

Killing Bill:
Politics, Policing and Street Violence in the *Gangs of New York* Era

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Policing heretofore has been *terra incognita* for anthropology, though this and other recent sessions at AAA meetings suggest that's changing. Good, because it is through police forces that the power of the state directly confronts its citizens. New York City is a key case because of its historical and current role as trend leader among urban American police. This paper discusses the creation and early development of the New York police force. Extreme social conflicts were channeled through politics and then through the police, in an effort to control life on the street and thereby shape society. This narrative of contending visions of America focuses on the first three of New York's *four* police forces, from 1845 to 1857. The period might be familiar to you, albeit it in a warped way, through Martin Scorsese's film *Gangs of New York*, loosely based on Herbert Asbury's book of the same name.

New York in 1845, was just Manhattan, maybe 400,000 people, with continuous building approaching today's midtown. It was policed by an all-purpose constabulary, supplemented by a night watch, and on the very frequent occasions of riot, backed by the militia. The constabulary and night watch went back to Dutch times. That system no longer worked.

Since the 1820s, the City had been transformed. Flamboyant wealth was matched by abject poverty and growing slums, such as the infamous Five Points. Most of the very poor were immigrants from Ireland, and most were Catholic. Emergent industrialism gave rise to militant trade unionism. Since the first popular election of New York mayors in 1834, political parties and factions had been locked in internecine struggle. A growing middle class, backed by the wealthy, were pushing a moralistic Protestantism that championed "Native American" values of proper domesticity against the "foreign hordes." Penny daily newspapers, forerunners of today's tabloids, kept up a constant barrage on the corruption and incompetence of the constabulary, the courts, and the politicians behind them. New York was a city in crisis, your proverbial seething cauldron.

A strong Nativist or Know-Nothing party was constructed upon these tensions, with immigrants their symbolic target. In 1845, about one-third of New York's population were foreign born, and more landed every day. With a two-third majority, anti-immigrant forces captured city hall in 1844, with publishing patriarch James Harper. He created a uniformed, 200-man police force, exclusively native born. Dubbed Harper's Police, they were sent in to close saloons on Sunday—and promptly chased the hell out. When the Democrats won the next election (mayors served for two years then), they disbanded Harper's Police, along with the constabulary and night watch, and created in their place a new, 800-man Municipal Police—ununiformed, un-trained, and *thoroughly* political. At the start, coppers were appointed for one-year terms by the Alderman of the Wards they would patrol, and these patronage plums reflected their constituency. That commonly meant appointing Irish men, a practice which quickly became an issue.

It isn't clear just how much these Ward-based, political police used violence. Carrying a gun was not a policy, though many did. Their first years were a knock-down, drag-out struggle for dominance of the streets--the Municipals against corner boys, disorderly drunks, and crowds.

Their chief had a motto, "There is no remedy for insulting language but personal chastisement." Over the dozen years of the Municipal's existence, they underwent substantial professionalization, put in uniform and trained by military to march and fight in formations. They used these new skills to break up riots and militant labor actions. But there was no great gulf between them and the people of the slums. The police did *not* try to close saloons on Sunday, unless for show. For the self-styled respectable classes, *that* was a problem—both on moral grounds, and because Sunday saloons were the hub of immigrant politics.

While that was happening, city politics were changing, with the street asserting itself in a new way. In 1842, a local politician named Mike Walsh became the first to just *grab* an election by turning out a couple of hundred voting "repeaters" and "shoulder hitters." Soon, any downtown pol worth his salt had his own boys, usually based in a volunteer fire department or an illegal saloon. Through vote fraud and intimidation, these political gangs won elections, and the even more vicious intra-party primaries. In return, gang members got political protection. For the most part, they were not criminals, but working men—at least except for their political boss. But with his indebted support, they had no fear of the law—for lifestyle offenses, for brawling, or for sticking somebody up. Democratic politicians of Tammany Hall happily let street life follow its own course. They were *part* of it. It was their electoral base.

1847-48 saw a new, even greater surge of Irish and German immigration. Around 1855, New York City passed from being one-third to *one-half* foreign born. Immigrants voted—sometimes more than once. A Nativist had no chance of becoming mayor. So the struggle shifted—to Albany. The New York State legislature was dominated by Protestant Republicans, who feared the immigrants, and wanted to shut down unlicensed saloons and those open on Sunday. The Democrats who controlled the City were largely Catholic, pro-immigrant, and very "wet" in terms of drinking. Within the City, however, there was a powerful elite minority, with substantial middle class backing, that sided with Albany in such concerns. In 1855, the Protestant, Republican, Nativists found their symbol—ironically in a saloon. Butcher Bill Poole—the Daniel Day Lewis character in *Gangs of New York* (who played Bill much as he was described)—was shot down after a night of hard drinking.

Poole was a Nativist. His business, butchering, was hit hard by immigrants getting butcher licences. Poole led a political gang that slugged it out with Democratic gangs in municipal elections. 1855 was a big moment for political gangs. Tammany Hall was splitting into factions, Hunkers vs. Barn Burners, then Hard Shells vs. Soft Shells. Wood eventually hived off to create his *own* Democratic organization, Mozart Hall. Poole's men often clashed with those following Irish John Morrissey, one of the biggest and toughest Democratic street leaders, though I can't say of which faction. One late night, Poole, Morrissey and their partisans crossed paths in a lower Broadway bar. Tempers flared. Morrissey finally left and went home to sleep. His men kept going, drinking at another saloon and then returning to the first. Guns were drawn and fired, and Poole fell.

He lingered eleven days, receiving ardent admirers. His final quoted words were

“Goodbye boys, I die a true American”—just like in the movies. Then came an outpouring of Nativist eulogies, press, and pamphlets. America itself, the heritage of George Washington, even the purity of its women, were at stake. It was the immigrants killed Bill, and their police. It wasn't a drunken shoot-out, but a dastardly plot to cut down a defenseless patriot. A Municipal pulled the trigger, and other Municipals helped him flee the City. That was the story—Bill Poole, martyr. What more proof was needed that City government was in the web of foreign enemies?

That was 1855. In 1857, the fore-shocks of the Civil War were breaking out in violence all over the soon-to-be-sundered Nation—Bloody Kansas for example. New York, at this moment, had as mayor the fantastic personage of Fernando Wood, initially the reformer darling of the elites, said to be the handsomest man in America. But Wood was under siege by other Democrats in the factionalization of Tammany Hall. Wood was pro-South, a Copperhead. Its cotton came to New York's textiles and through its harbor. His electoral base was the poor, and the poor felt threatened by the prospect of freed slaves. With rhetoric such as “in New York those who produce everything get nothing, and those who produce nothing get everything,” he was branded as a dangerous Communist. (This was Karl Marx time). He even proposed that New York City itself secede. And this Copperhead Communist controlled New York City and its police.

So the New York State legislature staged a constitutional coup. They changed the state charter under which the City was organized to seize control of Manhattan's vital functions, such as the harbor. This would do two things: ensure control of the City as War seemed more likely, and redirect enormous amounts of patronage and graft into Republican channels. The new charter abolished the Municipal Police, and created a new *Metropolitan* Police, State appointed and state administered. The same legislators passed a harsh new temperance law, which the Metropolitans were expected to enforce. Democrats called for resistance by any means necessary. Mayor Wood maneuvered, and reconstituted the about-to-expire Municipals. They lived!

Into the summer of 1857, *two* hostile police forces patrolled New York. It came to a head on June 16th, when the Metropolitans advanced on City Hall to arrest Mayor Wood. They were pelted with brickbats by people of the Five Points—located only a few blocks away. A deep cordon of Munis barred the Metros' way up the marble steps, and a fierce riot ensued. State officials commandeered a National Guard unit that happened to be parading by, and with fixed bayonets, the soldiers parted the Municipals. Their Chief, watching through a window, turned to the mayor and said, “Well, our game is up.” Wood submitted to arrest. Two weeks later, he lost his legal challenge to the State charter, and disbanded the Municipals. Talk about your contested legitimacy!

The Municipal Police died on July 2. That set the stage for the famed Dead Rabbit riot against the Boys of the Bowery, begun on 1:30 a.m. of the 4th of July. It was nothing at all like riot that opens *Gangs of New York*. No swords or cleavers. That's not how *men* fought. It started with an attack by men from the Five Points—soon to be labeled Dead Rabbits—upon

Metropolitans patrolling the Bowery, just two blocks to the east. The coppers sought refuge in the saloon of a Bowery politician, an enemy of Wood, and his boys defended their domain with hurled glasses and fists. There were at least three other assaults on Metropolitans that night, with one killed by a blow to the head.

On Saturday, the day of the 4th, fighting resumed on a grand scale. Planning is apparent. A squad of Metropolitans were lured into a trap in the Five Points and beaten. Bowery Boys scouting for trouble reported it, and a mass came to Metropolitan's rescue. Hell broke loose. Soon barricades went up on Bayard Street, with bricks and bullets flying between. Twelve died. After a few hours, everyone got tired and went home, or more likely to saloons to discuss the days events and plan for the morrow. Sunday brought another pitched street battle. The Metropolitans, believing it was the start of an attack on their very Headquarters, deployed all their men in the streets around it, and called for the National Guard. Soldiers arrived that evening, and marched around backing squads of Metros as they cleared the streets. A veneer of order was achieved.

Why these riots happened is far from clear. No doubt many things were involved. It was not primarily Natives vs. immigrants. A great many Bowery Boys were Irish themselves. It was certainly not "to settle for good and all, who holds sway over the Five Points"—as Daniel Day Lewis proclaimed. The two principal sides were aligned with different *Democratic* street organizations. My hunch is this was an explosion of the intense factionalism of the moment, which had different stakes in the Republican take over. The State coup damaged Fernando Wood directly much more than his Democratic adversaries, and the enemy of my enemy is my friend.

What *is* clear from actual events—who attacked whom—is that all this violence involved people of the Five Points targeting the Metropolitans. Several other smaller riots broke out in other poor immigrant neighborhoods over the 4th of July weekend, and these too began with attacks on Metropolitans. The 4th of July violence was, at its core, *about* the Police, the political powers which imposed them, and the vision of society they wanted to impose. At this higher level, it *was* Nativists vs. immigrants.

The Metropolitans quickly brought a new level of violent repression to policing. A few days after those riots, they deployed a cannon and two howitzers against crowds threatening a quarantine station. On July 12, Metropolitans were chased out of Klein Deutschland for trying to close Sunday saloons. They charged back in, guns blazing. A Metropolitan was shot dead in late July, though that was by a man reputed to be the leader of local Mafia—a harbinger of issues to come. The National Guard, meanwhile, developed plans to open fire on crowds as soon as they arrived at a riot.

Battle lines were clearly drawn. The NY State and City Republican-Protestant-Nativist-“dry” forces ruled. After a rocky start, the Metropolitans were vigorously professionalized along military models, trained to clear streets with disciplined phalanxes, creating “forests” of batons

beating everyone they could catch. But Republican police and politicians had their hands out just like the Democrats. Illegal saloons, gambling halls, and brothels still operated openly as long as they paid off. In the overlapping circles of poor, immigrants, and Democrats, the Metropolitan Police were seen as a corrupt, occupying army, compared by the Irish to the British back home.

This set the stage for the Draft Riots of 1863, which in large part was a battle of Irish vs. Metropolitan. In more extenuated ways, the Draft Riots set the stage for the dissolution of the Metropolitan Police in 1870, replaced by the modern NYPD—by none other than Boss Tweed, with strong immigrant backing. Tweed fell in 1871, brought down by a tsunami of financial scandal; combined with the bloody debacle of the Orange Riots—with more than 60 Catholics killed by National Guard; all amplified by the scathing cartoons of Thomas Nast—our imager of the great bourgeois anti-St. Patrick: Santa Claus.

Quickly, there was a new consolidation at the top of municipal power, and a reorientation of the NYPD. No longer were the police expected to take on immigrant issues like Sunday drinking, or moral offenses of prostitution and gambling. Those were fountains of graft. The police job, which they did quite effectively, was to keep a lid on the dreaded “Volcano under the City,” an eruption of “dangerous classes” which would leave the City in blood and ashes. The NYPD reached a new peak of street hegemony, able to keep the masses of poor from rioting; to suppress militant labor and radical political activities; and to ostentatiously protect the elite from a new breed of “professional criminals.” That phase lasted until 1894. After that—well, lots more stuff happened, and still is happening today, as Avi Bornstein and Ric Curtis will tell us

So, why should anthropologists study police? The New York City police force is case number one in American policing. Their early history shows in stark relief how the police were the front line in contending visions about our society and political struggles for control. Its not just New York. If you want to bring the anthropological focus on *power* back home, or to understand the divisions and modalities of *the state*, then consider the cultural history of policing. This talk has been about major transformational moments in early policing. The way policing plays out in less tumultuous circumstances is equally instructive—as other papers on this panel show.

The film *Gangs of New York* got some things right, and some big things wrong. It made the street gangs of the Civil War era seem like modern organized crime, which they were not. That pattern would not evolve until around 1905-- I'm writing a book on the subject. The movie completely missed the centrality of the police, and all but the most obvious aspects of politics. But if your are considering how New York City developed, what Gotham became and what it is *today*, then the movie's epigraph contains a lot of truth: America was born in the streets.

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