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Meaning of Los Angeles Riots

A T Callinicos

What happened in Los Angeles in April was not a race riot—a term better reserved for episodes whose predominant character is violence between different races, like the anti-black pogroms in Chicago in 1919 and Detroit in 1943—but a class rebellion, a rising by the poor of Los Angeles against all the ills and injustices inflicted on them in the Reagan-Bush era.

We have become, in the past few years, used to, even blase about, events which can be genuinely described as world-historical. The revolutions in eastern Europe and the collapse of the Soviet Union constitute the most obvious example, disrupting, as they have, the international state-system on a scale not seen since what Arno Mayer calls the Thirty Years War of 1914-45.1 The riots which broke out in south-central Los Angeles on April 29 also have a claim to be called world-historical.

This is not simply because of the scale of the riots—the largest the United States has experienced in the 20th century, leading to 58 deaths and causing nearly $1 billion worth of damage. For they occurred at a particular historical conjuncture, when western market capitalism appeared to be triumphant over the world, its lack of serious challengers confirmed by the disintegration of Stalinism and by the US-led coalition’s defeat of Iraq in the second Gulf war. This triumph has of course been theorised by Francis Fukuyama as the end of history in the sense of ‘history understood as a single, coherent, evolutionary process’: no higher social form than liberal capitalism can be conceived of Fukuyama concedes that the advanced capitalist countries still involve considerable social inequalities, but argues that “the sources of inequality will increasingly be attributable to the natural inequality of talents, the economically necessary division of labour, and to culture”. The tensions of liberal democracy and capitalism will henceforth come, he predicts, not from class antagonisms, but from “liberal democracy’s tendency to grant equal recognition to unequal people”, its inability to grant the especially gifted the special esteem they demand.2

Fukuyama is himself based in southern California, not far from the ghettos which exploded at the end of April. The riots—or to describe them more accurately the rising—suggest that far greater social strains exist within even the greatest liberal democracy than he is prepared to acknowledge. The image offered by the rising—summed up by the London Observer’s headline of May 3: ‘Superpower Retakes Gutted Second City’—sits ill with the triumphalist proclamations of a ‘second American century’ after the opening of the Berlin Wall.

The location of the rebellion is itself significant. For Los Angeles is one of the capital cities of the most dynamic zone of the world economy—the Pacific rim, embracing Japan, the east Asian four tigers (South Korea, Taiwan, Singapore, and Hong Kong), appendages such as Malaysia, Thailand, and Australia, and the western United States. The southern Californian economy is increasingly closely connected to Japanese capitalism. At the height of the last boom in the mid-1980s, California was running a $20 billion trade deficit (on total trade worth nearly $30 billion) with Japan; any visitor is struck by the number of Japanese cars on California’s freeways. Los Angeles has been a major recipient of Japanese financial and real-estate investment: a third of downtown LA is owned by Japanese interests.3

Los Angeles is thus a Weltstadt, integrated into the circuits of what is becoming global capitalism’s leading zone. This strategic international position corresponds to the city’s increasingly polyglot population. California in the 1980s and early 1990s has been the recipient of a vast new east Asian and Latin American immigration. LA, with 3,000,000 Korean residents, is the largest Korean city after Seoul.

Finally, of course, LA is the capital city of our dreams. Hollywood still dominates the world’s film and television industries. One of its chief products in recent years has been a certain image of southern California itself, as a kind of capitalist utopia, in which the ‘classless society’ advocated by contemporary conservative politicians such as John Major in Britain is realised—a open, fluid, mobile society in which almost everyone shares in middle-class affluence amidst endless sunshine. Television programmes such as LA Law and Beverley Hills 90210 acknowledge the existence of a darker edge of poverty and racism, but largely as a contrast to the radiant pursuit of happiness which dominates the picture.

The dark side of LA has now been exposed in the full light of day. But what does the rebellion portend? What caused it and what are its likely consequences?

The Fire Last Time

Commentary on the rising has focused on its racial aspect, and has tended to compare it to LA’s last riot, in the black ghetto of Watts in August 1965. The context is, however, quite different. Watts was one of a chain of risings in America’s predominantly black inner cities in the 1960s—Harlem 1964, Watts 1965, Newark and Detroit 1967, and the nation-wide conflagration which followed Martin Luther King junior’s assassination in March 1968.

Three main factors were involved in the ghetto risings of the 1960s. First, the civil rights movement of the early 1960s had a nation-wide impact. Its very success—mass civil disobedience in the American south forced intervention by the federal government to rescind the racist Jim Crow laws to which blacks had been subjected in these states since the defeat of reconstruction after the civil war of 1861-65—simply highlighted the plight of blacks in the great northern industrial cities. They already possessed the rights of political citizenship which southern blacks had now won thanks to the civil rights movement, but were still economically excluded, suffering disproportionately from low wages and unemployment, denied access to skilled jobs, subject to racist police harassment. Victory in the south thus fed the appetite for a radical improvement in the status of all blacks. This contributed, secondly, to a polarisation within the civil rights movement. The slogan of Black Power, first raised in 1966, captured the imagination of those black radicals whose goal was no longer integration in American liberal democracy but the transformation of the entire social structure. The posthumous growth in the standing of Malcolm X, the emergence of the Black Panther Party in Oakland, on San Francisco Bay, and spread of black power ideas to the Detroit car plants signified the emergence of a black revolutionary movement.
This development was part, thirdly, of a more general process of political radicalisation occasioned chiefly by the Vietnam war. A disproportionately large number of blacks saw combat in Vietnam. The links many drew between a racist power structure at home and an imperialist war in Asia was summed up by Munition Munition, thus explaining for his refusal of the military draft: ‘No Viet-
namese ever called me nigger.’ The interac-
tion of ghetto revolt and the largely campus-based anti-war movement seemed to presage a fundamental challenge to American capitalism.

The US ruling class was nevertheless able to see off this challenge. Three tact-
tics were of particular importance. First, higher welfare spending: president Lyndon B Johnson’s Democratic administration launched a ‘war on poverty’, whose social programmes succeeded in cutting those living under the official poverty line from 19 per cent in 1964 to 11 per cent in 1973. Secondly, repression: black radicals were targeted by police agencies co-ordinated by the Federal Bureau of Investigation for imprisonment and, in many cases (most notoriously Black Panther leader Fred Hampton and the prison writer George Jackson) assassination. Thirdly, incor-
poration: programmes of ‘affirmative action’ offered to a minority of blacks the opportunity to rise into the professional middle class; by the 1980s a black political elite had emerged, with over 7,500 elected black officials, including the mayors of many major cities.

OUTRIDERS OF THE STORM

The ghetto risings of the 1960s were thus the climax of a political movement that was ultimately defeated. This in turn set the stage for Reaganomics—the definitive abandonment of Johnson’s quasi-social-democratic ‘great society’ and its replacement by policies designed aggressively to promote the dynamic entrepreneurial capitalism, anti-union and deregulated, which many saw emerging in the sunbelt states of the south and the west. This, then, is one clear difference between the risings of the 1960s and the LA rebellion. As Lee Sustar put it: “Then, it was common for rioters to see the rebellions as a political act. By contrast, the 1992 rising comes after an extremely conservative period.”

Two remarkable books, written from opposite ends of the political spectrum, and both published in 1990, provide much of the framework necessary to understand the rising. One is The Politics of Rich and Poor, by Kevin Phillips, a conservative political consultant. Phillips is best known as the architect of the strategy, developed in The Emerging Republican Majority [1969], through which the Republican Party used white workers’ racial fears to break up the New Deal coalition created by Franklin Roosevelt in the 1930s (organised labour, blacks, and the south) and win control of the White House for all but four of the past 22 years. It is therefore all the more striking that Phillips should highlight the illegititarian nature of the policies pursued by the Reagan administration. Much of his book is devoted to demonstrating in considerable detail the scale on which wealth and income was redistributed from poor to rich in the United States during the 1980s. Thus the top 0.5 per cent of US households increased their share of total wealth from 14.4 per cent in 1976 to 26.9 per cent in 1983. The average income of the top 10 per cent of households rose 24.4 per cent between 1977 and 1987, and of the top 1 per cent 74.2 per cent, while the bottom 10 per cent’s income fell by 10.5 per cent. Meanwhile, the majority’s incomes stagnated. Median family income (in con-
stant 1987 dollars) was $30,820 in 1973, $30,853 in 1977. Inflation-adjusted weekly income per worker fell from $366 in 1972 to $312 in 1987. Phillips emphasises that this redistribution was not merely a consequence of the recessions of 1974-75 and 1979-82 and of the economic restructuring this entailed, but reflected the policies of deregulation, tax cuts for the rich and welfare cuts for the poor pursued by the Reagan administra-
tion and justified by the laissez-faire ideology of the new right. He argues, fur-
ther, that this ‘capitalist heyday’ is the latest case of a regular cycle in American political economy. Twice before there have been eras in which aggressive entrepreneur-
ial capitalism has been triumphal—the ‘gilded age’ in the late 19th century and the ‘roaring twenties’ after the first world war. In both of these earlier cases a surge in speculative investment led finally to ‘implosion’—the 1893 panic and the 1929 Wall Street crash—which in turn ushered in a political reaction against un-
controlled laissez-faire, respectively the ‘progressive era’ of Theodore Roosevelt and the ‘WASP hegemony’ and Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal. Writing in the aftermath of Black Monday, the Wall Street crash of October 19, 1987, Phillips speculated that the third great capitalist heyday might have passed its apogee and that a more egalitarian phase in American politics would soon develop.

Perhaps Phillips’ prediction has been confirmed, though not in the form he expected. He anticipated the reaction to Reaganomics to express itself electorally, in the shape of a revival of the presiden-
tial fortunes of the Democrats. But he noted that ‘[t]he majority of elected Democrats’ were ‘behaving as usual dur-
ing capitalist heydays. Which is to say cowed, conformist and often supportive of the prevailing entrepreneurial, free-
market mood.’ This is a good descrip-
tion of the Democratic primary elections in 1992: the threat to the party establish-
ment of Jesse Jackson’s Rainbow coalition in 1984 and 1988 had long since been defeated, leaving the field to two main contenders, the avowedly ‘pro-business Democrat’ Paul Tsongas, and Bill Clinton, one of the leading forces in securing the Democrats’ acceptance of Reaganomics. No wonder the victims of these policies were not inclined to look to the electoral system in order to express their anger.

Chief among these victims were black people. Any statistical summary of the deteriorating condition of most black Americans in the Reagan era makes horrifying reading. One third of blacks live below the poverty line, compared to one quarter in the late 1960s. Between 1975 and 1991 blacks’ median income fell from 63 per cent of that of whites to 56 per cent. The rate of unemployment among blacks is at 15 per cent, twice that among whites. In 1987 the rate of unemploy-
ment among young blacks was 34 per cent. Black infant mortality rates are twice those of whites. One in four blacks aged 20-29 are in prison, on parole, or on probation. A middle-class minority have, it is true, risen, but the Centre on Budget and Policy Priorities reported in 1988: ‘The income gap between lower- and upper-income black families is now wider than at any other point on record. Income inequality is now significantly greater among black families than among whites.’

The economic and political ascension of the black middle class thus masked the worsened plight of the majority of blacks. The black politicians increasingly responsible for governing America’s great cities, like David Dinkins in New York and Tom Bradley in Los Angeles, were, in effect, the district commissioners of a racist power structure with nothing to offer most blacks. Racism featured with increasing prominence in American politics in the late 1980s and early 1990s. New York city was shaken by a succession of controversies provoked by racial attacks; in Louisiana the fascist David Duke was able to project himself as a ‘respectable’ politician, and was only narrowly defeated in a contest for state governor. George Bush used the case of Willie Horton, a black criminal allegedly allowed by his Democratic opponent, governor Michael Dukakis of Massachusetts, to commit yet more crimes to win the 1988 presidential election. After the Gulf war Bush’s aides described his
re-election plans as ‘KKK’—crime, Kuwait, and quotas. The first and third of these issues involved an explicit appeal to white racism. ‘Crime’ is in American politics a code-word for violent crimes committed by blacks against whites; the Bush administration also launched an assault on the programmes of affirmative action, often involving setting aside of quotas of places for blacks, for example, in universities, introduced after the 1960s risings.

The Los Angeles rebellion can thus be seen as a reaction to the 15-year offensive (Reagan’s policies were fore-shadowed by those of his Democratic predecessor Jimmy Carter) on the economic condition of the majority of Americans, an offensive from which black people suffered with peculiar intensity. But why Los Angeles? The answer is to be found in Mike Davis’s ‘brilliant Marxist study of LA, City of Quartz. The 1979-82 recession wiped out much of the heavy industry on which the blacks of south-central LA had depended. At the same time youth employment programmes were cut back, as the war on poverty was dismantled and a local electorate dominated by the middle-class white suburbs demanded cuts in state and city taxes. It is hardly surprising that many young blacks gravitated towards gangs like the Crips and the Bloods which, through the part they play in the trade in drugs like crack offer a livelihood of sorts (citing an estimate that 10,000 gang members live off the drug trade, Davis suggests that ‘crack really is the employer of last resort in the ghetto’s devastated east side—the equivalent of several large auto plants or several hundred MacDonald’s). The official response, orchestrated by the ineffable Daryl Gates, chief of the Los Angeles police department, has been repression on a spectacular scale—above all in the shape of ‘Operation HAMMER’, a series of paramilitary police swoops through the ghetto in which thousands of youth were arrested on trivial charges.11

NOT RACE RIOT BUT CLASS RISING

The Los Angeles rebellion was thus an explosion waiting to happen in a city which expressed in concentrated form the conflicts of the Reagan-Bush era—not only the accumulation of misery in south-central LA but the spectacular display of wealth in, say, Beverly Hills. Appropriately enough, the incident which sparked off the rising was provided by the LAPD, four of whose officers were acquitted on April 29 this year of the charge of beating up a black motorist, Rodney King, on March 3, 1991. The jurors’ decision, in predominantly white Simi Valley, ‘suburbs of the suburbs of the suburbs to the north of LA’ the London Independent called them, where Ronald Reagan’s Presidential Library is sited, to defy the evidence of a videotape recording King’s beating, epitomised the systematic bias of American legal and political structures against black people. The tinder finally caught fire.

Media commentary has tended to describe what followed as a race riot. The dominant images soon became ones which dramatised the conflicts between people of different races—there, for example, of a white trucker dragged from his cab and beaten up by black rioters, and of Korean shopkeepers holding off looters with gunfire. But do these images, and the interpretation which their very widespread use by the media implied, accurately represent the nature of what I have insisted on describing here as a rebellion? There are many reasons for doubting that they do.

In the first place, as many establishment politicians were willing to concede, the rebellion was multi-racial in character. Thus Willie Brown, speaker of the California assembly, told the San Francisco Examiner of May 3: ‘the violence was not contained in the inner city; it spread to outlying and upscale neighbourhoods . . . For the first time in American history, many of the demonstrations and much of the violence and crime, especially the looting, was multi-racial—blacks, whites, Hispanics and Asians were all involved.’

Mike Davis commented:

...from the beginning of the looting, it turned into the post-modern equivalent to traditional bread riots—an uprising of the poor. In many places, it was totally humourous, indeed, almost a carnival. At the beginning of this uprising some Latinos were attacked and brutally beaten. But the major aspect of it, particularly on the east side of the ghetto, which is totally mixed—black and Latino—and where every Latino kid takes a white vice versa, was that the looting was totally bi-racial.12

Nor should this be especially surprising. After all, south-central LA, like the east of the city, is experiencing a substantial influx of Hispanics, many of them immigrants from Central and South America. Hispanics, like blacks, are particularly disadvantaged in American society. Between 1978 and 1987 the poverty rate among Hispanics rose from 21.6 per cent to 28.2 per cent.13

More, however, is involved here than the precise composition of the crowds who took to the streets. A common explanation of the riots was that they reflected the rebellion of an ‘underclass’ of the long-term unemployed, those structurally excluded from economic life. There are two respects in which this explanation is a misleading one. First, while the rate of unemployment among blacks is much higher than among whites, reflecting institutionalised racism, the majority of blacks are in employment. An ambitious Marxist study of contemporary class structure, conducted in the US in 1980, found that no less than 74.5 per cent of blacks were workers, in the sense of wage-labourers, as opposed to 49.7 per cent of whites; 15.4 per cent of all blacks and 21.4 per cent of black men were skilled workers (the equivalent figure for all whites was 12.4 per cent and for white men 16.7 per cent).14 Black people cannot be equated with an underclass marginal to economic life. Secondly, as we have seen, the economic policies of the 1980s bore down on the majority of working-class Americans. Blacks suffered worse, but it was only a minority, the corporate rich and the ‘new middle class’ of managers and professionals who flourished in the ‘capitalist heyday’ of the 1980s. In other words, a shared class interest underlay the multiracial character of the rebellion.

Class did not simply unite working-class blacks with their counterparts of other races; it also divided them from the black middle class deeply involved in managing LA and other big cities. The mayor of Los Angeles, Tom Bradley, the incoming police chief, Willie Williams, and the chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Colin Powell, on whose orders federal troops were deployed to help quell the rising, were all black. Their role in suppressing the rebellion was not wholly unprecedented. In 1985, Wilson Goode, the black mayor of Philadelphia, authorised the aerial firebombing of a black neighbourhood during fighting between police and a countercultural group called MOVE. But, as Lance Sefia observed, ‘[ ]the prominent role that black middle class officials played—been urging calm and in deploying force—is central to one of the most striking differences between the King verdict riots and their counterparts in the 1960s.’15 The fact that New York, a racial cauldron in recent years, did not explode—despite apanic-stricken exodus from Manhattan on May 1 prompted by fears that the rioting was about to spread there from LA—had much to do with the intervention of mayor Dinkins in alliance with more radical black politicians such as the reverend Al Sharpton.

Set against this background, the fighting between Koreans and blacks is best seen as a secondary conflict, reflecting the role played by Korean shopkeepers in the ghettos. Mike Davis explains:

The Korean community is the middleman community between people in the ghetto, black and Mexican, and big capital. The name you heard most frequently on peoples’s lips during the uprising was Latasha Harlins, the 15-year-old black girl killed by a Korean shopowner over a $1.79 bottle of orange juice last March.
The shopkeeper was convicted, but let off with a $500 fine and some community service, a much lighter sentence than homeless people arrested for curfew violations, who have to spend ten days in jail or somebody who looted some sunflower seeds who may get two years in jail.

So Latisha Harlins was a kind of rallying cry, but Korean shopkeepers have come to represent everything the international Pacific Rim economy has done to south-central L.A. The disappearance of local jobs under foreign competition, racist remarks by Japanese ministers—all of that has kind of coalesced together with the sense that black customers are usually treated either rudely or impolitely by Korean store owners.

Unlike the Jewish store owners that they replaced, they don't employ black youth. So the result has been a kind of catastrophic collapse of any relations between the black and Korean communities. Something like 2,000 Korean stores have been looted or destroyed.16

There are manifest dangers in these divisions. Blacks and Hispanics may be diverted by the idea that they are the victims of 'alien' Asian capital from identifying the great multinational corporations, U.S. and foreign-owned, which dominate the American as they do every other economy. Nevertheless, the hostility directed at Korean shopkeepers and some whites cannot alter the fact that what happened in L.A. was not a race riot—a term better reserved for episodes whose predominant character is violence between different races, like the anti-black pogroms in Chicago in 1919 and Detroit in 1943—but a class rebellion, a rising by the poor of Los Angeles against all the ills and injustices inflicted on them in the Reagan-Bush era.

CONCLUSION

To insist on so describing these events does not imply that one ignores their limitations. Contrasting the 1992 rebellion with the risings of the 1960s, which represented a radicalisation of the civil rights movement, Lee Sustar calls it "an angry but pre-political rejection of the system."17 The fact that the L.A. rebellion was not an expression of a political movement with an articulated programme must—together with the complicity of black politicians in the restoration of order—help explain the comparative speed with which the authorities were able, after the initial explosion, to regain control. This involved the deployment of considerable force—not merely police from all over the state and the National Guard, but federal infantry and US Marines—and very large-scale repression. Within some four weeks some 25,000 arrests had been made in the Los Angeles area (it took the apartheid regime eight months after a State of Emergency was imposed in June 1986 to arrest a comparable number throughout South Africa). Nor was this repression confined to L.A itself—1,100 demonstrators were arrested in downtown San Francisco on the night of April 30-May 1. 700 illegal immigrants were summarily arrested and deported to Central America. Through such means the rebellion was contained.

It is hard, however, not to believe that the rising represented a real break in American politics, a turn of perhaps greater import than Kevin Phillips' cyclical theory of US history allows for. I shall conclude with two considerations which may help situate the L.A. rebellion's long-term significance.

First, America since the civil war has been characterised by, on the one hand, a particularly brutal, dynamic, and uncontrollable variant of capitalism, and, on the other hand, the weakness of the kind of social intermediaries found in western Europe—above all, a strong reformist labour movement—which express working-class grievances, but within the framework of the existing order. The result is an alternation between periods which indeed correspond to Phillips' account of 'capitalist heydays', in which laissez-faire capitalism reigns supreme, and periods in which the discontent accumulated earlier on explode, because of the relative weakness of reformism, in a violent and uncontrolled form. The semi-insurrectionary mass strikes which unionised basic industry in the 1930s are a case in point; so too are the risings of the 1960s. The governmental efforts to limit the excesses of unbridled free enterprise—for example, Roosevelt's New Deal and Johnson's Great Society—are perhaps best seen as responses to, and efforts to contain grassroots revolts. The L.A. rebellion may represent the beginning of another period of mass insurgency.

Secondly, the rising coincided with a major strike by public sector workers in western Germany, the largest-scale industrial unrest of its kind since the immediate post-war era. The strikes were a symptom of Germany's transformation, as a result of the 1989 revolutions and the Federal Republic's absorption of the German Democratic Republic, from the cement of west European capitalism into a pole of instability, reflecting and intensifying the economic and political disorders arising from the drastic disruption of the continent's power-structure. The coincidence of the Los Angeles rebellion and the German strikes points to a larger irony. The successor states of the old Stalinist system in the east have set their course towards market capitalism at the very time when, against the backdrop of the third great world recession of the past 20 years, both the main models of liberal capitalism—the American free-market model which enjoyed such a revival in the 1980s, and the German 'social' model, far more committed to consensus and the corporate representation of labour and capital in national councils—are manifestly in crisis. Perhaps history is not over after all.

Notes


2 What follows is heavily indebted for both interpretation and information to Socialist Worker (Chicago), May and June 1992, and M Davis, 'The Rebellion that Rocked a Superpower', Socialist Review (London), 152, June 1992.


8 Ibid, chapters 2 and 3.

9 Ibid, p 47.

10 Ibid, p 207.

11 Davis, City of Quartz, p 314; see generally ibid, chapter 5.

12 Davis, 'Rebellion', op cit, pp 8, 9.

13 Phillips, Politics, p 208.


16 Davis, 'Rebellion', op cit, p 8.

17 Sustar, 'Fire', op cit.

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