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VIOLENCE DURING THE 1919 BOSTON POLICE STRIKE: AN ANALYSIS OF THE CRIME CONTROL MYTH

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ABSTRACT

This article approaches the notion of crime control through a historical examination of a riot that occurred during the 1919 Boston police strike. In September of 1919, the police walked off the job and the city was engulfed in a riot. Order was restored eventually by the Massachusetts National Guard, acting under the authority of martial law. The riot seemed to demonstrate that police presence controlled social order and criminal behavior. Law enforcement administrators, politicians, the press, and many American people accepted this logic after the riot in Boston. Evidence, however, suggests that the riot was caused by other factors beyond the control of the police. These factors are examined in this article, and it is argued that social norms played a greater role than police activity in controlling crime.

Introduction

The year 1919 was eventful in American history. The doughboys returned home and John J. Pershing was given a hero's welcome by a grateful nation. Woodrow Wilson spent much of his time taking a plea for a League of Nations to the world at large and to the American people. The heavy guns which had thundered throughout Europe were silent, and U-boats no longer lurked off American shores. Americans would soon return to a policy of international isolationism, but the war to make the world safe for democracy was over. It was time to enjoy the peace.

Not all was serene, however. The year 1919 was interspersed with labor-management confrontations, strikes, and violence. Labor activist "Big Bill" Haywood was fighting a jail sentence for his pacifism during the war, and American Federation of Labor president Samuel Gompers was organizing workers and speaking of a steel strike. Militant anarchists launched a nationwide bombing campaign to overthrow the government. In response, United States Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer vehemently attacked anything he deemed to be "un-American." Although the war was over, 1919 was a year of tension, fear, and change.

This atmosphere helped to produce a drastic change in American law enforcement. In 1919 the Boston police shook the foundations of American society by walking off the job while the country was in the midst of a domestic crisis. The public and its political representatives accepted the idea that the police were all that stood between civilized society and anarchism. Given the domestic turmoil, Americans viewed the police as their first line of defense against the political threat of communist revolution and its cousin, criminal activity. Like the doughboys, the police were viewed as sacred guardians of American nationalism. A police strike was unthinkable. In the public mind it represented only one

thing: It was proof that criminal and political anarchy had come to Boston.

In the atmosphere of a Red Scare, the Boston police strike had a profound influence on both the structure of American police agencies and the perceived mission and role of law enforcement. Structurally, the strike institutionalized the working-class status of patrol officers. Despite the rhetoric of service and professionalism, the strike demonstrated that police work was little more than a skilled trade. Further, the police were to be confined to rigid bureaucracies responsible for the maintenance of social and political order. At the heart of this responsibility was the belief that such structures ultimately could control crime.

The concept of crime control was reinforced by the violence which accompanied the police strike. The logic seemed simple and straightforward in 1919. When the police walked off the job, the city was engulfed in a riot. Two and a half days later the National Guard came and restored order through martial law. Police administrator A. L. Dunlap (1919) summed up the popular explanation of the riot well. The rioting, he believed, demonstrated the true value of American law enforcement. An aggressive police presence maintained political order and controlled crime. This common interpretation of the strike was held by fellow law officers, politicians, and the press. It was the commonsense analysis of what happened in September of 1919.

The purpose of this article is to suggest that the Boston police strike was interpreted incorrectly by political and police administrators in the immediate period following the walkout. It has been argued that the strike served to define crime control as one of the major missions of the American police, but this view is based on a popular perception rather than the actual causes of the riot in Boston. Specifically, this article will suggest that other social and political factors

caused the upsurge of violence in Boston. In reality, the police had very little to do with the amount of violence.

To argue that the notion of crime control is incorrect seems to fly in the face of the experience of Boston. The conventional argument is quite clear. The police walked off the job, and there was a tremendous rise in violence; when the National Guard replaced the police, the violence subsided. Ergo, the police and their replacements were obviously linked to crime control. In 1919 this logic was straightforward and accepted. The police formed a thin blue line between civilization and criminal anarchy.

Despite this popular conception of the strike, a different picture emerges when other factors are considered. First, the type of violence which spawned the riot must be examined, especially in terms of the types of crimes that were committed. Second, the social tension which existed in Boston must be considered and the role of traditional class animosity should be analyzed. Third, the national mood and the nation's perception of Boston must be assessed. The issues of the strike originated from local concerns, but the impact of the strike was felt from coast to coast. It is not sufficient simply to link the outburst of violence to the walkout.

These factors have been documented in a variety of secondary sources. When they are linked together, the popular conception of the strike and the belief that the Boston police could control crime are called into question. The violence which accompanied the Boston police strike was a result of the following factors: (a) social tensions between Boston's Yankee upper class and the Irish working class, (b) a failure of police and political management, (c) a national fear of Bolshevism and anarchism, and (d) an emotional urban outburst. The September riot in Boston was the result of social and political factors beyond police control. In short, the strike did not cause increased crime; rather, informal normative social control mechanisms were temporarily removed by political decisions. When this happened, crime and violence increased.

Two arguments will be used to demonstrate this point. First, the Boston police strike has been well documented in historiographical literature. An analysis of secondary sources will be used to compare interpretations of the strike to the idea that the police can control crime. Second, a review of police activity as reported by chronologies, newspaper accounts, and official police documents will be used to indicate the nature of violence during the riot. In essence, existing evidence tends to refute the notion of crime control.

An Analysis of Secondary Literature

While Walker (1975) has lamented about the terrible condition of police historiography, the literature concerning the 1919 Boston police strike stands in stark contrast to this norm. It remains one of the best-documented incidents in

American police history. There are several reasons for this situation. The city of Boston has received a favorable amount of historical attention, and this has been followed by an emphasis on the development of urban institutions such as the police. An example would be Lane's (1967) history of the department from 1822 to 1885. In addition, the 1919 strike caught the attention of the nation. Finally, with a growing interest in history among criminal justice scholars, the strike has been examined in several surveys of the American police experience. Unlike many facets of police history, there is a substantial body of secondary literature on the Boston police department and the 1919 police strike.

Fogelson (1971) has gathered a number of valuable primary documents in a report on the Boston police strike. He has combined official reports with news articles and correspondence. These documents generally reflect a common theme: The police caused a wave of criminal violence by walking off the job. In essence, the people of Boston clearly believed that the police were capable of controlling crime and maintaining social order—when they left their posts, chaos and criminal anarchy resulted. This theme is repeated constantly in Fogelson's documents.

Administrative manuals of the period also reflected this notion. Fosdick (1921) concluded that the police represented the state and its power to compel obedience. Striking police officers indicated that the state no longer functioned. Anarchy and criminal violence would be the only outcome of a police strike. Although extremely critical of the prestrike administration, Harrison (1934) reflected a similar theme. Other administrative writings (Cahalane, 1923; Smith, 1940) reinforced the crime control ideal. The Boston police strike seemed to emphasize the Peelian measure of police effectiveness. That is, the absence of crime denoted outstanding police performance.

Several analytical works have called the logic of contemporary and administrative accounts into question. Robeson (1947), Lyons (1947), and Koss (1960) provide informative chronologies of the strike. These examinations are far less emotional than contemporary accounts. Additionally, while administrative writers such as Fosdick (1921) and Harrison (1934) assumed that the police had well-defined functions, scholarly works on the strike indicate that the police function was far from clear. People in Boston may have believed that the police controlled crime, but in reality crime control was merely one of many ill-defined police duties.

Russell (1975) has provided an in-depth analysis of the strike. He contended that it needs to be viewed on two levels. Internally, the police labor dispute was manifested through ethnic confrontations. The police force was viewed as a part of the community, and it enjoyed support across classes. When the regular police force went on strike, they were replaced primarily with upper-class Yankee volunteers. Russell believed this was a major factor in the violence.

Externally, Russell (1975) stated, the strike has been interpreted from a national perspective. Even though the issues in Boston were based on local concerns, the impact of the strike extended throughout the country. The strike was a national event, and national hysteria overshadowed local concerns. Most mainstream historiographical interpretations follow the logic outlined by Russell.

Three general surveys of American policing serve to complement Russell's interpretation. Walker (1977) examined the strike in terms of its impact on police reform. He concluded that the rationale behind the walkout was misunderstood. Repetto (1978) considered the strike in terms of its impact on police management styles. He stated that until 1919 Boston was "Europe in America." The strike destroyed the successful Bostonian administrative system and the inner ethnic relations between the department and its citizens. Fogelson (1977) has placed the strike within the structure of growing police bureaucracy.

Analytical accounts of Boston have produced a clearer picture of violence during the strike. Specifically, if a thin blue line controlled crime in Boston, the literature would have revealed an upsurge in traditional crime. The analytical accounts, however, describe a rise in antisocial behavior during the strike; most criminal activity involved a 2-day surge of gambling, drunkenness, street fighting, and looting. Other scholarly examinations have focused on mob violence and national hysteria. With the exception of sensationalized news reports, the literature makes no reference to a crime wave. Police administrators and the public may have held the striking police responsible for creating a crime wave, but the analytical literature does not. A review of the history surrounding the strike explains why.

The Boston Police Strike

The story of the Boston police strike begins long before tensions came to a head in 1919. In 1905 Boston underwent an administrative transformation which placed the police under the control of a single police commissioner. The purpose of this move was to eliminate corruption in the department, but corruption in Boston was insignificant when compared to cities like New York (Russell, 1975). The real issue became one of administrative reform. The state government had removed the police from local control in 1885 (Lane, 1967), but the 1905 reform greatly enhanced the power of the police commissioner. Fosdick (1921) praised this concept and urged other departments to move toward centralized bureaucracy.

The early success in Boston was the result not so much of its organizational structure as of the personality of the police commissioner. In 1906 Stephen J. O'Meara was appointed to the office. His personality and talents helped transform the Boston police department into a modern bureaucracy with O'Meara benevolently controlling the reins of power. The 1885 attempt to reform the police laid the groundwork

for a powerful commissioner, and O'Meara was the man who could take advantage of this organizational structure.

O'Meara could manage the centralized office because of his power and popularity. Not only did he enjoy support among the rank and file, but his reputation also spread far beyond the confines of Boston. Theodore Roosevelt (1924) praised O'Meara for eliminating police brutality and corruption. Fosdick (1921) believed that the civil service promotional system in Boston was the epitome of a rational police system, and he gave the credit for establishing the procedure to Stephen O'Meara. O'Meara's contemporaries as well as historians joined to sing his praises.

The respect which O'Meara commanded had important political ramifications. Aside from his charisma and popularity, he was given virtually unlimited power after his appointment as police commissioner in 1906. He used this authority for individual and organizational success. Russell (1975) has noted that O'Meara was a strict disciplinarian but that he commanded the respect of his men. Repetto (1978) stated that O'Meara translated political popularity into bureaucratic popularity. His men may have come from Irish stock, but they were respected across class structures in Boston, from the toughest Irish neighborhoods to the homes of the Yankee elites. O'Meara used his competence and popularity to lend legitimacy to the Boston police department.

O'Meara died suddenly in 1918, and Edwin Upton Curtis was selected to replace him. Walker (1977) stated that this was a critical point because the strike essentially became a confrontation between organized police officers and Curtis. Whereas O'Meara enjoyed virtually unlimited praise, Curtis did not. Perhaps history has been unduly cruel to the man designated to fill O'Meara's shoes, but regardless of any interpretation it can be safely said that he was not the man of the hour. Curtis exhibited none of O'Meara's qualities.

William Allen White (1938) placed blame for the strike on Curtis's shoulders. Calvin Coolidge (1931), who was governor of Massachusetts during the strike, supported Curtis in his autobiography but in little else. Russell (1975) had one of the more caustic comments. He asserted that if O'Meara had lived he probably would have avoided a police strike; under Curtis, however, the strike became almost inevitable.

Economic and working conditions were the main issues of the strike. Tension over long hours and low pay had been brewing since 1916. The Boston patrol officers wished to improve their wages, their working hours, and the sanitary conditions inside the police stations. Although progress was extremely slow, O'Meara had promised the officers that he would do everything possible to alleviate the conditions. For the most part, the officers had believed O'Meara. When Curtis made such promises, the men scoffed.

The differences between the two commissioners and their ability to inspire loyalty was evident in the way they approached unionization. The question first surfaced in 1916

under O'Meara's administration. He issued a personal appeal to refrain from union activity and promised to do everything possible to create better working conditions (Boston Police Department, 1916). When the same issue faced Curtis in 1919, he simply reissued O'Meara's order.

Even the ghost of Stephen O'Meara could not help Curtis, however. When he assumed the office of police commissioner in December of 1918, Curtis brought a baggage load of Yankee elitism and disdain for the Irish. He wanted O'Meara's authority, but he could command none of O'Meara's respect. When officers approached him to demand improved working conditions, Curtis responded with confrontation, not charisma. The tension between the police commissioner and his officers began to grow.

By the summer of 1919 the Boston police officers had transformed their fraternal association, the Boston Social Club, into a building block for a labor union. Frustrated with the haughty Curtis, the leadership of the Social Club approached Samuel Gompers, President of the American Federation of Labor, and asked for an AFL charter. Initially surprised, Gompers gradually warmed to the idea of having the police join the labor movement, and he began working for their inclusion in the AFL.

The request for affiliation with a labor union brought a different response from the political power brokers in Boston. Mayor Andrew Peters hastily convened a special committee to investigate working conditions. The chairperson of the committee advocated reform, but he soon found that his hands were tied. Neither the mayor nor the committee had any real power. The police department was controlled by the police commissioner, who reported directly to the governor. When the mayor and his committee members went to see Police Commissioner Curtis, they were gruffly told not to interfere with police business.

As representatives of the mayor frantically sought the intervention of Governor Calvin Coolidge, Samuel Gompers made his move in early September. He granted the Boston patrol officers an AFL charter. Curtis sensed that it was time for drastic action. He summoned the officers who had been elected as union officials and suspended them. He then ordered the patrol officers to renounce the charter. On Monday, September 8, the patrol officers met to take a strike vote. The next day they walked off their jobs.

At first, Curtis was not unduly alarmed. He had a number of replacement officers, industrial police, and citizen volunteers. Although Mayor Peters asked him to request mobilization of the National Guard, Curtis scoffed at the request, as he thought Peters was overreacting. As dusk fell on the first night of the strike, Curtis believed that he had the situation well in hand.

Interpretations of the Riot

Edwin Upton Curtis had not assessed the situation completely. On Tuesday afternoon, September 9, 1919,

Boston police officers gathered their equipment and left precinct houses throughout the city. Crowds gathered around precinct houses in Irish neighborhoods, and their mood turned ugly. By nightfall, a riot was under way. The situation quickly grew beyond the police commissioner's control. The National Guard arrived 2 days later, and they literally repressed the riot. When the smoke cleared, Americans asked, "What happened?"

American political and law enforcement leadership answered the question from two related positions. Politically, they felt that Bolshevism had come to Boston, and from a criminological perspective they felt that the police had removed the controls from crime. As Russell (1975) noted continually, the political interpretation of the strike was influenced by the Red Scare. From this vantage point, people believed that the riot was the first stage of a proletarian revolution. On September 10, 1919, the *Wall Street Journal* ran a feature article entitled "Lenin and Trotsky on the Way." Variations on this theme were restated in several popular magazines and journals by such titles as "An Assault Upon Our Government" (*Open Shop Review*, October, 1919) and "No Bolshevism for Boston" (*Outlook*, September, 1919). Many newspapers across the country echoed these sentiments. In the hysteria of 1919, such reaction was predictable.

The criminological view of the mob and the riot complemented national political hysteria. Writers in popular publications like *Survey* ("Boston Police Strike," 1920), the *Canadian Municipal Journal* ("Police Strikes," 1919), and *Good Government* ("Shall the Police Strike?," 1919) contended that the mob was a criminally motivated group which took full advantage of the absence of the police. On September 14, 1919, the Sunday edition of the *New York Times* reflected this view in two editorials. In essence, these pieces all reflected the concept of crime control. The police had abandoned their stations, and crime was left to rule.

Influenced, no doubt, by national political hysteria, the criminological view became popular throughout America. Woodrow Wilson reflected the theme in an address in Helena, Montana, on September 11, 1919. Wilson (quoted in the *New York Times*, September 11, 1919) called the Boston police strike a crime against civilization. He went on to say that the obligation of a police officer was as sacred as the duty of a soldier; neither person has the right to abandon his country in time of need, because they reflect the public trust. Wilson said that when the police gave their loyalty to another organization, such as a labor union, they no longer represented the public. In such cases criminals were left to rule. The police had to remain on the job, Wilson believed, because they controlled crime.

Massachusetts governor Calvin Coolidge (1931) reflected the same theme. When the police officers went on strike, Coolidge fired all of them and proceeded to search for replacements. Samuel Gompers asked Coolidge to reconsider

his action 2 months after the strike, and he asked that the officers be reinstated without union affiliation. Coolidge refused, stating that the officers had no right to strike against the public interest. He implied that they were responsible for the control of order and crime and that their absence had led to criminal anarchy.

Police administrators were quick to jump on the issue of crime control. Chief Richard Sylvester, one of the most prominent members of the International Association of Chiefs of Police, cancelled the proposed AFL charter of the Washington, D.C., police partially on the basis of the crime control argument (*New York Times*, September 14, 1919). In Macon, Georgia, the chief was fired because he allowed officers to maintain union affiliation (*New York Times*, September 15, 1915). Chief A. L. Dunlap (1919) criticized police unions on the ground that they threatened the ability of the police to control crime. Administrators seemed to accept this logic. If the police failed in their mission, crime would reign.

A committee appointed by the mayor of Boston to investigate the strike also reflected the notion of police control of crime. In a letter from the committee chairperson to the mayor (Storrow to Peters, 1919), the police were condemned for leaving their posts. The committee concluded that it was vital for the preservation of law and order to keep the police loyal only to governmental authorities. If the police were to foster a secondary loyalty, such as affiliation with a labor union, criminal elements would gain control of society. The committee further believed that only harsh action from the National Guard had checked the crime wave that engulfed Boston during the riot.

The local and national press endorsed the concept of crime control. Russell (1975) conducted a thorough review of newspaper editorials and found that editors believed almost universally that the police had abandoned their anticriminal mission. In Boston, the *Herald*, the *Globe*, and the *American* all reflected this notion. Within a week the *New York Times*, the *San Francisco Examiner*, the *Los Angeles Times*, and the *New York World* ran articles criticizing the police. Fosdick (1921) summed up their criticism by maintaining that the absence of the police had caused a rise in crime.

The most biting condemnation of the striking police officers and most wholehearted support for the crime control concept came from the police commissioner. Edwin Upton Curtis directly cited the strike as the sole reason for increased violence and crime: The striking police officers had abandoned their offices to allow crime to reign. They should be condemned, according to Curtis, and should never be allowed to return to work (Boston Police Department, 1919).

Curtis's view summarized mainstream America's perception of the strike. The press, the politicians, the police administrators, and the public saw two results from the

strike. First, the police had walked away during a period of internal fear; they left their stations at a time of crisis. Second, when the police walked out, nobody was left to rule. Criminals filled the void and Boston became, in Russell's words (1975), a city of terror. The logic was simple: Decreased policing caused increased violence. Although this interpretation was popular, it was incorrect.

Unrecognized Factors Causing Violence

The rioting which occurred in the wake of the Boston police strike was spawned by factors far more significant than the walkout. There had been two strikes prior to Boston, and in each instance the police had returned to work with many of their grievances addressed. In these instances, however, there had been no violence. Boston drew national attention because of the riot.

As Russell (1975) suggested, the strike cannot be understood apart from the domestic political situation in 1919. After the Russian Revolution of 1917, many Americans genuinely feared a Soviet-style revolution in the United States. The rhetoric of the Russian communist party and of militant socialists in the United States did little to alleviate the situation.

Almost every historian who has examined the request for the AFL charter has noted the timing of the request. Although the issue was entirely a local affair, confrontation between the Social Club and the police commissioner took on added meaning in the summer of 1919. People might have been able to conceptualize the issues of the strike in another period, but the events of 1919 tempered their views. When the police walked out, their action was interpreted in terms of national hysteria and not as a local confrontation between Curtis and the Social Club.

Americans in 1919 seemed to have reason for fear. Weinstein (1968) argued that the war had cemented the order of industrial capitalism in the American social structure but that Americans were disillusioned. Hawley (1979) pointed out that there were riots in 20 major American cities in 1919. Allen (1931) outlined the extensive cross-country bombing campaign of anarchists, and Noggle (1974) has summarized the attacks on government officials. Antianarchist feelings spilled over to antiunion feelings. When strikes seemed to accompany the surge of terrorist violence, average Americans drew no distinction between Bolshevism and organized labor. The Boston police had no idea of the national impact that they would have when they walked away from their jobs in September.

Because the striking police officers were engaged in union activities, their actions became suspect in the minds of many Americans. According to Allen (1931), most Americans in 1919 were more concerned about internal security than with other social issues. The strong anticommunist mood which

swept the country in 1919 spilled into Boston in September. When the police walked out, many people saw this as the first stage of a Bolshevik revolution (Daniels, 1966). The hysterical atmosphere was conducive to violence.

The hysteria was undoubtedly one of the factors which motivated a number of prominent Bostonians to volunteer to serve as a replacement police force. Their actions need to be examined for two reasons. First, with volunteers and other nonstriking police officers at his command, Curtis actually had more officers during the strike than he had prior to it. Second, the volunteers came from the wealthier sections of Boston. This created a class distinction among the police and the working class. Both of these factors need to be examined in more detail.

After the 1905 restructuring of the Boston police department, the Boston police enjoyed the highest police per capita ratio in the country. Administrators believed that this high ratio was responsible for Boston's relatively low crime rate, and it was hailed as an administrative model for other jurisdictions. According to Fosdick (1921), Boston maintained 2.3 police officers for every 1,000 people. He attributed Boston's relative lack of crime to this ratio.

Curtis had actually increased this ratio with volunteer police officers. During the summer of 1919, he had feared a walkout and had recruited volunteers. By September, Curtis was confident that Boston could withstand a police strike. More than 400 patrol officers had vowed to remain on duty, and Curtis also had 225 command officers to assign to patrol. In addition, he assigned 100 park police officers to regular patrol duty, and he planned to ask Governor Coolidge for help from the state police. This skeletal force was backed by 1,954 volunteers and 220 railroad police. In the final analysis, Curtis had hundreds more officers available than he had under normal circumstances (Boston Police Department, 1919). If police controlled crime, it would have been logical to expect a crime decrease during the strike.

Not only did the increased force fail to stem the violence, it exacerbated it. This can be explained by public perceptions of the force's class and ethnic status. According to Reppetto (1978), the regular police were drawn from the local Irish working class. They were part of the community they serviced, and socially and economically they were not outsiders. Few firm statistics can be found to verify Reppetto's contention, and critics are quick to point out that Boston police officers are frequently stereotyped as "Irish working class."

Lane (1967) has devoted some attention to the ethnic composition of the force in the 19th century. From 1865 to 1885, the number of Irish officers increased dramatically. There were no Irish officers in 1861, but there were nearly 40 in 1869. By 1880 there were 100 Irish officers, and their numbers were growing. Under O'Meara the force was perceived to be an Irish force and, regardless of its ethnic

composition, the police enjoyed respect and cooperation in Irish neighborhoods.

The perception of the force was the crucial issue in 1919. After the 1905 reform, Bostonians generally accepted the stereotyped version of the Irish police officer. O'Meara molded that image to his advantage. In working-class neighborhoods and Irish communities, the police were seen as an extension of local power. By the same token, the power elites in Boston felt that the police well represented the interests of the business class.

The volunteer police officers who flocked to Curtis's banner did not carry the aura of class and ethnic equality. They were composed of business people and bankers, industrial police with a proven track record against labor, and elites from the Yankee community. Even the Harvard football team was sent on patrol. The volunteer police force was not part of the community, especially the community of the Irish neighborhoods.

When the characteristics of the riot are examined, the importance of the class status of the volunteer police force should not be overlooked. After an initial outburst of looting and drinking, the riot began to take shape. It was characterized by two recurring events, a marathon crap game in Scollay Square and random attacks by mobs on the volunteer police officers in Irish neighborhoods. The riot hardly represented a political revolution or the outburst of a crime wave. It did, however, demonstrate the deep class divisions in Boston.

While the riot obviously can be linked to a rise in criminal activity, the types of crimes merit examination. Evidence suggests that the riot began in a festive mood and became violent as mobs formed. The first reports of violence came from South Boston, where Irish street gangs were strong. Gang violence, however, was aimed almost exclusively at volunteer police officers. The gangs had enjoyed an informal code of behavior with the regular police. The appearance of the volunteer police officers threw this relationship into disarray. Apparently, the gangs did not like the idea of their informal network being broken by Yankee police officers. In South Boston they laid siege to the police station and told the volunteers to stay inside. The gangs did not go on a crime spree; they declared war on the volunteers.

If Boston had been subjected to a crime wave, the violence would have manifested itself in a different fashion. One would expect, as Walker (1988) has suggested, that robbery and burglary would have increased. It is difficult to ascertain whether this happened. To be sure, looting occurred, but it was the result of mob action. While newspapers reported a tremendous increase in rapes, street muggings, and murders, subsequent investigation revealed that most of the horror stories of roving criminals were fabrications. Data about the types of violence during the riot are sparse, because accurate crime statistics in Boston are difficult to obtain. Lane (1967) found a similar problem in his research of the 19th century.

It is possible, nevertheless, to draw a rough sketch of criminal activity during the riot. While the annual police report cannot be viewed as the comprehensive crime portrait of Boston, it is a good beginning. Criminal activity, according to the 1919 report, revealed two important trends. First, the overall number of arrests decreased in 1919, from 90,293 the year before to 67,947. Fewer police officers meant fewer arrests, even during a riot. Second, a reported increase in serious felonies does not appear actually to have materialized. Offenses against property increased, but offenses against people decreased. By far, the most commonly reported offense was disorderly behavior.

While there was a difference between reported offenses and the actual crime rate, another and perhaps more compelling form of evidence appeared in September of 1919. The actions of the National Guard also suggest that an increase in serious felonies never materialized. The response of the National Guard serves as the best evidence to support this position. If Boston had been involved in a crime wave, the Guard would have needed to respond with anticrime measures. In short, it would have responded to Boston as a police problem, and the National Guard would have dropped its military posture to serve as a *de facto* police department. This was hardly the case.

Russell (1975) did an excellent job of piecing together news accounts of the National Guard's activities with their official reports. The Guard did not come to Boston with the idea of patrolling the city. Russell reported that they departed the train in a grim mood with their bayonets fixed. Many of the veteran soldiers had just returned from World War I, and they were searching for their enemies. They found them among the street mobs and the gamblers in Scollay Square. The National Guard attacked Boston. Mobs were cleared by bayonets and volleys, and the marathon crap game in Scollay Square came to an abrupt end during a cavalry charge. The National Guard brought martial law, not preventative patrol.

The Guard may or may not have overreacted, but that is not the central issue. What is obvious is that the Guard was countering an emotional mob. Far from moving through hordes of criminals, the Guard employed the riot control methods that were acceptable in 1919. Its response was not anticriminal; it was antimob. This helps to demonstrate that the riot in Boston was more of an emotional outburst than a traditionally defined crime wave.

It is difficult to assess accurately the nature of criminal activity during the riot, but when the actions of the Guard are compared to arrest figures a picture emerges. Boston was in the midst of mob violence during the strike, not a crime wave. In this sense, it is probably better to conceive of the riot as an outburst of emotion rather than crime. Boston was only one of 20 major cities to experience a riot in 1919. The political mood of the country was more to blame for the riot than a repressed criminal element waiting to pounce upon

the public. The police strike was a catalyst to violence but was not the cause of criminal anarchy.

Conclusion

Why did the conventional wisdom suggest that the absence of the police caused a breakdown in law and order? There are several reasons, and probably the most important factor was the relationship of the strike to the nation's mood. A police strike in 1919 was a national event, and it placed Boston in the forefront of a violent, hysterical period. Like other major urban areas in 1919, Boston was socially ready to explode. Twenty cities experienced riots during the year with no police strike. The Boston police strike, however, served as a catalyst to a riot. It was an excuse to go berserk. The public forgot the other issues and blamed the police.

Another reason for the misconception is the way the press interpreted the strike. The press accepted the conventional argument without question. Boston's papers, even those with Irish working-class circulation, believed that the strike was synonymous with a loss of social and legal control. Before the strike, many of Boston's papers approached the topic of the walkout with a sense of doom. They predicted that criminals, thugs, and bandits would be left to rule the street. The riot seemed to reinforce their predictions. National newspapers reflected these themes.

Politicians responding to the riot were not disposed to look for underlying causes, and, given the events of 1919, it would have been politically unwise to do so. In a time of hysteria, the nation was in no mood to search for complex social realities. The nation simply wanted to return to normalcy. Calvin Coolidge sensed this and rode his newfound popularity to the White House. He was viewed as the man who helped save the country from anarchy.

Finally, the arrival of the National Guard did much to foster the notion of crime control. If the 1919 annual police report serves as evidence, no one seems to have questioned the purpose or function of the Guard. Far from an antiriot force, the Guard was commonly perceived to be an anticrime force. They remained on duty until a new police force could be recruited, and then they returned to civilian occupations. The crime control myth seemed to have been endorsed. The police walked off, but order was restored when the Guard walked on.

Although conventional wisdom suggests that the Boston police strike supports the idea of police control of crime, an analysis of the riot suggests that this was not the case. The ethnic balance in 1919 Boston was maintained by a series of informal social relationships. When the police walked out, these relations were thrown into disarray. Confusion was exacerbated by a wave of national hysteria and mass media exaggerations. Crimes such as robbery and burglary did not increase, but mob violence and group psychology dictated the course of the riot. Evidence suggests that the police did

not control crime in Boston, and the character of the riot tends to prove this. In 1919, however, few people looked for the social meaning of the riot.

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