

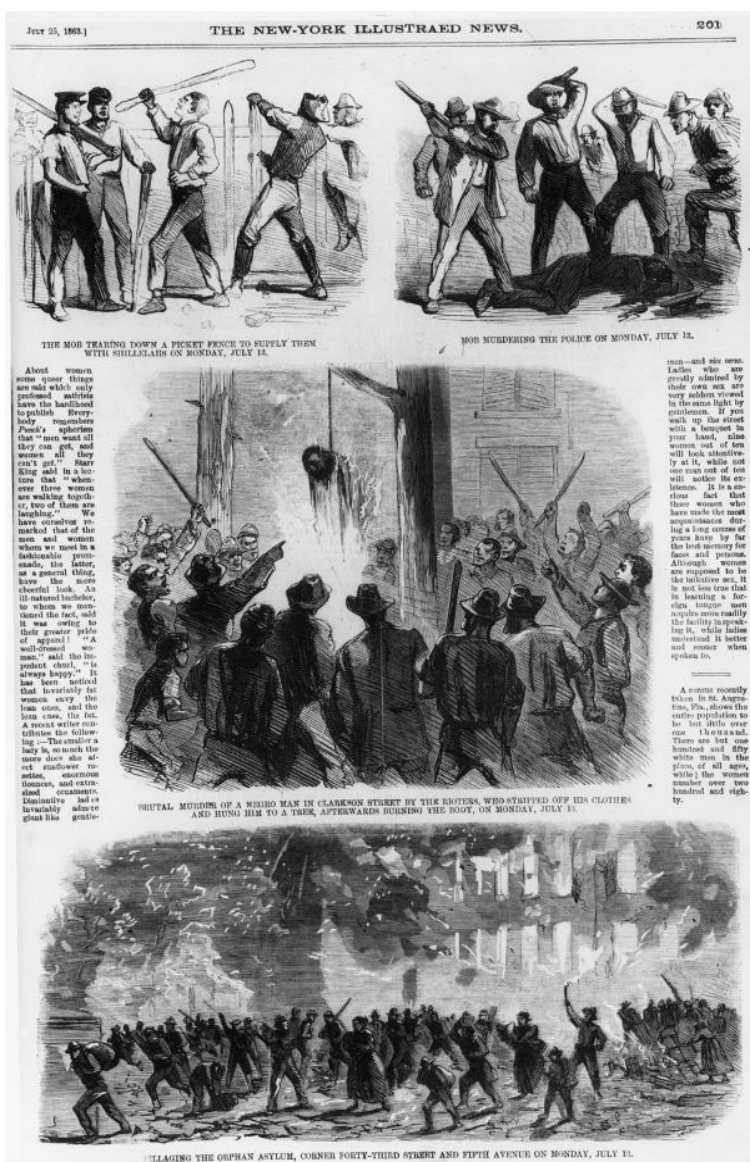
The Draft Riot Mystery

By BILL BIGELOW

AS HOWARD ZINN DESCRIBES in *A People's History of the United States*, the most destructive period of civil violence in U.S. history occurred during four days of rioting in July 1863. Zinn writes, "The draft riots were complex—antiBlack, antirich, anti-Republican." This activity focuses especially on the conflict between recently arrived Irish immigrants and Black people.

One of the critical "habits of the mind" that students should develop throughout a U.S. history course is to respond to social phenomena with "why" questions. They should begin from a premise that events have explanations, that people don't, for example, kill each other simply because they speak different languages, attend different churches, or have different skin colors. This activity takes the outrages of the 1863 riots as its starting point, and asks students to piece together clues that help account for this sudden explosion of rage. It's important to note that making explanations is different than making excuses. Here, we're asking students to try to understand the horrors committed, not to rationalize them.

Note: It's best to do this activity before students have read about the draft riots in chapter 10 of *A People's History of the United States*.



A page of the New York Illustrated News describing the 1863 riots led by Irish immigrants protesting the Union Army draft. Lasting nearly a week, the riots were the largest civil insurrection in U.S. history besides the Civil War itself.

Materials Needed:

1. One set of clues to “The Draft Riot Mystery.” (Before beginning the activity, be sure to cut these into individual clues and mix them up.)

Suggested Procedure:

1. Seat students in a circle.
2. Tell students that together they are going to solve a mystery. The mystery is: Why did whites in New York City, mostly Irish immigrants, go on a rampage and murder hundreds of people in July 1863? Tell them that this was the worst incident of non-war violence in U.S. history. Read aloud with students from chapter 10 of *A People's History of the United States* beginning with, “When recruiting for the army began ...” on p. 230 through the quote by Joel Tyler Headley on p. 231. Below are two additional excerpts from Milton Meltzer’s *Voices from the Civil War* (New York: Harper, 1989). You may want to read these to students as well:

Late in the afternoon a crowd which could have numbered not less than ten thousand, the majority of whom were ragged, frowzy, drunken women, gathered about the Orphan Asylum for Colored Children—a large and beautiful building and one of the most admirable and noble charities of the city [New York]. When it became evident from the menacing cries and groans of the multitude that danger, if not destruction, was meditated to the harmless and inoffensive

inmates, a flag of truce appeared, and an appeal was made in their behalf, by the principal, to every sentiment of humanity which these beings might possess—a vain appeal! ... [T]he vast crowd rushed in. All the articles upon which they could seize—beds, bedding, carpets, furniture, the very garments of the

fleeing inmates, some of these torn from their persons as they sped by—were carried into the streets and hurried off by the women and children who stood ready to receive the goods which their husbands, sons, and fathers flung to their care.

The little ones, many of them assailed and beaten—all, orphans and caretakers, exposed to every indignity and every danger—driven on to the street, the building was fired. This had been attempted whilst the helpless children, some of them scarce more than babies, were still in their rooms ...

... The house was fired in a thousand places, and in less than two hours the walls crashed in, a mass of smoking, blackened ruins, whilst the children wandered through the streets, a prey to beings who were wild beasts in everything save the superior ingenuity of man to agonize and torture his victims.

—From *What Answer?*,
Anna Dickinson, Ticknor, 1868

Many men were killed and thrown into rivers, a great number hung to trees and lampposts, numbers shot down; no Black person could show their heads but what they were hunted like wolves. These scenes continued for four days. Hundreds of our people are in stationhouses, in the woods, and on Blackwell’s Island. Over three thousand are today homeless and destitute, without means of support for their families. It is truly a day of distress to our race in this section. In Brooklyn we have not had any great trouble, but many of our people have been

compelled to leave their houses and flee for refuge. The Irish have become so brutish that it is unsafe for families to live near them, and while I write, there are many now in the stations and country hiding from violence ...

—From *The Christian Recorder in Marching Toward Freedom*, James McPherson, 1965

3. Tell students: “Each of you will be given at least one clue that will help solve the mystery. *Every* clue is important and can, in various ways, be used at least once. You may *tell* your clue to the rest of the class but you may not show it to anyone else. As you progress, you might select someone to write the group’s ideas on the blackboard or butcher paper.”

4. Distribute student reading “Draft Riot Mystery: Questions.” Review the questions on the handout to ensure that each student is clear about what is required.

5. Distribute the clues, giving one to each student. Ask students to “solve” the mystery on their own. You should stay completely out of their deliberations. However, remind students to speak up if they have a clue that they think would contribute to answering any of the questions in the activity.

6. Afterward, use the “Draft Riot Mystery: Questions” sheet as the basis for discussion. This is also a useful time to review class dynamics. Ask students what they did well, when they became frustrated, and how they responded to frustration. The idea for doing “social mysteries” with students came originally from Millie Thayer. This strategy is based on two books that include cooperation and discussion games, but without social content: Gene Stanford, *Developing Effective Classroom Groups* (New York: Hart Publishing, 1977) and Gene Stanford and Barbara Dodds Stanford, *Learning Discussion Skills Through Games* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1969). Each of these books includes fictional murder mysteries—unrelated to historical or current events—to teach group

discussion skills, and contains numerous useful suggestions and activities.

7. Some points to be brought out in discussion:

1. ***What events or conditions made the Irish angry?***

As the clues in the mystery activity

begin to suggest, exploitation of the Irish by powerful social groups has deep roots. Many texts include the “potato famine” in the litany of causes for European immigration to the United States in the 19th century. However, too often the famine enters history as a natural disaster: a blight, an act of God or nature.

Traditional texts generally fail to acknowledge the social context of the famine: as peasants starved, British landlords continued to export crops

and cattle to Great Britain. Half of the Irish people could have been fed with just the livestock exported in 1846.

People’s misery was not caused solely by a fungus on the potato plants. [See <https://rethinkingschools.org/articles/hunger-on-trial> “Hunger on Trial,” for a trial role play on the Irish Potato Famine.]

In the mystery activity, students receive clues that begin to indicate the discrimination and degradation the Irish suffered when they first arrived in the United States. They could find only the lowest paid, dirtiest, most dangerous work. And both male and female Irish workers competed with African Americans even to secure these wretched jobs. At times, employers would bring in Black or Chinese workers to break the strikes of Irish workers. The Irish Catholics were criticized and made fun of by “native” Protestant white Americans.

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More significantly, on occasion, the so-called natives attacked the Irish and burned their homes and churches. Irish children who attended public “common” schools were forced to read from the King James Bible in lessons.

Most Irish immigrants had the misfortune to arrive in the United States in the decade before the Civil War. As wartime desertions increased and voluntary enlistment decreased, the Lincoln administration instituted a military draft in March 1863. It became a “rich man’s war and a poor man’s fight,” as the wealthy were able either to buy their way out of the draft with a \$300 payment or by hiring a substitute. Poor Irish families had no such option.

2. ***What problems did the Irish immigrants in the U.S. face for which they might have blamed Black people?***

- The Irish may have seen Blacks as the cause of low wages and poor working conditions. They would have deeply resented Black strikebreakers. They might have feared that the increasing Black migration from the South would create even more competition for scarce jobs, housing, and other resources, and impoverish them still further.
- The Irish may have seen Black Americans as the tools of an Anglo ruling class whose oppression of the Irish stretched back centuries.
- The Irish might have resented that they were to be drafted to fight and perhaps die in a war that they didn’t necessarily support—a war that, as indicated, might free the slaves who then would flock in even greater numbers to take their jobs.

3. ***Who or what should the Irish have blamed for their problems?***

Of course, there is no single answer here. British colonialism and a system of unjust ownership were largely responsible for the suffering in Ireland and caused large groups of people to emigrate. In the United States, a similar system of ownership that failed to recognize the integrity of human beings, and treated people’s labor as a commodity, depended on cheap Irish workers. Moreover, to keep labor inexpensive this system benefited from and promoted competition between working people, such as the Irish and African Americans. As students saw in an earlier chapter of *A People’s History of the United States*, the Civil War was not fought to “free the slaves,” so anger at African Americans for the war was misplaced. (It’s worth remembering that Africans wanted even less to leave their homeland than did the Irish.) The managers of the U.S. economic system benefited from cheap labor wherever it was found, whether in the North or South.

Students may respond here: the British, the rich in the U.S., “native American” Protestants who burned churches and homes. Ask students how the Irish should have responded to their plight. Is it entirely unrealistic to think that the Irish might have reached out to African Americans? It’s unlikely that students have enough information to say one way or the other, however, their answers may reveal their own sense of the possibility for interracial alliances today.

4. ***In a few sentences or less, summarize the causes of the Draft Riots of 1863.***

Ask a student to read the final answer the class arrived at. Ask for additional

information that students would need in order to be more sure of their answer.

8. Ask students to think of times in their lives when they were victimized by “scapegoating” or witnessed another individual or group being blamed for something for which they weren’t responsible. Have them list a number of instances. Afterward, encourage students to share brief examples with each other.
9. Students might choose one of the instances from their lists and write about it in story form. This would be a personal narrative, not an essay, so encourage them to write their story as if they were simply telling it to a friend. Encourage them to give specific details and to use dialogue.
10. In a circle, allow students to read their papers aloud. Ask students to listen for the “collective text,” specific patterns that they begin to recognize. Some questions to help them see these patterns might be:

- Why was the particular individual or group made a scapegoat?
- What were the real, deeper causes that made the person or persons angry?
- How did those being scapegoated respond?

In follow-up discussion ask: Why do people often neglect to confront the *real* causes for their problems? ■

Additional sources: Milton Meltzer, ed., *Voices from the Civil War* (New York: Harper, 1989); W.E.B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America: 1860-1880* (Cleveland: Meridian, 1935, 1964); Vincent Harding, *There Is a River: The Black Struggle for Freedom in America* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1981); Ronald Takaki, *A Different Mirror: A History of Multicultural America* (Boston: Little Brown, 1993).

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The Draft Riot Mystery

Questions

Answer the following questions as a group using the clues that you have. *All* clues must be used at least *once* in your answers. Remember: you may say your clue aloud but you may not show it to anyone else. Question #3 is an opinion question. You won't need specific clues to answer this one.

1. What events or conditions made the Irish angry?
2. What problems did Irish immigrants in the U.S. face for which they might have blamed Black Americans?
3. Who or what *should* the Irish have blamed for these problems?
4. In a few sentences or less, summarize the causes of the Draft Riots of 1863.

The Draft Riot Mystery

Clues

- The Irish had a long tradition of being oppressed. Their land was taken over by wealthy British landlords. By 1700, only 14 percent of Ireland was owned by the Irish.
- Between 1820 and 1840, British landlords in Ireland evicted Irish peasants from the land. Landlords decided they could make more profit raising cattle than allowing peasants to farm the land.
- To escape terrible poverty, in the early 1800s thousands upon thousands of people from Ireland came to the United States. Between 1815 and 1840, one million Irish came to this country.
- The potato was the main crop for most Irish peasants. A potato famine began in Ireland in 1845. Between 1845 and 1855 about a million people in Ireland starved to death.
- Even though people starved during the Irish potato famine, British landlords continued to export grain and cattle to sell in Great Britain.
- One and a half million people emigrated from Ireland to the United States during the potato famine.
- Almost all the Irish who immigrated to the United States were Catholic.
- The Irish who came to the United States got the worst and lowest paid jobs. The men worked in mines, dug canals, worked on the railroads, and did other hard, poorly paid labor. These jobs were extremely dangerous. The women worked in the mills or as domestic workers.
- Irish women competed with Black women for jobs as domestics. In 1830, a majority of the servants in New York City were Black. By the 1850s, 80 percent of the servants were Irish.
- Many Irish men and women believed that if they traveled to America they would not be poor.

- Many native-born white Americans, who tended to have more money, looked down on the Irish. The Irish were often put down with names like “mick”: “Mick, do this, Mick, do that.”
- Many Irish people had been living in the United States a very short time when the Civil War broke out in 1861.
- Many Black people in the North resented the new people who came from Ireland and appeared to think that because they had white skin, they had more rights to jobs than did the Black people. As the Black abolitionist Frederick Douglass wrote: “Every hour sees us elbowed out of some employment to make room perhaps for some newly arrived immigrants ...”
- Because of their poverty, many of the Irish lived in terrible conditions in the United States. As one immigrant said, they treated us like “dogs.”
- At times, employers brought in Chinese or Black workers to break the strikes of Irish workers.
- At times, Black people in the North made fun of the Irish or criticized them as “the scum of European society.”
- Conflicts over religious instruction in school led some native-born white American Protestants to burn down Irish Catholic churches.
- In the South, at times the Irish would be hired to do the most dangerous jobs. Enslavers would prefer to lose a temporary Irish worker than a permanent enslaved Black person, whom they saw as their property.
- Irish workers saw that Northern businessmen were becoming rich off the Civil War. Contractors sold defective guns to the U.S. army; manufacturers sold cheaply made uniforms at a hefty profit; merchants sold sand as sugar.
- In the north, the Irish competed with Black people for jobs like waiters, coachmen, and longshoremen. The Irish constantly worried about this job competition.
- On January 1, 1863, President Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation. Many people in the North believed this meant that the Civil War was now being fought to free enslaved Black people.

- Democrats who opposed the Civil War owned many newspapers in the North. Some newspapers even supported the South. The papers wrote that whites in the North would be drafted to free enslaved Black people.
- If the enslaved Black people were freed, many Irish believed that they would move North. This is what the Democratic-owned newspapers wrote.
- During the Civil War, many Black refugees from the South came north to the cities.
- In the summer of 1863, 3,000 mostly white longshoremen in New York City went on strike. Most of the strikers were Irish immigrants. Employers brought in Black workers, under police protection, to break the strike.
- During the Civil War, very few Black people in the United States were Catholic.
- In March 1863, a draft law was passed. It made all white men, age 20 to 45 liable for military service.
- If someone was drafted into the military and didn't want to go, he could pay the government \$300—if he could afford it. For that amount he wouldn't have to join the military. Or, if a man was drafted, his family could hire a substitute to fight in his place.
- For many white soldiers, the Civil War was very unpopular. In 1862, in one month alone, more than 2,500 deserters were returned to the Union army in just one city.
- Many of the first people in the North who were drafted to fight in the Civil War were poor Irishmen.

Note: Most of the above "clues" are drawn from Ronald Takaki, *A Different Mirror: A History of Multicultural America* (Boston: Little Brown, 1993), chapter 6, "Emigrants from Erin: Ethnicity and Class within White America."