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Hot Spring

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New York City is on the verge of an explosion. With the March 16 police shooting of Patrick Dorismond, the number of unarmed black men gunned down by the NYPD in the last year has risen to three. People here are beyond grief, even beyond anger, so sickened and fed up with the out-of-control police force and our vicious Mayor Giuliani that they're ready to shut the city down.

The corporate media have tended to write about the burgeoning movement against police brutality as if it were mobilized and directed by Reverend Al Sharpton, a man whose political savvy seems finally to be catching up with his media skill. But while Sharpton has played a large and important role, gaining new respect from former critics, the focus on him has obscured the breadth and militancy of street-level protest.

Thousands upon thousands of New Yorkers have already been stirred into action, and the numbers will certainly grow. More importantly, they represent a broader cross-section of the city than in protests past, and they're less inclined to limit themselves to purely legal forms of expression.

There have already been a number of high-school walkouts here, and more are planned for the coming weeks. Explains

high-school student Morgan Benson, "We're not going to just march around in the streets singing or whatever. We're going to stir things up a bit. There's a general restlessness around -- people are just so outraged by this."

Young people of color today seem more willing to engage in direct action than at any time since the heyday of the 1950s and 1960s black civil rights movement.

While it was the black freedom struggle that pioneered large-scale civil disobedience in the United States, during the 1980s and 1990s the tactic became the almost exclusive province of predominantly white movements: environmentalism, anti-nuclear activism, animal rights, and so forth (with a few major exceptions, such as the anti-apartheid and anti-toxics movements).

"Young blacks and Latinos have not been eager to do civil disobedience," notes Richie Perez of the National Congress for Puerto Rican Rights, "because many of them have been through the [criminal justice] system, or have been touched by the system in one way or another. There's been a tremendous increase of police interference in people's lives, and people want to get away from it, they don't want more of it."

But youth of color have now begun doing direct action by the hundreds, a shift with far-reaching implications. And it's not just happening in New York: The widespread civil disobedience in California surrounding the passage of the Youth Crime Initiative earlier this year speaks to a national trend in the making.

The movement against police misconduct has been further strengthened by another national trend: the increased willingness of activists from an array of movements to work together across racial, age, and issue lines. The much-touted labor-environmental alliance of recent years has many lower-profile counterparts, from the joint campaign against highway construction by Native American activists and eco-radicals in Minnesota to the combined effort here by immigrant rights

groups and Lower East Side leftists to unionize undocumented greengrocer workers.

The large protests to date against police brutality in New York City have been solidly multiracial and multi-generational, which has often not been the case in the past. Much of the credit goes to People's Justice 2000, a coalition of more than a dozen action-oriented community groups who have been building alliances with one another since the mid-1990s.

There's another factor, too. Much as the in-your-face corporate power grab embodied by the World Trade Organization has brought environmentalists, human rights activists, and organized labor together, the unchecked abuse of police power under Mayor Giuliani has given whites and Asians new common ground with black and Latino movements.

"When people see Asians [at police brutality protests]," observes Bronx high-school student Rom Chy, "they're surprised because they never see Asian people come out for this kind of stuff. They think it doesn't happen to us. But every day, young people come up to me and tell me that the police harass them."

White activists like myself -- who are never stopped and frisked for the way we look -- have nonetheless come to experience police abuse firsthand, in a way that gives us new insight into what communities of color routinely face.

That's because Mayor Giuliani consistently uses police force to stifle political expression and punish his critics. Going to any publicly announced demonstration nowadays means walking into an armed camp: Staggering numbers of police are mobilized for even the tamest rallies. The police brass brazenly pick known organizers out of the crowd, jailing them on the slimmest of pretenses. Beatings are alarmingly common.

It used to be that civil disobedience arrests here meant a few hours at the local precinct and maybe a slap on the wrist. Now political protesters -- community gardeners trying to stop the City from bulldozing their land, Irish gays and lesbians protesting their exclusion from the St. Patrick's Day Parade, you name

it -- invariably spend more than 24 hours in jail, most of them in the fetid underground hell of Manhattan's infamous Tombs.

Just the other night, a group of friends and I were stopped in Greenwich Village and detained by the police for allegedly putting up posters announcing some upcoming protests. We stood lined up against a Bleecker Street bar for an hour as the size of the undercover operation that had been mounted against us became clear. The NYPD had employed a police captain, two detectives, three squad cars, an SUV filled with undercovers, two beat cops, two bicycle cops and even an officer on horseback to catch us.

We got away with only a summons and a court date, and at first I found myself greatly relieved that I wouldn't have to go back to the Tombs for the fourth time in a year.

Then I came to my senses and felt a rage proportionate to the NYPD's excess. With overkill having quite literally become the Police Department's policy, an uprising feels near at hand.