

Fight the Power: African Americans and the Long History of Police Brutality in New York City. By Clarence Taylor. New York: New York: New York University Press, 2018. Pp. 336 \$35.00

The deaths of two African-American men in 2014, Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri and Eric Garner in New York City, exposed the often-violent relationship between African-American males and police in America. These deaths helped bring about the Black Lives Matter social movement, which has made ending police brutality against African-Americans one of its primary concerns. In his introduction, Clarence Taylor, a professor of African-American history at Baruch College in New York City, states that he started writing his most recent book entitled *Fight the Power: African Americans and the Long History of Police Brutality in New York City*, in part, as an attempt to explore the origins of the Black Lives Matter movement. *Fight the Power*, a work that merges urban, political, and social history with public policy, provides the reader with a deeper understanding of the origins of the Black Lives Matter social movement. Moreover, the work also provides valuable insight into the interaction between the black freedom movement and the conservative movements that, in large part, shaped New York City politics since the pre-World War II era.

Taylor's argument in *Fight the Power* is that the recent Black Lives Matter movement is part of a long, and to-date unsuccessful, struggle against police brutality that has been a central demand of African-American activists and their allies in New York City from pre-World War II to the present day. Taylor, a noted scholar of African-American history and the author of several well-regarded books in the field of African-American history including *Reds at the Blackboard: Communism, Civil Rights, and the New York City Teachers Union* and *The Black Churches of Brooklyn*, belongs to a school of African-American historians who have attacked the central tenets of the popular narrative of the civil rights movement that traditionally focused on the activities of Martin Luther King, Jr. and other prominent southern leaders in the 1950s and 1960s. Since the 1990s,

numerous historians of African-American history including Taylor, have successfully undermined various aspects of the popular narrative of the civil rights movement by focusing on African-American activists in the North, the activism of African-American groups before and after the 1950s and 1960s, and the activists of non-liberal African-American groups. Given its scope and subject matter, *Fight the Power* fits neatly within and builds upon the already robust scholarship in the field of African-American history that has called into question several aspects of the popular narrative of the civil rights movement.

Taylor, in the introduction of *Fight the Power*, argues that the popular narrative's focus on the South in the 1950s and 1960s ignores the central role of various groups in the North. The history of the black freedom struggle includes the activities of many African-American activists and their white allies long overlooked by the popular narrative's focus on King and other prominent southern leaders. The activities of the black churches and press in the North, communists, the Nation of Islam, small Northern African-American civil-rights organizations and grassroots activists, as well as well-intentioned white liberal politicians like Mayor John Lindsay and New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio are essential parts of a broad and long black freedom movement. Thus, rather than a recent or isolated phenomenon, the Black Lives Matter movement's struggle against police brutality is part of the black freedom movement's long struggle against police brutality.

Taylor divides his book into eleven chapters with each chapter focusing on a different flashpoint in New York City history. Each chapter employs a case study format that focuses on an individual example of African-American resistance to police brutality. The book starts with an exploration of the activism of pre-World War II activists against police brutality and ends with a detailed discussion of Mayor de Blasio's ongoing efforts to stop New York City's controversial stop-and-frisk policy. Along the way, each chapter focuses on how African-American activists and their allies used various methods ranging from legal action and protests to advocacy for the creation of a Civilian Complaint Review Board to investigate allegations of police brutality.

However, Taylor shows that this has failed to end police brutality against African-Americans in New York City. Structural racism within the New York City Police Department and the criminal justice system as well as the opposition from a significant portion of white New Yorkers to reform of the New York Police Department (NYPD) acted to stymie reform efforts.

While several of the early chapters of *Fight the Power* draw extensively upon the author's previous scholarship into the activism of the black churches and communists in New York City, the book also reflects extensive new research. Archival research into several African-American groups including the Nation of Islam, the Harlem Defense Council, and the Progressive Labor Movement enrich chapters three, four and five and provide rich insight into the activities and perspectives of these groups. By drawing upon a vast body of primary sources including court documents and interviews, the work moves well beyond a journalistic or op-ed style discussion of some of the recent events explored in the last chapters of the book dealing with the actions of NYC Mayors Giuliani and de Blasio.

Taylor does his best work when he explores how African-American resistance to police brutality and the accompanying backlash against such activism played a significant role in shaping the politics of New York City. Some white New York City politicians including failed candidate William F. Buckley, Jr. in 1965 and two-term Mayor Rudolph Giuliani in the 1990s sought to mobilize white voters and did so via overt or latent appeals based on racial grievances. Other white politicians who were favorable to the black freedom movement's agenda like Mayors Lindsey and de Blasio faced fierce opposition when they attempted to reform police practices or impose oversight of the NYPD in response to the demands of African-American activists. Some portion of white citizens resisted reform of the NYPD, according to Taylor, because they viewed such efforts as threats to their status and privilege in New York City. For example, Taylor describes how attempts to reform the NYPD met with fierce resistance from some portion of ethnic whites. These reforms that included the hiring of thousands of non-white police officers and the civilian oversight of the

NYPD threatened to displace thousands of ethnic whites who had become heavily dependent upon jobs in the public service sector as New York City's economy deindustrialized. By exploring how the fear of diminished status fueled white resistance to reform efforts and how some white New York City politicians used white fear of losing their privileged status as a political tool, the book provides insight into the racialized politics of New York City. Likewise, Taylor's exploration of the complex interplay between the black freedom and conservative movements that shaped the politics of New York City politics provides future historians with valuable insight into the motivations of the many white New Yorkers who abandoned New York City's once-dominant Democratic party in large numbers.

Despite the many strengths of the work, *Fight the Power* is not without its flaws as the book fails to explore the internal debates that occurred within the African-American community over the policing of African-American neighborhoods. Recent scholars such as James Forman Jr.'s *Locking Up Our Own* and Michael Fortner's *Black Silent Majority* have explored the advocacy for stricter laws on drugs and increased policing by activists within the African-American community. *Fight the Power* would have been a stronger book if it more deeply explored the diversity of opinion within the African-American community on the questions of policing of African-American neighborhoods.

Additionally, the author could have spent more than a few pages exploring David Dinkins, the city's first and to date only African-American mayor. While Dinkins decried police brutality in a manner that fit neatly into the tradition that Taylor describes throughout the book, he also advocated for stricter crime laws as well as called for increased policing of African-American communities. Dinkins' tough-on-crime message found a very receptive audience among many African-American New Yorkers in the 1989 and 1993 elections. A detailed exploration of the Dinkins era would have enriched the book as it would have potentially supported the book's central thesis related to the centrality of activism against police brutality by both African-American activists and politicians. At the same time, a detailed

discussion of Dinkins' advocacy for stricter criminal laws and increased policing may have reflected the rich diversity and nuances of thought found in the African-American community that lies at the core of the contemporary critique of the popular narrative of the civil rights movement.

Overall, Taylor's book provides both the scholar and general reader with invaluable insight into how the activism against police brutality by various African-American groups as well as the political efforts by their allies played some role influencing New York City politics since the pre-World War II era. Additionally, Taylor does an excellent job of describing how the Black Lives Matter movement fits within this long struggle and describes how New York City continues to deal with issues of race and policing despite the best efforts of a wide array of actors to improve the relationship between African-Americans and the NYPD. Thus, despite any of its minor omissions, *Fight the Power* is a must-read for anyone who seeks to understand how the politics surrounding police brutality and race have significantly impacted New York City politics for nearly a century.

—James Barney, University of Memphis