

I'se a Man

Political Awakening and the 1942 Riot in the Bahamas*

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Abstract

When Americans began building their World War II bases in Nassau, the Bahamians they hired expected the high wage rates that usually accompanied foreign contracts. Unfortunately, the Bahamian government had negotiated much lower rates than were expected. Green, with his cry "I'se a man," captured the indignation that many of his co-workers felt. After attempts to address the wage issue by collective bargaining failed, two thousand laborers gathered at the building site chanting "we want more money." Their cries fell on deaf ears and police officers were called in to disperse the group. But, the police only succeeded in agitating the protestors. Eventually, armed with sticks and clubs, the leaderless crowd marched to where they would be heard. They marched to Bay Street, the stage for some of the most significant events in the Bahamas' history and a social space that has continually been at the center of cultural, economic and political life in the country. Two days of rioting ensued.

Although the riot was triggered by a labor dispute, it has been described as the first sign of a popular movement in the Bahamas. And, some have described the riot as a tremor along the fault line that divided the rich white Bahamians who owned businesses on Bay Street and the poor blacks who worked as laborers and lived in the poorer neighborhoods "over-the-hill." This paper is an effort to retell the story of the riot, focusing on its significance as the first sign of political awakening in the country's black community.

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I. Introduction

At the beginning of the Second World War, the British and American governments made arrangements to build training bases on several of the British West Indian islands. Two of these operational bases were scheduled to be built on New Providence Island, the economic hub of the Bahamas; one in Oaks Field known as Main Field and one in the western end of the island known as Satellite Field. The Project, as it was called, would employ over two thousand Bahamians. When the news about this employment opportunity was publicized, many men from the outlying Bahamian islands flocked to New Providence joining the already large labor pool that looked forward to the high wages that such foreign projects historically brought. The wages offered were not only lower than was expected but there was an inequity of pay between Americans and Bahamian laborers employed at the same jobs. The men were dissatisfied but neither management nor government made any real steps to reconcile the wage dispute. What started as low grumbling among the men at work, exploded into two days of rioting that left six men dead, several people injured and Bay Street, the island's principal commercial district, and parts of Grant's Town, where many of the laborers resided, in shambles.

Dame Doris Johnson, noted Bahamian politician, has argued that the 1942 riot was a watershed event in the Bahamas' political and racial history. That the June 1st and 2nd disturbances were emblematic of a growing political consciousness within the Bahamas' majority black community and was the explosive start of what would ultimately be a relatively quiet revolution to usher in black rule and independence in the former British colony. As Johnson recorded, as a consequence of the riot "the first awakenings of a new political awareness began to be felt in the hearts of black people ... time, and the remarkable foresight, courage, and initiative of a few dedicated members of that majority were all that were required to crystallize this awareness into a mighty political force."¹ Sir Randol Fawkes, labor leader and parliamentarian, has concurred.² As they rightly point out, the riot was the first major collective labor action in the Bahamas with political overtones.

¹ Doris Johnson, *The Quiet Revolution in the Bahamas* (Nassau, Bahamas: Family Islands Press Limited, 1972), 27.

² Sir Randol F. Fawkes, *The Faith That Moved The Movement: A Memoir of a Life and The Times*, (Florida: Dodds Printing, 1988), 40.

Political scientist, Colin Hughes, however, has questioned its significance. While accepting it as a precursor, he views it more as a symbol that was profitably mythologized and rallied around once the popular movement actually found its feet. According to Hughes, the riot was “a momentary outburst of raw energy” that “provided martyrs and a heroic moment” to Bahamian blacks “once a political movement had finally started.”³ Agreeing with Hughes, Gail Saunders sees it as a “short-lived spontaneous outburst” after which “the black masses slept on.”⁴ Both deny any direct link to the dramatic socio-political developments in the 1960s, pointing out that nothing much happened in response to the riot and that no real push for political power or majority rule could be said to exist in the Bahamas for more than a decade after the riot. They also point out that nothing like this ever happened again in the Bahamas making this event an anomaly.

The riot, however, was more than an isolated act of venting. And, although a powerful symbol of black agency that has been referenced again and again in the political struggles of Bahamian blacks, the riot was more than a symbol. The riot had real (if not immediate) effects. Following Johnson, it is our contention that the riot is rightfully considered the first shot in the battle for political change in the Bahamas. The riot also kindled the development of a pro-black consciousness in the country, a necessary precursor to black rule and independence. At the time of the riot, political and economic life in the colony was controlled by a small group of white merchants who were headquartered on Bay Street. As Johnson describes, “the usually docile and cheerful Bahamian workers” marched towards Bay Street, the space of white wealth, “in an angry and belligerent mood.”⁵ The 1942 riot demonstrated to both Bahamian blacks and the oligarchs who were known collectively as the “Bay Street Boys,” that Bay Street was vulnerable. Indeed, the riot showed quite clearly that the hold the merchant princes had on the Bahamas was far from complete and unassailable. The majority black population in the Bahamas could literally dismantle the edifices of minority white rule, if sufficiently provoked. The fissure that was created in 1942 would widen over the next few decades and within a quarter of a century it

³ Colin A. Hughes, *Race and Politics in the Bahamas*, (New York: St Martin's Press, 1981), 212-213.

⁴ Gail Saunders, *Bahamian Society After Emancipation* (Jamaica: Ian Randle Publishers, 2003), 119.

⁵ Doris L. Johnson, *The Quiet Revolution*, 15.

became a gapping whole that the majority black Progressive Liberal Party walked through to victory.

This paper is an effort to retell the story of the riot, focusing on its significance as the first sign of political awakening in the country's black community.

II. Don't Lick Nobody: Two Days of Mass Action

On June 1, 1942, just weeks after the Project had began, laborers from both Main Field and Satellite Field marched to Bay Street after their continual and by then quite loud demands for higher wages were met with patronizing replies and admonishments to return to work. As Leonard Storr Green, who was convicted as one of the leaders of the group explains, "one of the white bosses wanted to check up on the labourers so that they should go back to work. The crowd said they would not go back until they had some main proof about the wages and they did not go back."⁶ The crowd marched to Bay Street carrying clubs and sticks and assembled in Rawson Square, across from the Parliament and outside the Colonial Secretary's office, hoping "to put their plea for higher wages to someone in authority."⁷ Several members of the colonial government and the local assembly attempted to placate them, promising that if they dispersed and returned to work, their requests would be considered.

They were almost persuaded to put down their weapons and to go back to work but eye witnesses and members of the crowd of labors cite two things as triggering the riotous acts that took place. Some attributed the change in crowd's attitude to the presence of police superintendent Captain Edward Sears. Sears had been present at a peaceful but loud demonstration at the Main Field about wages a day earlier and had drawn his revolver in order to disband the crowd. As Green reports, Captain Sears' presence on Bay Street "made them angry because it looked as if he would do something."⁸ Others blamed Attorney General Eric Hallinan's insensitive remarks. Hallinan was among those who had attempted to mollify the

⁶ Evidence of Leonard Storr Green to the *Russell Commission*, 184.

⁷ Gail Saunders, *Bahamian Society after Emancipation*, 107.

⁸ Evidence of Leonard Storr Green to the *Russell Commission*, 184.

crowd. As Hallinan would later testify, he informed them that the American contractors “had intended to bring in labourers from America” but had changed their minds since the Bahamians “had done so well.” He then warned the workers “not to spoil that record.”⁹ The crowd perceived his remarks as a threat. If they did not return to work quietly, they would be replaced by workers from America. As Hallinan later recognized, “those remarks of mine were, I think misunderstood by the crowd and there was signs that they resented those remarks.”¹⁰

Whatever the catalyst, a portion of the crowd that had marched to Rawson Square singing patriotic anthems turned their attention away from diplomacy and bargaining and began to take their frustrations out on Bay Street. They moved down the street smashing car windows and breaking storefronts. Although the beginning crowd numbered in the thousands, it is hard to tell the number of people that actually took part in the violent outburst that followed their peaceful march to Bay Street. It is also difficult to determine which of the various groups of people who participated in the protest did which acts. It appears that the people that broke windows were not the same people that would later loot the stores.¹¹ But the record here is not entirely clear. As the workers marched to Bay Street from Oakes Field that Monday morning, their numbers were augmented by people who lived in the black communities that they walked through on their way to Bay Street. It is therefore quite possible that a portion of the crowd left peaceably after having made their case, a portion lashed out at the shops and automobiles that were parked on Bay Street, and that an altogether different portion of the crowd looted the shops.

After allowing the rioters and looters almost free reign on Bay Street for most of the morning, a force comprised of police officers and the Cameron’s Highlanders, a group of Scottish soldiers who were stationed in Nassau to protect the Duke of Windsor, who was Governor of the Bahamas, were brought in to sweep the street clean of protestors. This worked and by midday they managed to push most of the crowd “over the hill,” to the poorer neighborhoods outside the city center. There was a standoff in the Grant’s Town area at to the corner of Cotton Tree and Blue Hill Road between a small crowd of rioters and about 40 police offices and soldiers. The

⁹ Evidence of Eric Hallinan to the *Russell Commission*, 511.

¹⁰ Evidence of Eric Hallinan to the *Russell Commission*, 511.

¹¹ Evidence of Oswald Moseley to the *Russell Commission*, 266.

crowd was throwing rocks at the combined forces. One rock hit a Cameron Highlander and knocked him unconscious. During this standoff, one civilian was shot and killed, another was shot and eventually died in the hospital and five men were wounded and recovered.

It is possible that the crowd that rioted in Grant's Town were not from that neighborhood. Indeed, several Grant's Town residents insisted that the rioters were not from their settlement. As Alfred McKenzie, a black merchant, who owns a store in Grant's Town recounts, "I didn't recognize any one especially. I think there were just a few leaders and the majority of the crowds were looking for what they could get after the places was broken into. Young men and women made up this crowd."¹² Whatever the composition or origin, the police had a hard time subduing the crowd in Grant's Town. Having failed to control the crowd, the police read the Riot Act at about one o'clock in the afternoon, ten minutes after the incident at Cotton Tree, set curfew and left Grant's Town.

With the police went the authority of law and the force of the curfew.¹³ After the forces withdrew, the crowd, many who by now were intoxicated, laid siege to the Grant's Town police station, set fire to a filling station, fire truck and ambulance, looted the post office and library and broke into many of the small neighborhood businesses.¹⁴ Rioting and looting took place in this community all through the night. The police would later argue that their withdrawal saved lives. The crowd was in such an agitated mood, their commanding officer testified, that it would have taken extreme measures to contain them.¹⁵ The police therefore felt it was better not to be in a situation where they would be forced to fire on the crowd. Although some citizens testified before the Commission that "if the forces had returned to Grant's Town they could have easily pacified the it without trouble," others reported that "by this time the mob here was so drunk that they could only have been pacified at a very considerable loss of life." The Commission observed that,

¹² Evidence of Alfred McKenzie to the Russell Commission, 318.

¹³ Evidence of Alfred McKenzie to the Russell Commission, 318.

¹⁴ *The Report of the Select Committee of the House of Assembly and Report of the Commission Appointed to Enquire into Disturbances in the Bahamas which took place in June 1942*, Nassau Public Records Offices, 29. The Commission is also referred to as the Russell Commission and is hereafter cited as such.

¹⁵ Evidence of Edward Sears to the Russell Commission, 67.

in fact, only one person was injured in Grant's Town after the forces had been withdrawn and that was a rioter who was shot... by a coloured man in defence of his shop. A few shops, mainly liquor shops, were broken into; but the amount of damage done, although considerable, was not great."¹⁶

In Grant's town the rioting was not only more violent but also seemed to have been much more random than on Bay Street. Whereas on Bay Street, there was a definite pattern to the stores that were destroyed and looted, there seemed to be none in Grant' Town. On Bay Street there are numerous episodes of shop proprietors and other citizens being able to reason with the crowds; in Grant's Town, there was no listening to reason. ¹⁷

It was the opinion of most observers that the amount of alcohol consumed played a great part in the violence and destruction that took place that evening. Riots are often intoxicating because of the lure of recklessness and the sudden freedom to act on the basest of desires. When that allure is coupled with the intoxication of alcohol the dangers are magnified. In Grant's Town a number of bars had been broken into. In Captain Sears' report of what took place once the crowd was pushed over the hill, he states that the "Red Lion Bar had been broken into and *all* the liquor taken from there."¹⁸ Lance Corporal Gooding reported that when he went over the hill from Bay Street that "Bethel's Bar on the corner of Martin Street and Blue Hill road was being broken into."¹⁹ Complaining of the riot, one resident of Grant's Town testified, "I think there are too many liquor stores in Grant's Town."²⁰ After the rioting in Grant's Town, concerned citizens

¹⁶ *Russell Commission*, 30.

¹⁷ One of the two later fatalities was the result of a Grant's town resident protecting his property from a looter who refused to listen to reason. In his testimony, Clifford Holbert a stone mason who was protecting a shop that he owned with his father relays the incident that took at about 10 a.m. on June 2, "I was sitting on the counter and the leader who is called Johnson held his hand up and made a sign to the man. Johnson had a carpenter's hammer in his hand. He made a sign to the men and said, 'come on, boys lets go in.' I said to them, 'why don't you behave yourselves, aren't we all coloured?' They still came in. The others besides the leader had sticks, bottles and stones and some of them had empty sacs as if to put my property in. I was sitting on the counter with a shotgun on my knees. They flocked around me and as they flocked around me the gun went off. The leader was taken up to the hospital and was dead."

¹⁸ Evidence of Alfred Dewitt Sears to *The Russell Commission*, 65.

¹⁹ Evidence of McDonald Gooding to *The Russell Commission*, 83.

²⁰ Evidence of Samuel White evidence to *The Russell Commission*, 419.

submitted a petition asking for re-zoning, because as it stood there were 30 liquor stores in the southern district.

Throughout the night, bands went through the settlement looting and generally causing havoc. On the morning, June 2nd, a handful of businesses and residences were singled out for attack. Mr. George Cole's Eastern Pharmacy located on Shirley Street was one of them. Cole was a white merchant whose Grant's Town store had been destroyed the previous afternoon. A gang from Grant's Town marched to Shirley Street to loot the store. The Highlanders responded to the phone calls reporting the happenings at the pharmacy and were able to disperse the crowd without incident. The looting of Cole's pharmacy and the liquor store next door to it were the last actions of the riot.

Reassured by the Duke of Windsor, the Governor of the Bahamas that the wage question would be dealt with, more the half the workers returned to work on June 4th and by the end of the week, life returned to normal.²¹

III. Political First Steps: On The Meaning of the Riot

Most historians who have studied the riot have argued that it was not a significant precursor to the political movements that would take place in the Bahamas over the next few decades. The riot, they contend, was just a momentary outburst and its effects, they suggest, are difficult to trace. Doris Johnson, it's supposed, was mistaken when she described the rioters as being consciously engaged in a struggle for their rights and suggested that the riot caused "stirrings in the hearts of the poor and the not-so-poor Bahamians" that ultimately led to political and social change in the Bahamas.

One witness to the riot, Etienne Dupuch, the editor of a local newspaper and a person long thought to be "in touch" with the social attitudes of the Bahamian people argued that the riot was "the natural outcome of the narrow economic, political and social policies pursued by a small but

²¹ Michael Craton and Gail Saunders, *Islanders in the Stream: A History of the Bahamian People (From the Ending of Slavery to the Twenty-First Century)* (Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 2000), 290.

dominant political group in this colony during the last quarter century.”²² Similarly, Hughes has described the riot as “a momentary outburst of raw energy.”²³ And, Saunders, agreeing with both Dupuch and Hughes, has called the riot a “short lived spontaneous outburst by a group of disgruntled labourers ... [that] occurred against a background of narrow socio-economic and political policies.”²⁴ If the riot, however, was the opening skirmish in the battle for majority rule in the Bahamas can we fairly describe it as a momentary or short-lived outburst? Likewise, is it fair to blame the riot on a group of disgruntled workers when many of the rioters were not affiliated with the project? And, finally, is it accurate to describe the system of exploitation and oppression that hemmed in much of the black majority and privileged the Bay Street oligarchs as simply narrow socio-economic and political policies?

a. *Short-Lived or First Sparks?*

As noted above, Saunders claims that the sentiments which fueled the riot were “short-lived.” “Black anger,” she contends, “erupted spontaneously” and “then quickly died.”²⁵ Similarly, Hughes has called the riot a “momentary outburst.” To be sure, the riot was just a two-day affair; hostilities began the morning of June 1st, 1942 and by the afternoon of Tuesday, June 2nd, 1942 the rioting and looting was over. Even if one includes the small demonstration at Oakes Field on the preceding Sunday, the 1942 riot was still (in one sense at least) a brief disturbance. Still, it would be a mistake to describe the riot as just a momentary eruption. The riot was an important first step in the popular movement that would envelope the Bahamas in decades to come. The racial and political consciousness which fueled the quiet revolution in the Bahamas was ripened during this disturbance. And, as we argued elsewhere, processes of identity convergence and identity construction were certainly at work during the riot.²⁶ Additionally, as Hughes conceded, the riot

²² Evidence of Etienne Dupuch to *The Russell Commission*, 301.

²³ Colin Hughes, *Race and Politics in the Bahamas*, 212-213.

²⁴ Gail Saunders, *Bahamian Society after Emancipation*, 119.

²⁵ Gail Saunders, *Bahamian Society after Emancipation*, 119.

²⁶ Nona P. Martin and Virgil H. Storr. 2006. “Bay Street and the 1942 Riot: Social Space and Identity Work in the Bahamas.” Paper presented at the Fourth Annual Meeting of the Cultural Studies Association (U.S.), April 19 – 22, Arlington, Virginia.

continues to be a powerful symbol of black agency and has been referenced again and again in the political struggles of Bahamian blacks, relived in songs, sermons and speeches.

Admittedly, it's difficult to pinpoint the beginning of any movement. Did the Civil Rights movement in the United States begin with the landmark Brown versus the Topeka Board of Education decision in 1954? Or, did it begin a year later with the Dr. Martin Luther King led Montgomery Alabama bus boycott? Or, did it begin twenty five years earlier during the 1919 red summer riots? These were among the first race riots in U.S. where blacks offered a unified response. Similarly, did the South African Civil Rights movement begin in 1976 with the Soweto riots or did it begin with the Sharpeville Massacre in 1960? Each of these is arguably a valid start date for these movements. If we can never be certain about when a movement starts, however, we can perhaps be confident about when a movement is clearly underway.

Although the political awareness and willingness to take on the Bay Street oligarchs that Bahamian blacks evidenced during the riot would be increasingly evident in subsequent years, they were rarely exhibited before the riot. The 1937 riot in Matthew Town, Inagua and the 1935 labor disturbance at Roland T. Symonette's Prince George Hotel are two possible exceptions. But, even with these there are more differences than similarities. Although the 1937 riot involved violent attacks on members of the white merchant class by members of the black working class, it "resulted from a personal vendetta," involved less than a handful of blacks and "failed to develop into a political or labour riot."²⁷ The 1935 disturbance did involve between three and four hundred men but it resulted from their being unhappy that they could not find employment and there was no destruction of property or loss of life. With the possible exception of the semi-annual Junkanoo festivals, when whites gave blacks permission to roam free on Bay Street and veiled complaints were sometimes expressed, there was no time prior to the 1942 riot when blacks ventured into the white oligarch controlled city center to openly voice their dissatisfaction with the local ruling elite.

²⁷ Gail Saunders, *Bahamian Society after Emancipation*, 101.

Additionally, processes of identity convergence and construction were obviously at work during the riot. Identity convergence is the process by which an individual uses participation in group activity as a way of pursuing goals and behaving in ways that are consistent with his individual sense of self.²⁸ Identity construction is the process through which personal identities are aligned with the collective identity of a movement to which he belongs.²⁹ The riot was an opportunity for blacks to express their dissatisfaction with the merchant prince dominated socio-economic system and to demand change. For many of the rioters, Green's bold declaration "I'se a man!" explained and justified their actions. They had no choice but to stand up. The protest and riot was their opportunity to stand up. The riot also had a transformative effect on the black population in the Bahamas. It is worth repeating that before the riot, black Bahamian resistance to the white merchants' political and economic hegemony was muted at best. The riot was a very public metamorphosing of the black laboring class in the Bahamas from docile and compliant to active and defiant.

This change would be celebrated in popular song and political speeches. There are several folk songs that reference the riot including "Don't Burn Down Burma Road" and "Going Down Burma Road." The Project was divided between two sites, Main Field and Satellite Field, and the workers called the road between the two sites, which was used primarily to transport workers and equipment back and forth, Burma Road after the Burma Road in Southeast Asia that connected British Burma to China.³⁰ The popular "Going Down Burma Road" with its haunting refrain "don't lick nobody" is so closely connected with the riot that some participants insist that it was sang by the rioting crowd even though the evidence show they were composed much later on.

²⁸David A. Snow and Doug McAdam, "Identity Work Process in the Context of Social Movements: Clarifying the Identity/Movement Nexus," in *Self, Identity and Social Movements*, eds. Sheldon Styker, Timothy J. Owens and Robert W. White (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press), 47.

²⁹ David A. Snow and Doug McAdam, "Identity Work Process in the Context of Social Movements: Clarifying the Identity/Movement Nexus," 49.

³⁰Olga Culmer Jenkins, *Bahamian Memories: Island Voice in the Twentieth Century*. (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2000), 162.

As Hughes described, the riot “provided martyrs and a heroic moment” for Bahamian blacks.³¹ Just four years after the riot, for instance, H. H. Brown, a Methodist minister, asked his congregation to take responsibility for their government. To punctuate his point, he harkens back to the riot.

That a people have the kind of government that it deserves goes without saying. A criticism of the local government is therefore a criticism of the entire population. Until people waken to their own responsibilities, they will not have a responsible government. But nothing can possibly justify the attempt of any government to keep the people asleep. Who has learned the lesson of the (1942) riot?³²

Similarly, Randol Fawkes begins a speech 13 years after the riot with these words: “Remember the first of June, 1942.”³³ And, in the 1990s when Sir Lynden Pindling, often referred to as the “father of the nation,” was summing up the road to self-determination in the Bahamas, he began his history with the Burma Road Riot. “When the great heroes of our struggle ... stood on Burma Road,” he intoned, “they did not stand alone. When they stood in the General Strike ... against the property vote ... for the woman’s vote ... with the trade unionists ... [and] for majority rule, they did not stand alone.”³⁴

The effect of the riot on the ruling elite was also not short-lived. Although only moderate reforms were passed in response to the riot,³⁵ the ruling elite did not forget that these docile polite Bahamians could be turned otherwise if provoked. As Sherouse explains, “the threat of mob violence surely impacted those in power. To forestall more radical change, white leaders made minor political adjustments.”³⁶ It might appear that very little came out of the riot legislatively

³¹ Colin Hughes, *Race and Politics in the Bahamas*, 212-213.

³² Rev H.H. Brown, sermon at Governor’s Harbour, Eleuthera, January 14, 1946 quoted in Phil Cash, Shirley Gordon and Gail Saunders, eds., *Sources of Bahamian History* (London: MacMillan Caribbean, 1991) 291.

³³Rosalie Fawkes, ed., *Labour Unite or Perish! The Writings that Launched A Movement by Sir Randol Fawkes*, ((Florida: Dodds Printing, 2004), 2.

³⁴ Patricia Beardsley Roker, ed. *The Vision of Sir Lyndon Pindling: In His Own Words*, (Nassau Bahamas: The Estate of Lyndon Pindling, 2002), 163.

³⁵ Saunders, *Bahamas Society After Emancipation*, 118.

³⁶ Scott Sherouse, “Authority and Stratification in the Bahamas: The Quest for Legitimacy” (Ph.D. diss., Florida International University, 2004), 56.

but the minor reforms that did result sent a great signal. A chink in the armor of Bay Street had appeared. They were now making concessions when before such demands would have been rejected out of hand. The riot impressed upon the Bay Street Boys the understanding that they could not hold the space of Bay Street as their own domain, to be leased out one or two days a year.³⁷

b. Group of disgruntled workers or the Bahamian proletariat?

Although the riot certainly grew out of a wage dispute, several of the people who rioted and looted on Bay Street in the morning and Grant's Town that afternoon and evening were not directly affiliated with the Project. Moreover, the Project laborers who were involved in the riot were lashing out at more than unfair wages.

As the workers marched from Main Field to Bay Street, women, children and men not affiliated with the Project, joined in and participated fully in the events that transpired. As Oswald Moseley an agent for the Sun Life Insurance Company of Canada who witnessed the events reported, "there were lots of women in the crowd and they were inciting the men on and the women to my mind started the looting, which the men joined." And, "I saw a woman getting into a window and walking about inside the store making a selection of his stuff."³⁸ Cartwright similarly insisted that "most of the looting was done by the youngsters and women. I saw a girl come with a stick and she smashed a window which had not been broken, then she ran away, then she came back and took what she wanted out of this window she had broken."³⁹ McKenzie likewise testified that "young men and women made up [the] crowd" that he saw rioting on June 2nd.⁴⁰

³⁷ Ironically, because the riot was so heavy on the minds of the ruling elite, they banned the semiannual celebration of Junkanoo in which people from over the hill claimed Bay Street in a loud and boisterous parade.

³⁸ Evidence of Oswald Moseley to *The Russell Commission*, 266.

³⁹ Evidence of Samuel Felix Cartwright, *The Russell Commission*, 370.

⁴⁰ Evidence of Alfred Rhodriques McKenzie, *The Russell Commission*, 318.

The crowd also seemed to be broadly representative of the black working class population in the Bahamas. The Bahamas is an archipelago with dozens of inhabited islands besides the chief island, New Providence, which hosts the Bahamas' capital city, Nassau. It is noteworthy that the crowds, although drawn mainly from the "over-the-hill" area, contained individuals who were originally from these "Out Islands."⁴¹ Although a resident of Grant's Town, Bertram Cambridge insisted that the rioters were "all strangers" to him and "that they were people from the out islands who were quite unfamiliar to [him] and must have come over to get work at the project."⁴² It is also noteworthy that the crowd contained both skilled and unskilled workers. An effort to establish a broadly representative union just a few years before the riot had failed to launch because skilled workers would not participate.⁴³ The riot was, thus, the first time that a cross-section of blacks from all over the Bahamas stood together in a common cause.

And, again, that common cause was not just higher wages, though that was their immediate concern. They were more broadly concerned, however, with economic justice; they were receiving unequal pay for equal work. American workers were getting paid as much as 4 times more than Bahamian workers for doing the same jobs. As Dupuch correctly observed,

the difference in wages paid to Bahamian and American employees at the Project provided scope for considerable agitation which was greatly accentuated... The average person doesn't usually grumble about his wages if they are reasonably fair, but no one appreciates being given a lower human valuation when he is doing the same work along side a person of a different nationality or race.⁴⁴

⁴¹ When it was announced that there would be a construction development on New Providence that would employ over two thousand laborers, men from the Out Islands which were poor and agrarian flocked to the capital. Tariffs, hurricanes, droughts and blight made once profitable crops barely able to sustain the average farmer. Oscar Johnson, a produce agent turned tailor, told the Select Committee that "in 1928, however, a tariff was put on which prevented us from importing our tomatoes to the United States. It was then necessary to get a new market and I then represented Canadian firms sending the tomatoes to Canada. We had a number of hurricanes intermittently about 1932 and in between them we had droughts." Witnesses of the riot affirm the fact that many of the rioters were not from over the hill, but were from the Out Islands. Moreover, some list the overpopulation caused by Out Islanders seeking a better life in Nassau as one of the reasons for the riot.

⁴² Evidence of Bertram Cambridge, *The Russell Commission*, 176.

⁴³ Craton and Saunders, *Islanders in the Stream*, 270.

⁴⁴ Evidence of Etienne Dupuch's *The Russell Commission*, 301.

Thaddeus Johnson, a proprietor of a place where labor congregated, supports Dupuch supposition. When "the Americans took over the project," he testified,

... there was considerable dissatisfaction over the wages. The workmen figured it this way. They figured that this was an American job. They expected much bigger wages than the Nassau standard. No one seemed able to explain to the workmen why they could not receive the American wage. The American wage on the other side of Florida is very high, but I think that the workmen had in their minds at least two or three dollars a day.⁴⁵

This was an issue of fairness. Based on how they had been mistreated in the past by the white merchant class in the colony, the workers understandably assumed that the Bay Street merchants were responsible for this inequality.⁴⁶ During the riot, Bahamian blacks were lashing out at their unfair wages and all the other injustices.

There was also a matter of subsistence. Wages in general had not increased on par with the cost of living and it was difficult to survive on the wages they were being offered at the Project. This was particularly the case because this was temporary employment. It was easier to stomach making smaller wages if they were steady wages. As Bruce Johnson, an insurance agent with clients all over Nassau, reports, "the workmen were finding it harder and harder to get along owing to the increased cost of living."⁴⁷ When Leonard Storr Green realized that he would only receive 4 shillings a day determined that he would need a better paying job because "we can't live on four shillings a day now according to the prices in the stores."⁴⁸

Moreover, the riot (and the desire for equal and sufficient wages) seems to have been related to their desires for full citizenship. Bahamians are very expressive people and have a wealth of folk

⁴⁵ Evidence of Thaddeus Johnson, *The Russell Commission*, 124.

⁴⁶ Evidence of Richard John Anderson Farrington, *The Russell Commission*, 271. The crowd was unaware that the wages were fixed by London and Washington and assumed that it was the colonial powers that were keeping them from getting what was due them. In Samuel Cartwright's barbershop on Friday May 29th, ^{three} Americans from the project were discussing the project generally and the price of labour. "They said that the company wanted to pay higher wages to the working people here but the government and the bay street merchants had been hindering this payment of higher wages." Evidence of Samuel Cartwright, *The Russell Commission*, 370.

⁴⁷Evidence of Bruce Eric Johnson, *The Russell Commission*, 166.

⁴⁸ Evidence of Leonard Storr Green, *The Russell Commission*, 182.

songs from which the workers could have chosen as they marched to Bay Street. They could have kept cadence with the goatskin drum or many other traditional percussion instruments. Instead of choosing ethnic instruments or songs, however, the workers chose patriotic songs, songs of the British Empire, as their songs of protest. One observer, Oscar Johnson, a tailor on Bay Street, remembers that "it was a large crowd of people marching down George Street singing 'We'll never let the old Flag Fall' and that intermingled with the patriotic songs some were saying, 'we want more wages'."⁴⁹ These two, patriotic songs and a cry for more wages were intermingled because the laborers did not see these two sentiments as being inconsistent with one another. With their songs they appealed to their rights as Englishmen.

Perhaps here we can learn from Benedict Anderson's work on nations and "nation-ness". Anderson explains that nations are "imagined communities" because they picture ties that connect the citizenry together over long distances and through time. Of the things that connect people together few are stronger than national symbols such as national anthems. "No matter how banal the words and mediocre the tunes," Anderson explains, "there is in this singing an experience of simultaneity. At precisely such moments, people wholly unknown to each other utter the same verses to the same melody. The image: unisonance... the echoed physical realization of the imagined community."⁵⁰ The same holds true for other national symbols such as the flag or the coat of arms; they also serve as realizations of imagined community.

Interestingly, there were two incidents where imperial symbols were attacked. One was the burning of the picture of the royal family by Alfred Stubbs, one of the rioters. The second was the burning of the English flag. Napoleon McPhee offered a poignant explanation for his behavior. "I willing to fight under the flag," he explained, "I willing even to die under the flag, but I ain't gwine starve under the flag."⁵¹ While appealing to their rights as subjects of the crown they were also distancing themselves from the crown; showing their alienation from the imperial structure which had not ensured the justice that they sought. They were British subjects but they

⁴⁹Evidence of Oscar Ernest Johnson, *The Russell Commission*, 160.

⁵⁰Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso Press, 1991), 145.

⁵¹Fawkes, *Faith that Moved the Mountain*, 24.

were dissatisfied British subjects. Just like the smashing and looting of Bay Street was an attack against the economic status quo, the desecrating of nationally symbolic objects was a political attack. An attack that was not meant to reject British citizenship but to claim the protection and the rights of a British colonial. Again, it is meaningful that when they did not get any satisfaction from their employers, they marched to the center of government in the country, the Parliament Building and the Colonial Office.

Beyond concerns for economic justice and political empowerment, the rioters were concerned with the lack of racial equality in the colony. Although the Russell Commission concluded that the riot had nothing to do with the question of race, the Duke of Windsor who had called for the Commission was certain that "there was strong racial feelings on both sides" and that "Bahamas wage rates was only an excuse to make a vigorous and noisy protest against the white population."⁵² As Saunders states, "racial tension was an underlying cause of the riot."⁵³ On Bay Street, the rioters did not target black owned stores. Harry S. Black's Candy Kitchen, one of the few black owned stores on Bay Street, was not looted.⁵⁴ And, as Craton and Saunders report, "the damage was not indiscriminate; such shops as those owned by the Speaker of the Assembly and the wife of one of the white Project supervisors were almost gutted, but the shoe store owned by Percy Christie, the white would-be labor organizer, was left untouched."⁵⁵ Additionally, the rioters were openly hostile to the whites that they encountered. Speaking of the crowd, John Damianos, a grocery merchant on Bay Street said, "My impression was that when they saw a white face they were particularly infuriated and I think it had reached a point which was largely motivated by some racial feelings. I have never seen anything like this before."⁵⁶ Roland Cumberhatch also overheard the mob proclaim, "no white man is passing here today."⁵⁷

⁵² Saunders, *Bahamas Society After Emancipation*, 114.

⁵³ Saunders, *Bahamas Society After Emancipation*, 112.

⁵⁴ Gail Saunders, "The Role of Coloured Middle Class in Nassau, Bahamas," *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 10 no. 4 (1987), 451.

⁵⁵ Evidence of Mrs. Morton Turtle to the *Russell Commission*, 97.

⁵⁶ Evidence of John Damianos, *The Russell Commission*, 296.

⁵⁷ Evidence of Roland Cumberhatch, *The Russell Commission*, 476.

c. Narrow socio-economic and political policies or a system of apartheid?

It is a gross understatement to describe the set of socio-economic and political norms that existed in the Bahamas during the first half of the twentieth century as merely a collection of narrow policies. The policies were narrow to be sure and certainly favored the merchant princes. But, they amounted to a very real and complete (if relatively mild) system of apartheid. In 1942, blacks in the Bahamas were clearly second class citizens in the colony. And, most blacks depended on the whites oligarchs for the livelihoods.

As Dr. Claudius Walker complained before the Russell Commission in 1942, in the Bahamas “the coloured man makes all the concessions. I challenge any man in this colony to say that I am wrong in that. The coloured man is discriminated against in the churches, in the theatres, in the private schools.” If there is harmony between the black and white populations, Dr Walker went on to say, “it is harmony at the expense of the coloured population.” Saunders confirms Dr. Walker’s claim. “In fact, until the late 1950s,” she states, “blacks were barred from all hotels, were not allowed in some restaurants, movie houses and were only allowed to enter some churches by the rear door. Certain schools did not accept black children and many business firms were closed to them as places of employment.”

Racial discrimination was the norm. Racial animosity was quite commonplace. Racial prejudice was the order of the day. An almost indelible line divided the black and white communities in New Providence.⁵⁸ Most of the blacks were very poor and lived outside the city center in the “over-the-hill” communities like Bain Town and Grant’s Town. These communities, located to the south of Bay Street and separated from the city center by a small hill, were settled by liberated Africans and ex-slaves in the nineteenth century. As was the case since emancipation one hundred years earlier, blacks worked but never lived in the white areas from Bay Street to Montague.

⁵⁸ Segregation not so pronounced

The Bay Street oligarchs also controlled the country politically and economically. Klaw has described them as “a dozen or so Nassau merchants, lawyers, and real-estate brokers who are ... [named after] the street where they have their shops and offices ... [and are] in firm control of the Bahamas government, running it with a free hand.”⁵⁹ Similarly, Themistocleous has called them the merchant princes of Nassau with one hundred-plus years of “hegemony ... over non-white groups.”⁶⁰ The Report of the 1942 Commission of Enquiry into the riot has likewise described them as “elected representatives, who are collectively known as ‘Bay Street,’ (in which street or its immediate neighbourhood all the twenty-nine members of the House of Assembly except two have their places of business).”⁶¹

Not surprisingly, whites were generally unaware of how dissatisfied Bahamian blacks were with this system that privileged whites and constrained blacks. Surprise was their most common reaction to the riot. For instance, Morton Turtle testified, “I was amazed to find that the crowd felt hostile towards me. ... I have always felt in sympathy with the labourers and given them a good wages.”⁶² Similarly, Etienne Dupuch stated, “The riot came as a complete surprise to me. I never thought that our people could be agitated to the point of rioting because they have always enjoyed the enviable reputation of being patient docile and law-abiding.”⁶³ J.P. Sands spoke for many when he said, “I thought that everybody in the island was quite happy until about 8 o'clock on June 1st.”⁶⁴

The riot, then, occurred against a backdrop of extreme racial oppression and is correctly understood as an expression of black dissatisfaction with the prevailing social, economic and political order. The white oligarchs never quite understood the depths of black discontent with

⁵⁹ Spencer Klaw, “Nassau’s Bustling Bay Street Boys,” *Fortune* 59 no. 1 Jan 1959, 92.

⁶⁰ Rosalyn Themistocleous, *The Merchant Princes Of Nassau: The Maintenance Of Political Hegemony In The Bahamas 1834-1948* (Ph.D. diss., University Of Kent at Canterbury, 2000), 6.

⁶¹ *Russell Commission*, 40.

⁶² Evidence of Morton Turtle, *The Russell Commission*, 127.

⁶³ Evidence of Etienne Dupuch, *The Russell Commission*, 301.

⁶⁴ Evidence of J.P. Sands, *The Russell Commission*, 293.

the existing system. Although able to pacify the majority black population for a time, passing labor union legislation, extending the secret ballot to the Out Islands, and the series of concessions that were made in the years after the riot did not placate the black masses once and for all. Nothing short of majority rule, the white oligarchs would find out in subsequent years, could satisfy the black population.

IV. Conclusion

Although the 1942 riot has been described as a key event in the political development of the Bahamas, scholars have consistently downplayed its significance. Hughes, for instance, has described the riot as “a momentary outburst of raw energy” that “provided martyrs and a heroic moment” to Bahamian blacks “once a political movement had finally started.”⁶⁵ Similarly, Saunders has suggested that “black anger ... erupted spontaneously and then quickly died.”⁶⁶ The reason that they discount the significance of the riot, we believe, is because they focus too intently of its immediate socio-economic and political consequences. Since little on the surface changed in the aftermath of the riot, they concluded that the riot did not change much in the Bahamas. In a sense, they are correct. The Bay Street oligarchs barely loosened their grip on social, political and economic life in the country after the disturbance. And, it took two and a half decades for the majority black Progressive Liberal Party to snatch political control from the Bay Street merchant princes.

This preoccupation with immediate effects, however, obscures the true importance of the riot. In our view, it can not be reduced to a “short lived spontaneous outburst by a group of disgruntled labourers ... [that] occurred against a background of narrow socio-economic and political policies.”⁶⁷ First, we see it as the opening skirmish in the battle for majority rule in the Bahamas. The political awareness and willingness to take on the Bay Street oligarchs that Bahamian blacks evidenced during the riot was rarely exhibited before the riot. After the riot, evidence of their political awakening was quite obvious. Second, the anger vented by the rioters was reflective of

⁶⁵ Hughes, *Race and Politics in the Bahamas*, 212-213.

⁶⁶ Saunders, *Bahamian Society after Emancipation*, 108.

⁶⁷ Saunders, *Bahamian Society after Emancipation*, 119.

the dissatisfaction felt by the entire black working class not just the workers on the Project. As Sir Randol Fawkes correctly surmised, “when that mob marched on that early June morning, they took upon their shoulders the common burdens of all Bahamians.”⁶⁸ And, finally, their fight was not against an inadequate welfare system but against a system that oppressed the black majority in the Bahamas and privileged the Bay Street oligarchs. The riot set in motion a political snowball that would result in a movement whose final triumph would be majority rule and the dismantling of the system of apartheid that inhibited Bahamian blacks socially, politically and economically.

⁶⁸ Fawkes, *Faith that Moved the Mountain*, 27.