

Annex A: about the Ferguson events¹

2014-2015

Ferguson is a town in the suburbs North West of Saint-Louis, situated near the airport, with a majority Black population. It was the setting for riots of an unprecedented duration and scale which broke out in three waves. The first was from 9 to 25 August 2014, the second from 24 to 30 November 2014 and the third was one year later, from 9 to 11 August 2015.

The first was provoked by the death of Michael Brown, a Black man aged 18, at the hands of 28-year-old White policeman, Darren Wilson². It followed a police stop after a robbery at a shop. The following days saw alternating silent vigils, protests in the street, attacks on shops and confrontations with the police. The local police (50 out of 53 members were White) was overwhelmed and then reinforced by units from neighbouring areas and then by SWAT teams, on 13 August, then the National Guard, on 18 August, called out by Governor Jay Nixon (a Democrat). When the police escalated the use of arms (teargas, smoke bombs, rubber bullets etc.) the protesters responded in kind (Molotov cocktails etc.). A curfew was put in place on 16 August. Demos and confrontations continued, and the number of injured (some seriously) grew along with arrests (often arbitrary, including of journalists). A de-escalation began on 20 August, during the visit of the Public Prosecutor Eric Holder, sent by Obama. The National Guard withdrew on 21 August. Confrontations stopped with the funeral of Brown, on 25 August, attended by 5,000 people.

The second happened after the acquittal of Darren Wilson, on 24 November. But, in September and October, there were several incidents around the memorial in memory of Brown during protests in front of the police headquarters. Its Chief, Tom Jackson, was still in office and had authorised officers on patrol to sport wristbands saying “*I’m Darren Wilson*”. On the evening of the acquittal, protests and confrontations spread, two police cars and fifty or so shops were attacked, 12 buildings burned and 61 protesters arrested. Firefighters were prevented from intervening. Governor Nixon put the National Guard on high alert. Across the US, more than 170 demonstrations took place against the verdict.

The third took place to mark the first anniversary of the death of Michael Brown. In the meantime, on 11 March, there were demonstrations in front of the police station to protest against the resignation of Tom Jackson, who was provided with a year’s salary, paid in advance. The following morning, two cops were shot dead in front of the same police station³. Other, non-fatal, shootings happened in Saint-Louis itself, and in the South East suburb of Webster Groves.

On 9 August, peaceful and silent demonstrations were held while, at the same time, groups of people looted shops and shot at one another. Plainclothes police intervened and killed an 18-year-old Black man. In total, 120 people were arrested.

¹ The information in this text comes from the book by Phil A Neel *Hinterland: America’s New Landscape of Class and Conflict*, Reaktion Books, 2018, and uses Wikipedia for geographical data.

² Wilson would be acquitted in November 2014 by a majority jury verdict (9 against 3). In addition, he received financial support of \$400,000 raised by an extreme right racist website, and there was even a demonstration of 70 people in his favour on 23 August in Ferguson.

³ A 20-year-old Black man, Jeffrey Williams was arrested on 14 March 2015. Found guilty of two murders, he was sentenced to 25 years in prison on 17 March 2017.

As well as the gatherings every year in memory of Brown and despite the nomination, in April 2016, of a new Black police chief coming from Miami, Delrish Moss, several Black former protesters from 2014 have died under suspicious circumstances.

A textbook case

The population of Ferguson, a close suburb of Saint-Louis, grew strongly up until 1970, reaching 29,000, and from then on has never stopped shrinking, a consequence first of all of deindustrialisation, to 23,000 in 2010 and 20,500 in 2019. Since 1990, the “racial” composition has inverted. In 1990, Ferguson was still 73.8% White and 25.1% Black. In 2010, Blacks were a majority (67.4%) followed by Whites (29.3%). Yet, it was only in June 2020 that a Black Democrat was elected mayor. Income corrected for inflation had fallen and unemployment had doubled, going from around 5%, in 2000, to an average of 13%, between 2010 and 2012. The diminishing population, the closure of manufacturing industries and the collapse in property prices plunged many small municipalities in the Saint-Louis region into budgetary crisis. Garnering less tax revenue, they relied more and more on fees and various fines, applied by the police and authorised by the judicial system.

On the eve of the riots, out of a population of around 21,000, more than 16,000 residents of Ferguson had been the subject of an arrest warrant. And that number only took account of individuals targeted by warrants and not the total number of warrants issued. In 2013, this figure was 35,975, around 1.5 warrants per person! These warrants were part of a complex racket aiming to impose harsh fines on the impoverished population with the aim of financing the government of the town, largely revised to facilitate this predatory practice. In 2013, fines, court fees and other extorsions of this type represented around *20% of the budget of the municipality*. These fines were applied in a disproportionate manner to the Black residents of the town. Black drivers were twice as likely to be arrested, searched and prosecuted than their White equivalents. But Ferguson was only third in the region in the extortion stakes, its predatory financial system being behind the suburbs of St Ann⁴ (39.6%) and St John⁵ (29.4%), where the working class is mostly White.

To the phenomenon of deindustrialisation, are added the consequences of the financial crisis of 2008-9, leading to fiscal mini-crises at the local level. Many municipalities and poor counties have increased fiscal pressure on the poor of all colours. The “racial” factor has only served to amplify the phenomenon. As in the eighteenth century, at the beginning of capitalist development in England, poverty was *de facto* considered a crime. In conclusion, the racist character of the maintenance of order in Ferguson and in other towns of the US is undeniable. But the Blacks are not the only ones to bear the costs of these aggressions. It is enough to consider the condition of the poor Whites in rural areas. Thus, in the Saint-Louis region, White workers are not much better off than their Black class brothers and sisters.

⁴ St Ann, 8 km West of Ferguson, had a population of 13,000 inhabitants in 2010 (70% White, 22% Black). As in Ferguson, the population has been in decline since 1980.

⁵ St John, 6 km South West of Ferguson, had 6,500 inhabitants in 2010 (67.4% White, 24.3% Black). It also has a population in decline since 1980.