

Los Angeles 1992: The Context of a Proletarian Uprising

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“We cannot deny the role gangs played in the uprising. The systematic nature of the rioting is directly linked to their participation and most importantly to the truce on internal fighting they called before the uprising. Gang members often took the lead which the rest of the proletariat followed.”

Distorted by the bourgeois press, reduced to a mere ‘race riot’ by many on the left, the L.A. rebellion was the most serious urban uprising this century. This article seeks to grasp the full significance of these events by relating them to their context of class re-composition and capitalist restructuring.

April 29th, 1992, Los Angeles exploded in the most serious urban uprising in America this century. It took the federal army, the national guard and police from throughout the country five days to restore order, by which time residents of L.A. had appropriated millions of dollars worth of goods and destroyed a billion dollars of capitalist property. Most readers will be familiar with many of the details of the rebellion. This article will attempt to make sense of the uprising by putting the events into the context of the present state of class relations in Los Angeles and America in order to see where this new militancy in the class struggle may lead.

Before the rebellion, there were two basic attitudes on the state of class struggle in America. The pessimistic view is that the American working class has been decisively defeated. This view has held that the U.S. is - in terms of the topography of the global class struggle - little more than a desert. The more optimistic view held, that despite the weakness of the traditional working class against the massive cuts in wages, what we see in the domination of the American left by single issue campaigns and “Politically Correct” discourse is actually evidence of the vitality of the autonomous struggles of sections of the working class. The explosion of class struggle in L.A. shows the need to go beyond these one-sided views.

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1. BEYOND THE IMAGE

As most of our information about the rioting has come through the capitalist media, it is necessary to deal with the distorted perspective it has given. Just as in the Gulf War, the media presented an appearance of full immersion in what happened while actually constructing a falsified view of the events. While in the Gulf there was a concrete effort to disinform, in L.A. the distortion was a product not so much of censorship as much as of the total incomprehension of the bourgeois media when faced with proletarian insurrection. As Mike Davis points out, most reporters, “merely lip-synched suburban cliches as they tramped through the ruins of lives they had no desire to understand. A violent kaleidoscope of bewildering complexity was flattened into a single, categorical scenario: legitimate black anger over the King decision hijacked by hard-core street criminals and transformed into a maddened assault on their own community.” Such a picture is far from the truth.

The beating of Rodney King in 1991 was no isolated incident and, but for the chance filming of the event, would have passed unnoticed into the pattern of racist police repression of the inner cities that characterizes the present form of capitalist domination in America. But, because of the insertion of this everyday event into general public awareness the incident became emblematic. While the mainstream television audience forgot the event through the interminable court proceedings, the eyes of the residents of South Central L.A. and other inner cities remained fixed on a case that had become a focus for their anger towards the system King's beating was typical of. Across the country, but especially in L.A., there was the feeling and preparation that, whatever the result of the trial, the authorities were going to experience people's anger. For the residents of South Central, the King incident was just a trigger. They ignored his televised appeals for an end to the uprising because it wasn't about him. The rebellion was against the constant racism on the streets and about the systematic oppression of the inner cities; it was against the everyday reality of racist American capitalism.

One of the media's set responses to similar situations has been to label them as "race riots". Such a compartmentalisation broke down very quickly in L.A. as indicated in Newsweek's reports of the rebellion: "Instead of enraged young black men shouting 'Kill Whitey', Hispanics and even some whites - men, women and children - mingled with African-Americans. The mob's primary lust appeared to be for property, not blood. In a fiesta mood, looters grabbed for expensive consumer goods that had suddenly become 'free'. Better-off black as well as white and Asian-American business people all got burned." Newsweek turned to an "expert" - an urban sociologist - who told them, "This wasn't a race riot. It was a class riot." (Newsweek, May 11th, 1992).

Perhaps uncomfortable with this analysis they turned to "Richard Cunningham, 19", "a clerk with a neat goatee": "They don't care for anything. Right now they're just on a spree. They want to live the lifestyle they see people on TV living. They see people with big old houses, nice cars, all the stereo equipment they want, and now that it's free, they're gonna get it." As the sociologist told them - a class riot.

In L.A., Hispanics, blacks and some whites united against the police; the composition of the riot reflected the composition of the area. Of the first 5,000 arrests, 52 per cent were poor Latinos, 10 per cent whites and only 38 per cent blacks.

Faced with such facts, the media found it impossible to make the label "race riot" stick. They were more successful, however, in presenting what happened as random violence and as a senseless attack by people on their own community. It is not that there was no pattern to the violence, it is that the media did not like the pattern it took. Common targets were journalists and photographers, including black and Hispanic ones. Why should the rioters target the media? - 1) these scavengers gathering around the story offer a real danger of identifying participants by their photos and reports. 2) The uncomprehending deluge of coverage of the rebellion follows years of total neglect of the people of South Central except their representation as criminals and drug addicts. In South Central, reporters are now being called "image looters".

But the three fundamental aspects to the rebellion were the refusal of representation, direct appropriation of wealth and attacks on property; the participants went about all three thoroughly.

REFUSAL OF REPRESENTATION

While the rebellion in '65 had been limited to the Watts district, in '92 the rioters circulated

their struggle very effectively. Their first task was to bypass their “representatives”. The black leadership - from local government politicians through church organizations and civil rights bureaucracy - failed in its task of controlling its community. Elsewhere in the States this strata did to a large extent succeed in channelling people’s anger away from the direct action of L.A., managing to stop the spread of the rebellion. The struggle was circulated, but we can only imagine the crisis that would have ensued if the actions in other cities had reached L.A.’s intensity. Still, in L.A. both the self-appointed and elected representatives were by-passed. They cannot deliver. The rioters showed the same disrespect for their “leaders” as did their Watts counterparts. Years of advancement by a section of blacks, their intersection of themselves as mediators between “their” community and US capital and state, was shown as irrelevant. While community leaders tried to restrain the residents, “gang leaders brandishing pipes, sticks and baseball bats whipped up hotheads, urging them not to trash their own neighborhoods but to attack the richer turf to the west”.

“It was too dangerous for the police to go on to the streets” (Observer, May 3rd 1992).

ATTACKS ON PROPERTY

The insurgents used portable phones to monitor the police. The freeways that have done so much to divide the communities of L.A. were used by the insurgents to spread their struggle. Cars of blacks and Hispanics moved throughout a large part of the city burning their targets - commercial premises, the sites of capitalist exploitation - while at other points traffic jams formed outside malls as their contents were liberated. As well as being the first multiethnic riot in American history, it was its first car-borne riot. The police were totally overwhelmed by the creativity and ingenuity of the rioters.

DIRECT APPROPRIATION

“Looting, which instantly destroys the commodity as such, also discloses what the commodity ultimately implies: The army, the police and the other specialized detachments of the state’s monopoly of armed violence.”

Once the rioters had got the police off the streets looting was clearly an overwhelming aspect of the insurrection. The rebellion in Los Angeles was an explosion of anger against capitalism but also an eruption of what could take its place: creativity, initiative, joy.

A middle-aged woman said: “Stealing is a sin, but this is more like a television gameshow where everyone in the audience gets to win.” Davis article in *The Nation*, June 1st.

“Looters of all races owned the streets, storefronts and malls. Blond kids loaded their Volkswagon with stereo gear... Filipinos in a banged up old clunker stocked up on baseball mitts and sneakers. Hispanic mothers with children browsed the gaping chain drug marts and clothing stores. A few Asians were spotted as well. Where the looting at Watts had been desperate, angry, mean, the mood this time was closer to a maniac fiesta”.

The direct appropriation of wealth (pejoratively labelled “looting”) breaks the circuit of capital (Work-Wage-Consumption) and such a struggle is just as unacceptable to capital as a strike. However it is also true that, for a large section of the L.A. working class, rebellion at the level of production is impossible. From the constant awareness of a “good life” out of reach - commodities they cannot have - to the contradiction of the simplest commodity, the use-values they need are all stamped with a price tag; they experience the contradictions of capital not at the level of alienated production but at the level of alienated consumption, not at the level of labor but at the level of the commodity.

“A lot of people feel that it’s reparations. It’s what already belongs to us.” Will M., former gang member, on the “looting”. (International Herald Tribune May 8th)

It is important to grasp the importance of direct appropriation, especially for subjects such as those in L.A. who are relatively marginalized from production. This “involves an ability to understand working-class behavior as tending to bring about, in opposition to the law of value, a direct relationship with the social wealth that is produced. Capitalist development itself, having reached this level of class struggle, destroys the ‘objective’ parameters of social exchange. The proletariat can thus only recompose itself, within this level, through a material will to reappropriate to itself in real terms the relation to social wealth that capital has formally redimensioned”.

[...]

2. RACE AND CLASS COMPOSITION

So even Newsweek, a voice of the American bourgeoisie, conceded that what happened was not a “race riot” but a “class riot”. But in identifying the events as a class rebellion we do not have to deny they had “racial” elements. The overwhelming importance of the riots was the extent to which the racial divisions in the American working class were transcended in the act of rebellion; but it would be ludicrous to say that race was absent as an issue. There were “racial” incidents: what we need to do is see how these elements are an expression of the underlying class conflict. Some of the crowd who initiated the rebellion at the Normandie and Florence intersection went on to attack a white truck driver, Reginald Oliver Denny. The media latched on to the beating, transmitting it live to confirm suburban white fear of urban blacks. But how representative was this incident? An analysis of the deaths during the uprising shows it was not.

Still, we need to see how the class war is articulated in “racial” ways.

In America generally, the ruling class has always promoted and manipulated racism, from the genocide of native Americans, through slavery, to the continuing use of ethnicity to divide the labor force. The black working class experience is to a large extent that of being pushed out of occupations by succeeding waves of immigrants. While most groups in American society on arrival at the bottom of the labor market gradually move up, blacks have constantly been leapfrogged. Moreover, the racism this involves has been a damper on the development of class consciousness on the part of white workers.

In L.A. specifically, the inhabitants of South Central constitute some of the most excluded sectors of the working class. Capital’s strategy with regards these sectors is one of repression carried out by the police - a class issue. However the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) is predominantly white and its victims massively black and Hispanic (or as P.C. discourse would have it, people of color). Unlike in other cities, where the racist nature of the split between the included and excluded sectors is blurred by the state’s success in co-opting large numbers of blacks on to the police force, in L.A. capital’s racist strategy of division and containment is revealed in every encounter between the LAPD and the population - a race issue.

When the blacks and Hispanics of L.A. have been marginalized and oppressed according to their skin color, it is not surprising that in their explosion of class anger against their oppressors they will use skin color as a racial shorthand in identifying the enemy, just as it has been used against them. So even if the uprising had been a “race riot”, it would still have been a class riot. It is also important to recognize the extent to which the participants went

beyond racial stereotypes. While the attacks on the police, the acts of appropriation and attacks on property were seen as proper and necessary by nearly everyone involved, there is evidence that acts of violence against individuals on the basis of their skin color were neither typical of the rebellion nor widely supported. In the context of the racist nature of L.A. class oppression, it would have been surprising if there had not been a racial element to some of the rebellion. What is surprising and gratifying is the overwhelming extent to which this was not the case, the extent to which the insurgents by-passed capital's racist strategies of control.

“A lot of people feel that in order to come together we have to sacrifice the neighborhood.” Will M., former gang member, on the destruction of businesses. (International Herald Tribune May 8th, 1992.)

One form the rebellion took was a systematic assault on Korean businesses. The Koreans are on the front-line of the confrontation between capital and the residents of central L.A. - they are the face of capital for these communities. Relations between the black community and the Koreans had collapsed following the Harlins incident and its judicial result. In an argument over a \$1.79 bottle of orange juice, Latasha Harlins, a 15-year old black girl, was shot in the back of the head by a Korean grocer - Soon Ja Du - who was then let off with a \$500 fine and some community service. While the American State packs its Gulags with poor blacks for just trying to survive, it allows a shopkeeper to kill their children. But though this event had a strong effect on the blacks of South Central, their attack on Korean property cannot be reduced to vengeance for one incident - it was directed against the whole system of exchange. The uprising attacked capital in its form of property, not any property but the property of businesses - the institutions of exploitation; and in the black and Hispanic areas, most of these properties and businesses were owned by Koreans. But though we should understand the resentment towards the Koreans as class-based, it is necessary to put this in the context of the overall situation. In L.A., the black working-class's position deteriorated in the late 1970s with the closure of heavy industry, whereas at the end of the 60s they had started to be employed in large numbers. This was part of the internationalization of L.A.'s economy, its insertion into the Pacific Rim center of accumulation which also involved an influx of mainly Japanese capital into downtown redevelopment, immigration of over a million Latin Americans to take the new low-wage manufacturing jobs that replaced the jobs blacks had been employed in, and the influx of South Koreans into L.A.'s mercantile economy. Thus while Latinos offered competition for jobs, the Koreans came to represent capital to blacks. However, these racial divisions are totally contingent. Within the overall restructuring, the jobs removed from L.A. blacks were relocated to other parts of the Pacific Rim such as South Korea. The combativity of these South Korean workers shows that the petty-bourgeois role Koreans take in L.A. is but part of a wider picture in which class conflict crosses all national and ethnic divides as global finance capital dances around trying to escape its nemesis but always recreating it.

3. CLASS COMPOSITION AND CAPITALIST RESTRUCTURING

The American working class is divided between waged and unwaged, blue and white collar, immigrant and citizen labor, guaranteed and unguaranteed; but as well as this, and often synonymous with these distinctions, it is divided along ethnic lines. Moreover, these divisions are real divisions in terms of power and expectations. We cannot just cover them up with a call for class unity or fatalistically believe that, until the class is united behind a Leninist party or other such vanguard, it will not be able to take on capital. In terms of the American situation as well as with other areas of the global class conflict it is necessary to use the dynamic notion of class composition rather than a static notion of social classes.

“When Bush visited the area security was massive. TV networks were asked not to broadcast any of Mr Bush’s visit live to keep from giving away his exact location in the area.” (International Herald Tribune, May 8th, 1992.)

The rebellion in South Central Los Angeles and the associated actions across the United States showed the presence of an antagonistic proletarian subject within American capitalism. This presence had been occluded by a double process: on the one hand, a sizeable section of American workers have had their consciousness of being proletarian - of being in antagonism to capital - obscured in a widespread identification with the idea of being “middle-class”; and on the other, for a sizeable minority, perhaps a quarter of the population, there has been their recomposition as marginalized sub-workers excluded from consideration as a part of society by the label “underclass”. The material basis for such sociological categorizations is that, on the one hand there is the increased access to “luxury” consumption for certain “higher” strata, while on the other there is the exclusion from anything but “subsistence” consumption by those “lower” strata consigned to unemployment or badly paid part-time or irregular work.

This strategy of capital’s carries risks, for while the included sector is generally kept in line by the brute force of economic relations, redoubled by the fear of falling into the excluded sector, the excluded themselves, for whom the American dream has been revealed as a nightmare, must be kept down by sheer police repression. In this repression, the war on drugs has acted as a cover for measures that increasingly contradict the “civil rights” which bourgeois society, especially in America, has prided itself on bringing into the world.

Part of the U.S. capital’s response to the Watts and other 60s rebellions was to give ground. To a large section of the working class revolting because its needs were not being met, capital responded with money - the form of mediation par excellence - trying to meet some of that pressure within the limits of capitalist control. This was not maintained into the 80s. For example, federal aid to cities fell from \$47.2 billion in 1980 to \$21.7 billion in 1992. The pattern is that of the global response to the proletarian offensives of the 60s and 70s: first give way - allowing wage increases, increasing welfare spending (i.e. meeting the social needs of the proletariat) - then, when capital has consolidated its forces, the second part - restructure accumulation on a different basis - destructure knots of working class militancy, create unemployment.

In America, this strategy was on the surface more successful than in Europe. The American bourgeoisie had managed to halt the general rise in wages by selectively allowing some sectors of the working class to maintain or increase their living standards while others had their’s massively reduced. One sector in particular has felt the brunt of this strategy: the residents of the inner city who are largely black and Hispanic. The average yearly income of black high school graduates fell by 44% between 1973 and 1990, there have been severe cutbacks in social programs and massive disinvestment. With the uprising, the American working class has shown that capital’s success in isolating and screwing this section has been temporary.

The re-emergence of an active proletarian subject shows the importance, when considering the strategies of capital, of not forgetting that its restructuring is a response to working class power. The working class is not just an object within capital’s process. It is a subject (or plurality of subjects), and, at the level of political class composition reached by the proletariat in the 60s, it undermined the process. Capital’s restructuring was an attack on this class composition, an attempt to transform the subject back into an object, into labor-power.

Capitalist restructuring tried to introduce fragmentation and hierarchy into a class subject which was tending towards unity (a unity that respected multilaterality). It moved production to other parts of the world (only, as in Korea, to export class struggle as well); it tried to break the strength of the “mass worker” by breaking up the labor force within factories into teams and by spreading the factory to lots of small enterprises; it has also turned many wage-laborers into self-employed to make people internalise capital’s dictates. In America, the fragmentation also occurred along the lines of ethnicity. Black blue-collar workers have been a driving force in working class militancy as recorded by C.L.R. James and others. For a large number of blacks and others, the new plan involved their relegation to Third World poverty levels. But as Negri puts it, “marginalization is as far as capital can go in excluding people from the circuits of production - expulsion is impossible. Isolation within the circuit of production - this is the most that capital’s action of restructuring can hope to achieve.” When recognizing the power of capital’s restructuring it is necessary to affirm the fundamental place of working class struggles as the motor force of capital’s development. Capital attacks a certain level of political class composition and a new level is recomposed; but this is not the creation of the perfect, pliable working class - it is only ever a provisional recomposition of the class on the basis of its previously attained level.

Capitalist restructuring has taken the form in Los Angeles of its insertion into the Pacific Rim pole of accumulation. Metal banging and transport industry jobs, which blacks only started moving into in the tail end of the boom in late 60s and the early 70s, have left the city, while about one million Latino immigrants have arrived, taking jobs in low-wage manufacturing and labor-intensive services. The effect on the Los Angeles black community has not been homogeneous; while a sizeable section has attained guaranteed status through white-collar jobs in the public sector, the majority who were employed in the private sector in traditional working class jobs have become unemployed. It is working class youth who have fared worse, with unemployment rates of 45% in South Central.

But the recomposition of the L.A. working class has not been entirely a victory of capitalist restructuring. Capital would like this section of society to work. It would like its progressive undermining of the welfare system to make the “underclass” go and search for jobs, any jobs anywhere. Instead, many residents survive by “Aid to Families With Dependent Children”, forcing the cost of reproducing labor power on to the state, which is particularly irksome when the labor power produced is so unruly. The present consensus among bourgeois commentators is that the problem is the “decline of the family and its values.” Capital’s imperative is to re-impose its model of the family as a model of work discipline and form of reproduction (make the proles take on the cost of reproduction themselves).

4. A NOTE ON ARCHITECTURE AND THE POSTMODERNISTS

Los Angeles, as we know, is the “city of the future”. In the 30s the progressive vision of business interests prevailed and the L.A. streetcars - one of the best public transport systems in America - were ripped up; freeways followed. It was in Los Angeles that Adorno & Horkheimer first painted their melancholy picture of consciousness subsumed by capitalism and where Marcuse later pronounced man “One Dimensional”. More recently, Los Angeles has been the inspiration for fashionable post-theory. Baudrillard, Derrida and other postmodernist, post-structuralist scum have all visited and performed in the city. Baudrillard even found here “utopia achieved”.

The “postmodern” celebrators of capitalism love the architecture of Los Angeles, its endless freeways and the redeveloped downtown. They write eulogies to the sublime space within the \$200 a night Bonaventura hotel, but miss the destruction of public space outside.

The postmodernists, though happy to extend a term from architecture to the whole of society, and even the epoch, are reluctant to extend their analysis of the architecture just an inch beneath the surface. The “postmodern” buildings of Los Angeles have been built with an influx of mainly Japanese capital into the city. Downtown L.A. is now second only to Tokyo as a financial center for the Pacific Rim. But the redevelopment has been at the expense of the residents of the inner city. Tom Bradley, an ex-cop and Mayor since 1975, has been a perfect black figurehead for capital’s restructuring of L.A.. He has supported the massive redevelopment of downtown L.A., which has been exclusively for the benefit of business. In 1987, at the request of the Central City East Association of Businesses, he ordered the destruction of the makeshift pavement camps of the homeless; there are an estimated 50,000 homeless in L.A., 10,000 of them children. Elsewhere, city planning has involved the destruction of people’s homes and of working class work opportunities to make way for business development funded by Pacific Rim capital - a siege by international capital of working class Los Angeles.

But the postmodernists did not even have to look at this behind-the-scenes movement, for the violent nature of the development is apparent from a look at the constructions themselves. The architecture of Los Angeles is characterised by militarization. City planning in Los Angeles is essentially a matter for the police. An overwhelming feature of the L.A. environment is the presence of security barriers, surveillance technology - the policing of space. Buildings in public use like the inner city malls and a public library are built like fortresses, surrounded by giant security walls and dotted with surveillance cameras.

In Los Angeles, “on the bad edge of postmodernity, one observes an unprecedented tendency to merge urban design, architecture and the police apparatus in a single comprehensive security effort.” (Davis, *City of Quartz* p. 224) Just as Haussman redesigned Paris after the revolutions of 1848, building boulevards to give clear lines of fire, L.A. architects and city planners have remade L.A. since the Watts rebellion. Public space is closed, the attempt is made to kill the street as a means of killing the crowd. Such a strategy is not unique to Los Angeles, but here it has reached absurd levels: the police are so desperate to “kill the crowd” that they have taken the unprecedented step of killing the toilet. Around office developments “public” art buildings and landscaped garden “microparks” are designed into the parking structures to allow office workers to move from car to office or shop without being exposed to the dangers of the street. The public spaces that remain are militarized, from “bum-proof” bus shelter benches to automatic sprinklers in the parks to stop people sleeping there. White middle class areas are surrounded by walls and private security. During the riots, the residents of these enclaves either fled or armed themselves and nervously waited.

We see, then, that in the States, but especially in L.A., architecture is not merely a question of aesthetics, it is used along with the police to separate the included and the excluded sections of capitalist society. But this phenomenon is by no means unique to America. Across the advanced capitalist countries we see attempts to redevelop away urban areas that have been sites of contestation. In Paris, for example, we have seen, under the flag of “culture”, the Pompidou centre built on a old working class area, as a celebration of the defeat of the ‘68 movement. Here in Britain the whole of Docklands was taken over by a private development corporation to redevelop the area - for a while yuppie flats sprang up at ridiculous prices and the long-standing residents felt besieged in their estates by armies of private security guards. Still, we saw how that ended... Now in Germany, the urban areas previously marginalized by the Wall, such as Kreuzberg and the Potsdamer Platz, have become battlegrounds over who’s needs the new Berlin will satisfy.

Of course, such observations and criticisms of the “bad edge of postmodernity”, if they fail to see the antagonism to the process and allow themselves to be captivated by capital’s dialectic, by its creation of our dystopia, could fall into mirroring the postmodernists’ celebration of it. There is no need for pessimism - what the rebellion showed was that capital has not killed the crowd. Space is still contested. Just as Haussman’s plans did not stop the Paris Commune, L.A. redevelopment did not stop the 1992 rebellion.

5. GANGS

“In June 1988 the police easily won Police Commission approval for the issuing of flesh-ripping hollow-point ammunition: precisely the same ‘dum-dum’ bullets banned in warfare by the Geneva Conventions.” (Mike Davis, 1990, *City of Quartz*, p. 290.)

We cannot deny the role gangs played in the uprising. The systematic nature of the rioting is directly linked to their participation and most importantly to the truce on internal fighting they called before the uprising. Gang members often took the lead which the rest of the proletariat followed. The militancy of the gangs - their hatred of the police - flows from the unprecedented repression the youth of South Central have experienced: a level of state repression on a par with that dished out to rebellious natives by colonial forces such as that suffered by Palestinians in the Occupied Territories. Under the guise of gang-busting and dealing with the “crack menace”, the LAPD have launched massive “swamp” operations; they have formed files on much of the youth of South Central and murdered lots of proletarians.

As Mike Davis put it in 1988, “the contemporary Gang scare has become an imaginary class relationship, a terrain of pseudo-knowledge and fantasy projection, a talisman.” The “gang threat” has been used as an excuse to criminalise the youth of South Central L.A. We should not deny the existence of the problems of crack use and inter-gang violence, but we need to see that, what has actually been a massive case of working class on working class violence, a sorry example of internalised aggression resulting from a position of frustrated needs, has been interpreted as a “lawless threat” to justify more of the repression and oppression that created the situation in the first place. To understand recent gang warfare and the role of gangs in the rebellion we must look at the history of the gang phenomenon.

In Los Angeles, black street gangs emerged in the late 1940s primarily as a response to white racist attacks in schools and on the streets. When Nation of Islam and other black nationalist groups formed in the late 50s, Chief Parker of the LAPD conflated the two phenomena as a combined black menace. It was a self-fulfilling prophecy, for the repression launched against the gangs and black militants had the effect of radicalizing the gangs. This politicization reached a peak in the Watts rebellion, when, as in ‘92, gang members made a truce and were instrumental in the black working class success in holding off the police for four days. The truce formed in the heat of the rebellion lasted for most of the rest of the 60s. Many gang members joined the Black Panther Party or formed other radical political groupings. There was a general feeling that the gangs had “joined the Revolution”.

The repression of the movement involved the FBI’s COINTELPRO program and the LAPD’s own red squad. The Panthers were shot on the streets and on the campuses both directly by the police and by their agents, their headquarters in L.A. were besieged by LAPD SWAT teams, and dissension was sown in their ranks. Although the Panthers’ politics were flawed, they were an organic expression of the black proletariat’s experience of American capitalism. The systematic nature of their repression shows just how dangerous they were perceived to be.

As even the L.A. Times admitted, the recrudescence of gangs in L.A. in the early 70s was a direct consequence of the decimation of the more political expressions of black frustration. A new aspect of this phenomena was the prodigious spread of Crip sets which caused the other gangs to federate as the Bloods. As Davis puts it, "this was not merely a gang revival, but a radical permutation of black gang culture. The Crips, however perversely, inherited the Panther aura of fearlessness and transmitted the ideology of armed vanguardism (shorn of its program). But too often Crippin' came to represent an escalation of intra-ghetto violence to Clockwork Orange levels (murder as a status symbol, and so on)...[the Crips] achieved a "managerial revolution" in gang organisation. If they began as a teenage substitute for the fallen Panthers, they evolved through the 1970s into a hybrid of teen cult and proto-mafia".

That gangs, even in their murderous mutation as "proto-mafia" Crips and Bloods, have been an expression of the need for political organisation is indicated in a few instances where they have made political interventions. In two major situations, the Monrovia riots in 1972 and the L.A. schools busing crisis of 1977-79, the Crips intervened in support of the black community. These gangs, as an expression of the proletariat, are not in the grips of a false consciousness that makes them think all there is to life is gold chains and violence. Whenever they have been given a chance to speak, for instance in December 1972 at the beginning of the transformation of the gangs into the ultra-violent Crips and Bloods, they have come out with clear political demands. Every time they have been given a chance to express themselves, similar demands have been voiced. The LAPD does everything in its power to stop the gangs being given a voice so as to maintain its war against them.

Still, if the gangs wanted to appeal to people's sympathies, they have done themselves no favors by dealing in crack. However, if we look closely at this we find that the mass move into this trade is pushed on them by capital. Young blacks moved into the alternative economy of drugs when traditional occupations were destroyed. We are dealing with material pressures.

For a member of South Central's youth proletariat, the only rational economic choice is to sell drugs. While the internationalization of the Los Angeles economy has meant a loss for working class blacks, what the Crips and Bloods have managed to do is insert themselves back into the circuit of international trade. While the international trade in legal commodities decided that the Los Angeles blacks were expendable another branch found them eminently useful. Southern California has taken over from Florida as the main route of entry of cocaine into the United States. When in the early 80s the cocaine business found the market for its product saturated, its price falling and profits threatened, it, like any other multinational, diversified and developed new products, the chief one being crack - "the poor man's cocaine". Young proletarians participate in this business because it is the work on offer. It is not them but capital that reduces life to survival/work. We can see, then, that selling crack is in a sense just another undesirable activity like making weapons or cigarettes that proletarians are forced to engage in. But there is a significant difference. Within most occupations proletarians can organize directly within and against capital; but the drug dealing gangs do not confront capital as labor. Gangs do not confront the capital of the enterprise, they confront the repressive arm of capital-in-general: the State. In fact, to the extent that the gangs engage in the cocaine trade and fit firmly into the circuit of international capital, they are the capitalist enterprise. This is a problem. The drive-by shootings and lethal turf wars of the black gangs is the proletariat killing itself for capital.

It is necessary to see, then, that the murderous gangbanging phenomenon which is presently halted has not been, as the bourgeois press would have it, the result of the breakdown

of “family values” and the loss of the restraining influence of the middle class as they left for the suburbs; rather it resulted from: 1) the economics of capitalist restructuring (the replacing of traditional industries with drugs) and 2) the active destruction of political forms of self-organisation by state repression. The solution to the problem of the murderous crack wars is the rediscovery of political self-activity of the sort shown in the rebellion. The solution to inter-proletarian violence is proletarian violence.

The irrepressible nature of the gang-phenomenon shows the pressing need for organisation on the part of the youth proletariat of L.A. For a while in the 60s it took a self-consciously political form. When this manifestly political form of organisation was repressed, the gangs came back with a vengeance, showing that they express a real and pressing need. What we have seen in and since the uprising is a new politicization of gang culture: a return of the repressed.

6. POLITICAL IDEAS OF THE GANGS

Since the rebellion, some attention has been given to the political ideas and proposals of the gangs (or, more precisely, the gang leadership). The proposals are mixed. Some are unobjectionable, like that for gang members with video cameras to follow the police to prevent brutality and for money for locally community controlled rebuilding of the neighbourhood; but others, like replacing welfare with workfare, and for close cooperation between the gangs and corporations, are more dubious. The political ideas from which these proposals spring seem largely limited to black nationalism. So how should we understand these proposals and this ideology?

The attempt by the gang leadership to interpose themselves as mediators of the ghetto has similarities to the role of unions and we should perhaps apply to them a similar critique to that which we apply to unions. It is necessary: 1) to recognise a difference between the leaders and the ordinary members 2) to recognise the role of the leadership as recuperating and channelling the demands of the rank and file.

Some of the gang leaders' conceptions are, quite apart from being reactionary, manifestly unrealistic. In the context of capitalist restructuring, the inner city ghetto and its “underclass” is surplus to requirements - it has been written off - it has no place in capitalist strategy, except perhaps as a terror to encourage the others. It is extremely unlikely that there will be a renegotiation of the social contract to bring these subjects back into the main rhythm of capitalist development. This was to an extent possible in the 60s and 70s, but no longer.

Understandably, in the light of the main options available, there is a desire in the inhabitants of L.A. for secure unionized employment. But capital has moved many industries away and they will not come back. Many of the people in these areas recognise the change and want jobs in computers and other areas of the new industries. But, although individual people from the ghetto may manage to get a job in these sectors (probably only by moving), for the vast majority this will remain a dream. Within capital's restructuring, these jobs are available to a certain section of the working class, and, while a few from the ghetto might insert themselves into that section, the attractive security of that section is founded on an overall recomposition of the proletariat that necessarily posits the existence of the marginalized “underclass”.

But, leaving aside the change in the conditions which makes large scale investment in the inner cities very unlikely, what do the gang leaders proposals amount to? Faced with the re-allocation of South Central residents as unguaranteed excluded objects within capital's

plan of development, the gang leaders present themselves as negotiators of a new deal: they seek to present the rebellion as a \$1 billion warning to American capital/state that it must bring these subjects into the fold with the gang leaders as mediators. They are saying that they accept the reduction of life to Work-Wage-Consumption, but that there is not enough work (!) i.e. they want the proletariat's refusal of mediation - its direct meeting of its needs - to force capital to re-insert them into the normal capitalist mediation of needs through work and the wage. The gangs, with their labor-intensive drug industry, have been operating a crypto-Keynesian employment programme; now in their plans for urban renewal the gang leadership want fully-fledged Keynesianism, with them instead of the unions as the brokers of labor-power. But, even apart from the fact that capital will not be able to deliver what the gang leaders seek, the rebellion has shown the whole American proletariat a different way of realising its needs; by collective direct action they can take back what's theirs.

These demands show the similarity of gang and union leadership: how they both act to limit the aspirations of their members to what can be met within the capitalist order. But for all the negative aspects to the union/gang organization, we must recognise that they do originate from real needs of the proletariat: the needs for solidarity, collective defense and a sense of belongingness felt by the atomised proletarian subject. Moreover the gangs are closer to this point of origin than the sclerotic unions of advanced capitalist countries. The gang is not the form of organization for blacks or other groups, but it is a form of organization that exists, that has shown itself prepared to engage in class struggle and that has had in the past and now it seems again to have the potential for radicalizing itself into a real threat to capital.

BLACK NATIONALISM

The limitations of the practical proposals of the gang leaders are partly a result of their conflict of interest with the ordinary members but also a function of the limits of their ideology. The gangs' political ideas are trapped within the limits of black nationalism. But how should we view this when their practice is so obviously beyond their theory? After all, as someone once observed, one doesn't judge the proletariat by what this or that proletarian thinks but by what it is necessary impelled to do by its historical situation. The gangs took seriously Public Enemy's Farrakhan-influenced stance on non-black businesses and "shut 'em down". Although Farrakhan does not preach violence as a political means many in the black gangs agree with his goal of black economic self-determination and saw the violence as a means towards that goal. In reality this goal of a "black capitalism" is wrong but the means they chose were right. The tendency of separation and antagonism shown by the rebellion is absolutely correct but it needs to be an antagonism and separation from capital rather than from non-black society. It is necessary that as the marginalized sector rediscovers the organisation and political ideas that were repressed in the 60s and 70s that it goes beyond those positions.

But, just as blacks were not the only or even the majority of rioters, the Crips and Bloods are not the only gangs. Chinese, Filipinos, Vietnamese, Salvadorans and most other Latin American immigrants have all evolved the gang as an organizational form for youth. Now, just as these gangs are far less involved in the international side of the drug business - selling indigenous drugs such as marijuana, PCP and speed at much smaller profit - they also do not have the nationalist leanings of the black gangs. Before the rebellion, a level of communication was reached between black and Latino youth through the shared culture of rap music and the experience it expresses. The tentative alliance between blacks and Latinos that emerged during the uprising shows a way forward. Los Angeles and America generally does need a rainbow coalition, but not one putting faith in Jesse Jackson; rather, one from below focussing on people's needs and rejecting the mediation of the existing political

system. For [working-class] blacks, a leap is required, but it will not happen through some “battle of ideas” with the black nationalists carried out in the abstract, but only in connection with practice; only by and through struggle will the [working-class] blacks of L.A. and the rest of the American proletariat develop a need for communism to which the direct appropriation of goods showed the way.

“In one crowded apartment building 75% of the tenants were found to possess looted goods and were swapping goods among themselves.” LAPD Lieutenant Rick Morton (International Herald Tribune, May 8th 1992.)

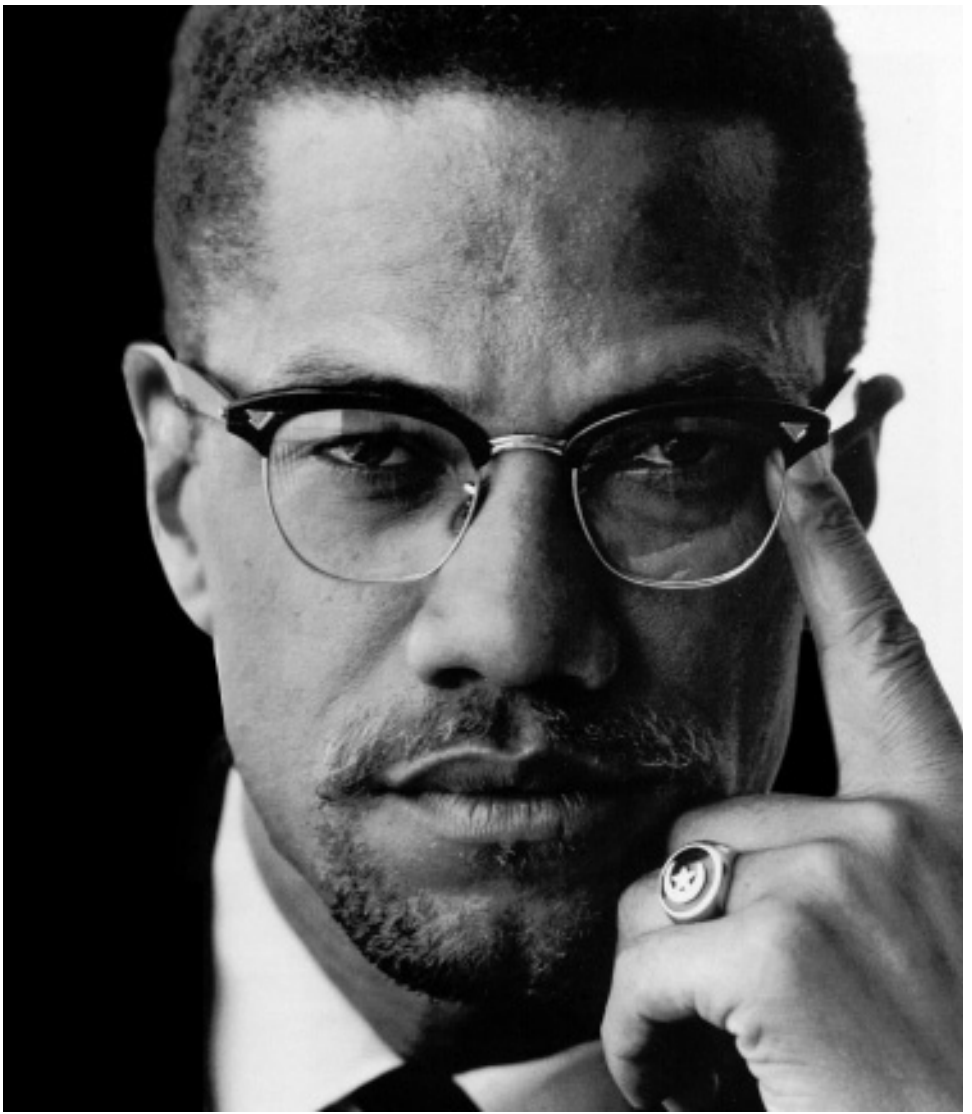
We might say the proletariat only sets itself the problems it can solve. Only by and through a new round of struggles such as began in L.A. will there be the opening for the American working class to find the ideas and organizational forms that it needs.

7. CONCLUSION

“Let us please not go back to normal.” Distressed caller on radio talk show during the riots. (Understanding the Riots, LA Times book, 1992.)

The rebellion in Los Angeles marked a leap forward in the global class struggle. In direct appropriation and as an offensive against the sites of capitalist exploitation, the whole of the population of South Central felt its power. There is a need to go on. The struggle has politicised the population. The truce is fundamental - the proletariat has to stop killing itself. The LAPD is worried and are surely now considering the sort of measures they used to break the gang unity that followed the Watts rebellion. The police are scared by the truce and by the wave of politicisation which may follow it. That politicization will have to go beyond black nationalism and the incorporative leanings of the gang leadership - another leap is required. In the multi-ethnic nature of the uprising and the solidarity actions across the country, we saw signs that the proletariat can take this leap.

For years, American rulers could let the ghetto kill itself. In May ‘92 its guns were turned on the oppressor. A new wave of struggle has begun.



UTONOMOUS MARXISM!

Aufheben: (past tense: hob auf; past participle: aufgehoben; noun: Aufhebung)

There is no adequate English equivalent to the German word Aufheben. In German it can mean “to pick up”, “to raise”, “to keep”, “to preserve”, but also “to end”, “to abolish”, “to annul”. Hegel exploited this duality of meaning to describe the dialectical process whereby a higher form of thought or being supersedes a lower form, while at the same time “preserving” its “moments of truth”. The proletariat’s revolutionary negation of capitalism, communism, is an instance of this dialectical movement of supersession, as is the theoretical expression of this movement in the method of critique developed by Marx.



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