Baltimore’s “Fire Next Time”

by Curtis Price

On April 27, 2015, Baltimore erupted into what was arguably the worst urban rioting in a major U.S. city since Los Angeles in 1992. Scores of buildings were looted and burned and at one point, so many buildings had been torched that the city ran out of fire equipment to put the fires out and had to summon surrounding county fire departments. The governor of Maryland called in the National Guard, and the Mayor of Baltimore introduced a night-time curfew for the next five days.

The causes and course of the riot are both familiar and long-standing, but add in new aspects not seen in L.A. in 1992. In West Baltimore, the epicenter of the riot, there are infant mortality rates at the level of Belize and Moldova, according to one study from the Johns Hopkins School of Public Health. A 20-year gap in life expectancy separates the poorest areas of Baltimore from the well-off. Into this social misery is poured a violent and flourishing drug trade.

For years, Baltimore’s drug trade existed in the form of local gangs vying for turf. But in the past decade, the drug trade became more organized, with larger and more ambitious cartels stepping in. Cartels such as the Black Guerrilla Family, named after a murky 1970s-era Black nationalist group that operated in the California prisons, set up a sophisticated operation that, strikingly, involved the presence of front groups infiltrating street-level community action groups and published a self-help entrepreneur manifesto that earned glowing endorsements from local school officials (including a former Mayoral candidate) unaware of the gang connection.

More significantly, the BGF (as it is known on inner-city streets here) effectively took over the city jail, the Baltimore City Detention Center, enlisting guards to bring in contraband such as drugs, cell phones, and money. One of the top leaders of the BGF had children by two female guards, who tattooed his name on their arms. Eventually, the Detention Center was raided and state control re-established, but the episode shows the striking reach and ambition of the BGF. (A woman I know who worked at the health center admission department at the Detention Center during the BGF take-over told me she knew something was coming down when she became aware of the presence of so-called homeless
inmates, who were actually undercover police agents. She could always tell the infiltrators because, even though their clothes were dirty and worn, their socks were always clean). 4

The police and drug gangs have a symbiotic relationship. For the police, the gangs have become a way to argue for more funding, expansion, and authority. The gangs use the police to “rat” on rival gangs in efforts to corner a market at the expense of rivals. Police corruption is widespread and many police are on the take, sometimes even dealing drugs themselves.

Police brutality is also well established: The city has had to pay out 5.7 million dollars to victims between 2011 and 2014 alone, and this is probably just the tip of the iceberg since few victims have the resources and perseverance to pursue cases against a system which most view correctly as stacked against them. Victims included an 87-year-old grandmother whose shoulder was broken when she was thrown down by a cop and arrested. 5 Between June 2012 and April 15th of this year, the Baltimore City Detention Center refused to admit 2,600 arrestees brought in by the police because their injuries and illnesses were too severe to be treated in the jail. True, many of these were pre-existing cases. But 123 of the injuries involved head trauma, a tell-tale sign indicating rough handling by police. 6

Factor in the already extraordinary levels of street violence, where accidentally bumping someone on the street can lead to a bullet, and then the random and inexplicable shootings that have affected nearly every black family in inner-city Baltimore and quite a few outside too: both Baltimore Mayor, Stephanie Rawlings-Blake and Bernard “Jack” Young, the City Council President have had relatives gunned down in street violence. 7

Everyone sees these shootings—but no one does when it comes to testifying or identifying the shooters. The reasons are both complicated and easily understood. Not only do you have to worry about retaliation from the gangs—no idle worry, as the firebombing of the Dawson family on East Preston Street, killing seven, because the mother had taken a stand against drug dealing on her block, illustrates—but you have to be scared of the police too. Which cop is secretly on the take and will turn your name over to the drug boys? In the rumors, some planted and some true, because there are so many shadowy parties with an interest in promoting disinformation, that swirl on West Baltimore streets, what is true and what is “yeast”?

The result is a justified wariness of the police. The police in turn interpret residents’ unwillingness to cooperate as complicity. By treating every resident as a potential collaborator, the police come to act in areas such as West Baltimore the way U.S. troops in Vietnam did in pacifying Vietnamese hamlets: everyone becomes a potential enemy. The city’s embrace of zero-tolerance policing and the decades-long failure of the war on drugs have only added fuel to the fire. The ramifications of an arrest and conviction are not just the short-term assaults on your dignity, but also the long-term effects of preventing you from getting hired on many jobs, especially in the service sector.

But the sharp and well-deserved distrust of the police is just one aspect of the general lack of social trust that acts as both a survival and defense mechanism, and also gravitates against political or collective action in the traditional sense, including leftist politics. This distrust comes out in many small, everyday
ways. A woman I worked with refused to get direct deposit at her bank because how did she know “they” weren’t going to try to steal from you? She demanded the security of a paper check. At my present job, the most popular shows among middle-aged African-American women are true crime “documentaries” such as the aptly-titled “Fear Thy Neighbor,” which re-enact crimes revolving around people close to you: the lover who suddenly morphs into a killer, the neighbors who are secretly serial murderers and rapists, the long-married ministers who suddenly abscond with church funds to feed the crack habits of secret teenage girlfriends. It’s summed up in the anguish of a woman I once heard on the Baltimore subway yelling at the top of her lungs, “Family will fuck you worse than friends.”

The randomness of so much early death on the streets also goes a long way in explaining the outpouring of anger over cases of police brutality. As Wilmington, Delaware City Council person Hanifa Shabazz put it in an interview with the *Wall Street Journal*, describing the similarly high murder rate in Wilmington, “You never know what’s going to happen next or who’s going to be the next victim”. At least with the police, you have an accountable party. With the random drug and score-settling shootings that are so much a part of inner-city life, there is no one to point to or protest about. So protests against police brutality become de-facto protests against a whole way of life; this is one of the many hidden transcripts behind the Baltimore riots.

For younger people, the pressures ratchet up. Hip-hop reality shows on BET and VH1 showcase the fabulous wealth of hip-hop moguls such as Kanye and Rick Ross, the multiple mansions and fancy cars, the nights at Atlanta strip clubs, drinking cognac, a world of material goods and endless pleasures that will never be available in West Baltimore in a dozen lifetimes.

West Baltimore is awash with young, aspiring rappers, hustling their self-made CDs on corners, turning out mix tapes while sleeping on grandmother’s basement couch, dealing a little weed or coke on the side, hoping for that big break. Because unlike a generation ago, where if you couldn’t sing like David Ruffin you settled down to a well-paid if monotonous job at Chrysler, hip-hop, through the democratization of music technology, has made a potential star of anyone with enough hustle and the right breaks. Because there is little, after all, that separates the abilities of a P. Diddy or Jay Z from any West Baltimore kid. And in the end everyone knows there are no Chrysler-type jobs anymore, just insecure, demeaning, and poorly paid servant jobs at fast food spots and working at hotels for rich tourists. And since you aren’t going to live past 25 anyway, why not live now? The Baltimore riots were not just riots of the reserve army of labor. They were riots equally or more so, to use the poignant term of a Brit criminologist, of the reserve army of consumers.

This dangling of consumer and brand names has a mixed effect. On the one hand, in some way, it represents the desire, however distorted, for more in life. On the other hand, it represents a privatization of this desire for something better. You get yours—and to hell with the rest. It becomes part of an individual struggle for survival and success. Any leftists who think the looting represents a
blow against private property would be quickly disabused if they tried to pry goods from a looter’s hands.

The left’s demands for “jobs” and the re-opening of closed recreation centers (many of Baltimore’s recreation centers were shut or sold off a few years ago), where kids can play ping-pong, when they really want their own Nintendos and Game-Boys, sorely misses the mark. Yes, poverty, unemployment, and all the rest of the usual root causes play a role. But these material factors are filtered through dreams and hopes that wouldn’t be satisfied even if $25-an-hour factory jobs with good benefits suddenly dropped out of the sky. This restlessness and dissatisfaction paves the way for future conflicts, conflicts that could end with more street unrest. Or just as easily devolve into brawls between rival East and West Baltimore flash mobs at the Inner Harbor.

For older people, different narratives play out. Anyone middle-aged or older remembers the devastation of the 1968 riots, the decades long disinvestment that hit Pennsylvania Ave, W. Baltimore Street, and Gay Street on the East Side, where boarded up and charred storefronts lingered and in some areas still do. And if you are older still, you remember when Pennsylvania Ave, Baltimore’s 125th Street, housed first-rate emporiums such as the Royal Theater, showcasing Moms Mabley, Red Foxx, and Pigmeat Markham. Or how your father, working the coke ovens at Bethlehem Steel, the dirtiest and most dangerous department at Sparrows Point, where Black workers were consigned, always went to work in a suit and tie, to assert his dignity. To older people, the young seem hell-bent on a road to self-destruction.

Then factor into all this, the sheer hopelessness and harshness of the environment, the withering away of any intermediate social institutions such as unions and community groups and the transformation of others, such as churches, from their Southern social gospel roots into the gospel of wealth as exemplified by the rise of mega-church TV pastors such as T.D Jakes. It becomes a hyper-metastasized version of “the surround of force” that Earl Shorris described in his early 1990s book on the American poor, “New American Blues.” Drawing on the way animals cornered by predators give up and don’t try to escape, Shorris compared the plight of the U.S. poor to an ongoing “surround.”

This is some of the background that led up to the social explosion in Baltimore after Freddie Gray died in a police van the night of April 11th and this background will further shape its resonance in future years. Gray was subjected to what is called a “rodeo ride,” in which defendants are driven aimlessly at high speed through the streets to produce a sense of helplessness and induce cooperation, and at some murky point no one can pinpoint, Freddie Gray’s spinal cord snapped. Gray’s death followed those of others, like Tyrone West in 2012, who died from a heart condition during a struggle with police. Usually small angry demonstrations would be held, followed by silence.

Why Gray’s death set off riots remains unknown. But surely the media coverage of Ferguson’s riots
played a part. Suddenly, confronting the police in the street no longer seemed something abstract, but was something you had seen on TV all last year. Fighting the police, if not socially acceptable, was at least normalized. Young people in response used social media to organize a flash mob to meet at Mondawmin, an older shopping mall on the edge of West Baltimore, in the hours after Freddie Gray’s funeral.

Unsympathetic critics have argued there was nothing political about the riots because over the past several years, an under-the-radar trail of flash mobs had gathered where young people suddenly descended on and stole from stores, attacked random passersby, or organized fights among themselves. There may be some truth to this, but what this view doesn’t understand is how, even if the initial impetus was non-political, however that is defined, once the confrontation outside Mondawmin took place, it suddenly became very political, despite the conscious intentions of the rioters.

For the next several hours, young people fought a pitched battle with police caught off guard, hurling rocks, bricks, bottles, and whatever else they could lay hands on. Mondawmin stores were broken into and looted. That night, major street battles and arson took place across the city. Police cars were burned, stores looted. True, the 2015 riots never reached the levels of the 1968 riots, which left significant swaths of Baltimore smoldering in ruin. But the National Guard was brought in, a curfew instituted, and, as it later turned out, even the FBI brought in planes to secretly monitor the unrest. The tally at the end showed 200 businesses broken into, 200 arrested and 150 fires set, including at a new senior center for the low-income elderly on the verge of opening, something which angered many older residents.

It is hard to know how all this affected the young people in West Baltimore who set off the riots. For the most part, their voices continued to be unheard, even with all the media coverage. The spokespeople chosen by the media to represent the youth were more often than not slightly older black college students, who had organized Ferguson and Eric Garner protests and thus were more savvy in dealing with the media, even if they weren’t themselves actually part of the layers of rioters.

But suddenly, young people in West Baltimore were listened to, even if only by way of their actions. Society paid attention. CNN was asking them what they thought. Young anarchists handed them bottles of water and legal aid information. Strangers in other cities marched in their defense. It had to be a transformative, heady experience for many, one that will subtly bubble throughout the social fabric of the city for years.

During that tense week, the police discredited themselves even more, with Police Commissioner Anthony Batts proclaiming that mysterious and un-named “outside agitators” had invaded Baltimore to inflame the riot areas and that intelligence sources had unveiled a threat by rival gangs such as the BGF and Crips to unite and “take out” officers in response to Gray’s death. (As it turns out, the BGF and others were meeting with local church leaders and City Hall officials to calm the streets down).
Later that week, the Baltimore States Attorney announced the indictment of the six cops involved. The indictment was correctly interpreted as a victory and protest rallies suddenly morphed into spontaneous celebrations. A few days after that, Rawlings-Blake asked the Department of Justice to step in and investigate systematic violations of law in police conduct. With these two interventions, the protests dissipated. A national march held on the day after the indictments were handed down, called by Malik Shabazz from Black Lawyers for Justice and the ex-New Black Panther Party head, only attracted a few thousand, despite Shabazz’s announcement that 10,000 protestors would descend on West Baltimore. A rally calling for amnesty for all rioters on May 16th only attracted a few dozen. For now, the streets are calm.

But both the indictments and Department of Justice investigations were also an attempt by the black political class governing Baltimore, which had been caught off guard, to reestablish control through concessions. In the next few months, there will undoubtedly be orchestrated events, such as nebulous “Youth Empowerment” conferences to “heal” the city and move in a “positive” direction (i.e. elect more Democrats.)

Yet this underscores one of the more important aspects of the Baltimore riots, that few observers have noted. The riots were the first rebellion in a major city governed by black politicians. Baltimore was no Ferguson, with an entrenched white political layer ruling over a majority black and disenfranchised population. The city has had black majority rule for more than a decade.

Yet during the long march of the black political class through the local Democratic Party little changed in areas such as West Baltimore. In fact, things got worse and few attempts were made to curb the systematic police brutality and lack of accountability. The Baltimore black leadership strata mostly turned their heads and chased after their own interests as brokers leveraging representation for “the black Community.” As Adolph Reed so presciently diagnosed in his 1979 TELOS takedown of the concept of “the black community,” “Black Particularity Reconsidered”:

These “leadership” strata tend to generalize their own interests since they see their legitimacy and integrity tied to a monolithic conceptualization of black life. Indeed, this conceptualization appeared in the Unitarian mythology of late 1960s black nationalism. The representation of the black community as a collective subject neatly concealed the system of hierarchy which mediated the relation of the "leaders" and the “led.”

In Baltimore, it led to former Mayor Sheila Dixon, a populist who shrewdly courted downtown business interests as well as shaking hands on inner-city street corners, getting indicted and removed for stealing a handful of Christmas gift cards intended for homeless children in a shelter.

It’s too soon to know if the lesson that black leadership will sell you out as much as white will have
lingering effects. But to Freddie Gray on April 11th, it made no difference that his tormentors were models of “diversity”: three whites and three blacks, men and women. In the end, they all acted in accordance with their social role.

NOTES

Ibid.
Puente, J, & Green, E (2015). "Mayor, Commissioner Denounce Work Outside Agitators.” From the Baltimore SUN.
Fenton, J. (2015). "Baltimore police say gangs 'teaming up' to take out officers." From the Baltimore SUN.

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