful in surveying the ebb and flow of popular disorders than in relating specific riots to their specific communities (he does not usually offer much about the specific aftermath of any of these episodes). For this reason, urban historians might be somewhat disappointed because he does not really concern himself with the urban context within which a

riot erupts or does so only rarely.

While rioting has expressed social discontent, he is not always very specific about how it altered economic arrangements or toppled regimes. He asserts, for instance, that the civil rights demonstrations of the 1950s and 1960s focused attention on how segregation conflicted with entrenched conceptions of equality, but he had previously effectively shown how lynching and white programs had helped create and maintain the very system of white supremacy, from the 1860s through the 1960s. Similarly, he showed how riotous actions by management and its official and unofficial agents helped erect and maintain the system of worker suppression from the 1860s through the 1930s, suggesting only that 1930s sit-down strikes and other labor union activities helped end that system. Surely, then, something more is necessary to provide a fuller explanation about how popular disorders interacted with other specific situational factors to effect change.

Although he claims that there have been at least 4,000 riots, "which does not come close to the total of all rioting" (p.183), Gilje does not provide a listing, as Richard Maxwell Brown did in his classic "Vigilante Tradition" essay in *Strain of Violence: Historical Studies of American Violence and Vigilantism* (New York, 1975) or as David Grimsted, Carl Prince, and Leonard Richards did in their studies. I did not find his two page appendix, "Counting Riots", very helpful in this regard. With an academic audience in mind, Gilje did not seek to convey the horrible reality of rioting, and except for his brief descriptions of the "savagery" of lynching he leaves the gore on the cutting room floor. Thus, in this dimension, one must still turn to contemporary accounts in Richard Hofstadter and Michael Wallace, eds., *American Violence: A Documentary History* (New York, 1970)

The questions raised above are important, especially in a work that will be read as widely as this one will. It is too bad that Gilje, who has devoted his professional research and writing to this broad topic, did not probe more deeply into some of the larger questions that we all have about this issue of popular violence in America. Especially so, since it might be quite some time before another historian will attempt so ambitious and comprehensive a treatment of rioting in America.

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