

From Gulf War to Class War: We All Hate the Cops

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“There’s a difference between frustration with the law and direct assaults upon our legal system.”

- George Bush, May 3, 1992

Sing, Goddess, the Anger...

Rumor has it that the first rocks started to fly as the four cops who beat Rodney King and the jury who acquitted them were leaving the courtroom in suburban Simi Valley. Subsequent to the acquittals of the cops, on the afternoon of April 29th, thousands of people began pouring into the streets of Los Angeles. In a few hours rioting spread across the L.A. metropolitan area. Conditions rapidly approached the level of civil war. The police withdrew from the main areas of the fighting, ceding the streets to the insurgent poor. Systematic burnings of capitalist enterprises commenced. More than 5,500 buildings burned. People shot at cops on the street and at media and police helicopters. Seventeen government buildings were destroyed. The Los Angeles Times Building was attacked and partially looted. A vast canopy of smoke from the burnings covered the L.A. basin. Flights out of Los Angeles International Airport were canceled and incoming flights had to be diverted due to the smoke and sniper fire.

Following the lead of events in the nation’s cultural capital, mass spontaneous rioting spread to several dozen cities across the United States. The rioting was the single most violent episode of social unrest in the United States in the twentieth century, far outstripping the urban revolts of the 1960s both in its sheer destructiveness and in the fact that the April-May riots were a multiracial revolt of the poor. As Willie Brown, a prominent Democratic Party politician in the California State Assembly (and no friend of the class war) put it, in the *San Francisco Examiner*. “For the first time in American history, many of the demonstrations, and much of the violence and crime, especially the looting were multiracial — blacks, whites, Hispanics and Asians were all involved.”

In the initial phase of the riots, the police were rapidly overwhelmed and retreated, and the military did not appear until the rioting had abated. Some rioters with megaphones tried to turn the uprising into a war against the rich in the places where they live. “We should burn down their neighborhoods, not ours. We’re going to take it to Hollywood and Beverly Hills,” shouted a man with a megaphone according to the *London Independent* (May 2, 1992).

Two blocks from the mansions of the rich, burnt-out stores testify to how close the riot came to attacking the enemy class in their own homes.

“On Sunset Boulevard on Thursday evening, I watched children with mobile phones coordinate the movements of their gangs with the arrival of police and fire trucks, warning looters when police were on their way.”

(*London Guardian*, May 2, 1992)

Tonight We’re Gonna Party Like It’s 1999...

“*The rebellion was community. It was liberation.*” — a woman from South Central Los Angeles.

Several people involved in writing this article attempted to find out what happened first-hand and what has happened since. This is some of the information we got from our few contacts in the L.A. area. The rebellion started among black people, spread immediately to involve Latinos in South Central (which is about 42 percent Latino) and Pico Union, and then brought in unemployed white workers from Hollywood in the north to Long Beach in the south and Venice in the west. East L.A. was spared only because of a massive show of force by the L.A. Sheriffs Department.

Everybody came out onto the streets. There was an unprecedented feeling of togetherness. Liquor stores were looted. Before the stores were torched, people got out hoses to defend their houses against the danger of spreading fires. Old people were evacuated. It was a family occasion. Carloads of people turned up at a clothing factory, and men, women and children loaded up and drove off. There were two days of continuous looting involving thousands of people, mostly black and Latino, with white people involved as well. The police were nowhere to be seen.

“There were no arrests in my area,” one woman we talked to said. Essential items were redistributed, otherwise some people would have had nothing. As far as the beating of truck driver Reginald Denny goes, some of the people who beat him had just defended a 15-year-old against being beaten by the police. This is, of course, not being mentioned in the media.

Harry Cleaver noted, in an article signed May 1st: “Remarkable in the dynamics of the rebellions has been the failure of the forces of mediation. When the verdict came in on the night of Wednesday the 29th, every respectable ‘community leader’ in Los Angeles, from the black former policeman Mayor Bradley on down, strove to avert rebellion by channeling anger into manageable channels. Meetings in churches were organized, passionate gospel speeches were mixed with equally impassioned speeches of outrage — all designed to permit a powerless, cathartic venting of emotion. At the biggest meeting, covered by network television, the desperate mayor went so far as to make an explicit plea for no action. Just as good business trade unions see their primary job as imposing the contract and maintaining labor peace, so did the good community leaders see theirs as the maintenance of order.”

Happily they failed. The May 1st issue of the *New York Times*, which styles itself as the paper of record of the U.S. ruling class, noted with alarm:

“Some areas took on the atmosphere of a street party as black, white, Hispanic and Asian residents mingled to share in a carnival of looting. As the greatly outnumbered police looked on, people of all ages (and genders), some carrying small children, wandered in and out of supermarkets with shopping bags and armloads of shoes, liquor, radios, groceries, wigs, auto parts, gumball machines and guns. Some stood patiently in line to wait their turn.” The corporate-liberal humor magazine *Spy* noted that when people drove into a Von’s parking lot to loot the supermarket they left the handicapped parking spaces open.

A one-shot anarcho-publication out of Minneapolis lampooning the layout of *USA Today* called *L.A. Today* (“Tomorrow...The World”) reported “...they’re celebrating in L.A...” One observer in L.A. exclaimed, “These people aren’t like looters. They’re like game show winners.” One woman cried gleefully as she carted off clothes from a looted store, “This is bargain basement! Bargain basement!” One reporter solemnly noted that, during the protests against the Gulf War, cases of drunk or stoned revellers were the exception, but “it was the norm last night.”

In looting, the proletariat’s “temporary mass suppression of market relations,” Harry Cleaver noted the creation of “...new laws (sic) of distribution’ and a new kind of moneyless order in which vast quantities of wealth are being, very quickly, transferred from the businesses which

have to those who do not. Beyond such direct-appropriation, however, we must also see the political statement behind the burnings: the demand for the end of the institutions of exploitation themselves...the rupture of the mercantile circuits of capitalist society is a political blow to its lifeblood.”

The 30,000-square-foot military enlistment center for all nine counties of Southern California was burned to the ground on the first night. The image of the riots, and of riots in general, pedalled by the enemies of revolt is a lie. This lie portrays rioting as an episode of indiscriminate mayhem where rioters attack each other like sharks in a feeding frenzy. Crimes against people, such as rape and drive-by shootings, virtually disappeared as previously atomized proletarians of different colors and ethnicities came together in mass collective violence, “proletarian shopping” and a potlatch of destruction. There were far fewer rapes and muggings during the period of the riots than there are in Los Angeles under the normal rule of law.

In the aftermath of the rebellion, young men who’ve spent their entire lives unable to visit the next street because the street lies within another gang’s territory can now do so. A woman told us that after the riots, “As a woman, I feel much safer on the streets.” Welfare mothers from four different areas have come together to fight impending welfare cuts. This is a remarkable new development. When these women demonstrate outside welfare offices, the ruling class knows that behind them stand well over 100,000 veterans of the riots. On a conservative estimate, more than 100,000 rebel poor in the greater Los Angeles area have now collectively experienced, in arson, looting and violence against the police, the intelligent collective use of violence as a political weapon: “What is happiness? The feeling that power increases, that a resistance is being overcome.”(Nietzsche, *The Antichrist*)

The number of people who participated in the uprising is well into the six-figure range. We know this because there were around 11,000 arrests (5,000 blacks, 5,500 Latinos, 600 whites), and the vast majority of rioters and looters were able to get away scot-free.

The political significance of the L.A. uprising can perhaps best be gauged by comparing the riot in San Francisco, which was the second biggest in the country (or possibly third, behind the armed actions in Las Vegas). If this riot had happened without any uprising in L.A., it would have been by far the most important riot in California since the 1960s. But the L.A. uprising put it completely in the shade.

In San Francisco, on April 30th, more than a hundred stores were looted and trashed in the downtown area of Market Street. Many of the yuppie shops in the Financial District were trashed, and the rich scumbag lair of Nob Hill was invaded and cars smashed up. One of the large posh hotels had its windows smashed by a gang of youths chanting “The rich must die.”Reminiscent of our local resistance to the Persian Gulf War, protesters from the East Bay marched onto the Interstate 80 freeway and occupied the Bay Bridge, causing a massive Bay-Area-wide traffic jam affecting several hundred thousand automobile commuters. This was a commendably intelligent tactical use of the spatial dynamics of automobile urbanism imposed by capitalism as a weapon against capital. These actions were echoed across the bay in street rioting and looting on Telegraph Avenue in Berkeley, where riots have broken out between one and three times a year for the past three years.

In San Jose, students looted and attacked police cruisers with rocks and bottles. Traffic was stopped in San Diego along Interstate 5 by protesters for two hours. Police were shot at by youths rioting in Tampa, Florida, and in Las Vegas, armed rioters burned a state parole and probation office and shot at police, who just managed to save the casino area from the anger of the mob.

Armed confrontations between police and local people continued in Las Vegas for the next 18 days. In Seattle, a burning vehicle was pushed into police ranks, the Interstate 5 freeway was closed for 2 hours, and there were loads of looting, smashing and burning in downtown Seattle. Similar events occurred in Atlanta, where tear gas failed to stop the rioters. In Rochester, New York, a curfew was imposed after a cop car was flipped over. Leftists tried to stop looting and openly allied themselves with the police at the demo in Minneapolis. There were smaller riots in Riverside, California, Denver, Miami, and Peoria and Springfield, Illinois. Riots broke out in various locations in Maryland, New York, Ohio, Tennessee, Texas and Alabama. At a march of 1,000 people in New Brunswick on May 1st, a truck driver plowed through a crowd, but retreated as an angry mob quickly materialized. It is possible that the attack on the truck driver in LA. was sparked by a similar provocation.

In spite of a very small number of atypical and stupid racist incidents, the riots have been for the most part an overwhelmingly affirmative series of events, explicitly anti-police upheavals leading in the areas of the revolt's dominion to a widespread temporary overthrow in market relations and a crack in the totalitarian reality of contemporary America. The riots have been an explosive reemergence of class warfare in the United States on a scale surpassing the heroic revolts of the 1965–71 period. The recent riots were more racially mixed than the urban uprisings of that period and were a reaffirmation of the war between social classes. The war between the rich and the mass of exploited and dispossessed of all colors is the central issue of our time.

The wave of revolt on the part of the poor is a decisive interruption of our rulers' triumphant propaganda-following the fall of their main imperialist rival in the former U.S.S.R., and their defeat of former client states in Panama and Iraq- that humanity as a species has reached "the end of history," and that democracy and the market are the final and inevitable end-point of human evolution.

Until the uprising, under the law in California the state had to arraign suspects within 72 hours of arrest or let them go. The California State Assembly voted unanimously to 'temporarily' extend the arraignment period. The bill was flown on a National Guard airplane to be signed by State Supreme Court Justice Malcolm Lucas. This is the epitome of democracy in action. In a democracy, the ruling class and their hired orchestras of lackeys brag that the difference between a democracy and a more open form of despotism is that under a democracy there are rules that limit the degree to which our rulers can screw us. When the rules don't work, they change the rules.

Sects, Lies, and Videotape...

Listening to the radio coverage and reading the newspapers during the period of the revolt, it was clear that our enemy the media was completely floored by the abrupt and widespread nature of the uprising. But what was most disorienting and terrifying to the media lackeys of the ruling class was the multiracial nature of the uprising. News photos consistently showed people of all colors in the streets. For fifty years, one of the core constructs of democratic capitalist ideology in the United States has been the massive and wholesale denial that this is a class society.

The revolt, at least temporarily, overthrew 50 years worth of democratic ideology. Now that the smoke has cleared, the media and many of their loyal lackeys on the left, are attempting to place a different spin on the events, with Judeo-Christian victim-morality and ahistorical humanism

as a prophylactic for the battered social contract and its protective friend, the rule of law. But, during the days in which the uprising unfolded it's clear that our rulers' media hirelings were conceptually overwhelmed by the enormity of the events.

During the revolt, the media creeps latched onto the video footage of the beating of a white truck driver, Reginald Denny, rebroadcasting footage of this largely atypical incident hundreds of times in order to tar the revolt with the stigma of a race riot. The subsequent rescue of Denny by several black people was not shown quite as often. Towards the end of the riots, the people who rescued Denny, naively, crassly or stupidly accepted awards for their rescue from representatives of the local business classes. This allowed their aid of the injured man to be deputized by the local commercial classes in their effort to assert proprietorship over 'humanitarian' acts, and by implication, indicting the riots as a completely psychotic episode or pogrom. This quick and cunning public relations coup on the part of the rich and the media is understandable, coming from the region that specializes in exporting spectacle and aerospace to the rest of the world.

Lootings and burnings of enterprises owned by Korean shopkeepers were described as being "racially motivated" in the bourgeois media. Some rioters described these enterprises as being "parasitic on the community." Unfortunately, many enterprises were spared simply because they were owned or managed by black merchants, or because they employed black wage-workers, as in the case of a MacDonald's. Another way of seeing this-, is as an aspect of the class war subsumed, unfortunately, under the rubric of race, a situation where urban wage workers and poor people who happen to be black are screwed over by shopkeepers who happen to be Korean. The United States is a profoundly racist society. Fifty years of totalitarian disinformation by the corporate media has attempted to bury a consciousness of class among the poor and has largely succeeded in dividing the working class along racial lines. Some rioters expressed their hatred of being ripped off in racial terms.

The media have been burying analysis of the riots under a superficial examination of racism in the United States. In part, this specious wallow in corporate humanism aims at obscuring the dangerous social questions suggested by a nationwide multiracial uprising of the poor. By reducing the riots to a question of race relations between 'blacks' as such and 'whites' as such, the media, especially the liberals and leftists, attempt to obscure the multiracial reality of the rioting and portray the riots as the exclusive domain of "black criminals." Working class and poor whites, no matter how impoverished or exploited they are, and regardless of the violence they offered to the cops and commodity relations, are identified in this propaganda scheme with rich whites on the basis of skin color alone.

Some enterprises owned by black capitalists were burned as well. U.C. Berkeley sociologist Harry Edwards, in a radio interview broadcast on May 6th, made the point that some wage-workers set fire to the enterprises that employed them. However, some stores and businesses were not attacked, because if every enterprise had been destroyed the neighborhood would have been left without grocery stores or restaurants.

What needs to be made clear here is that we are not liberals and we are not racists: we are not sorry that enterprises belonging to merchants and bosses of any color or ethnicity were looted or burned, but that rioters attacked these targets and spared others, mystified in seeing their class enemies in racist terms.

The recent nationwide rioting, like other riots in the past ten years, demonstrates clearly that the most realistic, practical, immediate way for working class and poor people to overcome inter-

nalized racism and racial divisions among themselves is found in a common violent fight against our mutual enemies — the cops, the business classes, the rich and the market economy.

On May 2nd, 5,000 LAPD, 1,000 Sheriffs Deputies, 950 County Marshals and 2,300 Highway Patrol cops accompanied by 9,975 National Guard troops, 3,300 Army troops and Marines with armored vehicles and 1,000 Federal Marshals, FBI agents and Border Patrol SWAT teams moved in to restore order and guard the shopping malls. Hundreds of people were wounded. Most of the people killed in the uprising were killed in the repression of the revolt, and most of them weren't participants in the revolt. The dead were mostly bystanders murdered by the police. In Compton, two Samoan men who were kneeling on the ground while being arrested were murdered by the cops. The police are also desperately trying to undermine the gang truce. They need the working class of South Central to start shooting each other again.

In the Mao-oid *Revolutionary Worker* an older woman was quoted as saying to some young people, "You should stop killing each other and start killing those motherfuckers," nodding towards the police.

In Los Angeles more than 12,000 people were arrested, the largest mass arrest in the history of the United States. Insurance adjusters are rating the L.A. riots as the fifth largest 'disaster' in U.S. history measured in insurance claims.

Defense campaigns are in a terrible state. There is no coordinated campaign to defend all the arrested. What little organized defense there is is concerned only with individual defendants, or particular aspects of repression, e.g. racism. Liberal lawyers have refused to defend looters. In San Francisco, the District Attorney Arlo Smith is intent on riding the backs of prosecuted looters into statewide elected office, and is pushing for state prison time for people found in possession of as little as a handful of T-shirts. Efforts to aid the imprisoned rebels have to be gotten together immediately, by making their names and the charges they face as widely known as possible, organizing benefit concerts to raise money to pay lawyers, etc.

Defense of the Indicted L.A. Four

The arrests of four black men in the beating of the white truck driver Reginald Denny is in part an attempt to reestablish a racial division of the urban poor that was ruptured or threatened by the revolt. It is an attempt to unite everyone appalled by "senseless mayhem" behind the state, and more insidiously an attempt to provoke more racially motivated attacks. Fear of such attacks will be used to justify the coming repressive measures. On a more positive note, we may be able to look forward to another massive social explosion the day that the convictions are handed down.

The men charged with the beating of Reginald Denny during the L.A. riot must be supported.¹ A defense attorney claims that Denny had taunted the black men involved, that Denny shouted out that the cops who beat Rodney King were not guilty. Obviously, we don't know whether this is true or not. We have to support Damian Williams and the other three defendants, because a successful prosecution would effectively tar all the insurgents with the brush of racist brutality: a cunning move on the part of the American justice system. The prosecutions are an effort to stigmatize the riots, not as a massive reassertion of class and community, but as a series of racist attacks, a mass outbreak of suburbanites' worst fears.

In the most radical and coherent episodes of the class war there have always been, and will be, ill-considered stupid uses of violence. The recent riots weren't fought by angels, but by flesh and blood human beings with all the flaws and limits imposed by conditions of horrific poverty and exploitation, responding to the daily violence of this shit society and all its terrors and mystifications. All of the insurgents have to be supported, regardless of what they are charged with and regardless of questions of guilt or innocence. None of them could get a fair trial, and even if they could, all of us would still need to take a clear line of unconditional support for all hostages taken by the state during and after the May Days.

* * *

A list of class war prisoners in the United States can be found in the Fall 1991 issue of "Social Justice" (POB 40601, San Francisco, CA. 94140), or from the Peoples Law Office (343 S. Dearborn, Suite 1607, Chicago, IL. 60604). Information about imprisoned war resisters from the Gulf war can be obtained from the "Anti-Warrior" (48 Shattuck, Box 129, Berkeley, CA. 94704).

¹ Editors' Note: It is abundantly clear that those charged with beating Reginald Denny are being crucified by the mass media and the government as punishment for their symbolic 'guilt' for the whole uprising. As usual, the commercial media have presented a highly skewed picture of the beating (without investigating events leading up to it in the area, including an immediately preceding police beating of the neighbors of one suspect), while the government at all levels is crusading for a quick and simple legal lynching. In contrast to the assault charge filed against the gang of cops who devastated Rodney King, Damian Williams (19), Antonine Miller (20) and Henry Watson (27) were each charged with attempted murder, torture, aggravated mayhem and robbery. At the arraignment of Damian Williams, LA. police chief Gates placed the entire LAPD on full tactical alert, in a melodramatic gesture similar to Gates' personal media-orchestrated arrest of Williams in the company of 200 cops and FBI agents. Williams' bail was then set at a level six and a half times that of Rodney King's LAPD assailants. When his mother was able to raise the money, the U.S. Attorney prevented his release. And while defense lawyers contested this, 37 new felony charges were filed against him and his two co-defendants. Bail was increased to 5580,000, almost 20 times that of the Rodney King assailants. When Damian Williams' mother, with widespread support from the outraged black community was coming close to making this new bail amount, court began special proceedings supposedly to determine whether property used for securing bail was "acquired legally," and the D.A. began videotaping Damian's family and supporters. For a more complete account see Mike Davis' "L.A. Was Just the Beginning" (*Open Magazine*, POB 2726, Westfield, NJ. 07091).

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