
Elizabeth Hinton, *America on Fire. The Untold Story of Police Violence and Black Rebellion Since the 1960s*

Simon Stow

- 1 Elizabeth Hinton, *America on Fire. The Untold Story of Police Violence and Black Rebellion Since the 1960s*.
- 2 W.W. Norton, 2021. Pp. 408. ISBN: 978-1-63149-890-9
- 3 Author: Simon Stow, The College of William and Mary, Williamsburg, VA
- 4 The central claims of Elizabeth Hinton's *America on Fire* are not new. What is new is the eloquence and painstaking nature of their presentation. It is a significant accomplishment and a major contribution to our understanding of urban violence in the United States. As Hinton makes clear, however, right from the outset, it is important to recognize that the nomenclature of such events – even “urban violence” – is itself deeply politicized. What most – and especially those on the right – call “riots,” and those on the left sometimes call “civil disturbances” are, she argues, best understood as “uprisings” or “rebellions” (3). The former terms, she notes, drain such events of any political content, and are thus reduced to expressions of anger, despair, or mass criminality on the part of a Black underclass (4). It is for this reason that she chooses to employ terms such as “rebellion” and “insurgency” (6) that capture the active and conscious nature of this violence. Indeed, she repeatedly identifies an internal logic to the uprisings which suggest the agency they embody, pointing to the ways in which those engaged in the rebellion picked out certain buildings for destruction – such as white owned businesses that treated Black customers poorly or who wouldn't hire African Americans – while leaving others, usually Black owned, standing (66, 219).
- 5 Hinton's most telling contribution is, however, her account of the causes of this violence. The prevailing view since the 1960s has been, she notes, the failings of the Black community. Downplaying accounts which would focus on socioeconomic factors (179), there has been a tendency among police and lawmakers to pathologize Black

behavior, pointing – as in the Moynihan Report – to the supposed breakdown of the Black family. The McCone commission, convened after the 1965 uprising in the Watts neighborhood of Los Angeles pointed to a “spiral of failure” where “the conditions of life are often marginal, [and] mass violence supplies a momentary relief from the malaise” (6). Even the progressive’s term for such malaise, “alienation,” is, she notes, shot through with the same misunderstandings of Black life, suggesting a population that is either unfit or unwilling to take part in society (176). Indeed, there is a tendency, she argues, for such figures to identify a perception among Black Americans of their being disadvantaged by racism that undermines their societal participation, while at the same time downplaying the extent or even the existence of that racism in ways that pathologize them as delusional (175). Indeed, in truly audacious move, many whites comes to see these views as embodying an anti-white racism that aims at, among other things, a genocide against the police (96, 115).

- 6 It is, however, the police and policing that draw the most attention in *American Under Fire*. Hinton repeatedly and convincingly makes the point the most urban rebellions or uprisings are caused by over-policing by an increasingly militarized and overly aggressive set of law enforcement agencies. By way of illustration, she tellingly notes that between 1964 and 1970 the federal allocation from nothing to \$300 million, an increase of 2,900 percent (22). Indeed, she argues that “Americans have been living in a nation and a national culture created in part by the extreme violence of the 1960s and early 1970s” (3). That culture, asserts Hinton, is a culture in which the short term fix of more police, and more heavily armed police has come to dominate over the sort of long-term solutions outlined by various formal inquiries such as that of the Kerner Commission. At every inflexion point, she notes, that “short-term solution became a long-term reality” (9). Nobody ever asked, she argues, whether President Johnson’s “War on Crime” actually exacerbated that which it was supposed to dampen (8). At the heart of Hinton’s book is the claim that it does precisely that. Most uprisings in the 1960s and early 1970s were, she notes, precipitated by regular, small-scale police interactions – such as traffic stops – with citizens tired of being overpoliced. Rock and bottle throwing was, she recounts, met by massive police force which then escalated into the uprisings that the instigators called riots (15). Tellingly, Hinton argues, more recent uprisings such as those in Ferguson, Missouri in 2014 following the death of Michael Brown, or in Baltimore, Maryland in 2015 following the death of Freddie Gray, only emerged from particularly egregious acts of police violence. This, she says, is evidence of how much of the “War on Crime” has become a part of the everyday lives of African Americans. “There are,” she writes in one of the book’s most original points, “no longer rebellions against everyday policing practices, a sign that the status quo has become accepted, however bitterly. In this sense, at least, national and local authorities won the War on Crime” (15).
- 7 There is so much of value in this text for understanding America’s urban uprisings, and much that I have not touched on in my review. I might, therefore, seek to justify my initial claim that its central theses are not new. The dog that does not bark in this text, though it should, is Frantz Fanon’s *Wretched of the Earth*. Time after time, Hinton’s arguments echo Fanon’s claims in that text. I am not, of course, suggesting impropriety on the part of the author, simply that an engagement with his work on violence might have added another layer to what is already an impressive text. More than that, however, it might have led Hinton to consider the extent to which the audience for such violence is not necessarily white. She argues, for example, that collective political

action is political if it is aimed at the government (14), but Fanon tells us that this need not be the case, that the development of consciousness through violence – something that Hinton hints at in the text (90) – might also be understood in political terms. That the author did not do what the reviewer might have done is not, of course, a legitimate critique of the book, simply a suggestion as to how an excellent and illuminating text might be further developed.