

# **20 Years After the L.A. Riots**

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*The singularity of the colonial context lies in the fact that economic reality, inequality, and enormous disparities in lifestyles never manage to mask the human reality.*

- Frantz Fanon

## **1. Letter From a Friend**

I asked a friend who lives in South Central to send me his thoughts about Los Angeles 20 years after the rebellion. The following is part of what he had to say:

Twenty years after the L.A. rebellion finds most of the black community in a state of shock because conditions are not better and the conditions which created the rebellion have only become more invisible to the outside world. The strait jacket of economics confines us all. The rock bottom conditions of poverty are suffocating the voice of protest in South Central L.A. Even the name South Central was changed to South L.A. by the politicians in an attempt to forget in their view the "negative" impact of the revolt.

The rebellion did change the relationship between the cops and the black / Brown community. They are not going to create another Rodney King situation. But the police use of deadly force has not ceased, just their attempt to cover up that relationship has taken on many different forms in an attempt to disrupt or derail any new form of organized rebellion which could be found in the L.A. rebellion. [No organization] has enlivened the imagination of the black community like the gang truce movement of 1992, which allowed the youth to "cross the tracks" to shed their "skin" of "colors" that help bridge the communities as a whole. That gives the people a breath of freedom, for a moment in time that must be passed on to the youth of today to continue. The gang truce movement in Watts has long since ended, but not forgotten by those who felt the power of free movement until the LAPD, in the name of fighting "organized crime" used the same form of tactics to disrupt and destroy it as they did groups like the black Panther Party of the 1960s ... Gang warfare which has helped to create many more sub-divided gangs ... leaves the community more divided than ever over colors.

Divide and rule is reinforced by economic hunger that creates battles over crumbs of a bankrupt drug trade that was booming during the late 1980s.

But the Rodney King beating and the murder of Latasha Harlins over a carton of orange juice sparked a rebellion that was about us all being criminalized.

The process of criminalization not only disenfranchises, but also dehumanizes individuals to the point that their oppression becomes invisible. A return to a Fanonian discourse seems appropriate to describe this invisibility and non-reciprocity and the criminalized mass of black and brown people in the urban ghetto who are seen as a moral cancer and a threat to civil order. The situation is Manichean, with the "dividing line" enforced by the police and prison system "creating an atmosphere of submission" (1968 38). A return to Fanon describes not only the brutal and mechanical violence of the state, as well as the sociopolitical discourse that is akin to colonization, but also its psychological trauma. For Fanon, the real revolt against colonialism is carried out by those dispossessed and marginalized people, who are completely "outside the colonial system"- people who, in the words of apartheid, are "surplus populations." Crushed by colonial expropriation (of land and labor), dehumanized by colonialism's ideology and its police, the damned of the earth - the "scum," the surplus people and the "feral rats" (as a shopowner, in a media interview, referred to participants in the English revolt of 2011), that mass insensi-

ble to ethics can only be held in check by violence, a violence that is "brought home and into the mind of the colonized" (1968 38). The old colonial tactic of divide and rule is manifested by intra-community violence, often by gang warfare, quickly settled by the knife or the gun. It is an atmosphere of violence, suggests Fanon, where everyone lives on edge. But every so often, the anger explodes outward. For Fanon, these damned and wretched people express the truth of civilization, its dehumanization. The frightening thing for the rules and the reformists is that they have nothing to lose. Additionally, in a Fanonian sense, the rebels express an elemental new humanism. Listen to this articulation by the poet Vicky Lindsey, of the activist group Mothers Reclaiming Our Children:

*I will never be free from you until you are free from me,  
your superiority complex versus my captivity ...  
me the serf, you the master is the reality  
which kept both of us enslaved throughout history ... (Afarly 157)*

South Central LA is like an internal colony; indeed, this is one of the concepts that Kathleen Cleaver said the black Panther Party, for self-defense, took from Fanon in 1966. The context was the 1965 Watts rebellion in LA, which signaled a dividing line between the urban revolt and civil rights leaders. One expression was the Watts youth's rejection of King's nonviolence philosophy; another was Malcolm X's rejection of the integrationist American dream. If the 1992 rebellion was as important as Watts, what can we say emerged out of it? Indeed, to consider the question, one has to understand the post-rebellion backlash and the state's response as intimately connected to the logic of capitalism.

## 2. California's Answer? Prisons

*The justice system has no justice in it. The whole community black and Latin were just fed up with this system.*

-Georgianna Williams

The Californian state has financed the building of more new prisons in the last 25 years than it built in the previous 100. The growth of prisons needs prisoners, and thus, the 25 years has seen the constant criminalization of people and the steady incarceration of the ghetto poor. Regarded as an absolute evil, inmates are, writes Loic Wacquant, the living antithesis of the American dream.

"The reality is that juvenile crime is not on the rise," argued Gene Ford in 1999. "The war against crime is a war against people of color, particularly the poor, inner-city youth who are characterized as gangbangers and walled in ... whole communities are segregated off ... The massive population confined behind walls [is] a reflection of the police state mentality." [Wacquant 204n] (Prison populations in the United States declined in the post-war years until the early 1970s and have increased since, even as crime stagnated ). In her aptly titled "Golden Gulag," Ruth Wilson Gilmore writes that the increase in California's prisons is the "biggest in the history of the world" (a 500 percent prison population increase from 1982 to 2000)<sup>1</sup>. It is a system of production that

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<sup>1</sup> In 2008, there were 2.3 million people in jail (Alexander 93).

has created its own consumption. In other words, crime, and thus criminalization, are the product of prison growth, not vice versa, and have a history.

Gilmore traces the growth of prisons to the revolutionary year of 1968, a year that also marked the crumbling of the old economic order, the year of global revolts and a declining rate of profit. The LA rebellion is thus contextualized in terms of the legacies of the black struggle and urban revolts of the 1960s and the structural changes in capitalism that resulted in a deep reduction of waged, semi-skilled urban jobs that had employed men of color (126). The two are and were linked. The structural crisis was both internal to capitalism and a product of these struggles. While the state introduced new laws in the wake of the urban revolts of the 1960s, the racial Keynesian and Fordist model that provided skilled work in the segregated suburbs outside of Watts was pushed to the limits by the myriad social movements of the 1960s as it attempted to fund social programs like the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act (CETA) and affirmative action. Alongside these programs was an emergent discourse of social exclusion conflating public assistance with criminality. By the late 1970s, structural shifts in the economy, "locked black and Latino workers into low-wage sweatshop labor" (Afarly 147), and by the 1980s and 1990s, the return of state budget surpluses alongside cuts in social programs meant that controlling poor people - especially black and brown youth who posed the greatest threat to the system - could be achieved through an intense program of prison building. The military-industrial complex which had been a backbone of the Californian economy was quite literally replaced by the prison-industrial complex. Nationally, incarceration is the third-largest employer. The 1.5 million-square-foot Twin Towers Correctional Facility in the heart of the city cost \$400 million and employs 2,400 people (Wacquant 2009 187). Criminalization and mass incarceration became part of the "spatial fix" (to use David Harvey's term) to the capitalist crisis. The state and its reproduction, in other words, moved from any pretense of welfare to outright warfare - the war on drugs, the war on crime and so on - bolstered by new mandatory minimum sentencing laws producing an endless supply of raw materials for production and consumption: inmates. The paradigm shift meant that by the late 1970s, any commitment to rehabilitation had ended. Mass incarceration had become just that, with harsher sentencing for minor offenses (for example, blacks were five times more likely to be arrested for marijuana possession than whites).<sup>2</sup> Harsh punishments and "enhanced" prison time (first appearing in the 1977 California penal law) meant that more and more young people of color would spend longer periods in jail. The 1988 Street Terrorism Enforcement and Prevention (STEP) Act, prefiguring the post-9/11 PATRIOT Act, was pushed through in response to the apparent "crisis" of drugs and gangs.<sup>3</sup> On the outside, the racist carceral society promoted traffic stops, stop and frisk, and other harassment based on racial profiling. Essential to the data collection of criminalization, it has become an ordinary part of daily life. Wacquant calls it "carceral affirmative action" (197).

In her book "The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness," Michelle Alexander wonders whether the black working class has become largely, "irrelevant and unnecessary to the newly structured economy." The new Jim Crow, she argues, is essentially the move from plantations to penitentiaries, a racial caste system "defined by marginalization" [mass incarceration] (219). This connection was also clear in a leaflet organizing a community rally in

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<sup>2</sup> There are an estimated half million people in jail for drug offenses, compared with 410,000 in 1980 (see Alexander 60).

<sup>3</sup> With gang membership becoming progressively simple to prove.

1993: The statement, "Don't leave your brothers hanging" was accompanied by an image of four castrated and lynched black men, making quite clear the intimacy of the new Jim Crow with the old. America, in short, had become, to use Tara Herivel and Paul Wright's book title, "The Prison Nation: The Warehousing of America's Poor." Like the denizens of the workhouses of old, the poor are blamed for their poverty and punished for it; what is different from the old poor laws is that there is no pretense of future work. In other words, while the prison warehouse can be considered within Marx's notion of a surplus population - the reserved army of the unemployed, needed to drive wages down - it produces, in a Fanonian sense, a caste outside the class system. Marxists as well as the established black leadership have long made the mistake of misidentifying the skilled, educated and political workers as advanced and others as backward. Fanon challenged this "fetish," which often views politics through the gaze of the state, which is designed through paramilitary policing, surveillance, incarceration, crime and the war on crime to suppress and hem people in - physical and mentally - and remove "disruptive elements" (Wacquant 7); whether they are working or not, all are potential inmates.

The LA rebellion marked a nodal point. The state's response was quite clear. Appealing to white Democrats, Bill Clinton endorsed, "three strikes and you're out" and a "racial agenda on welfare," writes Alexander, adding that, "Clinton - more than any other president created the current racial undercaste" (56-7). Such a retrospective is far from original, but the situation is starkly expressed by the following statistic: public housing was cut by \$17 billion, with a \$19 billion funding increase for corrections (57).

Writing of own his experiences in South Central L.A. at the time, the activist-intellectual Gene Ford (2000) concluded starkly: "The streets of South Central Los Angeles are a reflection of prison existence. The violent by nature LAPD dominates these streets with rifle butt, billy club, gun fire and fear."

### **3. Rationalizing Popular Action**

The L.A. uprising, like the 2005 rebellion in Paris and the 2011 revolt in London, was a revolt against police brutality, criminalization and violence; each including a struggle for recognition, against dehumanization and invisibility, to be heard against an unjust "justice system." (While the prison population in the US increased fivefold, it has doubled in England and France). Additionally, whether in response to the L.A. uprising, the Banlieues rebellion or the London revolt, the mainstream left continues to be incapable, as Fanon warned, of "rationaliz[ing] popular action," and is incapable of seeing "the reasons for that action." What Fanon described as the gap between progressive intellectuals and spontaneous revolts was expressed by Stuart Hall's lamentation that Thatcherism had won after the London rebellion; according to Zygmunt Bauman, the riot was of "defective and disqualified consumers" or "impotent rage" in the world of Slavoj Zizek. The latter was a theme repeated after L.A., when much of the liberal media focused on rumors of violence against whites and Asians and particularly on the beating of Reginald Denny. (Denny refused to go along with it. Like those in the LA 4+ committee, he criticized the criminalization of the accused and the media handling of the case, and later sued the city). While there were different views about the beating of Denny, all put the blame on police brutality. The LA4+ Committee explained that, "retaliatory actions of an oppressed people are [not] the same [as the] ...

calculated brutality by trained and professional enforcers of the status quo.” A simply equation: after Rodney King’s attackers were released, Denny’s attackers faced life sentences.

It was not the L.A. rebellion, but the police murder of George Noyes which helped create two important grassroots organizations: the LA gang truce and Mothers Reclaiming Our Children (Mothers ROC). Of course, these were different kinds of organization, but - and of course, one can also gesture to the historical relationship between the birth of the Crips and the Bloods and the black Panther Party - gangs are certainly organizations, and the gang truce was deeply political and had mass support. Rather than the LAPD, it was the gang truce, argued Ford - a militant who has lived in the area for over 30 years - that was responsible for the decrease in gang-related deaths. The police were actively opposed to the gang truce because it threatened their means of control and their practice of divide-and-rule through promoting gang (tribal) allegiances and playing one gang against the other. The truth on the streets is that the police are just another gang, backed by the courts and the prisons, and all are corrupt. Indeed, it is popularly understood that the, ”society [is] run on greed and looting,” as I have written. This creates a struggle over scarce resources where everyone is an enemy. Human beings are reduced to their animal instincts and then derided as mindless gangbangers. The gang, like a political party, is a corporate organization (it is intentionally built; see Afary 115). Thus, gang unity is threatening to unscrupulous, exploitative gang leaders, and especially to the police, which actively seek to destroy it by any means and violently assaulted and broke up gang unity parties, desperately seeking to channel the communities’ pent-up anger toward inter-gang rivalry, thereby suppressing any grassroots political organization. And yet, Fanon teaches us that this system is not absolute. Over and over again, organizations emerge from below and often briefly capture the imagination of large numbers of people. The gang-truce movement did continue despite the problem that to be associated with it publicly almost always meant arrests as a suspected gang member. It gave birth to a generation of organic intellectuals, argues Afary (100), and by 2003, Gilmore notes (278 n.22), the truce, ”included a number of Central City, Eastside and Westside Chicano and other Latino gangs” and rejected the suggestion that the alternative was to leave a gang; rather, the alternative was to transform it.

The prison-industrial complex (including lawyers and judges, as well as juries) which has ”caged an entire generation” (X-Felon quoted by Afary 100) thus plays an essential role in keeping the lid on mass discontent. One element is mass incarceration; another is the terror and violence of the prison, which is set up not to reform or rehabilitate, but to brutalize and break people and destroy the human being. ”No human contact” is the order of the day, and any individual supporting prisoners is considered immediately suspect and criminal. Mothers ROC and the LA4+ committee, formed after the uprising, were two grassroots movements organized to confront this dehumanization. Founded by African-American women, their membership was open to all and was organized as a response to the increasing incarceration of their children. Every flyer distributed at every venue of the criminal justice system carried its principle: ”We say there’s no justice. What are we going to do about it? ... EDUCATE, ORGANIZE, EMPOWER.” Like Las Madres de la Plaza de Mayo, Mothers ROC defied the idea that mothers should not be involved in the public political sphere, and also defied the sexism that blamed them for their son’s actions (”She” [Mothers ROC member Georgianna Williams] ”needs to get off this babying and pampering” a black pastor told The LA Times, while The New Yorker labeled Williams ”the mother of the LA riot” (Afary 150). On a flyer in 1995, Mothers ROC explained:

Mothers suffer a special pain when their children are incarcerated (lost to them). It was from this pain and suffering that Mothers ROC was born! ... We fight against the police abuse, the false arrests & convictions and the unfair treatment throughout the Justice System. We educate ourselves and our young about the workings of the ... system.

The system was very much part of American civilization as Williams, also of the LA4+, intimated in "From the South to South Central," a story which brought to mind Sojourner Truth: "I am a daughter of a sharecropper," Williams said, "born in the hills of Mississippi where the white man is the law. I picked cotton, I know how to make soap ... milk a cow ... plough a field. We did what we were told. We were told that we were free ... we were not free" (Quoted in Afary 154).

Resisting depersonalization, these organizations argued that, "We are all somebody's child," and that no one should be lost to the criminal justice system. With such basic humanist principles, they grew in confidence and developed ideas of self-education in contradistinction to the professionalized justice system, which promotes feelings of inferiority and alienation. The sense of inferiority, which is drummed in from an earlier age, and intellectual intimidation, which is essential to the justice system, were slowly overcome in a Freirian way. "As they taught one another what they learned," Gilmore suggests (278 n.20), "all the ROC'ers gained confidence; indeed, those who could not read well flourished by using their substantial memories to chart and compare." Mothers ROC and the LA4+ monitored the police, demanded justice for the NO Js (those without OJ Simpson's resources) and organized visible support in the courtrooms. The LA4+ committee's weekly meetings were, as Fanon argued, transformational and essential expressions of grassroots democracy. They became spaces for sharing food, personal stories, ideas, skills and solidarity (see Afary 128). Members with legal knowledge worked at information centers, and Mothers ROC organized workshops - which included academics, attorneys and gang members - on the system's injustices (Afary 141).

Beyond civil society and outside the spheres of thought which take the ground of the carceral society (even Tom Hayden, who was involved in the gang truce, supported the privatization of prisons in exchange for money for education), the prison-industrial complex has become the brutal reality of South Central L.A. And yet it is no coincidence that in prisons, the most dehumanized spaces in America, places that actively destroy minds and spirits, there is thinking radically against the odds.

#### **4. Thinking Inside the Prisons**

*The ultimate expression of law is not order, it's prison.*

-George Jackson, "Blood in My Eye"

The growing numbers of prison intellectuals from inside the hellholes of America's prisons are developing, in a long tradition of incarcerated thinkers, radical critiques of American society (see Dylan Rodriguez, "Forced Passages: Imprisoned Radical Intellectuals and the US Prison Regime" and Joy James, "The New Abolitionists:(Neo)slave Narratives and Contemporary Prison Writings"). They write to each other, share lyrics and help raise consciousnesses about the unbearable "conditions of life" (see Afary 100). Some, like the new Afrikan prison movement within the California prison system, have roots in George Jackson's philosophy and writings.

Like them, Jackson was angry and began to, "look around for something that would really bother these cats. Well, I couldn't find anything that bothered them more than philosophy." And



by that, of course, he meant a philosophy of revolution. Self-taught, Jackson seriously engaged Marx, Mao and Fanon, understanding, as Biko put it, that the greatest weapon of the oppressor was the mind of the oppressed. Thus, within the prison, the daily struggle is not to allow the imprisonment of the mind. In this context, it is important to note James Yaki Sayles' most serious reading of Fanon in his "Meditations on Frantz Fanon's Wretched of the Earth." Sayles, a black political prisoner who recently died, developed a pedagogy of readings, critical of the way that "The Wretched" has been read by the panthers and others privileging a narrow conception of violence and failing to note how little Fanon speaks of arms, and how much more he talks about, "the need for people to develop their consciousness and to learn to lead themselves." (186).

Just as Fanon warns that rage cannot sustain a movement for liberation, the L.A. revolt was far from simply spontaneous. It was preceded by the thinking of those who had had enough of the unjust justice system. The movements that came out of it and against the prison-industrial complex express, in their critique of the justice system, the rationality of revolt. They quickly grasp that elite politics hawked by politicians don't change anything, just as the offer to create employment by building prisons is fool's gold. They understand in the most Fanonian sense - from their experience - that the essence and appearance of a carceral society built for them, the surplus humanity, are one and the same: violence. And yet, to think with Fanon, it is from that arid zone of nonbeing, in the necessities of struggle, that a radical sense of what it is to be human flickers in the dark.

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