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Sociology

**Revisiting the Crown Heights Riot:
Multiethnic Hostility
at the Neighborhood and City Levels**

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Abstract

The 1991 Crown Heights riot in New York City represents one of the more significant recent examples of inter-ethnic urban violence. When the rioting was finally contained after three days of chaos, 38 civilians and 152 police officers had been injured, local businesses had suffered millions of dollars in property damage, and an innocent man was murdered by a mob. The speed and severity of the anti-Jewish fury, both violent and rhetorical, suggests considerable built-up hostility from the Afro-Caribbean Blacks of Crown Heights to their Lubavitcher neighbors. The 'power-threat' hypothesis argues that as a minority group increases in size, the majority will become increasingly antagonistic. However, findings based on a survey of American cities in the early 90s (MCSUI) suggest that neighborhood tensions may be most intense when the minority group is smaller. Respondents in neighborhoods that are more ethnically mixed and integrated are least likely to be hostile to other ethnicities. The theory appears to work at the citywide level, where a diverse city will lead to tensions between its ethnic groups competing for power and resources. Both offer reasonable explanations in the case of Crown Heights and New York City more broadly, though further study is required. The analysis of explanations for the 1991 riot offered in this paper provides a relevant context for understanding other multiethnic dynamics throughout the world.

Introduction

The Crown Heights Riot in 1991 was a nadir in Black-Jewish relations. Even observers who were unsentimental about those two communities' historic 'alliance' were shocked by the speed and severity of the anti-Jewish rhetoric and violence. Numerous explanations for this hostility have been offered in the three decades since. Many have argued for the primacy of antisemitism as a root cause. Others point to inequities and incompetence among civic institutions, especially the New York City Police Department, that ignored growing local tensions. Still, others locate the source of the conflict in the unique dynamics of Caribbean immigrants interacting with an ultra-orthodox Hasidic sect. Underneath all of these explanations is an assumption that the underlying cause of the Black community's hostility was the encroaching demographic presence of Lubavitcher Jews. This notion echoes the 'power threat hypothesis,' which argues that punitive actions from a majority group to a minority will increase as the minority grows in size and power. However, data from ICPSR's Multi-City Study of Urban Inequality (MCSUI) suggests that this assumption may be true at the metropolitan area level, but not at the neighborhood level. Indeed, the Crown Heights crisis manifested differently at these two levels. It began in the neighborhood, where the death of a Black child by a car driven by a member of the Lubavitcher Rebbe's retinue enraged feelings of injustice among the Caribbean community. At the city level, it was exacerbated by the involvement of partisans who extrapolated the crisis to a Black versus Jewish frame, to promote their larger political mission. As analyzed by J. Eric Oliver and Janelle Wong, the MCSUI data provide a helpful explanation for this difference and insights into why the post-riot reconciliation efforts independently pursued by neighborhood community leaders were successful.

Theories of Intergroup Dynamics

The Multi-City Study of Urban Inequality (MCSUI), conducted from 1992 to 1994, provides data that offers insights into ethnic relations in neighborhoods like Crown Heights. Organized by the Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research, the MCSUI was an omnibus survey project that aimed to "broaden the understanding of how changing labor market dynamics, racial attitudes and stereotypes, and racial residential segregation act singly and in concert to foster contemporary urban inequality." Using multistage sampling, adult residents in four metropolitan areas were surveyed: Atlanta (April 1992-September 1992), Boston (May 1993-November 1994), Detroit (April-September 1992), and Los Angeles (September 1993-August 1994). The

survey posed questions about how whites, Blacks, Asians, and Latinos perceive each other, including “amount of discrimination, perceptions about wealth and intelligence, ability to be self-supporting, ability to speak English, involvement with drugs and gangs,” and similar issues. In addition to a broad range of demographic questions, it also asked respondents about their current satisfaction with their neighborhood and their preferences for its ideal ethnic and racial makeup.¹

By integrating MCSUI’s attitudinal data with the 1990 Census demographics by census tract, social scientists J. Eric Oliver and Janelle Wong were able to establish several powerful findings concerning multiethnic urban environments. In “Intergroup Prejudice in Multiethnic Settings” (2003), and developed further in Oliver’s *The Paradoxes of Integration*, the data is used to persuasively suggest that, contrary to common assumption, hostility between ethnic groups at the neighborhood level does not increase with the size of a minority ‘out-group.’ The logic of this assumption is easily appreciated and is elaborated within the sociological tradition as the ‘power-threat’ hypothesis. Developed by sociologists Herbert Blumer and Hubert Blalock in the 1950s and 1960s respectively, the hypothesis argues that hostility and punitive actions from a majority group to a minority will increase as the minority grows in size and power.² This argument was developed from and for the context of Black-white relations and, as Oliver and Wong outline, may not necessarily correspond to situations where both groups are ‘minorities’ in the context of American society and where inter-communal dynamics emerge from specific contexts nothing like the Black-white tragedy of coerced immigration, slavery, and repression.

Their findings show that, in a variety of urban American multi-ethnic neighborhoods, the results are the opposite of what the ‘power threat’ model would suggest. They demonstrate that negative attitudes held by members of an ethnic ‘in-group’ that demographically dominates a neighborhood are consistently higher when the size of their majority is larger. Conversely, the hostility an ethnic group feels towards its minority neighbors decreases as they are closer in size, precisely the situation where a ‘power threat’ would expect greater animosity. Paradoxically, the predicted effect does appear, but only at the metropolitan level. Using

¹ Lawrence Bobo, et al. “Multi-City Study of Urban Inequality, 1992-1994: [Atlanta, Boston, Detroit, and Los Angeles].” Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research [distributor], April 4, 2008. <https://doi.org/10.3886/ICPSR02535.v3>

² Herbert Blumer. “Race Prejudice as a Sense of Group Position.” *The Pacific Sociological Review* 1, no. 1 (1958): 5. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1388607>. John Shelton Reed. “Percent Black and Lynching: A Test of Blalock’s Theory.” *Social Forces* 50, no. 3 (1972): 356-60. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2577039>.

the same MCSUI data, Oliver and Wong indicate that more diverse cities, where several different similarly-sized ethnic groups are competing for resources, prominence, and power, will suffer from greater intolerance.³ The more evenly powered these ethnic groups are at the city level, the greater the hostility between them. In other words, an extremely segregated neighborhood that is in a metropolitan area where ethnic factions actively contend for status should generate the most interethnic animosity and potential for violence. This precise combination of factors applied to Crown Heights in the 1990s. At the time of the riots, the area had an 80 percent Caribbean Black population as compared to 10 percent Hasidic Jewish, within the most racially diverse urban area in the country.⁴ Given these unique demographics and the findings derived from the MCSUI data, it is not surprising that neighborhood-level tensions between the Blacks of Crown Heights and the much smaller Lubavitcher community would be exacerbated by the hyperactive racial politics of New York City and explode into open conflict. All that was required was a trigger.

The Crown Heights Riot

Crown Heights is located in central Brooklyn within New York City, bounded on the west by Prospect Park, to the north and east by the sprawl of Bed-Stuy and Brownsville, and on the south by Flatbush. In 1940, Rebbe Joseph Isaac Schneerson moved his ultra-Orthodox dynasty, known as Chabad or the Lubavitchers from Poland to 770 Eastern Parkway in the center of Crown Heights. Originating in the 1700s as a branch of the revivalist Hasidic movement, Chabad prioritized outreach to non-Lubavitcher Jewish communities, while remaining relatively insular within their community.⁵ Over the next decades, the Lubavitcher population in Crown Heights grew, bolstered by the arrival of Holocaust survivors from Europe. By the 1960s, Hasidim outnumbered the secular Jews who had populated the neighborhood since the 1920s.⁶

³ J. Eric Oliver, and Janelle Wong. "Intergroup Prejudice in Multiethnic Settings." *American Journal of Political Science* 47, no. 4 (2003): 573. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3186119>.

⁴ Richard Girgenti. *A Report to the Governor on the Disturbances in Crown Heights: A Review of the Circumstances Surrounding the Death of Yankel Rosenbaum and the Resulting Prosecution*. Vol. 1. Albany, N.Y.: New York State Division of Criminal Justice Services, Office of Justice Systems Analysis, 1993, 39.

⁵ A. S. Ferziger, "From Lubavitch to Lakewood: The Chabadization of American Orthodoxy," *Modern Judaism* 33, no. 2 (April 2, 2013): 102.

⁶ Edward S. Shapiro, *Crown Heights: Blacks, Jews, and the 1991 Brooklyn Riot*. Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2006. 73.

Beginning in 1965, changes to federal immigration laws allowed more immigrants from the Caribbean. This group replaced the secular Jews who were by then abandoning Crown Heights, both due to the unwelcome presence of the Lubavitchers and to move to the suburbs.⁷ In 1960, the neighborhood was 70 percent white; within a decade the neighborhood had become 70 percent Black.⁸ Most of these new arrivals came from the Caribbean, including the Dominican Republic, Haiti, and Jamaica, along with Guyana in South America. By 1991, four in five residents of Crown Heights were Black. Most of the remainder were Lubavitchers.⁹ The Black population was mainly Caribbean immigrants who arrived after the removal of immigration quotas in the 1965 Hart-Celler Act; many still lacked citizenship.¹⁰ The Lubavitchers were most concentrated in a dense enclave around 770 Eastern Parkway and maintained a lifestyle that necessitated limited engagement with their Black neighbors.¹¹ Despite this separation, the two communities had come into growing conflict. The state investigation on the Crown Heights riot, which published its findings in the Girgenti Report, named for the lead investigator, indicated underlying tensions that led to the conflict. In 1977, five hundred Blacks protested in front of the 71st Precinct on New York Avenue and Empire Boulevard over alleged brutality by the Lubavitch anti-crime patrol.¹² Public housing and community board disputes were perpetual sore spots, but the most potent cause of Black anger toward the Jews of Crown Heights was their close relationship with the New York Police Department. The report cites “deep resentment in the black community over... the practice of closing public streets and barricading a service road during the Jewish Sabbath...and, at times, black residents have been required to identify themselves to gain access to the streets.”¹³ To the Black community, these were examples of their white Jewish neighbors, a minority, imposing their will on the Black majority. Echoing these sentiments, Reverend Al Sharpton later described the Lubavitch community in

⁷ Rachel Buff, “Teaching Crown Heights: The Complex Language of Identity.” *Shofar* 15, no. 3 (1997): 26.

⁸ Henry Goldschmidt, *Race, and Religion Among the Chosen People of Crown Heights* (Rutgers University Press, 2006). 94.

⁹ Richard Girgenti, *A Report to the Governor on the Disturbances in Crown Heights*. Albany, NY: New York State Division of Criminal Justice Services, Office of Justice Systems Analysis, 1993. 40.

¹⁰ Carol B. Conaway, “Crown Heights: Politics and Press Coverage of the Race War That Wasn’t.” *Polity* 32, no. 1 (1999): 98.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 99.

¹² “Jewish Anticrime Patrol Brings Protest by Blacks,” *The New York Times*, July 10, 1977, <https://www.nytimes.com/1977/07/10/archives/jewish-anticrime-patrol-brings-protest-by-blacks.html>

¹³ Quoted from Girgenti, 45.

Crown Heights as a ‘Fort Apache,’ likening it to a colonialist outpost amid Native Americans.¹⁴

On August 19, 1991, Rebbe Menachem Mendel Schneerson was returning home from the cemetery with a police escort in front and a station wagon behind him.¹⁵ The station wagon veered into an apartment building and hit two Black children, Gavin and Angela Cato.¹⁶ An ambulance run by the Hasidic emergency service, Hatzolah, arrived to take away the driver of the station wagon but not the seriously injured children.¹⁷ While the Cato children were eventually taken to Kings County Hospital, the largely Black crowd that formed around the scene began roving the streets.¹⁸ One group of Black teenagers encountered a young Orthodox student, Yankel Rosenbaum, and attacked him.¹⁹ Rosenbaum was also taken to Kings County Hospital, where he died early the next morning.²⁰ Over the next day, more NYPD officers were dispatched to Crown Heights to suppress disturbances, but violent protests and street fighting continued. A group of youths assaulted Lubavitcher Isaac Bitton and his son on Schenectady Avenue between President and Carroll Streets.²¹ On Wednesday, Dinkins was mobbed by rioters and, when he tried to calm the raucous crowd, received boos and objects thrown at him.²² Finally, the next day, First Deputy Commissioner Raymond Kelly deployed more aggressive tactics.²³ With officers now empowered to make immediate arrests and use force to disperse crowds, incidents were limited to an evening demonstration in

¹⁴ Dovid Margolin, “Jews Don’t Run: The Rebbe and Lessons from Crown Heights - On the 30th Anniversary of the Riots, How Crown Heights Survived to Remain a Thriving Jewish Neighborhood,” Chabad.org, August 19, 2021.

¹⁵ Shapiro, 2.

¹⁶ Girgenti, 55.

¹⁷ John Kifner, “A Boy’s Death Ignites Clashes in Crown Heights,” *The New York Times*, August 21, 1991, <https://www.nytimes.com/1991/08/21/nyregion/a-boy-s-death-ignites-clashes-in-crown-heights.html>.

¹⁸ Girgenti, 57.

¹⁹ Philip Gourevitch, “The Crown Heights Riot & Its Aftermath,” *Commentary Magazine*, January 1, 1993, <https://www.commentary.org/articles/philip-gourevitch/the-crown-heights-riot-its-aftermath/>.

²⁰ Conaway, 96.

²¹ Joseph P. Fried, “Vivid New Court Statements Detail Crown Heights Clash,” *The New York Times*, April 3, 1993, <https://www.nytimes.com/1993/04/03/nyregion/vivid-new-court-statements-detail-crown-heights-clash.html>.

²² Lynne Duke, “Racial Violence Flares for 3rd Day in Brooklyn,” *The Washington Post*, August 22, 1991, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1991/08/22/racial-violence-flares-for-3rd-day-in-brooklyn/719de3c5-766a-4a24-b344-883f6ac72953/>.

²³ Girgenti, 102.

front of 770 Eastern Parkway.²⁴ There were no incidents on Friday or Saturday. The Crown Heights riot was over, but everyone was aware that the conditions that had led to the violence remained. As *The New York Times* described it, a “yawning psychic chasm between uneasy neighbors was still apparent on the streets.”²⁵

Citywide Actors and the Response to the Riots

Throughout the riots and the aftermath that followed, local hostilities were magnified by the involvement of powerful city-level actors and factions with their interests. For these players, the real battleground was not street protests and violence, but rather their performance in local media and city elections. ‘Crown Heights’ was only one chapter in a narrative of injustice they claimed existed for much longer and on a greater scale than this specific event and were energetic in fulfilling the role of a champion to address it. Most importantly, the interplay between these two levels of multi-ethnic competition – neighborhood and city – had the intention and effect of broadening the public’s perception of the crisis from a Caribbean Black-Lubavitcher clash into a Black-Jewish or even a Black-white conflict.

Two individuals deserve recognition for their role in generalizing and amplifying racial tensions between the Lubavitchers and the Crown Heights Black community during the three-day conflict, as well as for impeding early efforts at reconciliation: the Reverend Alfred C. Sharpton and the former United States Attorney for the Southern District Rudolph W. Giuliani. In 1991, Sharpton was one of America’s highest-profile civil rights activists, an advocate for victims of racially motivated crimes like Michael Griffith and Yusuf Hawkins. He had also been criticized for his involvement in the controversial Tawana Brawley rape incident.²⁶ To Sharpton, the death of Gavin Cato was another example where those who murdered Black people were not brought to justice. Sharpton was involved in demonstrations during the week of the riots, some of which devolved into violent confrontations, although he was not personally involved in the fighting. On the second day, Reverend Al Sharpton and activist Lenora Fulani led a rally on Utica Avenue that became a charge on police lines.²⁷ But it was the Reverend’s campaign for attention in the weeks that followed the riots that threatened to break

²⁴ Shapiro, 41.

²⁵ “In Crown Heights, Simmering Tensions and a Fragile Peace,” *The New York Times*, August 23, 1991, <https://www.nytimes.com/1991/08/23/nyregion/in-crown-heights-simmering-tensions-and-a-fragile-peace.html?searchResultPosition=2>.

²⁶ Shapiro, 20.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 38.

the fragile ‘ceasefire’ between the two communities. Gavin Cato’s funeral was on August 26, 1991. Both Mayor Dinkins and Sharpton attended. While Dinkins offered brief remarks that called for peace and reconciliation, Sharpton delivered a fiery eulogy. He declared that “[t]hey don’t want peace. They want quiet. If they want peace, look at the arrangements in Crown Heights and make it equal.”²⁸ Infamously, he compared Jews to diamond dealers in South Africa, suggesting that the Jews who lived in Crown Heights were connected to the apartheid regime.²⁹ The shocking cries of “Heil Hitler” heard during the riots were a spontaneous street-level sentiment, but Sharpton deliberately used his speeches to imply that Lubavitchers were part of a larger conspiracy of Jews working to undermine Blacks in New York and America. He used the riots as an opportunity to promote his city-level political agenda, even when it did not necessarily reflect the realities of tensions in Crown Heights.

The other city-level actor, aligned with the Jewish community, was Rudolph Giuliani. In 1989, he ran as a Republican for mayor against Dinkins and lost, but he planned to run again in 1993. Giuliani saw in the Crown Heights riot a wedge issue to divide the Black and Jewish communities that were core components of the Democratic coalition in New York, as well as to undermine Dinkins’ persona as a racial healer and Jewish ally. A version of this strategy was ‘previewed’ in 1992 by Republican Senator Alfonse D’Amato, then struggling for his re-election. His campaign claimed that the Senator was the first public official to call the riots a ‘pogrom,’ insisting that his Jewish opponent, Abrams, was “hiding” on the issue.³⁰ In his close victory, the Senator managed to win a plurality of the Jewish statewide vote, nearly 40 percent, far higher than a Republican would normally receive.³¹ As the mayoral election in 1993 approached, Giuliani planned to use the Crown Heights riot to sabotage Dinkins’ Jewish support, essential to winning what was likely to be, like 1989, a very close election.³² On November 26, 1992, more than a year after the riots, the mayor delivered a televised Thanksgiving sermon that

²⁸ Dick Sheridan, “No Indictment: Calm Follows Storm,” *Daily News*, September 6, 1991, <https://www.newspapers.com/image/468908227/>.

²⁹ Shapiro, 158.

³⁰ Lally Weymouth, “On the Stump with Al D’Amato,” *The Washington Post*, November 1, 1992, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/opinions/1992/11/01/on-the-stump-with-al-damato/12b68d26-9cb7-4143-a13f-44db9ac3b102/>.

³¹ Alessandra Stanley, “The 1992 Elections: New York State -- U.S. Senate Race; D’Amato: Combining Money, Attacks and Foe’s Blunders,” *The New York Times*, November 5, 1992, <https://www.nytimes.com/1992/11/05/nyregion/1992-elections-new-york-state-us-senate-race-d-amato-combining-money-attacks-foe.html>.

³² Edward S. Shapiro, In conversation with the author, May 7, 2023.

included a defense of his conduct in Crown Heights and called for healing and unity. Jewish politicians and allies attacked the speech for failing to engage with his mistakes and for characterizing his detractors as “rabble-rousers.”³³ Giuliani castigated Dinkins for refusing to address what happened to the victims of the riots. “The people who are the most emotionally involved in this...are sitting out there with all the same questions they had the day before the speech.”³⁴ As the election approached, Giuliani began describing the events of August 1991 as a ‘pogrom,’ which Dinkins and other Democratic commentators argued was “race-baiting” and divisive.³⁵ When the election arrived in November, Giuliani’s strategy had paid off. With nearly the same margin as the election of 1989, he defeated Dinkins.³⁶ According to exit polls, Giuliani won nearly two-thirds of the Jewish vote that year, including 97 percent of the Jewish vote in Crown Heights itself and nearby Williamsburg.³⁷ Both Sharpton and Giuliani gained stature from the crisis, proving the political utility of making a neighborhood crisis into a city-wide symbol.

Intergroup Socialization as Reconciliation

Over the months that followed, the post-riot campaigns of Sharpton and Giuliani, which were trumpeted on the front pages of the city’s tabloids and in mass demonstrations, became increasingly disconnected from the realities of peace-making efforts on the ground in Crown Heights. Work to reconcile the communities was already underway, focused on making change from the ground up rather than messaging in the media. Leaders in both communities hoped that success could be found by bringing their people together to communicate rather than throwing rocks or racial slurs at one another. Oliver’s *The Paradoxes of Integration* offers support for the integration-building efforts of the Crown Heights community leaders in its analysis of the MCSUI survey data. In every urban area studied, friendship relationships with members

³³ Joel Siegel, “Dave in Pitch for Peace,” *Daily News*, November 26, 1992, <https://www.newspapers.com/image/469955487/>.

³⁴ James C. McKinley Jr., “Dinkins, in TV Speech, Defends Handling of Crown Hts. Tension,” *The New York Times*, November 26, 1992, <https://www.nytimes.com/1992/11/26/nyregion/dinkins-in-tv-speech-defends-handling-of-crown-hts-tension.html>.

³⁵ Edward S. Shapiro, “Interpretations of the Crown Heights Riot.” *American Jewish History* 90, no. 2 (2002): 106.

³⁶ Janet Cawley, “Giuliani Defeats Dinkins in Down-to-Wire New York Mayor’s Race,” *Chicago Tribune*, November 3, 1993, <https://www.chicagotribune.com/news/ct-xpm-1993-11-03-9311030172-story.html>.

³⁷ “Jewish Voters Back Giuliani in New York Mayoral Upset,” *Jewish Telegraphic Agency*, November 4, 1993. <https://www.jta.org/archive/jewish-voters-back-giuliani-in-new-york-mayoral-upset>.

of other ethnic groups are shown to have a significant effect on lessening neighborhood racial hostility. There is a nearly 20 percent increase among respondents who “feel close with blacks” or “feel close with whites” among the opposite race for those who report relationships with the other group.³⁸ Forging racially and ethnically mixed connections lowers racial prejudices, even in neighborhoods with dangerous levels of ethnic divide. Wong and Oliver are cautious about the reasons for this effect.

Given that the conditions in which interracial contact promotes racial understanding (e.g., equal status and goal sharing), it may simply be mere social exposure that leads to increased tolerance.... [R]esidents of integrated neighborhoods are more likely to participate in integrated civic associations that can often provide the ideal circumstances for interracial contact and may weaken negative racial attitudes.³⁹

Similarly, Crown Heights neighborhood leaders intuitively recognized that interracial contact could heal the tensions not only from the riots but those that had developed over the decades between the Blacks and Jews.

When the news of Gavin Cato’s death arrived at 770 Eastern Parkway, the initial response of the Lubavitcher leader, Rebbe Schneerson, was to not discuss the incident at all.⁴⁰ As the riots spiraled out of control, the Rebbe offered a vague gesture of goodwill: “It’s not in the nature of the Jewish people to have war,” which to many seemed like it did not adequately address the causes of the violence nor the anger in the Black community.⁴¹ To their credit, the Lubavitchers recognized that they had to reach out to their neighbors to ensure the violence would not return.

Since 1964, the West Indies Labor Day Parade has provided a celebration of the numerous ethnicities who made up the Afro-Caribbean community of Crown Heights. The Lubavitchers had long disliked the event, which encroached on their enclave on Eastern Parkway. In 1991, they used the Crown Heights riot as an opportunity to see it canceled due to the risk of the crowd turning violent.⁴² However,

³⁸ Oliver, 125.

³⁹ Wong and Oliver, 580.

⁴⁰ David Gonzalez, “As Racial Storm Rages, Hasidic Leader Is Aloof,” *The New York Times*, August 26, 1991, <https://www.nytimes.com/1991/08/26/nyregion/as-racial-storm-rages-hasidic-leader-is-alooof.html>.

⁴¹ Shapiro, 9-10.

⁴² Manuel Pérez-Rivas, “Looking to Have a Good Time,” *Newsday*, September 1, 1991, <https://newsday.newspapers.com/image/706198907/>.

Mayor Dinkins, who was to serve as Grand Marshal of the parade, brokered a compromise where an increased police presence would be put in place and the event went on as planned.⁴³ Lubavitcher representatives even joined the Afro-Caribbean leaders and the mayor, sending a hopeful message amidst the increased police presence and an atmosphere of distrust between the two groups.⁴⁴ Hasidic institutions also tried to rectify the mistakes that led to the violence. Hatzolah was the Jewish ambulance service that many Blacks held accountable for taking Yosef Lifsh, who crashed his car, instead of bringing the Cato children to medical attention. A week after the fatal accident, Hatzolah refurbished an ambulance owned by a Black organization for a joint service that would help both Jews and Blacks rather than discriminate.⁴⁵ In April 1992, community leaders held a “Seder of Reconciliation,” which would foster cultural exchange between the two groups and would “bridge the divide between Blacks and Jews.”⁴⁶ Even while the public sphere was consumed by the seeming failure of the message of reconciliation with Sharpton’s Cato eulogy, community leaders took the lead in moving forward and healing the wounds that had been opened by the week of August 21. It remained necessary to build organizations that would prevent an event like the riots from happening again.

After the riot, two youth group leaders, Richard Green, a Black, and David Lazerson, a Jew, joined together to set up Project CURE to provide activities that might unite teenagers from the two communities and help build tolerance.⁴⁷ Green and Lazerson started by hosting pickup basketball games where Lubavitchers and Afro-Caribbeans got to know each other, helping to dispel stereotypes each group had of the other.⁴⁸ Soon the program grew into after-school activities that discussed the “rich friendship between blacks and Jews historically” while providing extracurricular activities to young people who might not otherwise have access.⁴⁹ Green also worked on street outreach that

⁴³ Jeff Neverson and Don Singleton, “A Time to Heal, Celebrate,” *Daily News*, September 1, 1991, <https://www.newspapers.com/image/469093249/>.

⁴⁴ Leslie Wines, “Rabbis March in Caribbean Parade - UPI Archives,” *UPI*, September 2, 1991, <https://www.upi.com/Archives/1991/09/02/Rabbis-march-in-Caribbean-parade/1869683784000/>.

⁴⁵ “A Gift of an Ambulance,” *The New York Times*, August 28, 1991, <https://www.nytimes.com/1991/08/28/nyregion/a-gift-of-an-ambulance.html>.

⁴⁶ Henry Goldschmidt, *Race, and Religion Among the Chosen People of Crown Heights* (Rutgers University Press, 2006). 139.

⁴⁷ Shapiro, 222.

⁴⁸ Andrew L. Yarrow, “Blacks and Jews Take It to the Hoop,” *The New York Times*, October 12, 1991, <https://www.nytimes.com/1991/10/12/nyregion/blacks-and-jews-take-it-to-the-hoop.html>.

⁴⁹ Reuven Blau, “Amid Hate Spike, A Crown Heights Leader Pleads for Peace,” *The City*, January 13, 2020,

would “intercept these young people before it got to the critical point” that might lead to further violence. These actions lowered local rates of youth crime.⁵⁰ In January 1993, Project CURE hosted a scrimmage at halftime during a Knicks game, Racial Harmony Night, that celebrated the camaraderie and breaking of barriers that sports could achieve.⁵¹ Project CURE continues to provide programs to bring together young Blacks and Lubavitchers, using interethnic socialization to lower tensions between the two groups.⁵²

Anna Deavere Smith’s one-woman play, *Fires in the Mirror*, based on interviews conducted with Crown Heights residents, follows in the same communitarian ethos that motivated Project CURE and other efforts. By presenting the transcripts without edits, Smith centers the individuals and their stories and, crucially, the different perspectives to show the complexity of the situation. Along with narratives of the riot itself, she tells the story of a Lubavitcher woman asking a Black boy for help turning off the radio on the Sabbath and a Black girl’s view on the fashion choices of other ethnicities at her high school. She brings together both firebrands like Minister Conrad Muhammad of the Nation of Islam and activists like Norman Rosenbaum. The latter is portrayed both to deliver a speech about the need for justice for his brother, the murdered Yankel, and in a more personal reflection about how he learned the news of his brother’s death and how he felt. The spirit of the project might be best described by Richard Green when Smith quotes him arguing that men like Sharpton “didn’t have any power out there really. The media gave them power... Those young people had rage like an oil well fire that has to burn out.” The line emphasizes the centrality of individual choices and emotions to the conflagration that emerged. Smith’s play criticizes the role played, and not played, by citywide figures in events like the riots. She focuses her hope on the neighborhood

<https://www.thecity.nyc/brooklyn/2020/1/13/21210620/amid-hate-spike-a-crown-heights-leader-pleads-we-have-to-do-better>.

⁵⁰ David Mark Greaves, “Interview Richard Green Co-Founder, Crown Heights Youth Collective Patriarch, American Hero” *Our Time Press*, July 7, 2019, <https://ourtimepress.com/interviewrichard-greenco-founder-crown-heights-youth-collectivepatriarch-american-hero/>.

⁵¹ Ira Berkow, “Sports of The Times; Question: Can We All Run Together?” *The New York Times*, January 25, 1993, <https://www.nytimes.com/1993/01/25/sports/sports-of-the-times-question-can-we-all-run-together.html>.

⁵² Eli Cohen, “Three Days of Rioting Shattered Crown Heights. Thirty Years of Peacemaking Helped Put It Back Together.” *Jewish Telegraphic Agency*, August 19, 2021, https://jewishweek.timesofisrael.com/three-days-of-rioting-shattered-crown-heights-thirty-years-of-peacemaking-helped-put-it-back-together/?preview_id=1318742&utm_source=NYJW_Maropost&utm_campaign=NYJW_Daily_Update&utm_medium=email.

people at its center, and in doing so indicates that change is possible when focused on the community.

Conclusion

Explanations for the Crown Heights riot have ranged from a socioeconomic disparity between the two communities, inequity, and bias in treatment by the police, specific dynamics within the Caribbean Black and Lubavitcher cultures of Brooklyn, as well as a more general resurgence of that ancient hatred, antisemitism. To some extent, all of these are likely true. But the broadest potential explanation, and the most instinctual, echoes the ‘power threat hypothesis’ developed in the 1950s and 60s to explain structural racism. Applied here, this hypothesis would suggest that hostility from the Black community of Crown Heights was the result of the growing and encroaching demographic presence of Lubavitcher Jews, an argument that has common-sense parsimony, as well as less admirable resonance with antisemitic discourse.

The 1992-1994 MCSUI data, however, implies that this theory may not be sufficiently explanatory at the neighborhood level that any explanation for Crown Heights requires. From surveys of Atlanta, Detroit, Boston, and Los Angeles, results show that hostility between Blacks, whites, Latinos, and Asian Americans does not increase as minority out-groups grow in size. In contrast to expected results from the ‘power threat’ model, hostility declined in neighborhoods in which ethnic groups became closer in size and connection. With the postulation that New York City should exhibit similar dynamics to the four surveyed cities and that Caribbean Blacks and Hasidic Jews behave similarly in multi-ethnic settings as those other surveyed groups, one explanation for Crown Heights, then, is not that the Black population perceived its hegemony to be eroding and threatened by the Lubavitchers, but rather that ethnic demographic dominance causes or is accompanied by interethnic hostility. Further study is necessary to suggest whether this theory is broadly applicable where the demographics might not align with Oliver’s model as well as Crown Heights.

The so-called paradox further suggested by Wong and Oliver’s analysis of the data is that the ‘group threat’ hypothesis does, however, operate at the metropolitan level. More evenly diverse cities suffer from greater interethnic hostilities while those with one dominant group feature less. While the reason for this clear difference between the two levels of analysis remains unclear, it is useful to consider how they might interact, at times with pernicious effects. A more diverse city, like New

York, will have vigorous competition and resentment between ethnic groups. This may function to amplify and disseminate the hostility generated by highly segregated settings, like 1990s-era Crown Heights. When the riots are examined with the benefit of time, it seems probable that this neighborhood/city dynamic provided at least a contributing factor. If so, it is likely that the efforts at reconciliation diligently pursued by Crown Heights local leaders, to ignore their city-level advocates and partisans and develop deeper relationships between members of their very distinct communities, is partly responsible for the decades of enduring peace between Blacks and Jews in the neighborhood. It points to a possible solution to multiethnic tensions in other cities, given similarly diverse populations on the neighborhood and city levels.

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