

VIOLENCE BY ANY OTHER NAME

Thomas A. Dutton

The April 7, 2001, early morning shooting death of black teenager Timothy Thomas by white police officer Stephen Roach has triggered outrage in Cincinnati. Once again it is a time of urban rebellion. And once again Cincinnatians are shocked: How could this happen to the Queen City? On the April 13, 2001, edition of ABC's *Nightline*, Mayor Charlie Luken lamented the "violence" as "unthinkable." He and many others seem unable to grasp the public expressions of outrage—in the confrontations at City Hall, in formal protests, and in the streets. At a press conference earlier that day he pleaded for the "violence" to cease. "Knock it off," he said. "Knock it off now. It's just that simple." No question, the violence should stop. But, as a white professor active in Over-the-Rhine for twenty years, I consider the matter is far from simple.

At times like these it is vital to think clearly about how social problems, including violence, are defined. In this case, newspapers and television coverage have identified the core problem as "police/community relations," the "cop culture," and "race relations." As is now well known, fifteen African Americans have been killed by police officers since 1995, four since last November. They have been the only people killed in this time. As Reverend Damon Lynch III, leader and organizer of the Black United Front, remarked on the same *Nightline*, some of these shootings may be "justified," but too many happened under suspicious causes, such as the asphyxiation of Roger Ownensby Jr. after he was already handcuffed. This is absolutely tragic, and as Reverend Lynch urged, changes must occur quickly within the cop culture.

But the problem of race relations has other dimensions that need attention too, dimensions that may escape notice if the problem is defined mainly as "police/community relations." In fact, there is something superficial about bemoaning "Cincinnati's Racial Divide" and the hand-wringing over "Cincinnati in Crisis." To be sure, race relations in Cincinnati



are not good. The tone of much media coverage about race tensions and segregation in Cincinnati, as well as the Mayor's comments at Timothy Thomas' funeral, are about the need for healing and reconciliation—as if the problem is merely a lack of communication that can be cleared up by a good counseling session.

While police/community relations are very much a part of race relations, to equate the latter to the former is a reduction. Reducing our view about the myriad and seemingly intractable problems of the inner city to that of police/community relations may miss an opportunity to understand such problems in a deeper and more systemic sense. Worse, constructing Over-the-Rhine issues ideologically around police/community relations may reinforce a rather truncated discourse about crime, where behaviors of outrage are isolated from the social context that produces them: “If you do the crime, you do the time,” period. Crime here simply becomes an individual matter, its origin in social life neatly dismissed. As the ironically named Mr. Fangman, the aggressive president of the Fraternal Order of Police, notes, “We can't help it that these suspects committed violent acts... We don't create these situations, folks, we just react to them” (*Cincinnati Enquirer*, April 14, 2001, p. A4). The mass media and some political leaders have already exercised this punitive discourse, evoking references to the Gaza Strip, Beirut, and LA, and denigrating enraged black youth as looters, rioters, knuckleheads, lawbreakers, and roving mobs, devoid of humanity, just “dogs” in the street. This kind of discourse will never reveal how people of color have been systematically disenfranchised and brutalized in this country.

While everyone focuses on the “violence” currently raging in the streets, we need to come to understand how violence has been waged against African Americans and other people of color for a very long time. We could start with the enslavement of Africans as foundational to the American economy, but allow me to



concentrate now on the last fifty years. Since the late 1940s and early 1950s a series of moves on the part of government and the private sector have reinforced our own “American Apartheid:”

1) An explosion of the suburbs for the white middle class, encouraged by FHA’s liberalization of the mortgage market as well as its regulations favoring new construction, the single-family detached house, and a neighborhood appraisal process that ensured that neighborhood properties will continue to house the same social and racial classes;

2) The implementation of Urban Renewal that razed many black neighborhoods to make way for freeways, sports arenas, and corporate redevelopment, all of which displaced blacks into other (often slum) neighborhoods and into high-rise public housing projects;

3) A global restructuring of the economy which, through technological changes, de-industrialization, and the relocation of industry to outlying “edge cities” as well as other countries, guts the black working class of its job base in the manufacturing sector, resulting in a decline of real wages for workers, underemployment, and outright joblessness and;

4) The rise of neoconservatism to political power which divests the state of meeting social need—rollbacks on affirmative action, eliminating welfare, cutbacks in housing—while it prescribes more punitive measures—increases in police forces, the building of prisons, continuation of a militarized economy—all at a time when social need worsens greatly.

These trends cripple the livelihood and reveal the sham of “equal opportunity” for communities of color—and African-American communities in our inner cities in particular. The “hyper-segregation” of blacks in the inner cities is now a structural reality. As sociologists Massey and Denton say in their book



American Apartheid, “One-third of all African Americans in the United States live under conditions of intense racial segregation... No other group in the contemporary United States comes close to this level of isolation within urban society.” Recent census data now states that Cincinnati is the eighth most segregated city in the US. This extreme social and spatial isolation exacerbates the pathological effects of poverty, making it difficult to sustain neighborhood institutions and social organization.

As these trends of institutional violence continue to wrack most American cities, they take a particular form in Cincinnati:

1) Consider that in 1996 at the request of an alliance of corporate, business, and city power, the Urban Land Institute came to Over-the-Rhine bearing gifts of a gentrified, private market, and homeownership agenda for a community where approximately 90% of the population have incomes well below the reach of the market, let alone homeownership;

2) Consider Cincinnati Pops director Erich Kunzel’s “dream” to build the Greater Cincinnati Fine Arts and Education Center near Music Hall which, after originally promising no displacement, called for the removal of the Drop Inn Center, the area’s largest homeless shelter and lead institution in the Over-the-Rhine People’s Movement;

3) Consider the motion passed by the City Planning Commission on July 21, 2000 not to fund additional low-income housing units on Vine Street, which: 1) discriminates against a particular race and class—mostly low-income people of color; 2) ignores the city’s own Consolidated Plan which states a need of 30,000 affordable housing units in Cincinnati and; 3) discounts the city’s own records which show that between January 1995 through the first quarter of 2000, 60% of the \$8 million invested by the Dept. of Neighborhood Services for housing programs in OTR supported market-rate housing development and;



4) Lastly, consider mayor Luken's about-face decision last summer not to support the \$4.5 million tax credit package of ReSTOC—a community based, non-profit housing cooperative—to build economically mixed housing in Over-the-Rhine (a project that qualified for state funding by its third-place ranking in the state), and then forcing ReSTOC to sell one of its buildings in the package to a private owner to develop dot-com enterprises.

These examples of institutional violence have one thing in common, and that is the way they market Over-the-Rhine as an idealized version of itself, effectively erasing Over-the-Rhine as a place for poor people of color. Imagine your own neighborhood marketed to consumers on the basis of its architecture, promoted as a kind of airbrushed postcard version of the truth. The only problem is that the picture of your neighborhood has you airbrushed out of it. Revitalization efforts in Over-the-Rhine are selling an image that has no place for the poor who actually live there. “Development” means attracting people of higher incomes to live and play and work. Certainly development is a complex process entailing change, and I am not suggesting that the neighborhood keep out newcomers, including people of higher means. My point is that the city fights to deny resources to community based organizations while promoting renovation that expressly caters to whiter, wealthier residents. And in this process, the buildings and urban ambience are sold like a stage-set to folks who want to consume an urban night out. OTR is being Disneyfied, and this requires pushing people who don't look nice on the postcard out of the way. No wonder Over-the-Rhine residents feel resentful of such a development strategy. No wonder Main Street symbolizes the incursion of foreign investment.

Will such conditions propel new thinking within the city's elite about how to view urban issues and propose solutions? I am



doubtful. Hardly any version of community development today is conceptualized outside of the ideology of corporatism, with its lingo of public/private partnerships, enterprise and empowerment zones, tax abatements, tax incentives, and deregulatory legislation, all of which are ploys to advance privatization, to reduce environmental standards, and generally to subordinate social movements to the interests of business and the profit system. Community development has been reduced to a kind of plea-bargaining with the powers that be, such that utopian vision (full employment? housing as a right? free healthcare? transportation as a right?) cannot even make it to the table, and thus what ends up constructed as hope within the community is the desire to have a little more money funneled in its direction.

Trying to meet social need within a systemic distribution of resources that is badly skewed and maladjusted is the dominant ideology in community development today. Make no mistake, I am not disparaging community-based activists. But I do insist that Cincinnatians understand the larger forces at work over the last fifty years and to see how they circumscribe and condition what is conceptualized as possibility on the part of community leaders. That community institutions continue to persist at all within this context is an amazing testament; consider the thirty-plus year history of the Over-the-Rhine People's Movement. We should be thankful for their unending and tireless work to meet desperate need.

Urban disruption indicts the institutional rules that structure police/community relations, race relations, and community development in the US, and Cincinnati. It is the clarion call that such rules are not working, and that the new theoretical ground already embodied by such groups as the Over-the-Rhine People's Movement and the Black United Front needs to take root. The concept of "violence" needs expansion. Gentrification that produces displacement is an act of violence. Ignoring the 1985 Over-the-Rhine Comprehensive Plan, with its clear call to



preserve a minimum base of low-income housing, is an act of violence. Economic development that neglects to provide jobs for the people in OTR is an act of violence. Building stadia and supporting corporations at public expense while closing inner city schools are acts of violence. These violences are not separate from the issues we normally associate with police/community relations, or race relations. They are integral. And as long as all these issues are theorized on the same ground, within the same institutional rules, in favor of the same powerful groups who make those rules, poor communities of color will only lose. We should not be surprised when such communities erupt in righteous anger against the bonds of their oppression.

Thomas A. Dutton, Director

*The Miami University Center for Community
Engagement in Over-the-Rhine*

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