

Interpretations of the Crown Heights Riot

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The Crown Heights riot of August 1991 was one of the most serious incidents of antisemitism in American history. It took place in the Crown Heights neighborhood of Brooklyn, the worldwide center of the Lubavitch Hasidic movement, and lasted for three days. The riot was precipitated by an automobile accident involving a motorcade carrying the Lubavitcher rebbe back from one of his periodic trips to the Lubavitch cemetery in the borough of Queens. The accident killed a young boy named Gavin Cato and injured his cousin Angelina. The riot terrorized and traumatized the 20,000 Lubavitchers of Crown Heights. Yankel Rosenbaum, a Lubavitcher from Australia living temporarily in Crown Heights, was murdered; Bracha Estrin, a Lubavitch survivor of the Holocaust, committed suicide; six stores were looted; 152 police officers and 38 civilians claimed to have been injured; 27 police vehicles were damaged or destroyed; and 129 persons were arrested.¹

While the property damage and the number of killed and injured were small compared to other riots in American history, they did not appear so to contemporaries. The extensive attention the riot received was due in part to the fact that it occurred in the media center of America, if not of the world. The riot was preceded by two other events in 1991 which, along with the riot, seemed to indicate that the liberal political alliance between blacks and Jews was unraveling and that a new chapter in the history of black-Jewish relations and of New York City had opened. The first of these was the publication of the first volume of the Nation of Islam's *Secret Relationship Between Blacks and Jews*, which emphasizes the involvement of Jews in the slave trade and slavery. The second was a much-discussed speech in Albany in 1991 by Leonard Jeffries, a professor at City College of The City University of New York. He accused Jews of having controlled the slave trade and of subjecting blacks to derogatory stereotyping through their control of the mass media, particularly Hollywood. Jeffries' speech created an uproar in

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1. Richard H. Girgenti, *A Report to the Governor on the Disturbances in Crown Heights*, vol. 1, *An Assessment of the City's Preparedness and Response to Civil Disorder* (Albany, 1993), 139.

New York and was one of the factors leading to his dismissal as chairman of his college's Black Studies Department.²

Many questions emerged in the riot's aftermath. They involved, among other things, the nature of the medical care which Rosenbaum received at Kings County Hospital; the culpability of David Dinkins, the city's mayor, and Lee Brown, the police commissioner, in the city's failure to put down the riot immediately; the extent of aid provided the beleaguered Jews of Crown Heights by the Jewish establishment; and the history of black-Jewish relations and black-Lubavitch relations in Crown Heights prior to 1991. But the most important question concerned the character of the riot itself: what precisely occurred in Crown Heights beginning in the evening of August 19, 1991?

Almost immediately after the riot a host of differing interpretations emerged regarding its nature and origins. This effort at explanation, which continued throughout the 1990s, reflected the diverse political, religious, and social circumstances, the differing ideological assumptions, and the divergent understandings of the past by the journalists, sociologists, political activists, and historians who wrote about the riot. The diversity of explanations was to be expected. As the literary historian Alan Mintz has said, all historical narratives, "from the personal story to complex novels, are not simply naive and faithful transcriptions of experience but are built around preexisting armatures or schemata or master plots. New narratives may add to, play with, and subvert these story lines, but an appreciation of their uniqueness must begin with an understanding of the preexisting models."³

Historians have distinguished between narratives of "memory" and narratives of "history." While memory is a product of folk remembrances and is shaped by contemporary concerns, history defers to professional standards and respects the integrity and complexity of the past. In his book *Imagining Russian Jewry: Memory, History, Identity*, Stanford historian Steven J. Zipperstein argues that the historian's role has been to "implode collective memory, to juxtapose as starkly as possible the differences between history and myth, scholarship and error." This distinction between memory and history has been particularly significant in efforts to understand the American Jewish past, because many American Jews consider themselves repositories of quasi-

2. Nation of Islam Historical Research Department, *The Secret Relationship Between Blacks and Jews: Volume One* (Chicago, 1991). For the text of Jeffries' speech, see *New York Newsday*, August 18, 1991. Interestingly enough, there is no mention of the Crown Heights riot in Donald Horowitz, *The Deadly Ethnic Riot* (Berkeley, 2001).

3. Alan Mintz, *Popular Culture and the Shaping of Holocaust Memory in America* (Seattle, 2001), 72.

sacred memories involving Jewish identity, continuity, and antisemitism. As New York University historian Hasia R. Diner notes, the study of American Jewish history has been complicated by a Jewish collective memory which provides “a series of linked images that have grown organically out of the contemporary cultural needs of the public, however diverse it may be, as it defines and justifies itself and its present condition.” These images “provide the intertwined leitmotiv in American Jews’ understanding of where they have been, where they are now, and possibly, even where they might be heading. This bundle of memories plays a crucial role in the creation of an American Jewish narrative.” But, Diner concludes, “the right to interpret the experience” of American Jews must necessarily reside not with the general Jewish population but with professional historians because of their “academic training and emotional distance.”⁴

For the Jews of Crown Heights, the riot was simultaneously enigmatic and intelligible. Accustomed to viewing Jews as victims, they denied any responsibility for the events of August 1991 and were mystified as to its outbreak. They believed relations with their black and West Indian neighbors had been, if not close, at least cordial. “Today,” wrote Edward Hoffman in *Despite All Odds*, a sympathetic study of Lubavitch Jewry written just before the riot, “Crown Heights is one of the few truly integrated sections of New York City, where black and Jewish homeowners co-exist as next-door neighbors, each determined to maintain the safety and viability of their community as a place for families to live peacefully. The contrast to other sections of Brooklyn could not be more striking: burned-out tenements and boarded-up storefronts dominate the rubble-strewn landscape.” The Lubavitchers claimed that the rioters could not have come from Crown Heights. Rather, they must have been from other parts of Brooklyn and stirred up by outside agitators such as Alton Maddox, Sonny Carson, the Reverend Herbert Daughtry, and the Reverend Al Sharpton.⁵

For a small number of Crown Heights Jews, the riot was not simply an old-fashioned pogrom but a portent of the messianic era. For the Lubavitch messianists, it was not fortuitous that the riot had been triggered by an accident involving a motorcade in which the head of the Lubavitch community, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, was a passenger. Messianism had assumed a more prominent view among the Lubavitch Hasidim in the 1980s when Schneerson declared that the

4. Steven J. Zipperstein, *Imagining Russian Jewry: Memory, History, Identity* (Seattle, 1999), 95; Hasia R. Diner, *Lower East Side Memories: A Jewish Place in America* (Princeton, 1999), 18–19.

5. Edward Hoffman, *Despite All Odds: The Story of Lubavitch* (New York, 1991), 148.

coming of the messiah was impending and that it was their responsibility to make preparations. The often cryptic comments of Schneerson regarding messianism encouraged a minority of his followers to conclude that he, in fact, was the messiah. This growing messianism took place at a time when earth-shaking events could be interpreted as signs of the coming of the messianic era. In 1989 there was the death of the Ayatollah Khomeini in Iran, the student protests in Communist China, the breakup of the Soviet empire, the destruction of the Berlin Wall, and the mass exodus of Jews from Russia to Israel and the West. These events were followed by the airlifting of Ethiopian Jews to Israel and America's war with Iraq in 1991, which, despite the fears of Jews and the threats of Iraq, left Israel virtually unscathed. And then, almost simultaneous with the rioting in Crown Heights, there was Hurricane Bob and an unsuccessful coup in the Soviet Union. A full-page advertisement in the August 30–September 5, 1991 issue of *Jewish Week* of New York, paid for by Joseph Gutnick, a wealthy Australian supporter of Lubavitch, put these events into an apocalyptic framework. "Any one of these phenomena by itself is enough to boggle the mind. Connect them all together, and a pattern emerges that cannot be ignored," it declared. "The Era of Moshiach is upon us. Learn about it. Be a part of it. All you have to do is open your eyes. Inevitably, you'll draw your own conclusion."⁶

But what conclusion could be drawn about the riot? On the one hand, most Lubavitch spokesmen downplayed any messianic significance of the riot. It was a despicable act of anti-Jewish violence, pure and simple. But, on the other hand, it had begun as a result of an accident involving a car in Schneerson's own entourage. The accident could not be fortuitous, since everything that happened was part of God's plan. Schneerson's failure to speak directly about the riot fueled speculation that he believed it to be further confirmation of the impending arrival of the messiah. The ambivalence of Rabbi M. Shmuel Butman, who delivered the keynote eulogy at Yankel Rosenbaum's funeral, was characteristic of those Lubavitchers imbued with Lubavitch messianic fervor. For him the riot was both an attack on Jews everywhere and a sure sign that the messianic era was near.⁷

6. Allan Nadler, "Last Exit to Brooklyn," *New Republic*, May 4, 1992, 27–35; Jonathan Mark, "Crown Heights: 'Great Test' for Messianists," *Jewish Week*, August 30–September 5, 1991; David Remnick, "Waiting for the Apocalypse in Crown Heights," *New Yorker*, December 21, 1992, 53; Binyamin Jolkovsky, "Waiting for the King Messiah—and Wondering," *Forward*, November 19, 1994; Michael Specter, "Rabbi Menachem Schneerson: The Oracle of Crown Heights," *New York Times Magazine*, March 15, 1992, 35–38, 67–76. *Moshiach* is Hebrew for messiah.

7. Nadler, "Last Exit to Brooklyn," 27–35; Mark, "Crown Heights: 'Great Test' for Messianists."

This conflict between memory and history appeared in the immediate aftermath of the Crown Heights riot, as participants, onlookers, and scholars argued vigorously over the meaning of the riot. This conflict began with the description of Yankel Rosenbaum. According to the press and representatives of the Lubavitch community, Rosenbaum was a “rabbinical student,” a “religious scholar,” a “seminarian,” a “Talmudic scholar,” and a “divinity student.” Rosenbaum was not, in fact, a Lubavitch Hasid, although his clothing and beard were typical for members of this community. He was not a yeshiva student immersed in the study of Jewish religious texts. Rather, he was a future academician, and he was in New York researching Eastern European history during the 1930s in the archives of the YIVO Institute for his Ph.D. dissertation from the University of Melbourne.

This mischaracterization of Rosenbaum heightened his Jewishness and linked his death with the long and painful history of antisemitism, which many Jews in Crown Heights had experienced personally in Europe, as had Rosenbaum’s own parents, both Holocaust survivors. For the image makers, Rosenbaum’s significance was as a Jewish victim rather than as a Jewish history graduate student who happened to have been in the wrong place at the wrong time. It would have been incongruous to depict Rosenbaum as an academic since the Lubavitchers of Crown Heights did not, by and large, go to college, and they disdained the social and intellectual milieu of the university. Portraying Rosenbaum as an academic would also have detracted from the simplistic and dramatic imagery of black-Jewish conflict in Crown Heights. Also for those unfamiliar with Jewish history, it was natural to equate being Jewish with being religious, being religious with being an Orthodox Jew, and being an Orthodox Jew with being a student of Judaism’s holy texts. This distortion of Rosenbaum’s background was pervasive, and it occurred in a variety of Jewish and secular newspapers and magazines.

This imagining of Rosenbaum was part of a more general view of the riot as a “pogrom” and the rioters as modern-day “Cossacks.” “Pogrom” remains the favorite word of the Lubavitchers of Crown Heights to describe the events of August 1991. It was virtually inevitable that “pogrom” would be used since many of the Jewish families in Crown Heights had experienced the Holocaust, and the rioters were clearly hostile to Jews. They marched through Crown Heights chanting “Heil Hitler” and singling out Jews in Hasidic garb to attack. Even self-styled black “spokesmen” emphasized that the targets of blacks in Crown Heights were not an undifferentiated group of whites but the Jewish “diamond merchants” of Crown Heights.

Others besides Lubavitchers also used “pogrom” to describe the riot. Among these was *New York Times* columnist A. M. Rosenthal. In his September 3, 1991 column, titled “Pogrom in Brooklyn,” Rosenthal argued that the antisemitism exhibited in the Crown Heights riot would spread to other neighborhoods and cities if Jews remained “blind to reality, deaf to history—and suicidal.” “Black pogromists” exhibited the classic symptoms of antisemites: the dehumanization and demonization of Jews, the call for violence, the exaggerating of grievances against a peaceful minority. Rosenthal was particularly disparaging of the news reporting of the riot which pictured it as “some kind of cultural clash between a poverty-ridden people fed up with life and a powerful, prosperous and peculiar bunch of stuck-up neighbors—very sad of course, but certainly understandable.” Journalists unable to distinguish between political thugs and legitimate spokesmen for blacks, Rosenthal suggested, “are in the wrong business.”

Rosenthal’s column was quite critical of the mayor and the police commissioner. Not only had David Dinkins and Lee Brown been amiss in not immediately putting down the riot, but they had compounded this failure by meeting with Sharpton, Alton Maddox, and other “hate peddlers” and according them the respectability they desperately craved. Rosenthal was also scornful of the indifference of Jewish organizations to the suffering of the Jews of Crown Heights. “Their usually ferocious faxes were either silent or blurped out diplomatically balanced condolences to all concerned.” Rosenthal’s column was noteworthy since the *Times* had been generally supportive of the Dinkins administration.⁸

By contrast, the *New York Post* and Eric Breindel, the editor of its editorial page, had been strongly critical of the mayor long before August 1991, and the riot confirmed their opinion that he was simply out of his depth. The paper continually insisted during the remaining 28 months of Dinkins’ tenure that he had to go, and it offered as evidence his performance during the riot, which Breindel, a child of Holocaust survivors, persistently referred to as a “pogrom.” Former mayor Ed Koch, Mike McAlary, and Pete Hamill also described the riot in Crown Heights as a pogrom in their *New York Post* columns, and the paper called it the first pogrom in the West since the end of World War II.⁹

8. A. M. Rosenthal, “Pogrom in Brooklyn,” *New York Times*, September 3, 1991.

9. For an analysis of the *New York Post*’s coverage of the Crown Heights riot, see the unpublished paper by Professor Laurence Roth of Susquehanna University, “Tabloid Blacks and Jews: The *New York Post* Covers the Crown Heights Riots”; Richard Goldstein, “The Politics of Hate: Crown Heights and the Future of New York,” *Village Voice*, December 15, 1992, 12.

Breindel used “pogrom” in his column of September 5, 1991. Titled “Brooklyn Pogrom: Why the Silence,” it called the riot a “genuine pogrom” similar to those Jews had experienced in Europe. Breindel anticipated major criticism of his use of “pogrom.” He denied that a pogrom had to be sponsored by the government. A riot deserved to be called a pogrom if the government did not vigorously condemn the rioters and the police failed to put down the violence immediately. Breindel rejected any attempt to put a sociological gloss on the riot by portraying the riot as a response to economic and social deprivation. “This pogrom,” he said, “was a case of the poor terrorizing the poor. Jews who read life in terms of class rather than race should bear this reality in mind.” In any case, attempts to understand the thinking of the rioters were misguided, including the question “Why do so many black leaders dislike Jews?” Jews should fight all manifestations of antisemitism and not be side-tracked into futile and undignified attempts to mollify antisemites.¹⁰

By September 1991 it had become routine within Jewish circles to describe the riot as a pogrom and would remain so for some Jews a decade later. While the city government did not incite the rioters, Jews explained, the failure of the police to protect Jewish lives and property warranted identifying it as a pogrom. On August 22, 1991, New York City Councilman Noach Dear, who represented the heavily Jewish neighborhood of Boro Park, called the riot a “pogrom, just like we saw in Russia under the Czar, just like in Germany in 1939. This has to be stopped before the violence spreads.” An editorial in the August 30–September 5, 1991 issue of the *Jewish Week*, the highest-circulation weekly Jewish newspaper in New York City, declared “A Pogrom Grows in Brooklyn.” The paper would run articles with such titles as “After the Pogrom—An Analysis and Proposal.” Similarly, an October 29, 1992 press release by Judah Gribetz, president of the Jewish Community Relations Council of New York, termed the Brooklyn riot of August 1991 a “pogrom.” The *Jerusalem Post* also called it a pogrom and claimed it had been “fed by Arab propaganda and financed by Arab sources.” The paper hoped the riot would encourage the Jews of Crown

10. Eric Breindel, “Brooklyn Pogrom: Why the Silence?” *New York Post*, September 5, 1991. The editor of a collection of Breindel’s writings retitled this column “Kristallnacht in Brooklyn.” John Podhoretz, ed., *A Passion for Truth: The Selected Writings of Eric Breindel* (New York, 1999), 108–111. In a *New York Post* editorial of June 10, 1993 which strongly defended the use of “pogrom,” Breindel rejected the notion that a pogrom by definition must be state-sanctioned. Podhoretz, *Passion for Truth*, 120–22. See also the editorial “An Ugly Word Grows in Brooklyn,” *New York Post*, August 29, 1991.

Heights to wonder whether “the time has not come to join their brethren in Kfar Habad in Israel.” Nearly seven years after the riot the *Forward*, a weekly national Jewish newspaper, referred to the riot as a “pogrom,” and on the riot’s tenth anniversary the *Jewish Press*, a right-wing Orthodox weekly newspaper published in Brooklyn, carried an editorial by Shmuel Butman titled “The Crown Heights Pogrom: Ten Years Later.”¹¹

The description of the Crown Heights riot as a pogrom was insufficient to some residents of Crown Heights. They preferred Kristallnacht, a reference to November 8, 1938, when Nazis destroyed synagogues and Jewish-owned stores in Germany. A group called the Crown Heights Emergency Fund placed a full-page advertisement in the *New York Times* of September 20, 1991 headlined “This year Kristallnacht took place on August 19th right here in Crown Heights.” The statement warned that the Crown Heights riot was just the beginning and that Jews “everywhere” could expect attacks by “latter day Nazis.” This neo-Nazism “does not distinguish between Hasidic and non-Hasidic, Orthodox and Reform, affiliated or non-affiliated.” “The Jews of Crown Heights,” it concluded, “are the first line of defense for all American Jews and for all law-abiding citizens of good will—regardless of race, color or creed.” Other Jews compared the riot to Kristallnacht. An article in the *Jewish Press* bewailed the reluctance of America’s Jews to look realistically at the riot. “For some reason we are afraid to call it by name. It was America’s Kristallnacht. Shame on us. Shame on all of us.” A Jewish resident of Crown Heights who had survived the Holocaust agreed. “This has been like the pogroms,” Hannah Popack said. “Or like Kristallnacht. It is almost as though Hitler has come to life again.” Frequently the Jews of Crown Heights called upon both Jewish and American history to make sense of the riot. “What has happened to black people?” one Crown Heights Jew asked. “Why will no black leaders condemn these black Nazis, the black Ku Klux Klan?” And when the accused murderer of Yankel Rosenbaum was acquitted in October

11. Councilman Noah Dear News Release, “Dear Calls Upon Police Commissioner to Stop Pogrom,” August 22, 1991, American Jewish Committee Archives, New York; Simon Schneebalg, “After the Pogrom—An Analysis and Proposal,” *Jewish Week*, September 27–October 3, 1991; “Statement of Judah Gribetz, President, JCRC,” October 29, 1992, Jewish Community Relations Council of New York Archives, New York; “Crown Heights Closure?” *Forward*, April 3, 1998; “The Brooklyn Pogrom,” *Jerusalem Post*, August 26, 1991; Shmuel M. Butman, “The Crown Heights Pogrom: Ten Years Later,” *Jewish Press*, August 17, 2001. In the index of Fred Siegel, *The Future Once Happened Here: New York, D.C., L.A., and the Fate of America’s Big Cities* (New York, 1997), there is a listing for “Crown Heights pogrom.”

1992, one survivor of Kristallnacht said, “again, I heard the tinkling of the glass.”¹²

While the Crown Heights riot did not rise to the level of a pogrom, much less the Holocaust, it was infused with antisemitism. The riot was, as the *New Republic* said, “an anti-Semitic depravity.” (The *New Republic* also said that the riot “looks more and more like the first pogrom in American history.”) The rioters’ rhetoric was directed at Jews, and they attacked only Jews, those who looked like Jews, and the police who were protecting Jews. If recent history had taught Jews anything, it was to take very seriously the words of those seeking to do them harm. Jews were frightened even more by the failure of some black political and religious leaders to immediately condemn the rioters and black antisemitic agitators. This failure indicated, they feared, that antisemitism within the black community was not restricted to a lunatic fringe.¹³

The controversy over how to define the Crown Heights riot was not merely an issue of semantics. Politicians, both past and present, resorted to words redolent of the bloodshed and mass devastation suffered by European Jews to discredit Dinkins and his administration. Ed Koch, who had been defeated by Dinkins in the 1989 Democratic mayoralty primary and was a fierce critic of the mayor, continually used “pogrom” in characterizing the riot. It was, he said in 1993, “an ugly term, but it applies.” Other political foes of Dinkins also used “pogrom” since it implied that he had been indifferent to the attack on Jews. Andrew Stein, a candidate in the 1993 Democratic mayoral primary, used it in an unsuccessful effort to oust Dinkins. The controversy over the word came

12. Jonathan Rieder, “Crown of Thorns,” *New Republic*, October 14, 1991, 28; Ellin Ronee Pollachek, “America’s Kristallnacht: Anti-Semitism in Our Own Backyard,” *Jewish Press*, October 11, 1991; Popack, quoted in Dennis Duggan, “A Divide Uncrossed by Either Side,” *New York Post*, August 22, 1991; George P. Fletcher, *With Justice For Some: Victims’ Rights in Criminal Trials* (Reading, 1995), 69. For a criticism of the September 20, 1991 advertisement as a “betrayal of Jewish history and ethics” by a person who experienced Kristallnacht firsthand, see Henry Schwarzschild’s letter to the editor, *New York Times*, October 5, 1991: “However ugly were the anti-Semitic slogans and the assaultive behavior of people in the streets of Crown Heights a month ago, one thing that clearly did not take place was a Kristallnacht To speak, as the advertisement does, of neo-Nazism is to act as if the black community, itself under immense pressures of discrimination and social misery, were governmentally sponsored storm troopers. This abuses the historical uniqueness of the Holocaust for transient political and financial gain, dangerous in a community like New York, these days a tinderbox of group antagonisms.”

13. “Crown Depths,” *New Republic*, August 8, 1993, 7–8; Craig Horowitz, “The New Anti-Semitism,” *New York*, January 11, 1993, 23–24; Irving Greenberg, “Confronting Anti-Semitism: Steps for Blacks, Jews,” *Jewish Week*, September 27–October 3, 1991; Richard Cohen, “Victims of Black Antisemitism,” *Washington Post*, October 4, 1991.

to a head during the 1993 mayoral election. Rudy Giuliani, the Republican-Liberal candidate, made Crown Heights a key issue in his campaign, and he used “pogrom” frequently in attacking the mayor. “You can use whatever word you want,” he said in a Memorial Day weekend speech in the predominately white neighborhood of Bay Ridge in Brooklyn, “but in fact for three days people were beaten up, people were sent to the hospital because they were Jewish. There’s no question that not enough was done about it by the city of New York. One definition of pogrom is violence where the state doesn’t do enough to prevent it.”¹⁴

Not surprisingly, Dinkins and his supporters realized the political potential of the word, and they totally rejected its application to the Crown Heights situation. They argued that pogroms applied only to riots which were state-sanctioned, and no one could claim the Dinkins administration had fomented the Crown Heights riot. “To suggest that this is,” Dinkins said, “is not to contribute to the resolution of the problem but to exacerbate tensions and problems that are there.” Earl Caldwell, a black columnist for the *New York Daily News*, charged that Giuliani’s use of “pogrom” was inaccurate, racially divisive, and politically driven. Giuliani’s speech “does not bode well for a city that already has enough trouble.” The *City Sun*, a Brooklyn-based black nationalist weekly, charged that Giuliani’s use of “pogrom” resulted from a “quiet deal” he had made with the Crown Heights Jewish community. If any group was susceptible to a pogrom it was the city’s blacks since they faced the prospect of a police state led by Giuliani and supported by white, right-wing Republicans and Crown Heights Hasidim. Al Sharpton said that Giuliani was engaged in “race-baiting” by using the word “pogrom.”¹⁵

Dinkins refrained from such improbable conspiratorial notions. But he was personally offended by the use of “pogrom” since it insinuated that the riot was state-sanctioned and that he personally was an antisemite. “I am incensed by it,” he told radio personality Don Imus. It is “patently untrue and unfair.” Dinkins had many close Jewish friends, had appointed Jews to high positions within his administration, and had

14. Ed Koch, “‘Pogrom’ Is an Ugly Term, But It Applies,” *New York Daily News*, June 11, 1993; Giuliani, quoted in *New York Daily News*, July 1, 1993. See also Koch, “City Silent in Face of a New Pogrom,” *New York Post*, August 30, 1991. The August 26–September 2, 1996 issue of the *New York Observer* contained an editorial titled “The Pogrom in Crown Heights.”

15. Dinkins and Sharpton, quoted in Frank Lombardi, “Rev. Al: Rudy’s Race Baiting,” *New York Daily News*, June 2, 1993; Earl Caldwell, “Saying ‘Pogrom’ Does Violence to the City,” *New York Daily News*, June 2, 1993; *City Sun*, June 2–June 8, 1993.

gone out of his way to support Jewish causes. To be called an antisemite for political gain was, in his view, unconscionable even in a city where the politics of personal destruction had become an art form. To make matters worse, posters displayed at Jewish political rallies in Brooklyn during the campaign even charged Dinkins with responsibility for the murder of Yankel Rosenbaum. “Rarely has political discourse become so debased,” wrote the journalist David Remnick, “and yet this language of rage is tremendously influential.”¹⁶ But history, if not the memory of the Jews of Crown Heights, was on Dinkins’ side. Michael Stanislawski, a Columbia University historian and a specialist in modern European Jewish history, noted that it was “historically inaccurate” to couple “pogrom” with Crown Heights, because the word denoted organized violence against Jews “having some sort of governmental involvement.” Joyce Purnick, a writer for the *New York Times*, agreed. Giuliani’s Bay Ridge speech, she said, was not only inflammatory and wrong, but “an insult to those who lived through the real thing.” The city’s police “didn’t fail to protect the Jews of Crown Heights because they and David Dinkins wanted to see Jews killed. They weren’t Cossacks in blue. Thousands of Jewish New Yorkers were not murdered.”¹⁷

Liberal Jews who were emotionally committed to a black-Jewish political entente were also loath to use “pogrom.” Henry Siegman, executive director of the American Jewish Congress, warned against using such a loaded term. “It is strategically dumb and factually incorrect to insist that the violence in Crown Heights is essentially a black-Jewish problem,” he said shortly after the riot. “It is not. It is essentially a black-white problem and . . . for Jews to insist that it is a black-Jewish problem is to take the monkey off the back of white Americans and to put it on our own back.” Marc D. Stern, another official with the American Jewish Congress, agreed with Siegman. The riot, Stern said, was “in large part an anti-white riot, directed at the nearest available white community.” But it was also “the frustration of an inner-city black population which is beset by familiar urban ills—unemployment, drug abuse, teen-age pregnancy, and most telling of all, utter despair and hopelessness.”¹⁸

16. Dinkins, quoted in Paul Schwartzman, “Angry Dinkins: Crown Hts. Wasn’t a ‘Pogrom,’” *New York Post*, December 8, 1992; Remnick, “Waiting for the Apocalypse in Crown Heights,” 57.

17. Stanislawski, quoted in Joel Siegel, “Dinkins Huffly at Wordplay,” *New York Daily News*, December 8, 1992; Joyce Purnick, “Crown Heights Was Not Iasi,” *New York Times*, June 3, 1993. Iasi, a city in Rumania, is often spelled Jassy.

18. Siegman, quoted in Jerome A. Chanes, “Intergroup Relations,” in David Singer, ed., *American Jewish Year Book, 1993* (Philadelphia, 1993), 93; Marc D. Stern, “The Problem of Crown Heights,” *Congress Monthly* 60 (January 1993): 12.

If the Crown Heights riot was not a pogrom, then what was it? David Dinkins provided one analogy. As an American black man with a different historical narrative, the answer was readily at hand, although it took Dinkins three weeks to voice it. Yankel Rosenbaum and the Jews of Crown Heights, the mayor said, had experienced precisely what blacks had known in the American South—racially motivated mob violence. Dinkins used the terms “bias crime” and “lynching”—a word which resonated deeply within the historical consciousness of blacks—to describe the murder of Rosenbaum and likened it to the “lynching” of Yusuf Hawkins, a black teenager killed by a mob of white youths in 1989 in Brooklyn while checking out a used car. “No question,” Dinkins said. “Whatever term one gives to these kinds of vicious murders, that’s what it is.”¹⁹

By emphasizing the shared experience of victimization of blacks and Jews, Dinkins sought to repair the frayed political ties between the two groups, ties which were the basis of the city’s liberal political culture, and to salvage his own political future, which depended upon support from both communities. Other blacks, however, strongly dissented from his use of “lynching” to characterize the killing of Rosenbaum. They also resented any comparison of Rosenbaum’s murder with that of Hawkins. Just as Jews believed they had a proprietary interest in such words as “pogrom” and “Holocaust,” so blacks argued that “bias crime” and “lynching” should be used only when describing the murders of blacks. “How could the murder of Yankel Rosenbaum be called a lynching,” asked Colin Moore, the black nationalist lawyer. “To even describe it in the same breath as Yusuf Hawkins is an abomination. It’s pandering to the votes of a certain people.” Moore and others of his ilk hoped to use Dinkins’ terminology as a weapon in their struggle against the black political establishment of New York City.²⁰

Black radicals also denied that American blacks could be guilty of racism, as Dinkins’ statement claimed. Thus Al Sharpton speculated that Rosenbaum was murdered while being robbed. It was common within black radical circles of the early 1990s to argue that racism consisted of two elements—prejudice and power. While blacks could be prejudiced, they could not be racists since they lacked the power to put their

19. Dinkins, quoted in *New York Times*, September 7, 1991. The *New York Post*, the mayor’s leading journalistic foe, touched all the ethnic bases in describing the Crown Heights riot. On the riot’s first anniversary, it published an editorial titled “Anniversary of a Lynching,” *New York Post*, August 19, 1992.

20. *New York Times*, September 10, 1991; Moore, quoted in *New York Amsterdam News*, September 14, 1991.

prejudices into effect. United States Senator Daniel P. Moynihan, an authority on American racial and ethnic relations, strongly disagreed. "The notion that there is any race that is immune to the failings and sins of other people is itself a racist idea."²¹

Moynihan drew upon a pastiche of American historical precedents to understand the Crown Heights rioting. He called the murder of Rosenbaum a "KKK-style lynching" and said that New York could use the South as a model. "We got rid of the lynching in the South by a process of . . . public abhorrence, so the people involved became ashamed, and law enforcement, which took a long time." In describing the riot itself, Moynihan called it a "race riot," one that "was as bad as what happened in Detroit in 1943 when black workers were dragged from streetcars and killed by white workers." Moynihan's analogy at least put the Crown Heights riot within an American setting, although it is not accurate to equate Crown Heights with the riot in Detroit, which resulted in 34 deaths and required the military to restore order.²²

Another interpretation of the Crown Heights riot argued that it was not directed at Jews *per se* but at the Lubavitchers and that it had not been caused by antisemitism but by the jostling of blacks, West Indians, and the Lubavitchers for housing, government funds, political power, and city space. This jostling had been going on for years but without large-scale violence and rioting. A decade before the riot, Tim Robbins wrote in *City Limits*, a journal devoted to the study of New York City, that Crown Heights had seen "an ongoing tussle over turf and power between a large black and a West Indian population and an expanding community of Hasidic Jews." Historian Richard Wade agreed. Both groups, he said, were "locked into a unique historical struggle over a limited amount of space." From this perspective the riot was simply another chapter in the history of ethnic relationships and tensions in New York City—blacks versus Italians, Haitians versus Koreans, West Indians versus blacks. The riot, sociologist Jonathan Rieder said, must be understood within "the totality of ethnic relations in Crown Heights."²³

The belief that the riot was an ethnic conflict explained to some why Jews living in other areas in the city were not so fearful regarding the

21. Moynihan, quoted in *New York Post*, September 7, 1991.

22. Ibid. For the Detroit riot, see *Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders* (New York, 1968), 84–108.

23. Tim Robbins, "Tales of Crown Heights: The Fruits of Harassment," *City Limits*, December 1981, 12; Wade, quoted in Goldstein, "Politics of Hate," 11; Jonathan Rieder, "The Tribes of Brooklyn: Race, Class, and Ethnicity in the Crown Heights Riots," in Murray Friedman and Nancy Isserman, eds., *The Tribal Basis of American Life: Racial, Religious, and Ethnic Groups in Conflict* (Westport, 1998), 71.

future of ethnic and race relations in the city. According to Harriet Bogard, director of the New York regional office of the Anti-Defamation League, the circumstances in Crown Heights were unique and provided little instruction for understanding black-Jewish relations in general. The insular life-style of Lubavitchers was “culturally dissonant from what one assumes is normative for an American lifestyle” and made it difficult for them “to reach out beyond their own community.” This insularity resulted in a lack of contact with their neighbors which, in turn, led to a lack of knowledge and understanding between the two groups.²⁴

This “lack of contact” theory of prejudice became part of the conventional wisdom regarding the roots of the riot. But closer and more frequent contacts between groups does not necessarily further harmony. They can lead just as easily to hostility and contempt, as was the case in Crown Heights. The Lubavitchers rejected the “contact” theory. They noted that they were one of the few segments of the city’s Jewish population living in close proximity with blacks and West Indians, and they believed they were sufficiently familiar with the lifestyles of their neighbors. By contrast, they pointed out, Jewish national organizations which espoused the contact theory were staffed by persons who resided in the suburbs or in the city’s white neighborhoods. Little wonder, then, that the Lubavitchers became cynical about the advice proffered by the mainstream Jewish organizations headquartered in Manhattan.

Those who argued that the riot was directed at the Lubavitch community and not at Jews were, by and large, unsympathetic to the Lubavitch way of life. Peter Noel, a reporter of Caribbean background, claimed that the Lubavitchers were in large part responsible for the animosity of their black and West Indian neighbors. This resentment, Noel wrote, stemmed from the Lubavitchers’ aggressive lobbying for funds from government poverty programs, their assertive search for housing for their growing population, and their forceful demands for preferential treatment by city agencies, particularly the police. In responding to a question regarding the sources of mutual distrust between blacks and Hasidim in Crown Heights, Monsignor John Powls, the white pastor of St. Barbara’s Catholic Church in the depressed Bushwick ghetto of Brooklyn, provided another answer. “The real problem,” he said, is that “nobody understands how desperate inner-city communities like Crown Heights and Bushwick are right now. Young people there have absolutely nothing to live for. There are young adults 19 or 20 with nothing to do.” While this might have been true, it does not explain why

24. Bogard quoted in *New York Newsday*, August 26, 1991.

only in Crown Heights did ethnic rivalry and conflict—a longstanding feature of New York City’s history—escalate into a riot. Day-to-day relations between Italians and blacks were even worse than those between Jews and West Indians or between Jews and blacks, and yet there was no anti-Italian riot.²⁵

The Lubavitchers believed that characterizing the riot as anti-Lubavitch rather than antisemitic transformed them from victims into perpetrators. Even if everything said about the Lubavitch way of life was correct—which the Lubavitchers strongly rejected—did this justify violence against them? Were the Lubavitchers required to sit down at meals with their neighbors, to have their children play with non-Lubavitch children, to participate in interreligious and interethnic activities, and to educate others about the Lubavitch way of life in order to prevent rioting? Lubavitchers feared that characterizing the riot as anti-Lubavitch diminished the culpability of the actual rioters.

Jonathan Rieder provided the most extensive and sophisticated “ethnic” explanation of the riot. He strongly argued in several articles that the roots of the riot were multifaceted and “defy neat and easy categorization.” These roots included elements of racial, class, ethnic, economic, and generational conflict. In fact, Rieder said, while Jews were targeted by the rioters, “there was little evidence of coherent, formal anti-Semitic belief systems at work in Crown Heights,” and the “mob’s anti-Jewish rhetoric is hardly self-evident.” Rather, the riot resulted from the dysfunctional nature of ghetto culture, with its “repertoire of violent reprisals, collective allocation of blame, and communal vengeance” stemming from “alienation, antiwhite resentment, and retributive frustration.” At various times this black rage was directed at whites in general, Korean grocery store owners, or Hasidic Jews.²⁶

Crown Height Jews naturally were astonished by Rieder’s attempt to fit the riot into a liberal academic framework. What were they to make of his claim that racial and ethnic epithets were ambiguous and murky, especially to “outside observers who may not understand the communicative routines and linguistic codes that shape both the usage and significance of vernacular denigration”? Even the meaning of “Hitler

25. Peter Noel, “Crown Heights Burning: Rage, Race, and the Politics of Resistance,” *Village Voice*, September 3, 1991, 37–40; Pows, quoted in *New York Newsday*, August 26, 1991.

26. Rieder, “Tribes of Brooklyn,” 63–66; Rieder, “Reflections on Crown Heights: Interpretive Dilemmas and Black-Jewish Conflict,” in Jerome A. Chanes, ed., *Antisemitism in America Today: Outspoken Experts Explode the Myths* (New York, 1995), 358–69; Rieder, “Crown of Thorns,” *New Republic*, October 14, 1991, 26–31.

should have finished the job!" was not so self-evident to this sociologist. "Some of this opacity is of relatively recent vintage; but some of it is timeless, too." If formal antisemitic belief systems were not present among the rioters as Rieder believed, most of whom were young and poorly educated, certainly informal ones were. As even Rieder noted, the rioters baited Jews with shouts of "Hitler should have finished the job!" "Hitler was right!" "Seig Heil!" and "Kill the Jew." Recent history had taught the Jews of Crown Heights, who certainly were not "outside observers," not to discount the words of those who said they wanted to kill Jews. Rieder's revisionism, by contrast, "shockingly" defied common sense. It also challenged the relevance of the Jews' own historical narrative.²⁷

Rieder was one of many observers who stressed the social and economic roots of rioting in general and the Crown Heights riot in particular. Historian Robert Fogelson expressed the conventional liberal wisdom regarding the riots of the 1960s. They were, he said, "articulate protests against genuine grievances . . . [and] attempts to call the attention of white society to the blacks' widespread dissatisfaction with racial subordination and segregation." Since the 1960s, liberals and radicals had frequently described rioters as "protesters," riots as "insurrections" and "rebellions," and riotous behavior as "retaliatory violence." To their conservative critics, such explanations and terminology served to rationalize the violence of the rioters and to foster bizarre conspiratorial theories. Thus Richard Goldstein, a writer for the *Village Voice*, a left-wing weekly, said that the real culprit behind the Crown Heights riot was a white power establishment which sought to funnel black rage on to poor Jews. They hoped that doing so would deflect black anger away from themselves and drive a wedge between progressive-minded blacks and Jews in the city. There was, however, no evidence for such a conspiracy, and Goldstein's theory was credible only to the paranoid.²⁸

More thoughtful observers emphasized the social and economic environment of the rioters. Their sociohistorical narrative underscored the role of material deprivation, alienation, and despair in determining the behavior of the poor and was part of a cult of victimization and

27. Rieder, "Tribes of Brooklyn," 62, 64, 66; Marvin Greisman, "Liberal Professor Engages in Crown Heights Revisionism," *Jewish Press*, April 12, 1998.

28. Robert Fogelson, "Violence as Protest," in Roger Lane and John J. Turner, eds., *Riot, Rout, and Tumult: Readings in American Social and Political Violence* (Westport, 1978), 343; Richard Goldstein, "The New Anti-Semitism: A Geshrei," *Village Voice*, October 1, 1991, 34-36.

complaint which had become increasingly prominent in the nation since the 1960s. Taken to an extreme, this explanation could lead to exculpating and even justifying the rioting. According to proponents of the sociohistorical narrative, the proper context for understanding the riot was the history of racism, both nationally and in New York City. Riots were, in effect, protests against racism and intolerable social and economic conditions. The most important thing about the Crown Heights riot was the social and economic makeup of the rioters, not the ethnic and religious character of their targets. This emphasis on the rioters explains why some observers could write stories about the riot without dwelling on the religious and ethnic nature of the victims. From their perspective, antisemitism was a minor element of the story.

One of these observers was *New York Times* columnist Anna Quindlen. Quindlen noted in her column of September 7, 1991 that while the antisemitic rhetoric of the rioters was “unforgivable and disgraceful,” it was “also predictable.” She held to the conventional wisdom of the *Times* and other liberal outlets that the riot was, in essence, not a black-Jewish conflict but a racial clash between whites and blacks. “The misery that envelops the lives of poor black people in this country is so pervasive, so amorphous,” she claimed, that “fixing blame” for the violence perpetrated by blacks in America “is often impossible.” Quindlen’s failure to mention Yankel Rosenbaum was understandable since his death was not a major part of her story of Crown Heights. Seeking justice from his killers—“fixing blame”—was a distraction from the struggle to better the lot of blacks. Quindlen concluded by saying that “the rage in Crown Heights is not about the death of one child” but about the daily racism experienced by blacks. “What must you feel,” she asked her readers, “if your whole life is a slur, if you read the handwriting on the wall of your existence and the graffiti seems to say, ‘Who cares?’” Quindlen’s critics charged that she seemed to imply that only blacks were justified in feeling rage. They pointed out that the Jews of Crown Heights were also warranted in feeling rage since they had been the targets of a three-day riot, and one of them had been murdered.²⁹

The urban rioting beginning in the 1960s had convinced many Americans that race was the key to understanding urban unrest. This view became an article of faith particularly within the American Left, and it was strongly affirmed by the Kerner Commission, established by the Johnson administration in the aftermath of the rioting in Los

29. Anna Quindlen, “The Graffiti on the Wall,” *New York Times*, September 7, 1991.

Angeles, Newark, Detroit, and other major cities between 1965 and 1967. The commission's mandate was to analyze the causes of the riots and then to suggest remedies, and its final report claimed that America was fast becoming two nations—one white, affluent, and suburban and the other black, poor, and urban. Although this racial paradigm was hardly accurate even during the 1960s and was even more remote from reality during the following decades, it became the most convenient and easiest explanation for urban discontents. Cornel West, the black philosopher and political activist, argued that for blacks, Jews were not Jews but whites. “The particular interaction of Jews and blacks in the hierarchies of business and education cast Jews as the public face of oppression for the black community, and thus lend evidence to this mistaken view of Jews as any other white folk.” The black provocateur Sonny Carson said that he wasn't antisemitic. He simply hated all white people.³⁰

Race provided the context for the *New York Times*' reporting on the Crown Heights riot. Even when a *Times* article of August 21, 1991 noted that the antagonists were blacks and Hasidim, not simply blacks and whites, the headline read “Two Deaths Ignite Racial Clash in Tense Brooklyn Neighborhood.” The *Times* forced a conflict involving at least three groups—blacks, Caribbeans, and Hasidim—into a racial pattern which hardly did justice to the manifold economic, political, and social factors at work. “The antagonists of African descent,” said the political scientist Carole B. Conway, “belonged to ethnic groups that had very different histories and relationships with the Jewish community. An exclusively black/white or even black/Jewish frame misled readers when it referred to ‘blacks and Jews’ or ‘blacks and Hasidim.’” Conway was particularly concerned with the effect of the *Times* reporting on the image of blacks. “The inability to conceive of persons of African descent as having interaction more complex than racial conflicts with people whose skin color is white,” she protested, “is symptomatic of a larger problem in American society itself—one that fails to define and understand individuals and communities of color as persons who have a complete range of humanity in their being, both for good and for evil.”³¹

30. Cornel West, *Race Matters* (New York, 1994), 111. See Rieder, “Reflections on Crown Heights,” 381, for an attempt to put the Crown Heights riot within the context of class and status conflict: “The ethnic framing is a consequence, not a cause of the social conditions of unequal encounter. As Koreans have filled once-Jewish retail niches, antimercantilism now takes an anti-Asian form.”

31. Carole B. Conway, “Crown Heights: Politics and Press Coverage of the Race War That Wasn't,” *Polity* 32 (1999): 106, 118.

The *Times*' emphasis on race enabled it to bend over backwards when describing the rioters, to narrow the moral differences between the rioters and their Hasidic victims by slighting the anti-Jewish animus of the rioters, and to stress that more had to be done in addressing the root causes of racial tensions. Hence the headline of one *Times* article read "For Young Blacks, Alienation and a Growing Despair Turn into Rage" while another said "The Bitterness Flows in Two Directions." The *Times* continued well beyond 1991 to stress the racial nature of the riot. In an April 1992 article discussing the arrest of a suspect in the murder of Yankel Rosenbaum, the *Times* reporter noted that in Crown Heights the arrest had "served only to expose the scars left from the racial violence last summer." When Lemrick Nelson and Charles Price were convicted in February 1997 of violating the civil rights of Rosenbaum, the *Times*' article claimed that the jury's decision had "laid bare once again New York's deep racial divide." This emphasis on race ignored the fact that the victims of the Crown Heights riot, excluding the injured police, were not simply whites but Jews, or gentiles mistaken for Jews.³²

The take of the *New York Times* on the Crown Heights riot reflected the political correctness of its ownership, editorial board, and reporters and was part of a pattern of reporting regarding racial issues. This pattern included the paper's account of a three-day riot fomented by illegal immigrant Dominican drug dealers, which it portrayed as justified community outrage prompted by the use of deadly force by the police; its coverage of the December 1995 arson slayings at a Jewish-owned clothing store on 125th Street in Harlem in which the murderer was described as a soft-spoken man of principle and the store owner as an insular religious Jew; its description of the violence suffered by Asians at the hands of blacks, which downplayed the anti-Asian bias of the culprits; and a three-part series in March 1994 on Louis Farrakhan which suggested that he was less extreme than commonly believed.³³

Even those who did not share the politics of the *Times* used the racial paradigm in explaining the riot. These included the *New York News* and the *New York Post*, hardly paladins of political correctness. The *News*, in two editorials in the week after the riot, called it a "racial explosion" and a "race riot." Neither even mentioned antisemitism or dwelled on the religious and ethnic identity of the riot's victims. Reporter Mike McAlary

32. *New York Times*, August 23, 1991, April 9, 1992, February 11, 1997; Hilton Kramer, "What the *Times* Still Won't Say About the Crown Heights Riot," *New York Post*, April 2, 1996.

33. William McGowan, *Coloring the News: How Crusading for Diversity Has Corrupted American Journalism* (San Francisco, 2001), 26, 64–69.

titled one of his *New York Post* articles “Let’s now seek justice in Yankel’s lynching,” and Eric Breindel, who had been among the first to depict the riot as a “pogrom,” characterized it in 1993 as “New York’s worst race riot in recent memory.” In one piece for the *Wall Street Journal*, Breindel managed to call the riot an “anti-Semitic riot,” an “urban race riot,” and a “racial disturbance,” and to state that Rosenbaum was “lynched.” The two-volume report issued by Richard H. Girgenti, New York state’s director of criminal justice, also called the riot “the most extensive racial unrest New York City has experienced in over twenty years.”³⁴

The racial character of the Crown Heights riot came almost automatically to those who believed that race was the key to understanding the recent history of New York. These included *New York Newsday* columnist Jimmy Breslin, who had been attacked by blacks while covering the riot. “Blacks against whites is the fundamental story of the city in our time,” he wrote in a July 1993 column. “Only now it is intensified to the point where the city rises or falls on the ability of whites to live with blacks.” For him what made Crown Heights distinctive was not being the world center of the Lubavitch Hasidim or the center of the West Indian population in the United States. Rather, it was “the only place in the United States where you can find a group of whites in a neighborhood that is predominately of color.” And the Lubavitch were distinctive not because of their Jewishness but because they had not moved when blacks invaded their territory. The Lubavitch were “better than any other whites because they stayed and everybody else ran.”³⁵

The historical narrative of black politicians and journalists differed from that of Jews and white journalists. Its central theme was the deep-seated and ever-present racial oppression of blacks by whites. Mary Pinkett, who represented parts of Crown Heights in the New York City Council, denied that the central story of the riot was antisemitism. “The incident,” she said, “was the culmination of anger. The complaint the blacks have is the racism of American society.” This complaint included the city’s dealings with the blacks of Crown Heights. Black resentment, Pinkett concluded, will continue “until the police and other agencies begin to do their jobs without fear or political favoritism.” This attempt

34. “Cooling Crown Heights Is a Long-Term Job,” *New York News*, August 22, 1991, “Crown Heights: The Vultures Descend,” *ibid.*, August 23, 1991; *New York Post*, September 9, 1991; Breindel, “The Lemrick Nelson Trial: Still No Valid Explanation,” *New York Post*, July 29, 1993; Breindel, “Autopsy of a Riot,” *Wall Street Journal*, July 22, 1993; Girgenti, *Report to the Governor on the Disturbances in Crown Heights*, I, iii.

35. Jimmy Breslin, “The Lubavitchers Will Never Run,” *New York Newsday*, July 21, 1993.

to put a civil rights gloss on the rioting explained the use of the mantra “no justice, no peace” by blacks marching in Crown Heights. For them the key event was not the murder of Yankel Rosenbaum but the initial accident which killed Gavin Cato.³⁶

A few blacks interpreted the Crown Heights riot within the matrix of black nationalism and third worldism. For them the proper analogy was not only between Crown Heights and Mississippi but also between Crown Heights and Soweto or Crown Heights and the Middle East. Through such legerdemain, the Jews of Crown Heights were transformed from victims into oppressors. Al Sharpton described the Jews of Crown Heights as “diamond merchants,” implying that the relationship between them and the oppressed blacks of Brooklyn was similar to that between South African diamond mine owners and their black employees. “Talk about how Oppenheimer in South Africa sends diamonds straight to Tel Aviv and deals with the diamond merchants here in Crown Heights,” he said in his eulogy at the funeral of Gavin Cato. “The issue is not anti-Semitism; the issue is apartheid.” Sharpton also used his eulogy to encourage the young rioters to keep the pressure up. “Young people, don’t apologize. Don’t be ashamed and don’t back up. You come from a great people. . . . In your body runs the blood of Malcolm X and Fannie Lou Hamer. Stand by; don’t ever sit down. Forward ever, backward never! We will win because we’re right.”³⁷

Radical blacks also accused the Jews of Crown Heights of oppressing the blacks of Crown Heights in much the same way that the white European capitalistic Israelis had suppressed the Palestinians, a people of color. As one fantasist black publication put it, Crown Heights was linked to South Africa and Palestine by “the common thread of racial and economic repression,” while the international power of the “zionist [*sic*] lobby” was indicated by David Dinkins’ description of young blacks in Crown Heights as “hoodlums” rather than freedom fighters. Critics of these black nationalist conspiracy theories responded that the Lubavitchers of Crown Heights were not wealthy, that few were involved in the diamond trade, that they had little influence over events in the Middle East, and that over 50 per cent of the Israelis were as much a “people of color” as the Arab Palestinians.³⁸

36. Mary Pinkett, quoted in Jerome R. Mintz, *Hasidic People: A Place in the New World* (Cambridge, Mass., 1994), 337; Pinkett, quoted in Andrew W. Cooper, “The Two Nations of Crown Heights,” *New York Times*, January 6, 1992.

37. Sharpton, quoted in J. J. Goldberg, *Jewish Power: Inside the American Jewish Establishment* (Reading, 1996), 307–308.

38. *Arm the Masses*, September 1991, 3. This magazine was published by the December 12th Movement.

For black nationalists, Crown Heights was not a riot but a justified “rebellion” against racist exploitation. This position was argued by a flyer put out by the Black Consciousness Movement advertising a rally on September 4, 1991 in Crown Heights to honor “The True Heroes of the Crown Heights Rebellion . . . Black Youth.” The flyer described them as “the children of Malcolm X” and said that it was “better to fight on Utica and President Street than in Panama or the Persian Gulf, killing our own people of color.” This nationalist argument persisted in a variety of forms throughout the 1990s.³⁹

One egregious example was an article by Fred Goldstein in *Workers World*, published in the wake of the conviction of Lemrick Nelson in federal court for violating the civil rights of Yankel Rosenbaum. The trial and verdict, Goldstein said, was an example of “ruling-class retribution for an act of rebellion by an oppressed people.” But the real villains were not the Lubavitchers of Crown Heights but the American ruling class, which had manipulated Crown Heights Jewry “for the purposes of oppression and division—in much the same way that the United States supports the Israeli state against the Palestinians and all the Arab people.” Rebellion was inevitable under such conditions. “And in every rebellion there will be casualties.” Goldstein did not explain how the largely Protestant power elite used the Jews of Crown Heights or how they benefited from the poverty and high rate of unemployment of blacks in central Brooklyn and the “relatively privileged” status of the Lubavitch community.⁴⁰

Not all radicals, however, agreed with the black nationalists and their supporters. A group called the International Committee Against Racism published a statement which put the rioting within a nonnationalist Marxist framework. It favored uniting the working class against the “rich and powerful,” irrespective of skin color. The events in Crown Heights, it said, were “only the tip of the iceberg; the rebellion is about many other things like police brutality, unemployment, rotten schools and health care, racist education, bad housing.” It warned that attacking Jews and other whites because of their race and ethnicity divided the working class, furthering the capitalists’ strategy of divide and rule. “We urge young people, who are in the leadership of this rebellion, not to be sucked into nationalist ideology. There are potentially thousands of white and other minority workers who would love to get involved in the struggle, if they felt they would be accepted as comrades-in-arms.” Once

39. The flyer is in the Crown Heights riot files in the archives of the Jewish Community Relations Council of New York.

40. Fred Goldstein, “No Justice, No Peace: Behind the Crown Heights Verdict,” *Workers World*, February 20, 1997.

this takes place, then we could move on to the overthrow of our “rotten system in a united, multi-racial, multi-cultural way.”⁴¹

New York City liberals also offered explanations of the riot which did not assume the racial balkanization of the city and the overthrow of capitalism. This was particularly true of liberal Jews, for whom left-wing politics was a significant component of their Jewish identity and who rejected the idea that the Crown Heights riot signaled the end of the black-Jewish political alliance. One such individual was Victor A. Kovner, the chief corporation counsel during the Dinkins administration and a noted civil libertarian. In receiving the 1999 Stanley M. Isaacs Human Relations Award from the New York chapter of the American Jewish Committee, Kovner provided an interpretation of the riot which virtually ignored its antisemitic dimensions. He denied that the riot arose out of a basic conflict of interest between the city’s Jewish and black communities. Rather, it had been triggered by “misunderstandings,” particularly the widespread resentment of the special privileges accorded the Lubavitch by the city, including the police escort provided to Rabbi Schneerson on his frequent trips to the Lubavitch cemetery in Queens. Kovner was gratified that Jews dedicated to the civil rights movement had not been dissuaded by the riot. If anything, he believed, their commitment had intensified.⁴²

Rabbi Marshall Meyer of Temple B’nai Jeshurun on Manhattan’s Upper West Side provided an alternative liberal explanation for the riot. Meyer had fled Argentina during the 1980s for political reasons, and his experience of living in a country dominated by an antisemitic military junta had shaped his understanding of the causes of antisemitism. These causes were to be found in economic and social injustices, whether in Argentina or in the United States. “It’s no surprise that we might expect a problem with anti-Semitism after twelve years of Reagan and Bush in which social inequalities have grown,” he said in 1993. To blame Reagan and Bush for the Crown Heights riot shows the extent to which the riot had become a Rorschach inkblot in which people saw whatever they wanted.⁴³

41. The statement of the International Committee Against Racism is in the Crown Heights riot files in the archives of the Jewish Community Relations Council of New York.

42. Kovner quoted in Peter Noel, “Hillary’s Crown Heights Problem,” *Village Voice*, August 24, 1999, 63. For a statement of the Brooklyn chapter of the left-wing New Jewish Agenda denying that antisemitism was rife among blacks and calling for strengthening the black-Jewish coalition, see the *Amsterdam News*, September 14, 1991.

43. Meyer, quoted in “Beyond Crown Heights: Strategies for Overcoming Anti-Semitism and Racism in New York,” *Tikkun* 8 (1993): 60. For an article which blames unemployment for the riot, see Sheryl McCarthy, “In Crown Heights, Jobless Numbers Tell the Story behind the Violence,” *New York Newsday*, August 26, 1991.

Conservatives, for their part, asserted that liberalism and multiculturalism were part of the problem, not part of the solution. Richard Brookhiser of the right-wing magazine *National Review* believed that the Crown Heights riot stemmed from the attenuating of a common civic identity and the undermining of respect for authority brought about by multiculturalism. The riot had “exposed multiculturalism as an unworkable civic ideal, though whether anyone will come up with a workable one is another question.” But conservatives believed that multiculturalism was merely symptomatic of the deeper rot with which the Left had infected New York City. A contempt for a racist police force, a cult of victimization which excused violence when committed by those suffering from racial discrimination and economic deprivation, and a belief that social and economic conditions and not individual qualities determine one’s fate—all of these ideas were key components in the world view of the American Left and had seeped into the mind-set of the rioters. Conservatives also criticized explanations of the riot which emphasized its social and economic “root causes.” These, conservatives believed, provided a patina of legitimacy and sociological exoneration for what was essentially lawlessness. For conservatives, it was not surprising that such rationalizations and the riot itself would occur in America’s quintessentially left-wing city.⁴⁴

Their criticisms of liberal “root causes” theories of the Crown Heights riot did not prevent conservatives from providing their own “root causes” for the riot, and these, not surprisingly, emphasized the culpability of the Left. Amity Shlaes, in an op-ed piece in the *Wall Street Journal* published a week after the riot, delineated the social roots of the riot. It had primarily resulted from “thirty years of welfare culture in which fostering minorities’ sense of entitlement has caused only greater rage.” From Shlaes’ perspective, rioting was rational for people embittered by society’s indifference to their legitimate claims. The major problem with the conservative interpretation of the Crown Heights riot, as well as with the leftist claim that rioting was inevitable given the depressing social and economic conditions of the ghetto, is that there should have been additional riots in other parts of the city since the welfare culture and the poverty within the racial and ethnic communities of New York City had existed prior to August 1991 and persisted after that date. But, in fact, the Crown Heights riot was *sui generis*. Neither conservatives nor the

44. Richard Brookhiser, “On the Offensive,” *National Review*, February 2, 1993, 24; for a rejection of the “root causes” explanation of the riot, see the editorial “Failure in Crown Heights,” *New York Post*, July 21, 1993.

Left offered a credible explanation for the absence of other riots, showing the inherent weakness of any interpretation of the Crown Heights riot which downplays its ethnic and racial dimensions.⁴⁵

While disagreeing as to the roots of the riot, liberals and conservatives agreed that the Crown Heights riot had a logic to it. In so doing they were in the tradition of sociologists as ideologically diverse as Gustave LeBon, Emile Durkheim, Max Weber, Vilfredo Pareto, Robert Park, Charles Tilly, Georg Simmel, Neil Smelser, and Talcott Parsons, all of whom had sought to fathom the sociological patterns of civil violence. In addition, historians such as Charles Tilly, E. P. Thompson, George Rudé, and Georges Lefebvre had asserted that rioting in France and England had not been aimless but purposeful. Recent American urban violence strengthened this tendency to believe that rioting was rational. The rioting in Los Angeles, Detroit, Chicago, Newark and other American cities during the 1960s, it was argued, was an attempt by the poor and inarticulate to make themselves heard, to effect economic and social change. As Paul A. Gilje said in his history of American rioting, "riotous crowds do not act merely on impulse and are not fickle. There is a reason behind the actions of rioters, no matter how violent these actions may be. . . . In any given situation, rioters have an infinite number of options. But the activity selected by rioters is not capricious nor random."⁴⁶

Not everyone agreed. The McCone Commission, which investigated the Watts riot in Los Angeles in 1965, concluded that it had been irrational and purposeless. Some observers of the Crown Heights riot came to the same conclusion. The rioters, in fact, did not articulate any social and economic goals, and their leaders did not advocate any collective political objectives. Columnist Murray Kempton argued that the ultimate cause of the 1991 riot was the existence of "a class of surplus persons, for whom no useful function is available and who are kept alive badly fed and warehoused and denied most means of expression beyond the angry shouts on the street." It was impossible to fathom a purpose behind the nihilistic actions of this *lumpen proletariat* besides assuaging their desperate and empty lives. If in 1991 this was to

45. Amity Shlaes, "In Brooklyn, Not Just Another Racial Incident," *Wall Street Journal*, August 26, 1991. The article on Crown Heights in the conservative monthly *Commentary* argued that the motivating force behind the riot was black antisemitism. Philip Gourevitch, "The Crown Heights Riot and Its Aftermath," *Commentary* 95 (1993): 30-31.

46. James B. Rule, *Theories of Civil Violence* (Berkeley, 1988); Paul A. Gilje, *Rioting in America* (Bloomington, 1996), 6.

be achieved by attacks on Jews, in the future the aimless fury of the underclass would have other targets.⁴⁷

Residents of Crown Heights—Jews, blacks, and West Indians alike—claimed that the riot was fomented by violence-prone and alienated outsiders with little concern for the welfare of the area's residents, and that the riot had conveyed a distorted view of the neighborhood's race relations. Martin Markowitz, who represented Crown Heights in the New York State Senate, described it as an "unfortunate incident" caused by outsiders "who see no hope for themselves and the future." Some persons emphasized the random and irrational nature of the Crown Heights riot in order to salvage what remained of the black-Jewish progressive political entente. Cornel West argued that the riot was an unorganized and "random act" brought on by the death of Gavin Cato. It was not proof of widespread antisemitism among blacks. In fact, blacks "unequivocally" opposed antisemitism. Richard Goldstein of the *Village Voice* also stressed the random nature of the riot. Its real lesson, he said, "is that Jews must learn to live in a more dangerous world, where hate goes unanswered and primitive passions are stoked as a safety valve for helpless rage."⁴⁸

In *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory*, his classic account of Jewish historiography, Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi noted that the historian aspires to do more than merely fill in the gaps in memory. "He constantly challenges even those memories that have survived intact." The historian's task is particularly difficult regarding the Crown Heights riot because of intense memories involving ethnicity and political ideology. These memories were not only popular ways to understand the riot. They were also instruments in the maintenance and acquisition of power. In questioning these memories, the historian steps on sensitive toes, but he has no choice. History, a character in James Joyce's *Ulysses* says, "is a nightmare from which I am trying to wake." But memory can be even more frightening.⁴⁹

47. Murray Kempton, "Blood and Anger and Indifference," *New York Newsday*, August 28, 1991. For other journalistic statements in this vein, see Felicia R. Lee, "For Many Young Blacks, Alienation and a Growing Despair Turn into Rage," *New York Times*, October 25, 1991; Sam Roberts, "On the Mean Streets, A Greater Sense of Alienation," *New York Times*, September 8, 1991.

48. Markowitz, quoted in *New York Newsday*, August 26, 1991; Michael Lerner and Cornel West, *Blacks and Jews: Let The Healing Begin* (New York, 1995), 181; Goldstein, "New Anti-Semitism: A Geshrei," 38. Cornel West had argued previously that the riot was not a random act but a product of the economic desperation spawned by capitalism. "Without some redistribution of wealth and power, downward mobility and debilitating poverty will continue to drive people into desperate channels." West, "Black Anti-Semitism and the Rhetoric of Resentment," *Tikkun* 7 (1992): 16.

49. Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory* (Seattle, 1982), 94.