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Documentary shows current problems echo those in 1967 that led to Newark riots

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Aristide Economopoulos/The Star-Ledger

Prior to the viewing of the documentary historian Clem Price talks about the riots and what led to them. Local police are invited to the showing of Revolution 67 and the NJ Historical Society's exhibit on the Newark and other New Jersey cities.

NEWARK — The lens of history opens Newark, 1967, to two interpretations.

Riot? Or rebellion?

A screening and discussion of a documentary film about the riot/rebellion for Newark police brass and officers this week was also open to interpretation. Was it a history lesson? Or cautionary tale?

"Revolution '67" came out in 2007, and had a national run on PBS. It's the back-story of Newark's riots: loss of factory jobs to the South and overseas; federal housing and transportation policies favoring

suburban development; government corruption or incompetence impacting city services. Two of three still exist.

This is where the old adage of history repeating itself comes in. The problems of 1967 are the problems of 2010, and those problems lead to distrust of government.

"Americans are always wary of authority," said Rutgers-Newark history professor Clement Price, who facilitated the screening Tuesday for police at the New Jersey Historical Society in Newark. "That's the nature of our democracy. But that can be minimized by the higher aspirations of law enforcement and the community they are sworn to protect."

Police are on the front lines of that distrust, fair or not.

"The crime issue diverts from the real situation," said Marylou Tibaldo-Bongiorno, the filmmaker. "You can't have a sustainable city with a poverty rate of 27 percent. If we find ways to reduce

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poverty, everything else, the schools, the crime, the police relations, will rectify."

Until then, crime is inevitable. Manageable, but inevitable.

That's why both Price and Newark Police Director Garry McCarthy wanted the NPD to see the film. Price had previously arranged a screening for 200 members of the State Police.

"The fact these agencies are receptive to this kind of gathering is evidence of how much they've changed," Price said.

Price and McCarthy are friends. What seems an odd pairing — the noted scholar and the controversial (for lack of a better word) police director — is grounded in respect for history and the lessons it offers.

McCarthy spoke of those lessons in the kind of blunt language that gets people like him fired, if they work for mayors who cave in to critics.

"The conditions that led to it — the poverty, crime and anger — are the same conditions that exist today," McCarthy said during the discussion. "This was a seminal moment in the city's history, and the city hasn't grown out of it. You could say we're in the middle of another riot."

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The 1967 Newark Riots

Crossroads: The 1967 Newark Riots - Clement Price, Donald Malafronte, Junius Williams, Roger Smith and Craig Mierop. Five New Jerseyans who lived through the riots and studied the riots recall the five days in July 1967 that forever changed Newark. (Video by Scott Lituchy / The Star-Ledger) July 2007

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He didn't mean on the streets; he meant the perfect storm of economic realities and political turbulence. He meant 167 fewer cops on the street and political opponents sharpening their daggers. Those "higher aspirations" Price alluded to, well, they are elusive in Newark politics, and in its politically orchestrated activism.

"This is an incredibly racially polarized city," McCarthy said. "When you have people pulling in different directions at the same piece of fabric, eventually that piece of fabric will rip apart. Newark never seems to pull in the same direction."

For instance, as the NPD reorganizes to cover a 13 percent reduction in force, union leaders representing separate groups of Hispanic officers, black officers, and Portuguese officers backed a failed effort by Councilman Ras Baraka to recall McCarthy, just two months after he was reappointed by the city council. Back when McCarthy was reappointed, Baraka immediately said he hoped police didn't "retaliate" against his South Ward constituents because of his negative vote.

Police retaliation. Words that drip with '67 history. Words that don't speak to the "higher aspirations" of a community pulling together.

And so 1967 remains, and as Price said, "We live in the shadows of our history."

In Newark, hauntingly so.


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