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## 16-5 The New York Times *Prints* *Opinion on the New York City* *Draft Riots in 1863*

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*The Conscription Act of 1863 made all men aged 20–45 liable to military service. Men could avoid the draft, however, by paying \$300 or finding a substitute, a provision that led directly to riots in several cities. But none equalled the fighting in the streets of the working-class districts of New York City from July 13–16. There were over \$1.5 million in property losses and hundreds of casualties—including scores of African Americans lynched from street lamps. Union forces fresh from the Battle of Gettysburg were required to restore order. In the midst of the disorder, the New York Times printed the following letter from one of the rioters and its own editorial opinion on July 15, 1863.*

*SOURCE: New York Times, July 15, 1863.*

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MONDAY NIGHT—UP TOWN.

*To the Editor of the New-York Times:*

You will, no doubt, be hard on us rioters tomorrow morning, but that 300-dollar law has made us nobodies, vagabonds and cast-outs of society, for whom nobody cares when we must go to war and be shot down. We are the poor rabble, and the rich rabble is our enemy by this law. Therefore we will give our enemy

battle right here, and ask no quarter. Although we got hard fists, and are dirty without, we have soft hearts, and have clean consciences within, and that's the reason we love our wives and children more than the rich, because we got not much besides them; and we will not go and leave them at home for to starve. . . . Why don't they let the nigger kill the slave-driving race and take possession of the South, as it belongs to them.

A POOR MAN, BUT A MAN FOR ALL THAT.



The mob in our City is still rampant. Though the increasing display of armed force has done something to check its more flagrant outrages, it is yet wild with fury, and panting for fresh havoc. The very fact of its being withstood seems only to give it, for the time, new malignity; just as the wild beast never heaves with darker rage than when he begins to see that his way is barred. The monster grows more dangerous as he grows desperate. . . .

It is too true that there are public journals who try to dignify this mob by some respectable appellation. The *Herald* characterizes it as the people, and the *World* as the laboring men of the City. These are libels that ought to have paralyzed the fingers that penned them. It is ineffably infamous to attribute to the people, or to the laboring men of this metropolis, such hideous barbarism as this horde has been displaying. The people of New-York and the laboring men of New-York are not incendiaries, nor robbers, nor assassins. They do not hunt

down men whose only offence is the color God gave them; they do not chase, and insult, and beat women; they do not pillage an asylum for orphan children, and burn the very roof over those orphans' heads. They are civilized beings, valuing law and respecting decency; and they regard with unqualified abhorrence the doings of the tribe of savages that have sought to bear rule in their midst.

This mob is not the people, nor does it belong to the people. It is for the most part made up of the very vilest elements of the City. It has not even the poor merit of being what mobs usually are—the product of mere ignorance and passion. They talk, or rather did talk at first, of the oppressiveness of the Conscription law; but three-fourths of those who have been actively engaged in violence have been boys and young men under twenty years of age, and not at all subject to the Conscription. Were the Conscription law to be abrogated to-morrow, the controlling inspiration of the mob would remain all the same. It comes from sources quite independent of that law, or any other—from malignant hate toward those in better circumstances, from a craving for plunder, from a love of commotion, from a barbarous spite against a different race, from a disposition to bolster up the failing fortunes of the Southern rebels. All of these influences operate in greater or less measure upon any person engaged in this general defiance of law; and all concerned have generated a composite monster more hellish than the triple-headed Cerberus. . . .

You may as well reason with the wolves of the forest as with these men in their present mood. It is quixotic and suicidal to attempt it. The duties of the executive officers of this State and City are not to debate, or negotiate, or supplicate, but to *execute the laws*. To execute means to enforce *by authority*. This is their *only* official business. Let it be promptly and sternly entered upon with all the means now available, and it cannot fail of being carried through to an overwhelming triumph of public order. It may cost blood—much of it perhaps; but it will be a lesson to the public enemies, whom we always have and must have in our midst, that will last for a generation. Justice and mercy, this time, unite in the same behest—*Give them grape, and a plenty of it.* . . .

**OBJECT OF THE MOB.** If this mob was originated in a passionate spirit of resistance to the Conscription law, it very soon changed its purpose, and assumed the character merely of a mob for robbery, plunder and arson. This is shown in the rifling of houses, hotels and stores, and the assaults and felonies upon the persons of unoffending citizens. Some of the ringleaders are noted thieves, who have served out several terms in Sing Sing

and other penitentiaries and prisons. Hundreds of the workmen who joined with the crowd on Monday were, of course, as honest as the average of us, but they were at once joined by all the knaves of the City, who saw in the occasion an opportunity for plunder such as had never before presented itself. They made good use of their opportunity, as hundreds of unfortunate citizens can testify. The whole thing, if it continues, bids fair to become a gigantic mob of plunderers, with no more reference to the Conscription than to the Koran. It is remarkable, and almost incredible, how infectious this spirit becomes. A man who joins in such a mob as this may never have stolen a pin's worth in his life before, but when a jewelry store like that up town, or a mansion like those in Fifth-avenue, is broken into, the temptation is almost irresistible to rush in, and obtain a share of things. If this affair is allowed to go on, if it be not promptly put down, it will quickly result in a state of things such as was never before known in a civilized city. It is now a question of the protection of firesides, property and persons against general plunder. It has nothing to do with the conscription.

**LAW AND LIBERTY.**—It has heretofore been the boast of this country that liberty regulated by law was the principle which governed its citizens. The most perfect freedom to every man in every relation of life—freedom of person, of speech and in the pursuit of happiness, has been our glory, while the universally upheld governance of law has been the safety both of ourselves and of our liberty. The dominance of the mob strikes at the root of this great and special American principle. It reverts us back to semi-barbarism, and throws us forward into despotism. A mob is un-American, anti-American. Every grievance can here be remedied, every wrong can here be righted by *law*, which has its power in the will of the people and “its fountain in the bosom of God.” It will be a dark day for the liberties of America, for its honor, its greatness, its power, its glory, when this excrescence of European despotism fastens itself upon our free institutions and society. Every man who prides himself in the name of American must use his determined efforts to drive back this black and deadly tide of human depravity.

1. According to the letter, the rioters were responding to the injustice of the Conscription Act, something disputed by the editorial. Consider the language of class in these documents.
2. Discuss the following statement: “Let the nigger kill the slave-driving race and take possession of the South, as it belongs to them.”