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*This is a longer version of a paper written for The Harvest of American Racism (University of Michigan Press, 2018) R. Shellow, D. Boesel, D. Sears and G.T. Marx. "In the summer of 1967, in response to violent demonstrations that rocked 164 U.S. cities, the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, a.k.a. the Kerner Commission, was formed. The Commission sought reasons for the disturbances, including the role that law enforcement played. Chief among its research projects was a study of 23 American cities, headed by social psychologist Robert Shellow. An early draft of the scientists' analysis, titled "The Harvest of American Racism: The Political Meaning of Violence in the Summer of 1967," provoked the Commission's staff in November 1967 by uncovering political causes for the unrest; the team of researchers was fired, and the controversial report remained buried at the LBJ Presidential Library until now....*

The article below expands on the recollections and offers further thoughts about the Commission, the role of commissions more generally and a critique of the hastily written last chapter of the report.

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## Inside the Tent: Some Reflections on Working for the 1967 Kerner Commission

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*In times like the present, men should utter nothing for which they would not willingly be responsible through time and in eternity.<sup>1</sup>*

Abraham Lincoln

A. A Little Genealogy

Proust in looking back 50 years, claimed he offered a theory of the past not a precise record. My 50 year theory, based on faded notes, and, even more, faded recollections has been enhanced and refreshed by reading Shellow (1970), Shellow, Boesel and Sears in this volume, Lipsky and Olson (1969 ), Kopkind (1971), Marx (1971a,b,c,d), Marx and Useem (1971), Kearns (1991), Herman (1995) Harris (2008), Barnhart and Schlickman (1999) McLaughlin (2014), Zelizer (2016) and Gillon (forthcoming). There is so much more that I would like to have read or reread but as always the deadline made me not do it.

In early September 1967 I received a call from Rob Shellow asking if I was available to work for the Kerner Commission. I had been involved in the civil rights movement as a member of CORE (The Congress of Racial Equality), had just published Protest and Prejudice, a widely reported on study of black response to civil rights issues with an introduction by Bayard Rustin, a major theorist and leader of the civil rights movement. I had just begun teaching at Harvard and was affiliated with the Joint Center for Urban Studies. I was teaching a large race

relations class because Professor Tom Pettigrew, who created the class, was on leave. The class dealt with some of the topics previously taught by Gordon Allport, a Twentieth century giant in the study of prejudice and discrimination.

I don't know how I came to the attention of Rob Shellow. But I was in contact with (or had colleagues who were colleagues) of a number of those he consulted about hiring staff; Daniel Patrick Moynihan was head of the Joint Center for Urban Studies where I had a half time appointment; Professors Ralph Turner and Neil Smelser, the major American theorists of mass behavior (or what sociologists call Collective Behavior and Social Movements) were central to my education at UCLA and Berkeley. Jim Coleman and Pete Rossi had ties to the University of Chicago and to another of my professors Seymour Martin Lipset. Others who were consulted about prospective employees such as Professor Herb Gans of Columbia were aware of the book I had just written.

I was thrilled to participate. I filled out U.S. Civil Service Form 85 (a form that could only make sense to a career bureaucrat) for a "nonsensitive or noncritical sensitive position". I don't know if work for the Commission was nonsensitive, it certainly was critical in two senses—as important and as social critique. There was a vetting process of some kind, seemingly more for political loyalty to President Johnson than for national security loyalty.

By 1967 the heady optimism of the 1960s had less wind in its sails, but still furlled. The times were indeed changing and I could play a different part beyond that of student activist. Working for the Commission could further bring the news of the monumental injustices and costs to American society of its festering racial order. What is more, this time the message came not from hastily made placards, mimeographed handouts and threatened boycotts, but from a **PRESIDENTIAL COMMISSION**. To quote what President Johnson said in another context, we were now "inside the tent pissing out", rather than the reverse.

Certainly, to judge from past commissions there was the risk of window dressing and cooptation and ritual reaffirmations without the beef.<sup>2</sup> But ideas mattered, social change usually came by accretion and part of a loaf could still offer nourishment and build strength to come back for more. That I was to be paid for doing good works and, in the process, have access to an astounding amount of data that the beginning scholar could only dream of, meant that it was too good to be true. Of course it was (not true that is). It was hypothetically good, but soon turned out not to be true.

Most of the staff was let go after only a few months (fired with enthusiasm the same way we came in) and there would be only one hastily put together, underdeveloped and, although data rich, poorly integrated, report which was minimally analytic and that did not elaborate on the general charge of racism. What is more, the *Harvest* report was suppressed and even worse may have been intended to be destroyed.<sup>3</sup> Beyond that, President Johnson was conveniently out of Washington when the commission report was delivered to his office. He initially sought to embargo its release. It was released after the *Washington Post* (March 1, 1968) ran a story based on a leaked copy. He never publicly received it. He even refused to sign thank you letters for the Commissioners, let alone providing an anticipated reception in the Rose Garden.

## B. The Work

I have primarily soft, even hazy, feeling memories, not hard, clear, factual memories of the mechanics of working on the document. Among the former: the thrill of commuting with other Type A persons from Boston to Washington DC each week after teaching my last class; having a legitimate pulpit from which to bring the news yet once again of what was wrong with American race relations and what had to be done<sup>4</sup>; meeting leaders such as Roy Wilkins, Fred Harris, John Lindsey and Herbert Jenkins and working with Kennedy style role models such as Commission executive director David Ginsburg and deputy Victor Palmierie.

Among the youthful staff there was a kind of mad, Kereouacian excitement of pressure filled days and nights in which we could speak truth to power and the American public. The word this time would come not from jejune, self-righteous, often raggedy—in your face youth so easily characterized as communist agents (whether Cuban or Russian)<sup>5</sup> or oedipal rebels, but from the very center of what Tom Wicker in his introduction to the Bantam edition of the report called the "moderate and responsible establishment".

Having an ID badge and gaining access to restricted areas added to the excitement and the sense that something important was going on within that federal office building. My first memory on entering the office was being mesmerized in front of a live teletype machine that continually spit out news from all over the world (a forerunner of the internet and streaming news).

In notes from our first meeting we were told to write at a 10th grade level, not to use jargon, to stick close to the facts and not to take sides or talk to the press.

Because we were dealing with such explosive (to coin a phrase) events we must keep our cool and, as was requested by Jack Webb in *Dragnet*, deal with "just the facts." Of course facts don't exist (at least for comprehension) absent a frame of reference and a means of collecting them.

The Shellow team was only one of the groups working on the report. We understood that our task was to make sense of the raw data gathered by the 40 persons working in city teams of 6 (consisting of at least 2 blacks). They did interviews in 23 cities (10 were chosen for more intensive analysis). They provided us the raw data on which we based our summary analysis.

Parallel inquiries were done by Robert Conot (a journalist and author of a powerful account of the 1965 Watts riot) who worked on descriptive and historical accounts; Milan L. Miskovsky CIA analyst and later lawyer (who negotiated the release of pilot Francis Gary Powers) headed a "special investigations group" that visited 15 cities with emphasis on 5 that had major disorders. In addition, 90 witnesses gave depositions and others briefed the Commission in DC or during visits to the selected cities. We did not have access to the closed Commission hearings, other than the few times we presented. There were also numerous consultants who wrote reports and task forces or panels on insurance, private enterprise, and the mass media. At the end, once the fecal matter hit the air conditioning system, several additional consultants were quickly brought in and hastily wrote reports that were rejected, apparently these were intended to replace *Harvest*.

We had little formal contact with the above groups other than the city teams and our work was relatively uninformed by what the others found. How these groups were to come together for a final report was not well articulated. Looking back it seems very unwieldy, even chaotic. The Commission's work did not follow the ideal sequence from fact gathering to analysis to recommendations. Instead with time pressures, and as a policy report intended for the public, many chefs worked independently and in parallel. Having so many cooks might also validate the claims the Commission put forth if the findings were equivalent and also could serve as a hedge against the failure if a group did not perform as expected.

I was responsible for writing reports on Dayton, Cincinnati, Detroit and Grand Rapids and with others on Plainfield.<sup>6</sup> In the reports we sought to make sense of interviews, news clips, documents and statistical data. The data were roughly divided into three parts—prior conditions, events during the disorder and

subsequent actions in the few months since the event. With respect to the latter two, I was particularly interested in types of disorder, the interaction between participants and police in various types of disorder (a factor that could shift rapidly), and in the varieties of outcome that followed different kinds of event. *Harvest* was abstracted from the case studies and offered an "ideal type", general description that summarized re-occurring forms and processes, even as it identified patterns of difference.

What we saw in the data confirmed what we knew from prior research. One hardly needed to spend millions of dollars and have a staff of over 100 to know that the disorders were connected to the situation of the Negro in America. There was rioting in Harlem and Watts, not in mid-town Manhattan, nor Beverly Hills.<sup>7</sup> But that broad observation did not help in examining variation between the cities that did experience disorders. It could not account for the lack of strong statistical correlations between where disorders were most likely to occur, or their intensity and characteristics such as cities with the greatest or least black-white disparities, with recent improvements or worsening of race relations, or in the north rather than the south.

The perspective I shared with my colleagues is one that is central to any scientific or scholarly undertaking—the need to parse the richness of reality into conceptually measurable units. That effort provides ground rules for discussion, even among persons who may hold very different (partisan) views on other issues. This approach can offer credence to the social scientist's claim to be non-partisan, even though the rules chosen and the interpretations offered may have a partisan component (although that need not be one with political implications).

Terms such as "riot" and "rebellion" needed to be clearly defined. Because of its breadth and Rorschach like character, language can be unhelpful and inflammatory, particularly when contentious public issues are involved. The empirical record we saw worked against the sweeping application of terms such as riots or rebellions or seeing participants as either criminals or protesters. Nor was there only one explanation or preferred official response.

With respect to understanding what was going on, a better linguistic fit lies in an inductive approach. In applying this to the disorders—looking up from the facts, rather than down from the theory or concept, it was clear that there were important differences between the events in various cities, as well as differences within cities during the disorders and in their aftermaths. This required identifying

some major types of disorder and a series of research questions. Responses, whether by police to the events, or subsequent programs for social change also needs to deal with specifics.

The need for specificity also works against seeing any single, undifferentiated factor such as racism, economic exploitation, culture or organization as the sole cause of the variety of things to be explained. The many research questions that could be raised about the thousands, and even millions, of discrete interactions bound together under the broad rubric of “riot” do not lend themselves to a single explanation.

Acknowledging such variation forced us to think comparatively. In this case that meant considering differences between cities, events within cities and types of participant (and changes in their behavior over time), as well as a variety of common factors (if not necessarily found in the exact same forms or degrees) that can cut across these such as prejudice, discrimination, indifference, culture, the economy and regional sources of inequality. Yet all causes are hardly equal, and some presumed causes are worthy of being categorical rejection.

Here we see the social scientist's great challenge—above all to acknowledge the known and unknown unknowns, the constant changes and continuities of social life and the presence of complexity, multiplicity and multi-causality, without resorting to the sink hole of relativism ("it's just your story man"), a toothless inclusiveness ("it all matters"), or the failure to reach any conclusion until there has been more research. When important issues are at stake, we must wend our way between the underreach of those timid social scientists who fail to reach any conclusions (however qualified) and the arrogance of those who overreach.

My approach to the Kerner data was also informed by a general view of the role conflict could have in social change offered by 19th century social theorist Georg Simmel (Coser 1956) and by what could be reasonably expected of social science with respect to explanation, prediction and its even more modest role with respect to prescription. The approach was also informed by the history of U.S. disorders over the last two centuries.

Consider the classic race or communal riot where blacks and whites fight each other as in 1919 in Chicago and 1942 in Detroit; the pogrom where one group attacks another as in the Zoot Suit violence in Los Angeles in 1943; ideologically inspired political protest (or issue) violence as with the disorders associated with the death of Martin Luther King 1968; celebratory violence or issueless riots

(where there is no protest ideology) as with violence in San Francisco as WW II ended; opportunistic or commodity violence and looting during prolonged power outages or when police went on strike as in Boston in 1919. Several or more of these are often present in large scale events (e.g., political protest, opportunism, fighting between groups). Other categories can be added such as "media riots" in which events are staged or false stories are reported. These can be configured in a variety of other ways. However, the basic point is that conflict behavior that outwardly looks similar because it involves race or ethnicity may have different forms and causes. One size hardly fits all, even as having the concept of a shoe is necessary for discussion.

### The Infamous Chapter VII of *Harvest*

King Alfonso the Learned of Spain reportedly said, "Had I been present at the Creation, I would have given some useful hints for a better ordering of the universe." I would say the same thing about giving some useful hints for a better ordering of the last Chapter of *Harvest*, "America on the Brink: White Racism and Black Rebellion" had I been present at its creation.

I did not work on that chapter. Nor did I have a chance to critique it. Almost as soon as I saw it, we received the news that there would be only one report issued months earlier than originally planned. Simultaneously we learned that we, and more than 100 other staff members, were to be let go.<sup>8</sup>

The chapter, particularly the last half needed extensive revision and to be shortened. Its central points regarding the links between the position of the Negro in America and disorders and the need to open up the political and social system because it is right and would likely (in the longer run) make disorders less likely, is both a moral and pragmatic truth that must be accepted by anyone believing in American democracy.

Without revision the chapter reads like more like an impassioned manifesto for a social movement, than a policy analysis carefully crafted by specialists that directly links to the six previous chapters. It greatly exceeded our expertise as analysts of mass behavior and social movements. Our job as analysts within the Commission was to describe what happened and the associated causal factors and to offer interpretation beyond listing facts. As a matter of strategy, the chapter's language of threat would not help move a divided nation toward racial justice.<sup>9</sup>

The first six chapters are (if hardly page turners) of good academic, quality, given that we only had about two months to draw together a vast amount of data.

They are empirically grounded, reflect knowledge of the relevant research literatures and are logically developed. They stayed close to the facts that were gathered. Reasonable persons would find little to dispute here.

Those chapters were consistent with our task as social science researchers experienced in understanding mass behavior and social movements. Chapter VII tried to answer . President Johnson's third question, "what can be done to prevent this from happening again?" But the answer was in some places naive, lacking in nuance and qualification, overly general, and not adequately linked to the preceding chapters, let alone being inflammatory. It was also too narrow in the emphasis on young males. There was a need to identify racism in its various overt and unseen forms, as well as to identify unjust and often unintended, unequal racial outcomes apart from a well-developed ideology of racism. The task for knowledge and improvement is to get specific and to craft responses based on the particulars while not being mindful of larger pictures.

The data that were gathered and the weak tools social science has for drawing strong conclusions about the multiplicity of, and linkages among, necessary and sufficient causes of varied disorders, let alone about specific policies, do not square with the rhetorical excesses and sweeping generalizations of Chapter VII.

It is unfortunate that *Harvest* was seen before the vast amount of supporting documentation could be added and that chapter VII was offered as a conclusion before rapidly moving events precluded its revision. Instead, a short conclusion suggesting various scenarios that might describe American society in the future and the factors likely to result in one rather than another outcome was needed.

Knowing it was not meant for the surprise circulation it received within the commission and was a working, tentative, first draft intended for critical, collegial commentary rather than forced release and then rapid burial offers a context for, and should soften, any critique of it.

### C. Fifty Years Later: Above the Tent

At a personal level I am grateful for the chance to have worked for the commission at the beginning of my career. It was an education in many ways. It provided data and research questions that lasted a lifetime on topics such as police behavior in riots and intelligence gathering; types of riot (in particular calling attention to the neglected topic of issueless riots which helped locate understanding protest riots); counter-rioters and community (self-help) police patrols;

implications of the minority or majority group identity of activists and researchers; and, more broadly the study of social movements and mass behavior and of the requisites for social order (Marx 1970a, 1974, 1988 and 2016; 1970b; Marx and Archer 1971; Marx and Useem 1971; Marx and McAdam 1994). That I drew from the Commission experience may have added to the credibility of the writing. I also exited the tent with new colleagues and acquaintances, some that lasted over decades.

I saw the (usually) dependent role of commissions and the client serving role expected of social scientists supervised by lawyers, who in turn were subservient to the President. The latter in the adversarial lawyerly mode, started with politically palpable answers and then looked to build their case. The social scientist more confined by methodological strictures and taking less for granted, begins the search by identifying (and often questioning) what the questions should be and only then precedes to seek answers. Hovering over these are reoccurring tensions between symptoms and causes, Band-aids and surgery, carrots and sticks and expediency and truth/justice. The democratic policy maker's preference for clear, optimistic, sound-bite answers and the social scientist's preference for complex, less optimistic, qualified answers is another source of tension.<sup>10</sup>

In creating a high level, very visible commission any leader runs the risk of having it go where he or she does not want it to go and to some extent that happened here. While the Commission was not the runaway train likely perceived by President Johnson, the train went a lot faster than he would have liked. This is due in part to the efforts of Lindsay and Harris and the guiding (if not fully controlling) hands of Ginsburg, Palmieri and Kerner<sup>11</sup>. But neither did it please those who sought its imprimatur for a "liberal" massive managerial/technocratic type of public-private federal effort to rebuild the cities (in effect "a war on urban racial injustice") that would largely bypass local governments and the problems of the rural poor, black or white. It pleased even less those who sought a fundamental restructuring of the economy wherein black inequality is not caused by racism, rather both are caused by the capitalist economy. (Kopkind 1971).

It is not surprising that the final report was something of a compromise. That follows from time and resource constraints, the organization of the Commission, and the fact that it was a document requested by a president with strong personal and partisan needs, while involving an issue which cried out for acknowledgment of the threats and the magnitude of the problems and a need to reassure the country.

The report's forward tells us in the best, high minded, ecumenical words, "This was a bipartisan Commission and a nonpartisan effort." (Report, 1968, p. V. If it was bipartisan, most of the partisans were white males, and whether Democrat or Republican, did not stray far from the center of the political spectrum. Nor was it the case as President Johnson claimed in Executive Order 11365 creating the commission that, "this matter is far, far too important for politics." According to one source (Garvey 1968) "the staff was given instructions 'to build upon existing programs,' and not to expect increased expenditures. There was also mention of 'platform material'".

President Johnson's first two questions to the Commission, "what happened?" and "why did it happen?" called for a report Johnson hoped would narrowly focus on the events of the summer of 1967. He wanted acknowledgment of the positive role he had played in civil rights and he did not want his expansion of the Viet Nam war to be threatened by new domestic expenditures (even as he also disingenuously argued that the country *could* afford both "guns and butter").<sup>12</sup> He continued to fight Congressional efforts to undermine his domestic focus on poverty and civil rights.

Apart from President Johnson's personal preference to avoid the call for vast new expenditures, the report had to put the riots issue first. To focus only on the need to rebuild cities would be seen as ignoring, and even rewarding, behavior that resulted in the massive destruction of communities and lives and would trigger further backlash.<sup>13</sup> Given the fear and anxiety the country felt in the summer of 1967, the riots had to be central to the Commission's charge as expressed in President Johnson's first two questions.

Yet, by its very nature the issue contained elements that worked against the Commission being fully captured by the President. For moral, practical and political reasons he could not stop with just two questions. He had to ask the commission what could be done to prevent future disorders. Thus the Commission was charged with determining, "What is the relative impact of depressed conditions in the ghetto—joblessness, family instability, poor education, lack of motivation, poor healthcare—in stimulating people to act?" That of necessity opened the door for a much wider change agenda and created a division within the Commission, it also called out for an interpretation to frame the welter of facts. Sadly, that was not forthcoming.

Working for the Commission I saw the limitations of using terms such as the "power structure", "power elite" and "government" in an undifferentiated way as is often the case for those outside the tent looking in. There were pronounced differences and real (and potential) conflicts within the big tent of the Commission and its surrounding environment. Consider for those—between the President and his surrogate Governor Kerner as against some members of congress, politicians such as Mayor Daley of Chicago and Governor George Romney of Michigan or commission members such as Lindsay; conflicts between members of the commission (Thornton, Corman and Peden as against Lindsay and Harris, and Thornton who privately discussed the Commission's deliberations with President Johnson vs. the other commissioners); between lawyers (and those with different sponsors who served as aides to one or another commissioners and a Democrat and Republican split among other staff) and social scientists (and those with a psychological vs. social bent or with contrasting views of the ideal relation between social science and activism); between some white and the few black employees,<sup>14</sup> and between the several groups charged with studying the events.

While I would not characterize the Washington environment I saw as toxic or a snake pit, the various groups and individuals served their own interests, as well as the general public goals of the commission. The former was significant in how they defined realizing the latter.

The anger and sense of betrayal the Shellow staff felt with the shelving of *Harvest* reflected our inexperience—perhaps with a dash of youthful arrogance with respect to the clash of social science as against political expectations. We felt that as experts with a method, results subject to revision and a commitment to objectivity and truth (however hazy it might sometimes be), rather than commitment to serving explicit political ends, that we had a strong claim to be heard above others lacking these. In addition, our sense of betrayal was fueled by anti-censorship, academic norms of freedom of expression. The truth (that we were so jejunely assured that we possessed) should win out over politics. With appropriate revision *Harvest* should have been published and we should be honored, rather than being fired and having the report buried. Our feelings were no doubt made stronger because the data just happened to come out in a way that supported our political goals as citizens. Alas. As blues singer Moses Allison wrote, "it didn't turn out that way, it just didn't turn out that way." But how did it turn out?

Some of the passion and themes of Harvest were in the final Kerner report (e.g., the preface, chapters II-V). On p. 93 for example we read of the "explosive mixture" that produced the events of the summer of 1967 in language fitting our Chapter VII: " we have seen in our cities a chain reaction of racial violence. *If we are heedless none of us will escape the consequences.*" (italics added). We are told as well that a nation will not deserve freedom from violence "unless it can demonstrate the wisdom and the will to undertake decisive action against the root causes of racial disorder."<sup>15</sup>

While muted, the Kerner report noted the presence of a protest theme (which, while hardly the only factor) was much more explicit in the disorders of that summer than in previous racial violence. Given calls to stand up and the violent language<sup>16</sup> associated with the more militant civil rights groups heard by urban youth who grew up hearing that message, this finding is not surprising. The scale of the events (beyond a particular precipitating incident or opportunism) along with the angry rhetoric reflected a nascent political will by those with few options, as with the beginnings of the anti-colonial uprisings in the 19th and 20th centuries.

Rather than violence as a reaction to a particular precipitating abuse, it is seen as a legitimating form of political action. Underdeveloped in the Report's abundance of statistical data is the idea that for many the violence was an expressive political form—a scream out for help and recognition. It could be a source of pride and strength, not shame and weakness. It was an assertion of dignity, rather than a calculated political disruption that could be withdrawn in return for specific gains.<sup>17</sup> Of course this will not be said by a sitting President—change must be seen to come , "not because we are frightened by conflict, but because we are fired by conscience."<sup>18</sup> Though it is tragic, all too often conscience and awareness become fired only after a conflict.

### Racism

If I could have made only one change in the final Kerner report it would have been to better develop the political context and the discussion of racism and the ways in which white society was implicated in racial injustice (not in the "ghetto" -the term in the original quote (p.1 of Report 1968)).<sup>19</sup>

The abundant facts of inequality on which Harvest was based, reported in the Kerner Report and the 102 pages of tables in the appendix, are like jello without a mold,—hard to grasp absent a conceptual container. While the preface to

the report conveyed the sense of urgency, it did not offer an overarching, interpretive narrative, nor adequate specification to order the diverse facts.

In seeking to explain the disorders the commission rejected conspiracies and criminal element theories and focused instead on racism and poverty. It notes, "...white society is deeply implicated in the ghetto. White institutions created it, white institutions maintain it, and white society condones it." That is fine as an introductory summary but as it now stands, seems grafted on to the rest of the report. Much more should have been done to make a case that goes beyond memorable headlines and slogans. For those already convinced, the implied racism charge was no doubt emotionally gratifying, but it was not developed enough to be convincing to others.

The racism focus has the virtue of pointing out that many of the problems faced by blacks stem from the system of social organization rather than from the personal failings of the individual. Yet this would have benefitted from better documentation and being treated in a conceptually more sophisticated way. Racism is not a uni-dimensional concept, nor does it involve all whites or affect all blacks in the same way. The interaction of racism with other factors needs consideration.

The concept of racism as used is too abstract and general. Because it accused everyone, it accused no one. While in a subtle sense any white who grows up in American culture cannot escape a degree of racism or profiting economically and psychologically from a society stratified by color, there are vast differences between individuals and institutions with respect to their benefit from racism and the amount and kind of racism. What was needed from a social science perspective was, if not a report that names names, at least one that names institutions and contrasts varying manifestations of racism. One looks in vain for an adequate discussion of who specifically profits in what ways from having a large black underclass. Just which white institutions created, maintain, and condone it?

It is not enough to find causes in "the conditions that breed despair and violence ...discrimination, slums, poverty, disease, not enough jobs" and stop there as the Commission did. Rather, the next step must be to ask, "why are these conditions here? What caused them?" What is there about slavery and the remnants of Jim Crow within the context of our social and economic system that created and sustains them? Absent that, we see yet another study about blacks done mostly by

whites that focused on black behavior, but says little in detail about the behavior of whites and white institutions toward blacks

In addressing white behavior, the report would have been more persuasive if it had differentiated institutional from idiosyncratic racism, racist attitudes from racist behavior, self-conscious and intended racism from subconscious or non-reflective and unintentional behavior and attitudes that may have racist consequences.

As exciting and personally meaningful as our efforts in the Shellow group were, they were a brick in a larger collective edifice. Contrary to what we thought at the time, the words of Harvest were not a sword hanging over the commission, although they might have been blowin' in the wind at its back. Whether what we wrote was an impetus for how the final report was framed and some of its stronger language does not matter.<sup>20</sup>

What does matter is that yet again an august body (in this case the most august ever) said what had to be said about America's strange and bitter harvest of shame. In doing this it offered what is still the most comprehensive data and programmatic report ever done on race relations.

In selling more than two million copies and receiving widespread media attention (including a dramatic reading by Marlon Brando on a television talk show) it served, as Director David Ginsburg observed, "as an exercise in communication, education and pedagogy."<sup>21</sup> That it still must be said fifty years later is no longer an American dilemma, it is an American tragedy. But it is also continues to be an inspiring call for carrying on. As contemporary events daily suggest, the destruction and bitterness of racial injustice takes a terrible toll. Indeed, "It is time now to end the destruction and the violence, not only in the streets of the ghetto but in the lives of the people." (Report p. 265)

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<sup>1</sup> As quoted by Commissioner Fred Harris (2008, p. 111). This may have encouraged the Commission. Harris reports, "I more than once quoted as a standard for our actions something I had read that Lincoln said during the Civil War.

<sup>2</sup> Psychology professor Kenneth B. Clark, noted for his pioneering studies with his wife Mamie (1939) of the self-identification of black children which was cited by the Supreme Court in its landmark school desegregation case told the Commission, "I read that report of the 1919 riot in Chicago, and it is as if I were reading the report of the investigating committee on the Harlem riot of 1935, the report of the investigating committee on the Harlem riot of 1943, the report of the McCone Commission on the Watts Riot. I must again in candor say to you members of this Commission --it is a kind Alice in Wonderland with the same moving pictures reshown over and over again, the same analysis, the same recommendations, and the same inaction." (Report, 1968, p. 265.

<sup>3</sup> A surviving copy in the Johnson Presidential Library in Austin has the words "Destroy" written on the front page. (McLaughlin 2014)

<sup>4</sup> A sampling of the more prominent earlier treatments among a vast literature: Dubois (1899), Chicago (1923), Dollard (1937) and Myrdal (1944).

<sup>5</sup> Here it is well to note that neither the House Committee on Un-American Activities nor the Senate McCellan Committee found evidence of conspiracy. President Johnson however appears to have seen more organization. He told historian Doris Kearns, "it simply wasn't fair for a few irresponsible agitators to spoil it for me and for all the rest of the Negroes, who are basically peace-loving and nice" and "a few hoodlums sparked by outside agitators who moved around from city to city sparking trouble. Spoiling the progress I've made in these last few years."

<sup>6</sup> The Plainfield report is in Boesel, Goldberg and Marx (1971)

<sup>7</sup> But everything is connected. Among the most poignant and uncomfortable of my 1960s memories is flying into Los Angeles on a picture perfect day in August 1965 and seeing flames rise over the Watts section of Los Angeles. A few hours later, as I sat in the fabled garden setting of the Beverly Hills Hotel for a cousin's wedding, the beauty, serenity and hopes of that moment were accompanied by the screeching of sirens and the smoke of the Watts riot a few miles away.

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<sup>8</sup> The denial by the Commission's public relations director that we had been let go was my first direct experience with the government's lying. At the time I wrote in a letter to the editor, "Whether or what kind of Byzantine intrigues were involved here is an issue that reasonable persons can speculate and perhaps disagree on. However, what is not at issue is the fact that a number of professional social scientists formally employed by the commission are no longer employed by it." (Marx, 1968)

<sup>9</sup> This of course assumes that the Commission and President Johnson wanted social scientific knowledge as independent factors regarding what should have been done. While such knowledge is not scientific in the physical science sense, it at least can provide a method, concepts and factual bases for recommendations. This contrasts with policies driven only by values, interests or pragmatic concerns. Lipsky and Olson (1969) consider factors beyond the data that have driven such commissions.

Inferences about opaque and often shifting motives should always be approached with caution. The Kerner Commission executives faced a very constraining time schedule and it was important to have the veneer of social science to validate the policy claims that were put forth by the social scientists. Rob Shellow (1970) captures this in recounting his conversation with Victor Palmieri. Shellow pointed out how hard it would be to study the riots with social science methods in just a few months. Palmieri responded, "that's not important ...what's important is that you've got that PhD."

<sup>10</sup> The purist social scientist above the battle who can so easily attribute base political motives to plebian politicians, needs as well to acknowledge the element of self-promotion involved in his or her own activities.

<sup>11</sup> To their credit (and perhaps surprise) they did emerge with a unanimous document. The threat of one or more minority reports was avoided and according to a news account, "the commission decided to recommend what should be done, rather than what the members thought could be done under current political circumstances..." New York Times, March 3, 1968.

<sup>12</sup> Politics apart, the failure of the final report to address the correlation between external war as a cause, or at least a frequent accompaniment of internal violence was a major failing. More than two-thirds of all race riots in the fifty-year period from 1913 to 1963 occurred during (or immediately before or after) war periods. The four largest race riots before the Vietnam War came during war periods (. The Civil War saw the New York draft riots, World War I witnessed the East Saint Louis riots, the end of World War I saw the 1919 Chicago riot and the 1943 Detroit riot.

<sup>13</sup> Even with the stick language, candidate Nixon preferred to read the riot act rather than the riot report. He criticized the report for blaming "everybody for the riots except the perpetrators of the riots" and promised "to meet force with force". The "liberal" report was seen to wreck Republican presidential aspirant Lindsay's chances. The backlash to black and student disorders brought Nixon to the presidency 6 months later and slowed, and in some ways reversed, the civil rights progress of the prior decade.

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<sup>14</sup> It seems unbelievable in 2016 to see that as late as 1967 a Commission concerned with race relations had only 2 black members, and only one black in a higher staff position and only one woman, nor did it have any social scientists (imagine a commission on climate change made up only of politicians and leaders of interest groups).

The Commission's 1967 conclusion that our nation is "moving toward two societies –one black, one white –separate and unequal" is memorable. Yet is it accurate, particularly today? Developments such as a black president, the growth of a black middle class and the prominence of blacks in many aspects of American culture, let alone the long march from the end of slavery to the end of Jim Crow in the 1960s, suggest the need for some qualification. But how much and in what ways?

While we are hardly a post-racial society, we are ever more multifaceted and dynamic. With that comes the need to analyze traditional taken for granted simple, global dichotomies of black-white, inequality-equality and segregation-integration. But it is premature to celebrate the arrival of a society in which, in Martin Luther King's words children, "...live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character."

It was after all not much more than 50 years ago that Governor George Wallace proclaimed in his inaugural address, "segregation now, segregation tomorrow and segregation forever" --and a significant percentage of the population supported him for president. But the dark, filamentous, multi-celled rhizoids of inequality never really went away and we had the disquieting election of 2016.

<sup>15</sup> Harris and Lindsay were central here. Harris' (2008, p. 112) sees the Kerner Commission telling the "bald truth". There were no short-range solutions, there was no conspiracy and "...there had been frequent cases of murderous overreaction by the police and the national guard in the cities where the riots had occurred. As for causes, we concluded that most people in America, black and white, felt economically and politically powerless, and an overlay of racism on that sense of powerlessness had produced, for blacks, an intolerable and explosive situation." To "make things right and to prevent future upheavals" there is a need "for deep and fundamental social, political, and economic change ...and vigorous federal action to root out racism."

Some may question whether (and where) the Commission report calls for vigorous action against racism and for "deep and fundamental change" rather than the intensification of existing federal programs, but Harris's view is consistent with what was written in *Harvest*.

<sup>16</sup> In 1967 this was still largely for self-defense or as a threat if rights were not granted. The rhetoric became more aggressively violent as the Viet Nam war escalated and protests among whites as well as blacks became more prevalent and violence increased on the part of police and protesters.

<sup>17</sup> In some of the cases where authorities entered into negotiations with persons claiming to represent those in the streets, the latter were unable to deliver on their agreement to stop the violence. Beyond the simple black-white conflict, in many areas the disorders reflected divisions within the black community between established leaders and angry youth.

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<sup>18</sup> In its inspirational conclusion, the Commission also takes an equivalent approach. It says it is time to end the problem. Its' often quoted, but never critiqued words:

The destruction and the bitterness of racial disorder, the harsh polemics of black revolt and white repression have been seen before in this country. (Report p. 265)

Resting uneasily in these words is the idea of balance, as if black revolt and white repression represented nothing more than legitimate conflicts of interest among parties of good will. The destruction and bitterness of "racial disorder" which, given the context of the Report, suggests to most people the recent riots, rather than the far greater and costlier "racial disorder" associated with slavery, racism and indifference across the span of American history.

<sup>19</sup> A related problem at the conceptual level that could hardly have been dealt with then is the deep issue of the links between the social and the psychological resources so well put by Ellen Herman (1995) with cultural resources informing and being informed by both.

<sup>20</sup> *Harvest* was given to the Commissioner's aides, but it seems unlikely that many of the commissioners were aware of it or that any of those who were would have taken the time to give it a close reading (that's what assistants and executive summaries are for).

<sup>21</sup> It had a calming and reassuring message. Among the most noticeable short run impacts was increased attention to the spark of poor police-community relations and greater professionalism and restraint in police response to civil disorder. More broadly, it resulted in a large scale federal effort to create national standards and assistance programs for locally controlled police departments.