



Lincoln Lore

Number 1822

Bulletin of the Louis A. Warren Lincoln Library and Museum, Mark E. Neely, Jr., Editor.
Ruth E. Cook, Editorial Assistant. Published each month by the
Lincoln National Life Insurance Company, Fort Wayne, Indiana 46801.
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December, 1990

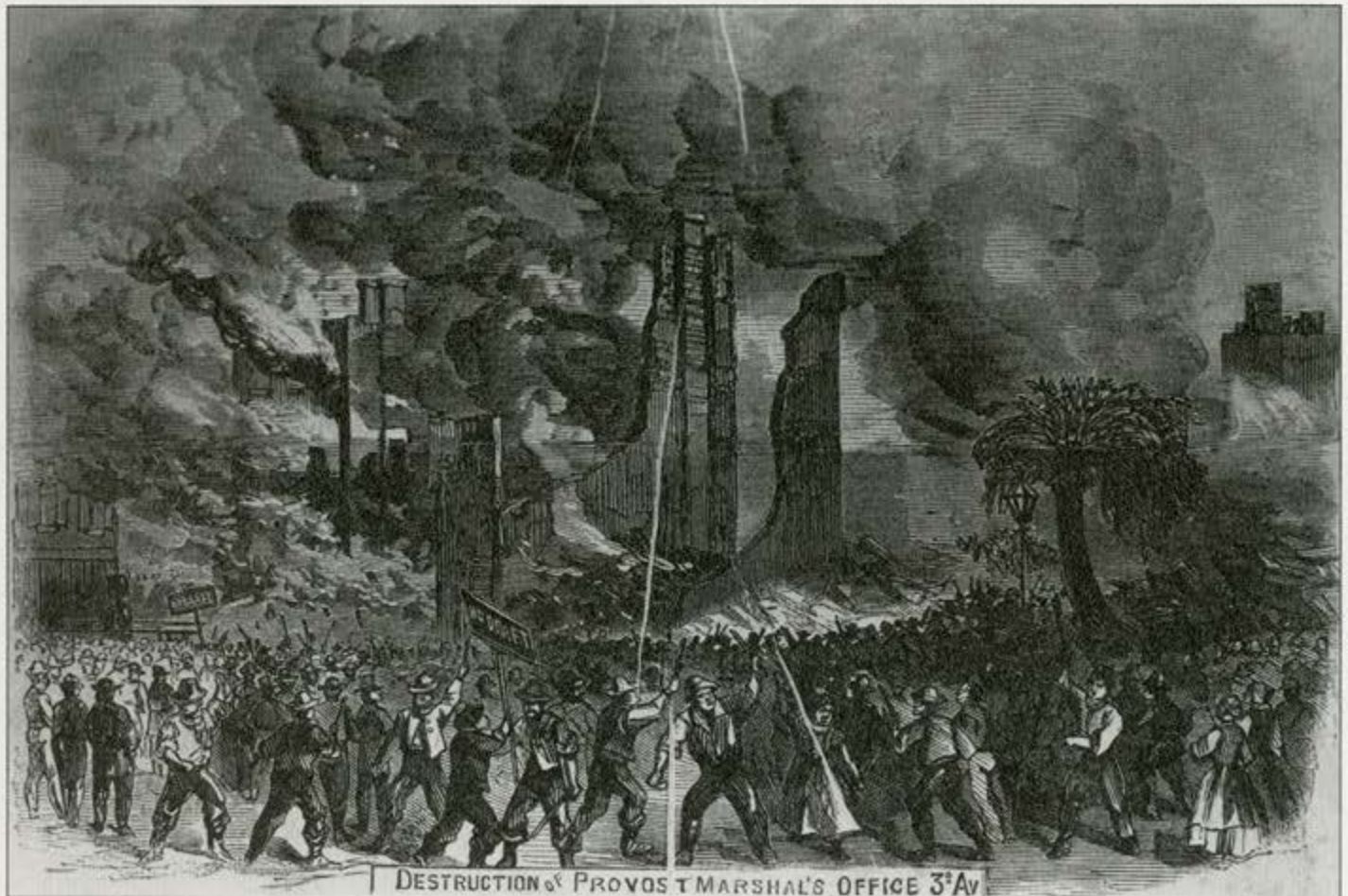
IVER BERNSTEIN ON THE NEW YORK CITY DRAFT RIOT OF 1863 (Part II)

by Sarah McNair Vosmeier

Striving for a popular government of the working people, artisans were especially angered and threatened by the Conscription Act, which they hated for being biased against the working class and for sanctioning new kinds of federal intervention in local affairs. As Bernstein describes the riot, the artisans were the most rationally and exclusively political among the rioters, although all rioters acted politically. The artisans were involved only in the earliest, least vicious stage of the riot, refraining from looting, from indiscriminate destruction of property, and from violence against blacks.

The men of the Black Joke [Fire] Engine Company enacted the opening scene of the riot, and they were representative of other artisan rioters. One of the ways the Conscription Act infringed on local government was to ignore the local tradition of exemp-

ting firemen from the state militia, and this gave artisans who also served as firemen even more reason to hate the draft. On Saturday, July 11, a Black Joke member's name had been drawn in the lottery for the draft, and so on Monday morning the fire company stormed the draft office and set the building on fire. Although this arson might seem like an emotional and irrational act, the fire company focused its anger specifically against the building as a symbol of the draft and the Republican administration. When the fire began to spread to the tenements next door, the Black Joke foreman called on the crowd to let the firemen put out that blaze, making a distinction between fellow workers' homes and the political target of the draft office (p. 18-19). Thus Bernstein's analysis suggests that artisans were among the crowds Dawson describes gutting the offices of the Republican *New York*



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FIGURE 1. Supplement to Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper, July 25, 1863. Burning the Ninth District Provost Marshall's Office (at Third Avenue and Forty-seventh Street) was the opening scene of the riot.

Tribune, but they probably were not in the "separate crowds" the Fort Wayne paper described as "bent on plunder, pillage, and robbery of persons."

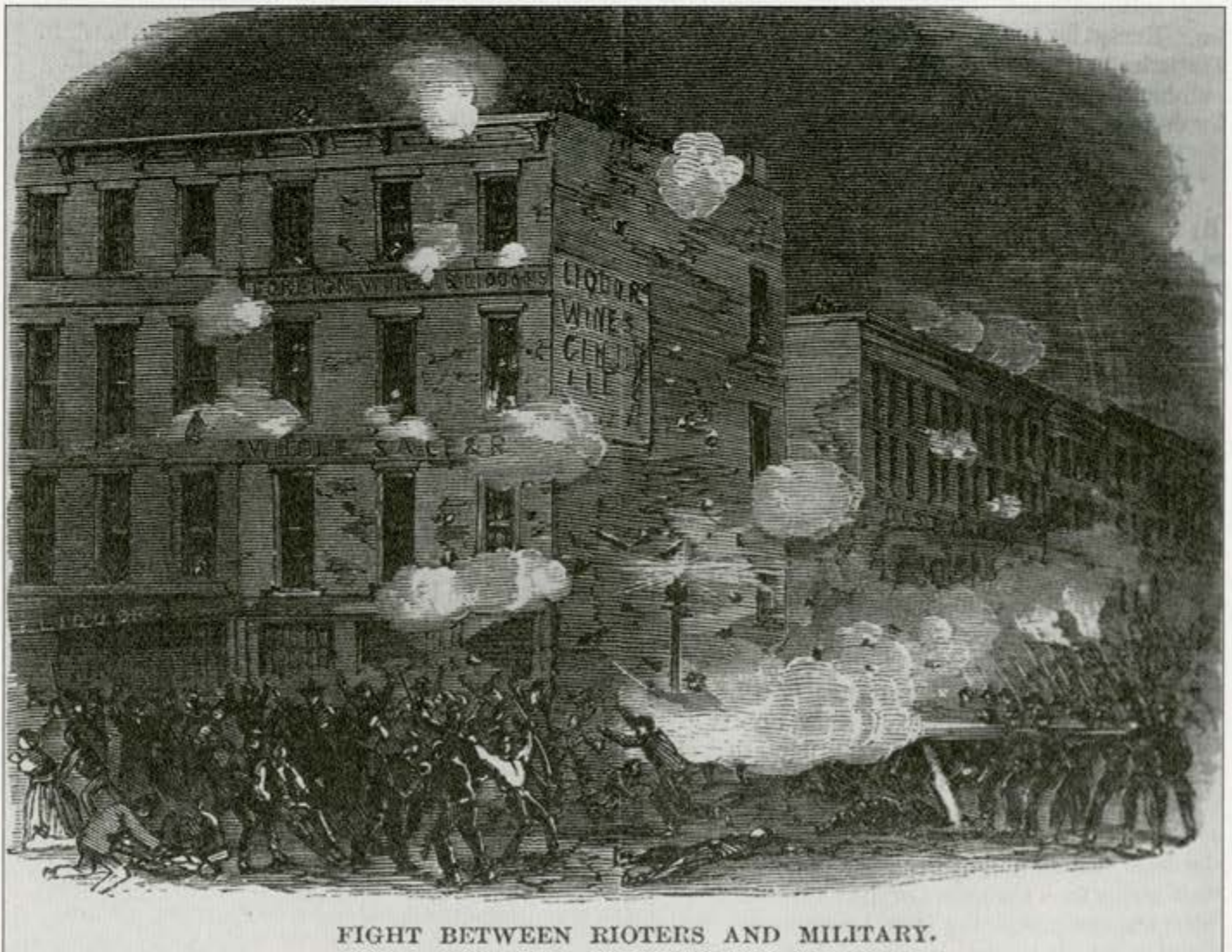
Whereas artisans' traditional skills and craft culture gave them some degree of power, industrial workers labored in new industries without centuries-old craft traditions. Without the support of craft traditions, even skilled industrial workers feared that their employers might replace them with cheaper unskilled labor. This was especially true after the Emancipation Proclamation when the white workers predicted they would soon be competing against free black labor from the South. Job security was not the industrial workers' only concern though: conflict with their employers (the industrialists who supported the AICP) extended beyond the workplace.

One of their most common disputes was over saloons. Employers, who wanted to reform working class culture and to keep their employees sober, disapproved of saloons in general and Sunday liquor sales in particular. Workers resented blue laws because Sunday was their only day off; in fact, they valued their saloons more than their employers probably realized. For workers living in crowded tenements, saloons were more than places to drink: they were central meeting places, political forums, and even employment agencies. Democrats, who sympathized with the workers, were lax in enforcing liquor laws, and they had thwarted the employers' crusade against saloons for years. In the late 1850s, though, the industrialists enlisted the Republican party to their cause, and in 1857 the Republican-sponsored Metropolitan Police began zealously enforcing the liquor laws (p. 106). For the industrial workers, then, the Republican party was

a tool of their employers, who were using it to threaten the workers' political expression, their livelihood, their religion, and even their cultural existence. The Conscription Act, which threatened their very lives, was the last straw.

Rioting was a political act for the industrial workers as for the artisans, and like the other working-class groups, industrial workers blurred the boundaries between workplace behavior and political action. Rioting among industrial workers began, as Fort Wayne Democrats learned, when "bodies of rioters...visited large manufacturing establishments, urging the laborers to join them." For all working class rioters, the early stage of the riot was much like a city-wide strike: groups of strikers/rioters moved from factory to factory, "forcing" the workers to leave their jobs and join the protest. Artisans did not go much beyond this rationally political behavior, but the industrial workers' desperate struggle against their Republican employers seems to have led them to continue the riot with more and more violence. Nevertheless, as Bernstein illustrates, even the most irrational and inhuman violence had political meaning. For example, when crowds broke into a draft officer's home and beat him, they taunted him by calling him "Mr. Lincoln" (p. 36).

The industrial workers tried to drive all representatives of the Republican party out of their neighborhoods, and they lashed out at Metropolitan policemen and federal troops, especially. When Dawson reported that "Col O'Brien, commander of a detachment of troops, was captured by the mob and after being terribly beaten, was hung to a lamp post," he left out the lurid details of the mob's fury. As Bernstein explains, on Monday Colonel Henry O'Brien, a local man who had charge of a regiment



FIGHT BETWEEN RIOTERS AND MILITARY.

From the Lincoln Museum

FIGURE 2. *Harper's Weekly*, August 1, 1863. Class conflict over saloons and drinking provided a backdrop for industrial workers' riot behavior, and saloons often served as headquarters for rioters planning attacks against the army.

of federal troops, had ordered his troops to use cannon fire to clear a street, and a woman bystander and her child had been killed. The enraged crowd burned down O'Brien's house that night. The next morning

neighborhood people spotted O'Brien returning to inspect his property. One man approached O'Brien from behind and clubbed him to the ground. The murder of Colonel O'Brien that afternoon lasted six hours. Women dominated the crowds that first beat his face to a pulp, later pulled him through the streets and into his own backyard, stripped him of this uniform, and finally "committed the most atrocious violence on his body" before he died (p. 36).

The common laborers (like longshoremen) committed similar atrocities, but they directed their fury at blacks. Bernstein focuses on longshoremen because they were especially active in the riot. As workers, longshoremen had more independence than the industrial workers: instead of being controlled by one employer, they formed new work crews every day and did brief stints of labor for many different shipping merchants. Also, most longshoremen belonged to the Irish Longshoremen's United Benevolent Society, which was fairly successful in enforcing union wage rates. More historically significant, though, was their control over who could legitimately enter the workforce.

In addition to enforcing wage rates, the union successfully prevented blacks from becoming longshoremen. As a consequence, whenever the union longshoremen went on strike, the shipping merchants, desperate to have their cargo unloaded, turned to blacks, and racial violence inevitably ensued. The Irish longshoremen had been on strike in April and June of 1863, and the shipping merchants had had to bring in the Metropolitan Police — and eventually federal troops — to protect black strikebreakers. The Irish attacks on police, federal troops, and black workmen during those months foreshadowed even more gruesome violence to come.

The nature of waterfront employment contributed to the in-

evitability of this racial violence. Only people who lived near the piers could get there early enough to be handy for whatever work was available on any given morning. Because almost any man could be a common laborer, the labor pool was only limited by the number of people who lived near the piers. Although blacks could not work as longshoremen, they did find other jobs on the waterfront, and so they lived near the piers and were always available as strikebreakers when the Irish longshoremen were on strike.

Frustrated by the power black workingmen gave merchants during strikes, the longshoremen attacked their black neighbors with new intensity during the riots, as if they were trying to purge blacks from the neighborhood entirely. This new behavior began on Monday afternoon when mobs burned the Colored Orphan Asylum, destroying its furniture and even uprooting the surrounding trees and shrubbery (p. 27). Similarly, many black victims were drowned or set on fire, as if the rioters were trying to eradicate even their bodies. Trying to understand the rioters' inhuman violence, which included sexual mutilation of black men, Bernstein proposes a psychological explanation.

After the manhood of black workingmen had been publicly reified and debased, white laborers seem to have imagined, an objective black male presence could be cleansed from the neighborhoods. We must be careful here not to ascribe too much structure and rationality to such emotional behavior. But it is certainly worth wondering whether bonfire lynch murders and drownings of black victims were the final acts in much improvised dramas of conquest and purification. Fire and water would symbolically render harmless what these rioters perceived as the post-emancipation social power of their black neighbors....

Boys often led the most violent and sexually charged attacks on black men.... [Young men's economic position was especially precarious, and many poor boys] may have wondered whether they would ever become full-fledged



From the Lincoln Museum

FIGURE 3. *Supplement to Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*, July 25, 1863. Not content with merely destroying the orphanage, rioters even uprooted surrounding trees and shrubbery, as if they wanted to purge blacks from the neighborhood entirely.

participants in the family and job networks that defined social maturity for the mid-nineteenth-century adult workingman. Attacks on both Republican draft offices and the bodies of black workingmen make sense if we imagine white working-class youths to be seeking to restore to the community not just political order but also social and sexual order (pp.29-30).

Despite Bernstein's caveat above, his whole project is to ascribe structure and rationality to the emotional behavior of the 1863 rioters — either through psychohistory, as here, or through a careful analysis of the history of various classes. There is a human need to understand and organize chaotic reality, and Bernstein's book is tremendously satisfying for that reason. Nevertheless, I was left wondering how appropriate it is to treat such violent behavior academically. Is it appropriate, or even accurate, to use economic pressures to explain why people would burn a human being alive? Is it appropriate or accurate to imply that Colonel O'Brien's death was caused by the frustrations of cultural conflict?

Another problem with Bernstein's analysis is his surprisingly limited treatment of blacks. Whereas he devotes whole chapters or sections to the history of different groups among the working and upper class whites, he does not have a separate section on black New Yorkers, and he does not discuss their history in depth.

Similarly, he does not attend much to Southern sympathizers. From our twentieth century perspective, it is difficult to imagine why Northerners might support the Confederacy, and Bernstein does not help us much with this. Instead, he suggests that "pro-Confederate statements were a convenient way for some rioters to denounce the Republican Party. More likely than not, these displays and salutes did not represent deep-seated Confederate sympathy" (p. 26). Surely all the frustrations with Republican rule and the perceived economic threat of freed blacks must have given at least some of the rioters deep-seated sympathy with the Confederacy.

All of these difficulties (treating the riots academically, downplaying black New Yorkers' history, ignoring deeply felt Confederate sympathy) stem from Bernstein's focusing on class as the most important factor in his history, more important than human wickedness, racism, or wrongheadedness.

Histories that treat groups rather than individuals are important and useful, but we should not forget their limitations: specific individuals rarely fit neatly into categories like the ones Bernstein describes. Peter Cooper is a good illustration of this problem. Bernstein uses the Cooper Union as an example of the institutions Union Leaguers hoped would resolve urban class conflict, but Cooper himself was not part of the group Bernstein refers to as Union Leaguers. In fact, he was a Democrat during the war, and when he was associated with Republicans, it was with the industrialists rather than the Union Leaguers.

If Bernstein's class-based categories limit his work, he more than compensates in other ways. One compensation is his skillful use of sources. He has obviously done a great deal of work with city directories, censuses, and similar material. Unfortunately,

perhaps, that kind of research is rarely appreciated as much as lucky finds among narrative sources are. Bernstein makes good use of the latter sort of material too, as in his use of two sources on industrialists' relations with their workers. He combines an 1829 newspaper story about an industrialist named James Allaire with John Roach's reminiscences about his apprenticeship in Allaire's factory before Roach became an industrialist himself. Bernstein begins with the newspaper story, which referred to a sign [in Allaire's factory] reading, "Any person that brings, or drinks, spirituous liquors on my premises will be discharged, without any pay for the week." Allaire boasted to the reporter that he had discharged only two men in the nine years that the sign had been posted.

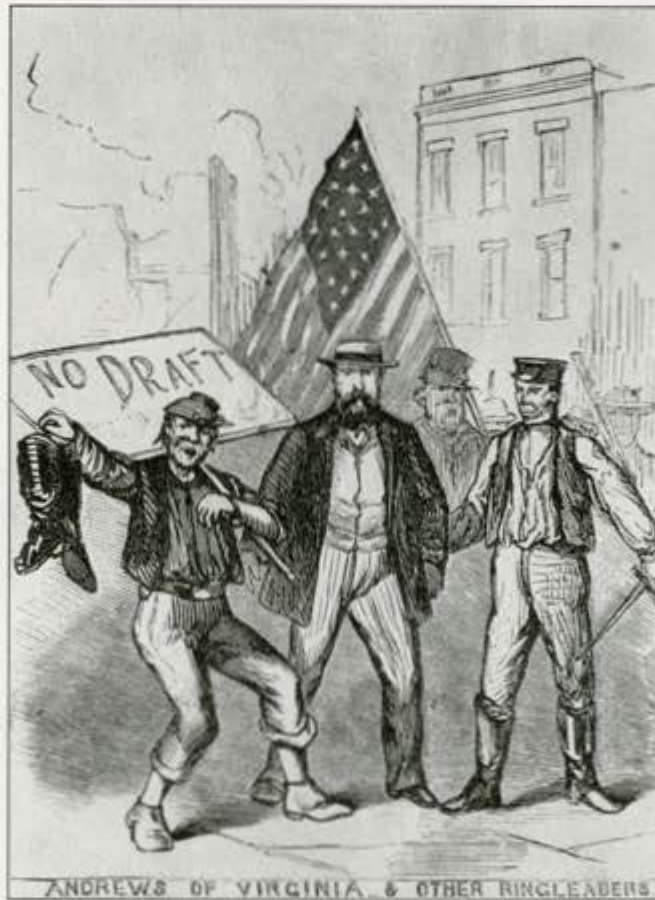
Next Bernstein contrasts the newspaper story with Roach's reminiscences.

The overeager young Roach [decided not to pay] the molder's apprentice fee of fifty dollars and paraded into the foundry only to find himself ignored by the journeymen. Allaire learned of the treatment Roach had received (doubtless informed by Roach), "took the lad by the hand and leading him to the shop said to the men, 'You see this boy. I want him to learn this trade. Mind you I will have no interference with him.'" After Allaire left, the men hauled Roach over a barrel and looked on while "a big Englishman" paddled the young apprentice who had been so quick to complain to the boss. Roach was taken on by the journeymen molders only when he agreed to give them sufficient whiskey to pay his footing (p. 167). Obviously, if the journeymen could dispose of fifty dollars worth of Roach's whiskey, more drinking was being done than Allaire wanted to admit. The two stories also illustrate the constant power struggle (between industrialists and their employees) which contributed to the July riot.

Bernstein's skillful research is complemented by his writing: his book is well organized and easy to follow. The opening section is a fast-paced narrative of the riot week, and even readers with only minimal interest in this topic would profit from these first two chapters. (The second chapter is the only one in which Lincoln is discussed at any length.) Readers who want to know more about antebellum class relations in New York will want to continue to the next section, but the final section on post-war New York is likely to be of only minor significance to Lincoln scholars.

Bernstein's historical imagination also makes reading his book especially enjoyable. For example, he brings a narrative structure to his analyses by introducing his treatments of various trades with the reminiscences of old men speaking at retirement dinners or other ceremonial occasions.

In the end, Bernstein's own introductory statement that the riot was "one of those unusual events important in its own right — it mattered in the war and in the life of the city — and important for its illumination, like a flash of lightning, of a darkened historical landscape" (p. vii) is the best summary of the significance of his book. Using skillful research and writing, he brilliantly analyzes the draft riot itself and the two decades of New York City class conflict it reveals.



From the Lincoln Museum
FIGURE 4. Supplement to Frank Leslie's *Illustrated Newspaper*, July 25, 1863. John U. Andrews, a Confederate sympathizer from Virginia, was unusual. Bernstein explains: for more rioters, "pro-Confederate statements...did not represent deep-seated Confederate sympathy," but rather hostility to the Republican administration.