Book Review

Review of Taylor, Clarence. 2019. *Fight the Power: African Americans and the Long History of Police Brutality in New York City*. New York: NYU Press. 336 pp. Hardcover. US\$35.00. ISBN: 9781479862450.

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Clarence Taylor's *Fight the Power: African Americans and the Long History of Police Brutality in New York City* is a candid and timely book. Taylor raises many arguments in *Fight the Power*. His main argument is twofold. First, race was a primary motivating factor behind police brutality in New York. Second, the false representation of blacks as criminals in mainstream media hindered efforts to meaningfully reform the New York Police Department (NYPD). The association of blackness with criminality, he argues, formed the basis of the interest in the racialized social control of blacks through police use of force. Taylor further avers that official's (e.g., mayors, police commanders) resistance to efforts that challenged the criminalization of blacks and attempts to democratize the NYPD has perpetuated police abuse and domination of black and brown New Yorkers. To support these claims, he documents numerous sociopolitical events and developments coupled with sundry detailed, sterling and cogent examples underscoring the struggles for change and official resistance to citizen-based recommendations for police reform. Although Taylor dedicates most of the chapters to tracing the historical attempts of black activists to limit police power, *Fight the Power* is more than a detailed historical account of the struggles between police and black communities and their fight for change. Beyond that, it is a call for police reformers to recognize true reform needs to focus on reducing police power through the democratization of police agencies by pushing for thorough involvement of civilians in police organizations' decision-making processes.

Taylor uses the first four chapters to highlight early efforts made by black activists to reform NYPD. For example, in Chapter One, he describes how activist groups like the People's Voice raised public awareness about police brutality by providing detailed witness accounts of police abuse that challenged the police-friendly versions reported in the white press. In addition to raising public awareness of police violence, the People's Voice also organized protests against police brutality as a way to highlight the public ire it engendered, and recommended several solutions to reform the police, namely that the NYPD hire more black officers. In the following chapter, he underscores the important role the American Communist Party played in combating police domination of blacks as it pushed the idea that police brutality is akin to lynching and genocide and, thus, a violation of human rights that obligates the state to take responsibility. Similarly, in Chapter Three, Taylor reminds readers that the Nation of Islam was instrumental in challenging police abuse of power in that not only did it challenge the racist images of blacks portrayed by the police as justification for excessive force, it also called on black public citizens, more precisely, to adopt de-escalation strategies (e.g., meetings and lawsuits) as they pushed for better police treatment. In the next chapter, Taylor documents instances of active opposition from NYPD and their attempts to push for the establishment of an

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independent monitoring agency. Despite the strong resistance, the combined efforts by civil rights organizations such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) compelled the NYPD to create a Civilian Complaint Review Board (CCRB) where civilians could file complaints about their police contact. These early efforts, explains Taylor, set the stage for subsequent recommendations for addressing police domination of black New Yorkers.

In the middle Chapters (5-7), Taylor continues to document efforts made by black reformers to change NYPD as well as the policing system's reactive efforts to resist their reform efforts; moreover, he provides recommendations to highlight how the opposition perpetuates police brutality. For example, in Chapter Five, he describes how the Harlem and Bedford-Stuyvesant riots, which was triggered by two police-involved killings of unarmed black male citizens, increased public awareness of police brutality and compelled other civil rights organizations, such as the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), to give due attention to the problem of police abuse of power. Despite the increased pressure these organization put on the police and their allies, little change followed, and this was primarily a result of then-mayor Robert Wagner who refused "to adopt any serious proposal that would make him seem as if he were an adversary of the police" (127). However, as described in Chapter Six, black reformers' push to increase NYPD's accountability was met with notable state support in 1966 when then-mayor John Lindsay announced his plan to create a civilian review board that consisted of mainly citizens. However, like previous efforts aimed at improving the relationship between police and black citizens, this undertaking was also met with strong opposition from groups such as the Patrolmen's Benevolent Association (PBA) and the New York Conservative Party. Further vitiating the potential impact of the civilian review board was the lack of support from white New Yorkers who were made to believe that a review board would work only to undermine police authority and excuse the behavior of blacks who had committed crimes. The lack of support from the city's white electorates helped "defeat the proposed board before it was implemented and for years to come the opportunity for residents to have a voice in determining how the police operated in their communities" (158).

In the final chapters, Taylor once again documents the pattern of police brutality, examines police reformers' efforts to make recommendations for change, and the consequent opposition of police to any suggested solutions that threaten police power. For example, in Chapter Eight, he describes how after 20 years following the defeat of Lindsay's CCRB, former mayor Edward Koch supported the creation of new a review board intended to reflect the city's diversity. Created in 1993, the new CCRB was given power to "receive, investigate, hear and make findings public concerning [external] complaints...[and] recommend disciplinary actions against officers found guilty" (162). However, the new CCRB immediately came under attack soon after former mayor Giuliani took office in 1993, as he refused to provide adequate funding for the board, arguing that the city was facing a financial deficit and promoting the idea that police brutality was not a serious concern under his administration. As a result of the lack of funding, the new CCRB could not hire new investigators and, thus, former officers were hired to fill vacancies, perpetuating the pattern of civilian exclusion from police processes and police domination. Taylor argues further evidence of this can be seen in the controversial police events involving Abner Louima and Amadou Diallo, which sparked mass street demonstration to pressure the police to make changes. While the demonstrations compelled the NYPD to make efforts to improve police-community relations, the department fell short of addressing the problem of police brutality. As Taylor explains in Chapter Ten, improving police-community relations became more of a focus under mayor Giuliani's successor, Michael Bloomberg, as he was more willing to acknowledge the seriousness of police brutality and inclined to make genuine efforts to reduce tension between police and black and brown communities. However, his support for the department's stop, question, and frisk policy posed a serious challenge to building public trust in the NYPD. Taylor explains that this was the case because the policy mainly targeted young black and brown males, leading to notable increase in external complaints filed, allegations of racial profiling, and concerns that the policy violates the fourth amendment. While Bloomberg staunchly opposed this claim and fought against a court-ordered recommendation that a federal monitor be established to oversee the NYPD, current mayor, Bill de Blasio, who won the 2013 mayoral election, supported the idea. De Blasio's support for legal rulings to end discriminatory police practices—and acceptance of recommendations to take actions to increase civilian inclusion in

policymaking and strengthen transparency and accountability—is regarded as the most significant achievement thus far in the struggle to curtail the abusive policing of black communities. Nevertheless, de Blasio's support for broken windows policing, which is similar to stop, question, and frisk, have perpetuated police brutality. The death of Eric Garner, which stemmed from a stop about him selling untaxed cigarettes, serves as a sterling example. As noted by Taylor, the fight continues.

The primary goal of *Fight the Power* is to raise awareness about the long history of police brutality in NYC and the efforts made by black activists and their allies to curtail the abuse. Taylor met this goal as each chapter, which serves as a mini history lesson on its own, is packed with hard-hitting facts that make it difficult to refute his claim that police brutality is a result of the intertwining of race (black) and the criminal justice system. While Taylor claims that the criminalization of blacks in the press perpetuates police brutality may be dismissed on the grounds that it is a development that is disconnected from the NYPD, his underscoring of official efforts to dismiss the prevalence and seriousness of the problem, which he demonstrates are influenced by race-based media reports, strengthens this claim. Moreover, the active resistance to recommendations intended to limit police power by increasing transparency and accountability further advances his claim. While the stories told in this book do not identify all of the forces in NYC that fought against police abuse, those reviewed by Taylor come together to paint a historical and telling picture of how the police have dominated black New Yorkers and how black activists and their allies have and continue to fight police domination and organizational resistance.

Fight the Power is a timely book given that police are now experiencing a legitimacy crisis, which was engendered by police brutality involving unarmed black citizens, a pattern, as Taylor noted, predates the 1960s. While the stories shared by Taylor are true to NYC, the lessons to be taken from these stories apply to police organizations across the nation, especially those serving large cities as they have similar stories about police abuse of power, reform, and resistance. As police transparency and accountability have become principal foci in police reform, the police have turned to body-worn cameras (BWCs) to achieve these organizational outcomes. While BWCs may compel police to be more transparent and accountable (if used optimally), leading to improved police-community relations, Taylor suggests that these devices will do little to reduce police domination of black and brown communities. Instead, Taylor argues that police domination can only be reduced by meaningfully involving citizens in police decision-making.