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Structural Strain and the 2014 Ferguson Uprising

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Abstract

While there has been some attempt to understand the events of the 2014 Ferguson uprising in terms of discrimination and public neglect, there has not been any attempt to unify the disparate features of the uprising – precipitating factors, mobilization, institutional response – using a singular theory or method of mass mobilization analysis. This paper seeks to explain how the events unfolded in Ferguson using the structural strain theory of collective behavior, as proposed by sociologist Neil Smelser. Applying the six conditions of structural strain theory, it can be observed how the events leading up to, and including Mike Brown's death, primed the city for an outburst of collective violence and destruction of the kind not seen in the U.S. in two decades. Using an inductive and case study approach, this paper consists of a content and secondary source analysis of ethnographies, social media posts, and journalistic reporting (among other sources) that unites previous research and data. A hope of this study is to expand upon existing understandings of the Ferguson uprisings and promote the usefulness of structural strain theory as an analytical tool in the study of collective movements.

1. Introduction

"Burn this bitch down," Louis Head, stepfather of Mike Brown, exclaimed to a crowd the night a grand jury handed down a bill of no indictment of Ferguson officer Darren Wilson for the shooting death of Brown only a few months prior (Lowery 2016: 69). By this point, Ferguson, a small suburb of St. Louis had become a site of national interest as the circumstances of Brown's death reverberated throughout the country, inspiring an entire movement in the process. For many though, that very night, when it became evident that Wilson would not face a trial, the city erupted into full-scale riots. The rage and grief apparent in Head's statement reflected a shared sense of injustice and recognition that there was something fundamentally broken in the present social order. On November 24, 2014, Americans across the country witnessed Ferguson burning in real time on live television. Not since Rodney King in Los Angeles in 1992 had police misconduct had such wide reverberations on a community (and the country) in such a shocking way. All told, after the events subsided, the city sustained nearly $5 million in property damage, not to mention the psychic toll that such events had on residents and the country at large (Unglesbee 2014).

Mike Brown's death, like Trayvon Martin's before him and Freddie Gray's after him, became a symbol for the systematic devaluing of black life by the pillar institutions of American society. Narratives of racial progress in a country marked by the twin legacies of chattel slavery and Jim Crow began to crumble as African-American communities actively rose up against forces of discrimination and exclusion that had not completely gone away, but simply blended into the mosaic of a supposed "post-racial" society. Nevertheless, for all of its representativeness as a microcosm for the collective struggle of Black life, the Ferguson uprising was itself borne out of the unique conditions of its specific geographic and political context. Therefore, to understand Ferguson – and to understand why Mike Brown's death felt like more than an aberration on the community – it is important to examine the structural realities that belied any sense of justice or fairness in the minds of the people of Ferguson.

Despite the fact that the Ferguson uprising is distinct in the sense that it is borne out of a specific set of social realities, there is some value in viewing it – and its causes – using specific analytical tools, helping to situate the events in relation to similar movements or realities. One useful tool is social movement theories, which actively try to explain

social movements using tried frameworks to parse out the specificities and explain fundamentally why movements occur, grow, and sometimes fail. One theory in particular, the structural strain theory (or value-added theory), sought to explain how social movements arise under conditions of significant social stress.

The concept of structural strain as applied to social movement growth and mobilization arose out of the work of sociologist Neil Smelser (2013), who outlined the theory in his work *Theory of Collective Behavior*. According to Smelser, there are six general conditions that promote the generation of social movement formations: structural conduciveness, or the conditions that allow for certain behaviors to emerge; structural strain, or the presence of some stress on a society that creates the possibility of unrest; generalized belief, or the recognition by broad members of a society or social group that a problem exists; precipitating factors, or events that help convert the recognition of strain into direct action and mobilization; mobilization for action, or the relevance of organization in creating a coherent and strong movement; and failure of social control, or how authority figures fail to stop a movement from mobilizing.

Despite the fact that Smelser's theory (and breakdown theories more broadly) has gone out of fashion with many social movement theorists (in favor of resource mobilization and/or political process theories), there is continuing relevance for theories that seek to explain collective behavior in a manner that recognizes that many of the traditional channels of redress that movements cling to are not necessarily applicable across all social contexts. Smelser's theory is useful in thinking through social movements when democratic rights are scarce or exist merely as abstractions. In this paper, it will be argued that structural strain theory serves as a useful tool to explain how societal pressure and neglect created the conditions that led ultimately to the uprising in Ferguson, with particular attention placed on the relationship between the dominant municipal establishment in Ferguson and the city's dominant Black population. The structure of the study will be centered around a content analysis, which examines already existing data compiled from scholars and journalists and demonstrates how the data fits within the paradigm of structural strain theory.

2. Literature Review

Structural strain theory is borne out of a Durkheimian functionalist approach to social movements and is frequently grouped together within a broad set of paradigms referred to as "breakdown theories," which seek to explain collective behavior as a response to poor levels of social integration (Buechler 2008). When the social order is defined by a multitude of communities with weak social ties, unrest may often follow suit. Broadly speaking, breakdown theories sought to explain collective behavior that might be characterized as severe social unrest, including events like community violence, riots and rebellions (Useem 1998: 215). Breakdown theories represented the dominant position of movement theories in the post-war period through the 1970s, before its hegemony was displaced by resource mobilization theory. Besides structural strain, other variations within breakdown theory include mass society theory and relative deprivation theory. While the specificities of these theories vary, the core unifying notion at their heart is that failures of the social order frequently produces "subjective tension and therefore the psychological disposition to engage in extreme behaviors, such as panics, mobs etc. to escape from these tensions" (McAdam quoted in van Stekelenburg and Klandermans 2008: 5). Belonging to what is commonly referred as the "classical approach" to social movement studies, some of the earliest and most integral figures in breakdown theories include Le Bon and Blumer (van Stekelenburg and Klandermans 2008: 5). By the 1960s, the academic tides began to shift away from breakdown theories, at least partially as a result from analysis of the contentious politics and movements of the era.

If breakdown theorists sought to explain social movements through social disorder and alienation, subsequent theorists placed far more weight on the relevance of solidarity and organization in the construction of protest movements. The chief paradigm that emerged from this period is resource mobilization theory, which, along with political process theory, remains the dominant theoretical paradigm of social movement theory. One of the primary assumptions built into resource mobilization theory is that movements are guided by rational actors with clearly defined goals acting with centralized control over movement resources (Jenkins 1983:529). Some prominent theorists of resource mobilization theory include Tilly, McCarthy and Zald. Theorists, especially Tilly, have argued that strain in the classical models of collective behavior are insufficient alone to generate movement activity (Tilly 1978 paraphrased in Jenkins 1983: 530). Therefore, according to critics, breakdown theories lack explanatory power in positing the emergence of social movements. Buechler (2004: 53) describes the orientation shift of social movement scholars as "the shift from a deterministic collective behavior paradigm (with strain and breakdown as major determinants to an agency-oriented resource mobilization paradigm in which actors' purposes, interests, and goals displace deterministic factors."

In response, numerous criticisms have been lodged against some of the fundamental assumptions of resource mobilization theory. Piven and Cloward (1991: 437) have pointed the tendency of institutional theorists to conflate

normative social movement behavior (e.g. non-violent protests, electoral campaigns, etc.) with non-normative forms of social movement behavior (e.g. riots, insurrections, etc.). This kind of broad grouping of clearly diverse forms of collective behavior inevitably leads to imprecise metrics for gauging resource capacity, the motivations for individual movement actors, and the relative significance of the severity of strain in producing a collective response. Therefore, ironically enough, resource mobilization theory runs into the same problem of promoting a deterministic view of social movement mobilization that fails to account for a plenary of structural and interpersonal conditions that exist outside the standards of traditional movement activity. Instead of trying to explain all social movement activity with a single defining theoretical paradigm, it is arguably more useful to understand social movements using different theoretical paradigms, based on the unique sociocultural, political and economic conditions that gave rise to the movement in the first place.

Another potential criticism of resource mobilization theory, from the perspective of Smelser's theory in particular, is the fact that Smelser himself does not discount the relevance of resources within his methodological framework. More specifically, the fifth condition that Smelser proposes in structural strain theory, mobilization for action, assumes the presence of material or immaterial resources that help to precipitate the formation of movement actors, which is not inconsistent with resource mobilization paradigms (Smelser 2013). The clear difference, though, between Smelser and the theorists who came after him is that Smelser understood the foremost importance of strain and, critically, the recognition of strain by the people that must proceed any attempt to forge a collective movement to address it.

The existing literature on race riots examines them from multiple dimensions, ranging from individual and interpersonal factors of participation to the structural conditions that give rise to them. Kawalerowicz and Biggs (2015: 675), in their analysis of the 2011 London riots, define a riot as "an event in which a large number of people deliberately damage property and attack others; this often involves looting." There are justifiable reasons to take issue with this definition for its neglect of the political and rhetorical character of riots as responses to systemic injustice, yet it accurately encapsulates the logistical and procedural aspects of riots in a useful, clear way. Among scholars, there are two common explanations for the emergence of riots, particularly in urban contexts. The first explanation, the "flashpoint model," argues that riots occur as a manifestation of frustration in response to a combination of macro or institutional factors as well as interpersonal ones (Waddington, Jones, and Critcher 1989; Klein and Maxson 2006; Moran and Waddington 2016). Still, others conceive of riots as a form of political protest that acknowledges the lack of efficacy in channeling energy and resources through traditional channels and institutions (Wacquant 2008; Akram 2014).

As previously discussed, a potential issue with the latter model is that protests and riots constitute two vastly different forms of political action with different tactics and goals. It is possible for a protest to devolve into a riot under a set of particular conditions (e.g. if protests come to be seen as ineffective or there is a hostile response from institutional forces), but it is more analytically precise to categorize the two as separate phenomena (Holdo and Bengtsson 2020: 165). In their analysis of the 2013 Stockholm riots, Holdo and Bengtsson (2020: 168) argue that localized strain creates an incentive structure that promotes the development of riots. However, the strain alone typically does not account for the emergence of riots. Scholars have posited the relevance of a spark that helps mediate the temporal space between perceived strain and the mobilization toward rioting. On frequent occasions, the act that serves as the catalyst for revolt is an act of personal violence, not of property but of bodily harm (and often death) (Lieberson and Silverman 1965: 888).

3. Methods

As a point of clarification, I am defining the uprising as the spontaneous eruption of anger, directly after the grand jury decision in late November 2014 to not indict Wilson in the death of Michael Brown, which represented the apex of the events in Ferguson in terms of the intensity of the response of the people. This is not to suggest that any mobilization or political action in Ferguson in the months leading up to the grand jury decision will not be taken into consideration. On the contrary, structural strain theory not only helps to explain how the conditions of Ferguson prior to Brown's death helped spark the movement, but it also helps to elucidate how the events in the immediate aftermath of Brown's death - lack of public transparency, growing militarized response to protestors, etc. – led to further anger and alientation, and by extension, mobilization.

Examining the events leading up to the riots help underscore the temporal dimension of structural strain theory, as Smelser proposed it, in which each of the six different conditions for collective behavior follows in a straight path. Therefore, in thinking through how the movement turned into a series of riots, the events leading up to the riots have to be considered and fleshed out in detail. In regards to terminology, I am using the term "uprising" more frequently

than “riots” in the paper, even though I am referring to the same social phenomena. My reason for doing so stems from the fact that “uprising” denotes the political character of the movement as a fundamental response to injustice. “Riot,” on the other hand, is a term frequently used pejoratively, to effectively neuter the rhetorical content of a movement

The method of data collection will be a secondary source analysis and a materials-based analysis. As discussed in my response to the previous question, my research will be based on information previously written on the topics under consideration. Some of the resources I will draw upon include news and media reports, first-person accounts and interviews of those involved or implicated in the movement, and written reports on the movement. Particularly, previously published interviews with residents of Ferguson as well as movement participants will prove useful, as the effects of structural strain are oftentimes most visible at the personal level. Additionally, the Ferguson uprising was among the first major protest movements to utilize social media, so a content analysis of online activism and mobilization will be a critical facet of the research.

The analysis will entirely rest on a qualitative analysis since quantitative measures are both inaccessible and inadequate for the variables under study. Moreover, a secondary source analysis is most appropriate because of logistical concerns (distance, lack of direct contact with movement participants, and time). The benefit of collecting secondary data, in this case, is I have a great breadth of data to work with, since much has already been written on the movement. Yet, in my look at the scholarly literature, no one has taken this particular approach, which allows me to present the movement in a new light. The collection of secondary data will be used to draw a theoretical link between the Ferguson uprising and structural strain theory. For this reason, additional research is devoted to fully understanding the contours of structural strain theory and gaining an understanding of how structural strain theory has been applied to other past movements, including riots/uprisings. This helps to ensure that no misrepresentation of the movement or the theory is taking place.

4. Data Analysis

4.1 Condition 1: Structural Conduciveness

The first condition of structural strain theory, structural conduciveness, refers to the ways that the social structure promotes or inhibits the ability of strain to translate into collective behavior. Smelser himself wrote, “If hostility is to arise from conditions of strain, these conditions must exist in a *structurally conducive* (author’s emphasis) setting – a setting which is either permissive of hostility or prohibitive of other responses, or both (2013: 224-225). These structural conditions can either be localized to the specific socio-spatial context of a particular area or arise from the larger structural factors that exist in the broader society. Frequently, the line between the micro (or localized) conditions of strain emergence and the broader structural conditions is not always clear. In many cases, the two intersect. In the case of Ferguson, however, analysis will focus on immediate social, economic and political conditions of the city.

Ferguson, Missouri is a suburb of the greater St. Louis metropolitan area. Up until the latter half of the 20th century, Ferguson was a primarily white suburb. In 1970, roughly 1% of the city’s population was black. By 2010, that share rose to 67% (Rothstein 2014). The influx of African-Americans to Ferguson corresponded to a large migration of white residents out of Ferguson. The development of Ferguson as a majority-black city was a direct consequence of federal, state and local policy related to housing and urban development in the mid-20th century. As legal scholar Richard Rothstein (2014) has noted extensively, the history of Ferguson is, in many ways, a history of segregation, discrimination and exclusion, in the form racially explicit zoning, denial of adequate municipal services, and municipal incorporation policies designed to keep African-Americans from majority-white areas.

Ferguson has become characteristic of the phenomenon of “hypersegregation” in African-American communities, which consists of four primary conditions: unevenness, or the degree to which African-Americans reside across communities; isolation, or the low probability of African-Americans living in proximity to whites; concentration, or the quantity of physical space occupied by African-Americans; and centralization, or the degree to which African-Americans reside near the urban center (Deaton and Massey 1988 paraphrased in Cobbina 2019). The cumulative effect of the segregationist policies resulted in the unequal development of the greater St. Louis metropolitan area, to the benefit of the majority-white St. Louis suburbs and to the detriment of Ferguson. As a result, Ferguson lacks many of the community resources typically found in metropolitan areas of its comparable size, including social agencies, job training facilities, affordable housing, and health clinics (Swanstrom and Dreier 2014).

Additionally, despite the fact that African-Americans now make up over half the population of Ferguson, city politics remain overwhelmingly dominated by white legislators, administrators and city officials. As of 2014, only one of the six elected city council members was African-American (Pearce et al. 2014). The racial composition of elected officials, in the case of Ferguson, proved consequential in the allocation of municipal positions across the board, especially for the police department. At the time of the writing of the U.S. Department of Justice's *The Ferguson Report* (2015), it was acknowledged that of the 54 sworn members of the Ferguson Police Department, only four were African-American. The case of the racial mismatch between the population and its representative institutions in Ferguson is unique in the sense that, for many comparable cities, a growing racial homogenization in the population typically results in a simultaneous racial homogenization in the institutions of governance in that municipal context (Lee 2018: 15).

Why does any of this matter particularly? What do the maldevelopment of Ferguson or its fundamental lack of representative institutions have to do with the emergence of strain, and thus a hostile reaction from members of the community? In regards to the concrete economic conditions of the city, it is important to note that when economic development is minimal, social instability invariably manifests in its absence. Previous research demonstrates that economically distressed neighborhoods are frequently characterized by high rates of unemployment, poverty, violence and crime (Massey and Denton 1993). Thus, the arrival of social ills, created by institutional discrimination at every level of governance, necessitates a mechanism for controlling the population and maintaining the public order (Blauner 1969: 396). As deviance and crime become wedded to the social fabric of a given community, members of that community will face more consistent interaction with police, increasing the likelihood of strain via discrimination, unnecessary force, intimidation, and even death.

In regards to the lack of representative public institutions in Ferguson at the time of Brown's death, the relative importance of responsive governance, and broad citizen trust in those institutions, is partially predicated upon markers of shared identity. Bobo and Gilliam (1990: 382) have argued that "black empowerment" (as measured by the extent of black presence in public office) leads to greater trust by African-American community members because "it is a contextual clue of likely policy responsiveness to black concerns." When communities are not represented by politicians who share in their unique policy interests, trust invariably breaks down. Strain thus can develop between the inherent discrepancy between the wishes of the population and the (un)willingness of the government to manifest those concerns through relevant policy considerations or proposals.

4.2 Condition 2: Structural Strain

The concept of structural strain forms the crux of the analysis of the Ferguson uprising. Strain is not easily definable because it can manifest in a multitude of ways, but it can be effectively thought of as the tension that develops between the population in a given context and the structural (political, economic, or social) factors that exist in that same context, and that makes the emergence of a hostile outburst or response possible. Smelser (2013: 16) considered four broad types of strain in his formulation of collective behavior: ambiguities, deprivations, conflicts, and discrepancies. Because of the incredible complexity that exists at the intersection of strain, the social structure, and the population, there is no established type of outburst that corresponds to a specific kind of strain. A collective response may manifest in significantly different ways across different social contexts, even when subjected to similar kinds of strain.

In the case of Ferguson, the broad category of strain under analysis is conflict-related strain. More specifically, strain in this context is operationalized as the discriminatory, extractive and unjust practices of the Ferguson Police Department (with the complicity of the other municipal institutions) enacted upon the largely-Black population. Analysis will focus upon patterns of racial bias in Ferguson PD, law enforcement as a practice of revenue generation, and the frequent use of unnecessary force and intimidation by officers. As a point of explanation, the source drawn exclusively from in this portion of the paper is the U.S. Department of Justice's *The Ferguson Report*, which consists of the investigation and analysis by members of D.O.J. into the practices of Ferguson PD. The reasons for drawing heavily from this sole source are two-fold: firstly, it provides the most comprehensive, all-encompassing account of the legal and law enforcement practices in Ferguson; and secondly, the institutional authority of the D.O.J. gave it unprecedented levels of access to documents and other materials that help elucidate the extent of the problem. This is not to suggest that there are not other valuable sources to be drawn from. However, there are few sources that match the breadth, depth and legitimacy that the D.O.J.'s analysis offers to the contents under study.

An explicit aim of Ferguson PD was revenue generation for the city budget. Between fiscal years 2010 and 2014, the amount of revenue acquired from court fines nearly doubled doubled from $1.38 million to $2.63 million, consistently accounting for nearly a quarter or more of Ferguson's total operating budget (Department of Justice, Civil Rights Division 2015: 17). When revenue accumulation becomes a primary feature of law enforcement activity, there

is an insidious incentive to apply the law in a manner that is punitive and unfair. One officer admitted that, frequently, members of the police force would hold contests with one another to determine who could issue the most citations within a single traffic stop or encounter, including up to fourteen citations for a single individual (Department of Justice, Civil Rights Division 2015: 19). In 2014, one report showed that there was an average of three warrants per household in Ferguson, mostly from municipal fines (Thomas 2014). The immediate effect of this is two-fold: firstly, it forces members of the community to engage in an overburdened, confusing and bureaucratic court system with little hope of discharging the fines; and consequently, it pushes an already poor population into a state of financial and legal ruin, further harming their opportunities to acquire stable employment and housing.

Additionally, patterns of abuse extend from municipal practices to cases of physical abuse and intimidation from officers within the community. Frequently, cases of police misconduct were in clear violation of citizens' constitutional and civil rights. Examples abound, but the most consistent cause for excessive use of force was escalation by the officer involved in the altercation, especially in the case of unwarranted traffic stops (Department of Justice, Civil Rights Division 2015: 56). Often, arrests were made not based upon actual wrongdoing by the suspected perpetrator, but on attempts to challenge the authority of the officer (Department of Justice, Civil Rights Division 2015: 47). These so-called "contempt of cop" cases were common, as officers felt that disrespect was reasonable cause to arrest someone. Likewise, force was used largely indiscriminately against any member of the community perceived to be resistant to the demands of the officer, even including children and the mentally ill. However, use of force falls most heavily on Ferguson's African-American residents, who accounted for 90% of incidents of force (Department of Justice, Civil Rights Division 2015: 48). It was also common for Ferguson officers to deploy canines and ECWs (i.e. tasers) against potential suspects in a manner that is unsafe and abusive (Department of Justice, Civil Rights Division 2015: 48-49). For instance, in one particular case, officers used an ECW device against a man with diabetes who supposedly bit the hand the hand of the officer while having a seizure (Department of Justice, Civil Rights Division 2015: 60). This kind of heightened response to criminal offenses (or perceived criminal offenses) reflects both a lack of ability to de-escalate conflict and a lack of concern for the safety and well-being of members of the Ferguson community. A byproduct of this use of punitive force is a further breakdown in public trust in the department's capability in protecting the community.

In the public realm, considerable debate and research has been devoted to uncovering the systemic nature of anti-Black racial bias in policing (Balko 2020). It is overwhelmingly evident that, in the case of Ferguson, such racial bias was not an aberration, but rather a defining component to the day-to-day work of the police department. While composing only 67% of Ferguson's population, African-Americans accounted for 85% of traffic stops, 90% of citations, and 93% of arrests (Department of Justice, Civil Rights Division 2015: 98). The magnitude of these disparities become even more acute when compared to the treatment that Ferguson's white population receives from police. For instance, African-Americans in Ferguson are more than twice as likely to be stopped and searched in traffic stops than their white counterparts, yet African-Americans were 26% less likely to be found with contraband than whites (Department of Justice, Civil Rights Division 2015: 102). Similarly, Ferguson PD's execution of arrests based solely on the fact that the suspect had an outstanding municipal warrant fell disproportionately on African-Americans. Between 2012 and 2014, officers arrested 460 individuals on outstanding warrants, while 443 of those (or 96%) were African-American (Department of Justice, Civil Rights Division 2015: 105). Moreover, in addition to the covert racism that manifests through the institutional force of the department, officers were frequently known to make racist and off-color jokes about Black people, including emails circulated that depicted President Obama as a chimpanzee and one that equated an African-American woman obtaining an abortion as a form of crime mitigation (Department of Justice, Civil Rights Division 2015: 112).

4.3 Condition 3: Generalized Belief

For structural strain to result in a meaningful response and attempts at redress, those who are subjected to strain must be aware of the strain and its broad extent in the social context. For Smelser, "generalized belief" – or the awareness of strain – "identifies the source of strain, attributes certain characteristics to this source, and specifies certain responses to the strain as possible or appropriate" (Smelser 2013: 16). In the case of Ferguson, the connection between strain (police bias and misconduct) and citizens' perceptions of that strain are clear and evident. Several scholars have interviewed African-American Ferguson residents and protestors, many of whom tell the same story: the police department serves less of a protective role in the community than one that instills fear and anger in the minds of many. In this section, the three markers of structural strain (excessive use of force, racial bias, and revenue extraction) in Ferguson will be reiterated through the anecdotes of the people who have experienced it firsthand. Perceptions of

police certainly varied, but particular patterns of anger and concern emerged from the perspectives of African-Americans in Ferguson.

The most noticeable theme among those interviewed is that Ferguson PD frequently engaged in racial bias. More specifically, in criminologist Jennifer Cobbina's research, several people believed that it was not simply that police disrespected Black citizens but viewed them as less than human. One female resident, Susanna, said the following: "I think they view us as dogs. Our lives are worthless. They don't think we matter. They don't care for us (Cobbina et al. 2016: 221). Others expressed views on similar lines, suggesting that officers regard Black people as "dogs" and "threats that need to be contained." This fundamental practice of dehumanization was manifest in the various ways that officers directly engaged with Black residents. According to some, it was not uncommon for police to get verbally aggressive and even resort to using racial slurs (Cobbina 2019: 45-46). Stereotypes frequent color officers' perceptions of Black residents as well. Ebony, another resident, opened up about her brother's regular contact with Ferguson police:

"I have a brother who I guess probably in the last two years he's been pulled over – stopped probably, I would say, twenty-four times…and that's when he's coming to visit me. He doesn't live in the neighborhood. He's a professional. He drives a very nice vehicle. But every time he's being harassed, 'Are you a drug dealer? Where did you get your money?' Slamming him down on the streets for no apparent reason. [He's] not breaking the law [and he committed] no infractions. Just you're driving while Black" (Cobbina 2019:39).

Another common thread connected to this entrenched bias was fear – individual fear on the part of an individual that they could, at any moment, be subject to the force and dehumanization that was endemic, as well as a kind of relational fear that a friend, family member or vulnerable member of the community could be harassed, arrested, injured, or killed. For instance, Aliyah, a female resident, after observing multiple occasions of teenagers being arrested for no other apparent reason than that they were traveling in large groups, advised her twenty-three old son to ensure that "there's no more than two or three people in your car" (Cobbina 2019: 39-40). The reputation of the department extended beyond the immediate municipal borders. A resident, Devanta, explains his family's hesitation to come to Ferguson:

"If I tell a family member, tell one of my cousins [or] tell one of my uncles [to] come over they'll say, 'Ain't you in Ferguson? Naw, I can't mess with Ferguson.' Then I hear all these rumors about Ferguson [police] beating people in jail or always stopping people for no reason, always trying to find a reason to pull somebody over…[My family members say] 'I know if Ferguson [police] pull me over I'm going to jail' and they know that so they feel like I'm not gonna test Ferguson" (Cobbina 2019: 48).

Other residents and protestors directly connected racial bias to Ferguson's focus on policing as a practice of revenue generation for the city, a process, which as previously mentioned, disproportionately harmed African-American residents. In an interview, one activist said the following:

"A lot of people knew it uh, it was racist out here. But up until the killing of Mike Brown, uh... they really didn't know the extent. Ferguson police department need to be dismantled. All those racist-ass cops in there. It's fucked up. Profiting. Pulling all these Black people over, people are scared to cross the border, right there at the uh, the highway, off into the county. Afraid - somebody waiting to pull us over. They'd rather go around the outskirts all the way around than just go through here - cause they waiting for us. They making money off of us" (Taylor 2016: 107).

Another protestor made a similar argument, highlighting the violent and expropriative nature of the department:

"I think if you talk to just about anybody that was out here before the DOJ came down and they started describing—everybody knew that this was the order of things; the police stop people... I call it performing armed robberies on tax-paying citizens. Cause that's what they've been doing...' Police do have a gun... they do rob you for some money... you can't contest it, you gotta give it up...So it's a armed robbery in all counts...the community, they know about it" (Taylor 2016: 106).

It is relevant to conclude this section with the disclaimer that these perspectives are not, in any manner, universal. Many Ferguson residents admitted to having pleasant interactions with the police (Cobbina 2019: 49). Still, it is evident that police misconduct in Ferguson was from abnormal, and the vast majority of cases of abuse fell disproportionality on Black people, as has been previously discussed. From her collection of personal interviews, Cobbina (2019:29) reported that African-Americans in Ferguson were six times more likely to report negative encounters with police than their white counterparts. The cumulative effect of all of this is not simply a strain in trust

in the institution of law enforcement; it is the clear absence of trust altogether. Ferguson police had created, in Wesley Lowery's (2016: 44) words, a "seething cauldron of resentment." Up to this point, the background of Ferguson has been laid out. This provides the framework for understanding the consequential nature of the event that forms the backbone of the mobilization of protest in Ferguson: the shooting death of Michael Brown in August 2014.

4.4 Condition 4: Precipitating Event

As Smelser argues, the presence of conduciveness, strain, and generalized belief are necessary, in some contexts, for a collective response to occur, but are not sufficient. What is required, additionally, is a spark (or "flashpoint") which gives generalized beliefs "concrete, immediate substance" (Smelser 2013: 17). In the case of Ferguson, it will be argued that Michael Brown's death at the hands of officer Darren Wilson served as the conduit between generalized belief and mobilization of action on the part of protestors. The strain that had been materialized and internalized in the hearts and minds of protestors became actualized and united in a single concrete moment. The resentment of residents toward police and the other municipal authorities was undeniably present well before the events of August 2014, but Brown's death effectively refined that anger in a manner that promoted a sense of solidarity around the strain faced by the Black population of Ferguson. This section is devoted to placing Brown's death in a context to help explain the events that followed suit.

There has been considerable interest and debate around the event that transpired on August 9th, 2014, the day that changed the city of Ferguson and, arguably, the nation. On that afternoon, it was reported that Officer Wilson observed Michael Brown and his friend Dorian Johnson walking down Canfield Drive. When Wilson saw both men walking in the street, he told them to move to the sidewalk, which they refused to do. What happened next is far from clear. Officer Wilson alleged that, at that moment, he realized Brown was a robbery suspect. In response, he tried to exit his vehicle, which was met by a forceful response from Brown, who punched him and reached for his gun. Wilson fired two shots, prompting a chase between the two that culminated in Wilson firing a total of twelve shots after Brown turned around and charged at Wilson. Two bullets struck Brown in the head, ending his life. Johnson asserted, conversely, that Wilson instigated the altercation, grabbing Brown by the neck. Brown tried to pull away and retreat as Wilson grabbed his gun. Wilson fired two shots in his back. Brown turned around, lifted his arms in surrender, and Wilson opened fire again (Cobbina 2019: 138).

Before long, word spread throughout the community of Brown's death. Hundreds of people gathered in the area, where Brown's body remained in the spot where he collapsed for over four hours, covered only by a sheet (Lowery 2016: 26). The spectacle of Brown's body baking in the summer heat under questionable circumstances circulated quickly online and became a charged symbol in Ferguson of the consistent dehumanization of Black lives from the municipal apparatus. Many compared it to a modern-day lynching, harkening back to the past practice of African-Americans being murdered and having their bodies displayed as a warning to other Black people (Lowery 2016: 25). The deep connection between Brown's death and the systemic discrimination embedded in the citizens' daily interactions with police was not lost on the African-American people of Ferguson. One protestor, Carl Union, said of Brown's death, "That could be any of us. That could have been me dead on the street" (Lowery 2016: 25). Hours had passed, and Ferguson emerged in the national spotlight. "Hands Up, Don't Shoot" became the rallying cry of a movement that would begin to take hold in the community (and the country). The next section examines the complex terrain of mobilization that emerged in Ferguson in response to Brown's death.

4.5 Condition 5: Mobilization for Action

Once strain has been broadly internalized by the population and that strain becomes connected to a particular event, the capacity for mobilization can begin. Smelser (2013: 17) writes, "This point marks the onset of panic, the outbreak of hostility, or the beginning of agitation for reform or revolution." In the Ferguson context, the death of Michael Brown opened the floodgates for citizens to express grievances through modes of collective action. Mobilization for action reflects the deep complexities of movement activity, from the individual and interpersonal dimensions of protest to the macrostructural or institutional apparatus that channel individuals toward public redress. With this in mind, understanding the unrest in Ferguson requires an understanding of both the relational features of protest as well as the strategies and methods employed by groups to actively respond to Brown's death. This section will cover three broad features of the Ferguson protests: the early role of peaceful action; the mediation of the digital and spatial components of action; and the individual reasons and incentives to engage in protest.

For many, the memory of Ferguson conjures images of violence and destruction – of burning buildings and tear gas. However, protest in Ferguson in the immediate aftermath of Brown's death were overwhelmingly peaceful. There

were extreme examples of violence in the days following the incident (i.e. the destruction of a QuikTrip gas station), but traditional forms of activism broadly took hold, thanks in part to the creation of various on-the-ground organizations and groups that engaged in rallies, marches, and acts of civil disobedience. Organized action emerged largely from individuals and groups within the St. Louis County area. For instance, groups like Organization for Black Struggle, Missourians Organizing for Reform and Empowerment, and Millennial Activist United formed coalitions of more seasoned activists and younger protestors to put pressure on the local government to provide some sense of justice (Lowery 2016: 59). Likewise, the growing notoriety of the Ferguson case brought prominent activists and celebrity figures to Ferguson to support the work of local organizers. Theologian and intellectual Cornel West, educator and civic leader Deray McKesson, and fashion designer Charles Wade were among those who assisted in the protest movement (Lowery 2016: 61). The cumulative effect of the peaceful protests included raising the platform of the protestors, creating a strong base of mobilization across the totality of the region, and increasing the level of public awareness around the situation in Ferguson and how it intersected with racial justice issues throughout the nation.

Much scholarship has been devoted to understanding the role of social and digital media in the context of the Ferguson protests. Online platforms, especially Twitter, proved useful in documenting Brown's death, galvanizing protestors, and augmenting the spatiality of the on-the-ground movements. On Twitter, the use of hashtags (e.g. #MikeBrown, #HandsUpDontShoot) not only raised awareness of what was going on in Ferguson via popular media channels, but provided organizers with a shared discursive space to discuss, deliberate and debate tactics of engagement (Tewksbury 2018: 60). Beyond the immediate logistical and strategic components of collective action lies the relevant component of solidarity creation through online dialogue. Social media platforms can effectively build community and a sense of togetherness through grievance sharing and a sense of shared struggle for justice (Tewksbury 2018: 59). However, it is relevant to consider the fact that social media activism, in the Ferguson context, ought not to be considered divorced from the on-the-ground activism conducted by protestors. Rather, social media activism and physical protest in Ferguson ought to be observed as mutually co-constitutive: online activism promoted the sharing of information to support physical protest, while physical protest utilized social media to document the progression of the movement and expose the fraught relationship between protestors and the police (Mislan and Dache-Gerbino 2018: 688).

An additional component of mobilization that is worthy of examination is the relative importance of individual motivations for direct involvement with the movement. Deconstructing personal drives for protest is relevant for mobilization analysis within a structural strain framework precisely because the presence of strain would likely predict grievance-based motivations, which is exactly what is observed from analyses of the individual motivations of the Ferguson protestors. In her interviews conducted with protestors in Ferguson, Cobbina (2019: 75-95) observed four broad categories of drive that promoted individual involvement in the movement: "victims of injustice"; "not isolated events"; "desire to affect change"; and "moral duty to get involved."

The first motivational category – "victims of injustice" – refers to the extent to which protestors expressed outrage at the circumstances of Brown's death. Many felt that Wilson's use of deadly force was completely unjustified and necessitated an organized response. The second category – "not isolated events" – connects political action to the presence of broad strain in the Ferguson context. For protestors who engaged in protest through this motivational lens, Brown's death was not an aberration, but rather an extreme example of the ways that Ferguson police routinely interact with African-American residents. The third – "desire to affect change" – reflects the individual feelings of responsibility to get involved to alter the social fabric in a manner that is consistent with social justice for all people. The fourth – "moral duty to get involved" – describes the importance of a sense of personal obligation in spurring people to take action. This sense of obligation can be broad (a general dissatisfaction with racial injustice in the United States) or specific (a sense of responsibility to the state of one's own community). Given the complex nature of individual factors of political involvement, these four categories are far from exhaustive, but they nevertheless help to elucidate and demystify the relationship between structural factors and personal political agency.

4.6 Condition 6: Failure of Social Control

The final condition of structural strain theory concerns the ways that political institutions fail to respond to an emerging movement, increasing hostility and giving rise to non-normative forms of political action. Smelser writes, "the behavior of agencies of social control in the face of a hostile outburst concerns the manner in which force is exercised, though, of course, many factors other than force enter into the encouragement or discouragement of hostility (2013: 261). In the case of Ferguson, it can be observed how the police and municipal authorities tried to control the situation in a way that fanned the flames of resentment, bringing the movement from an orientation of relative peaceful engagement through traditional forms of democratic redress to one resulting in large-scale riots. The failure of social

control in this context revolves around two institutional responses to the protests: the failed attempt to control and manipulate the narrative around Brown's death, and the escalation of police response to protestors.

From the moment that Brown's death became a public story up through the grand jury decision, the Ferguson authorities sought to preserve its institutional legitimacy in such a way that ultimately backfired. Instead of capitulating to protestor's justified concerns, public officials made a series of calculated public relations maneuvers that only further alienated the majority- Black population. For instance, on the day that Officer Wilson's identity was revealed in connection to Brown's death, Thomas Jackson, chief of police, released the surveillance video of Brown engaging in a robbery in the moments before his altercation with Wilson. His motivation to many was clear: in steering the public conversation away from Wilson and to Brown's act, he could try to quell the unrest by emphasizing Brown's apparent criminality (Swaine 2014). However, instead of turning public opinion against Brown, his attempted smear campaign only further incensed members of the community, who felt his portrayal of Brown was unjustified. Likewise, public leaders repeatedly failed to acknowledge the legitimate anger of protestors, arguing instead that there was no systemic bias against African-Americans in Ferguson. The city's (white) mayor, James Knowles, went on MSNBC in August and offered the following analysis: "There's not a racial divide in the city of Ferguson. That is the perspective of all residents in the city. Absolutely" (Swaine 2014). His remarks were swiftly criticized all around by residents, protestors, and political commentators. These, along with other examples of the city's absolute failure to communicate openly about the perceived grievances of the residents, accelerated the breakdown of the already tenuous relationship between the city and the Black population.

Additionally, as level of engagement of protest increased throughout Ferguson, protestors were met by an increasingly repressive and militarized police force. Far from pacifying the anger of residents, the open hostility of the police to mobilization fueled the anger at the very institution that caused the grievances in the first place. From early on in the protests, it was evident that the police were not keen on allowing demonstrations, even ostensibly peaceful ones, to take place. As some have noted, the police failed to create spaces of peaceful protest engagement – "free speech zones" – where grievances could be aired without fear of arrest or detainment (Serrano and Pierce 2015). As has been previously mentioned, when traditional forms of protest are met with open antagonism from the institutional apparatus, the incentive structure to continue mobilization in that fashion breaks down, allowing non-normative action to supersede and take hold.

Moreover, even when police allowed peaceful demonstrations to occur, they would engage through overwrought demonstrations of force. Among the tactics employed by Ferguson police to reign in protestors included the use of armored vehicles, attack canines, and tear gas (van Heyer 2014). Others noted the excessive, indiscriminate deployment of crowd-control weaponry, like bean bag rounds, stingerballs, and pepperballs (Serrano and Pearce 2015). Instead of controlling the protests, the heightened response from police incited the acceleration of fear, chaos, and panic. By the time the grand jury decision was announced in November, many protestors no longer felt that the non-violent route of engagement was productive, especially in the face of an unresponsive, repressive local government. Ferguson erupted in a full-scale uprising, a mode of political action once thought marginal in 21st century America.

5. Discussion

Whether it is broadly acknowledged or not, it is clear that the ripple effects of the events of Ferguson reverberate through the present day. The uprisings that stretched throughout the continental United States in response to the death of George Floyd in the summer of 2020 demonstrate the enduring relevance of the practice of non-normative political action in the context of extreme social repression. Far from being relegated to the dustbin of social movement theory, breakdown paradigms, including structural strain theory, are viable lenses of examining the world, as the American social fabric appears to be fraying at the seams. One immediate implication of this research is the importance of having representative, responsive political bodies, especially in communities that experience sharp marginalization. Researchers, practitioners and representatives in the field of public policy need to take seriously the notion that outbursts like this are avoidable, but given the fact that American local, state and federal governance is historically marked with the stain of systemic racism and classism, it remains to be seen whether or not that fundamental institutional orientation can be uprooted with the swiftness and thoroughness that is needed to prevent further uprisings. In the meantime, what ought to be of more pressing concern is what uprisings, like the kind in Ferguson and Minneapolis, can teach American society.

In his book *Specters of Revolt* (2016), political theorist Richard Gilman-Opalsky argues for the concept of an "intellect of insurrection." Uprisings (or riots), in popular discourse, are so often coded as "unnecessarily violent,"

"irrational," or "chaotic." This framing serves several purposes: it upholds the status quo by assuming that uprisings are unjustified; it reinforces marginalization by promoting unsubstantiated stereotypes about the urban (or suburban) poor; and it further mystifies and hides the violence that characterizes the everyday – the violence of segregation, the violence of poverty, the violence of the police state. Instead, Gilman-Opalsky argues, uprisings should be seen as expressions of a kind of "philosophy from below," events imbued with rhetorical content. When marginalized people brush against and exhaust the limits of "rational" action in a liberal democratic framework, subversive political action carries an emancipatory fervor. Uprisings are valid expressions of the will of a people who are not served by the society, and these outbursts, with all of their apparent structureless-ness and complications, are legitimate manifestations of an alternative political arrangement, where everyone's voice is given a platform and no one has to suffer the indignity of a society bent against them.

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