

## ARTICLES.

## ■ URBAN AMERICA SEES ITS FUTURE

In L.A., Burning  
All Illusions

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Los Angeles

**T**he armored personnel carrier squats on the corner like *un gran sapo feo*—"a big ugly toad"—according to 9-year-old Emerio. His parents talk anxiously, almost in a whisper, about the *desaparecidos*: Raul from Tepic, big Mario, the younger Flores girl and the cousin from Ahuachapan. Like all Salvadorans, they know about those who "disappear"; they remember the headless corpses and the man whose tongue had been pulled through the hole in his throat like a necktie. That is why they came here—to ZIP code 90057, Los Angeles, California.

Now they are counting their friends and neighbors, Salvadoran and Mexican, who are suddenly gone. Some are still in the County Jail on Bauchet Street, little more than brown grains of sand lost among the 17,000 other alleged *saqueadores* (looters) and *incendarios* (arsonists) detained after the most violent American civil disturbance since the Irish poor burned Manhattan in 1863. Those without papers are probably already back in Tijuana, broke and disconsolate, cut off from their families and new lives. Violating city policy, the police fed hundreds of hapless undocumented *saqueadores* to the I.N.S. for deportation before the A.C.L.U. or immigrant rights groups even realized they had been arrested.

For many days the television talked only of the "South Central riot," "black rage" and the "Crips and Bloods." But Emerio's parents know that thousands of their neighbors from the MacArthur Park district—home to nearly one-tenth of all the Salvadorans in the world—also looted, burned, stayed out past curfew and went to jail. (An analysis of the first 5,000 arrests from all over the city revealed that 52 percent were poor Latinos, 10 percent whites and only 38 percent blacks.) They also know that the nation's first multiracial riot was as much about empty bellies and broken hearts as it was about police batons and Rodney King.

The week before the riot was unseasonably hot. At night the people lingered outside on the stoops and sidewalks of their tenements (MacArthur Park is L.A.'s Spanish Harlem), talking about their new burden of trouble. In a neighborhood far more crowded than mid-Manhattan and more dangerous than downtown Detroit, with more crack addicts and gang-bangers than registered voters, *la gente* know how to laugh away every disaster except the final one. Yet there was a new melancholy in the air.

Too many people have been losing their jobs: their *pinche* \$5.25-an-hour jobs as seamstresses, laborers, busboys and fac-

tory workers. In two years of recession, unemployment has tripled in L.A.'s immigrant neighborhoods. At Christmas more than 20,000 predominantly Latina women and children from throughout the central city waited all night in the cold to collect a free turkey and a blanket from charities. Other visible barometers of distress are the rapidly growing colonies of homeless *compañeros* on the desolate flanks of Crown Hill and in the concrete bed of the L.A. River, where people are forced to use sewage water for bathing and cooking.

As mothers and fathers lose their jobs, or as unemployed relatives move under the shelter of the extended family, there is increasing pressure on teenagers to supplement the family income. Belmont High School is the pride of "Little Central America," but with nearly 4,500 students it is severely overcrowded, and an additional 2,000 students must be bused to distant schools in the San Fernando Valley and elsewhere. Fully 7,000 school-age teenagers in the Belmont area, moreover, have dropped out of school. Some have entered the *vida loca* of gang culture (there are 100 different gangs in the school district that includes Belmont High), but most are struggling to find minimum-wage footholds in a declining economy.

The neighbors in MacArthur Park whom I interviewed, such as Emerio's parents, all speak of this gathering sense of unease, a perception of a future already looted. The riot arrived like a magic dispensation. People were initially shocked by the violence, then mesmerized by the televised images of biracial crowds in South Central L.A. helping themselves to mountains of desirable goods without interference from the police. The next day, Thursday, April 30, the authorities blundered twice: first by suspending school and releasing the kids into the streets; second by announcing that the National Guard was on the way to help enforce a dusk-to-dawn curfew.

Thousands immediately interpreted this as a last call to participate in the general redistribution of wealth in progress. Looting spread with explosive force throughout Hollywood and MacArthur Park, as well as parts of Echo Park, Van Nuys and Huntington Park. Although arsonists spread terrifying destruction, the looting crowds were governed by a visible moral economy. As one middle-aged lady explained to me, "Stealing is a sin, but this is like a television game show where everyone in the audience gets to win." Unlike the looters in Hollywood (some on skateboards) who stole Madonna's bustier and all the crotchless panties from Frederick's, the masses of MacArthur Park concentrated on the prosaic necessities of life like cockroach spray and Pampers.

Now, one week later, MacArthur Park is in a state of siege. A special "We Tip" hotline invites people to inform on neighbors or acquaintances suspected of looting. Elite L.A.P.D. Metro Squad units, supported by the National Guard, sweep through the tenements in search of stolen goods, while Border Patrolmen from as far away as Texas prowl the streets. Frantic parents search for missing kids, like mentally retarded 14-year-old Zuly Estrada, who is believed to have been deported to Mexico.

Meanwhile, thousands of *saqueadores*, many of them pathetic scavengers captured in the charred ruins the day after

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the looting, languish in County Jail, unable to meet absurdly high bails. One man, caught with a packet of sunflower seeds and two cartons of milk, is being held on \$15,000; hundreds of others face felony indictments and possible two-year prison terms. Prosecutors demand thirty-day jail sentences for curfew violators, despite the fact that many of those are either homeless street people or Spanish-speakers who were unaware of the curfew. These are the "weeds" that George Bush says we must pull from the soil of our cities before it can be sown with the regenerating "seeds" of enterprise zones and tax breaks for private capital.

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## *A Crips/Bloods truce is the L.A.P.D.'s worst imagining: gang violence politicized.*

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There is rising apprehension that the entire community will become a scapegoat. An ugly, seal-the-border nativism has been growing like crabgrass in Southern California since the start of the recession. A lynch mob of Orange County Republicans, led by Representative Dana Rohrabacher of Huntington Beach, demands the immediate deportation of all the undocumented immigrants arrested in the disturbance, while liberal Democrat Anthony Beilenson, sounding like the San Fernando Valley's Son-of-Le-Pen, proposes to strip citizenship from the U.S.-born children of illegals. According to Roberto Lovato of MacArthur Park's Central American Refugee Center, "We are becoming the guinea pigs, the Jews, in the militarized laboratory where George Bush is inventing his new urban order."

### **A Black Intifada?**

"Little Gangster" Tak can't get over his amazement that he is actually standing in the same room of Brother Aziz's mosque with a bunch of Inglewood Crips. The handsome, 22-year-old Tak, a "straight up" Inglewood Blood who looks more like a black angel by Michelangelo than one of the Boyz N the Hood, still has two Crip bullets in his body, and "they still carry a few of mine." Some of the Crips and Bloods, whose blue or red gang colors have been virtual tribal flags, remember one another from school playground days, but mainly they have met over the barrels of automatics in a war that has divided Inglewood—the pleasant, black-majority city southwest of L.A. where the Lakers play—by a river of teenage blood. Now, as Tak explains, "Everybody knows what time it is. If we don't end the killing now and unite as black men, we never will."

Although Imam Aziz and the Nation of Islam have provided the formal auspices for peacemaking, the real hands that have "tied the red and blue rags together into a 'black thang'" are in Simi Valley. Within a few hours of the first attack on white motorists, which started in 8-Trey (83rd Street) Gangster Crip territory near Florence and Normandie, the insatiable war between the Crips and Bloods, fueled by a thou-

sand neighborhood vendettas and dead homeboys, was "put on hold" throughout Los Angeles and the adjacent black suburbs of Compton and Inglewood.

Unlike the 1965 rebellion, which broke out south of Watts and remained primarily focused on the poorer east side of the ghetto, the 1992 riot reached its maximum temperature along Crenshaw Boulevard—the very heart of black Los Angeles's more affluent west side. Despite the illusion of full-immersion "actuality" provided by the minicam and the helicopter, television's coverage of the riot's angry edge was even more twisted than the melted steel of Crenshaw's devastated shopping centers. Most reporters—"image looters" as they are now being called in South Central—merely lip-synched suburban clichés 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.

Local television thus unwittingly mimed the McCone Commission's summary judgment that the August 1965 Watts riot was primarily the act of a hoodlum fringe. In that case, a subsequent U.C.L.A. study revealed that the "riot of the riffraff" was in fact a popular uprising involving at least 50,000 working-class adults and their teenage children. When the arrest records of this latest uprising are finally analyzed, they will probably also vindicate the judgment of many residents that all segments of black youth, gang and non-gang, "buppie" as well as underclass, took part in the disorder.

Although in Los Angeles, as elsewhere, the new black middle class has socially and spatially pulled farther apart from the deindustrialized black working class, the L.A.P.D.'s Operation Hammer and other antigang dragnets that arrested kids at random (entering their names and addresses into an electronic gang roster that is now proving useful in house-to-house searches for riot "ringleaders") have tended to criminalize black youth without class distinction. Between 1987 and 1990, the combined sweeps of the L.A. P.D. and the County Sheriff's Office ensnared 50,000 "suspects." Even the children of doctors and lawyers from View Park and Windsor Hills have had to "kiss the pavement" and occasionally endure some of the humiliations that the homeboys in the flats face every day—experiences that reinforce the reputation of the gangs (and their poets laureate, the gangster rappers like Ice Cube and N.W.A.) as the heroes of an outlaw generation.

Yet if the riot had a broad social base, it was the participation of the gangs—or, rather, their cooperation—that gave it constant momentum and direction. If the 1965 rebellion was a hurricane, leveling one hundred blocks of Central Avenue from Vernon to Imperial Highway, the 1992 riot was a tornado, no less destructive but snaking a zigzag course through the commercial areas of the ghetto and beyond. Most of the media saw no pattern in its path, just blind, nihilistic destruction. In fact, the arson was ruthlessly systematic. By Friday morning 90 percent of the myriad Korean-owned liquor stores, markets and swapmeets in South Central L.A. had been wiped out. Deserted by the L.A.P.D., which made no attempt to defend small businesses, the Koreans suffered dam-

age or destruction to almost 2,000 stores from Compton to the heart of Koreatown itself. One of the first to be attacked (although, ironically, it survived) was the grocery store where 15-year-old Latasha Harlins was shot in the back of the head last year by Korean grocer Soon Ja Du in a dispute over a \$1.79 bottle of orange juice. The girl died with the money for her purchase in her hand.

Latasha Harlins. A name that was scarcely mentioned on television was the key to the catastrophic collapse of relations between L.A.'s black and Korean communities. Ever since white judge Joyce Karlin let Du off with a \$500 fine and some community service—a sentence which declared that the taking of a black child's life was scarcely more serious than drunk driving—some interethnic explosion has been virtually inevitable. The several near-riots at the Compton courthouse this winter were early warning signals of the black community's unassuaged grief over Harlins's murder. On the streets of South Central Wednesday and Thursday, I was repeatedly told, "This is for our baby sister. This is for Latasha."

The balance of grievances in the community is complex. Rodney King is the symbol that links unleashed police racism in Los Angeles to the crisis of black life everywhere, from Las Vegas to Toronto. Indeed, it is becoming clear that the King case may be almost as much of a watershed in American history as Dred Scott, a test of the very meaning of the citizenship for which African-Americans have struggled for 400 years.

But on the grass-roots level, especially among gang youth, Rodney King may not have quite the same profound resonance. As one of the Inglewood Bloods told me: "Rodney King? Shit, my homies be beat like dogs by the police every day. This riot is about all the homeboys murdered by the police, about the little sister killed by the Koreans, about twenty-seven years of oppression. Rodney King just the trigger."

At the same time, those who predicted that the next L.A. riot would be a literal Armageddon have been proved wrong. Despite a thousand Day-Glo exhortations on the walls of South Central to "Kill the Police," the gangs have refrained from the deadly guerrilla warfare that they are so formidably equipped to conduct. As in 1965, there has not been a single L.A.P.D. fatality, and indeed few serious police injuries of any kind.

In this round, at least, the brunt of gang power was directed toward the looting and destruction of the Korean stores. If Latasha Harlins is the impassioned pretext, there may be other agendas as well. I saw graffiti in South Central that advocated "Day one: burn them out. Day two: we rebuild." The only national leader whom most Crips and Bloods seem to take seriously is Louis Farrakhan, and his goal of black economic self-determination is broadly embraced. (Farrakhan, it should be emphasized, has never advocated violence as a means to this end.) At the Inglewood gang summit, which took place on May 5, there were repeated references to a renaissance of black capitalism out of the ashes of Korean businesses. "After all," an ex-Crip told me later, "we didn't burn our community, just *their* stores."

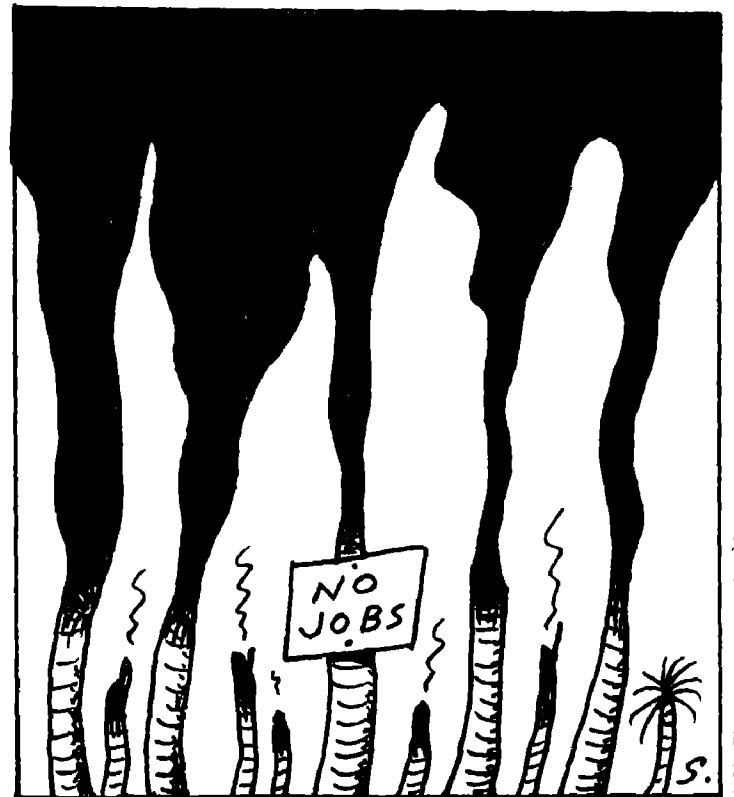
In the meantime, the police and military occupiers of Los Angeles give no credence to any peaceful, let alone entrepreneurial, transformation of L.A.'s black gang cultures. The

ecumenical movement of the Crips and Bloods is their worst imagining: gang violence no longer random but politicized into a black *intifada*. The L.A.P.D. remembers only too well that a generation ago the Watts rebellion produced a gang peace out of which grew the Los Angeles branch of the Black Panther Party. As if to prove their suspicions, the police have circulated a copy of an anonymous and possibly spurious leaflet calling for gang unity and "an eye for an eye. . . . If L.A.P.D. hurt a black we'll kill two."

For its part, the Bush Administration has federalized the repression in L.A. with an eye to the spectacle of the President marching in triumph, like a Roman emperor, with captured Crips and Bloods in chains. Thus, the Justice Department has dispatched to L.A. the same elite task force of federal marshals who captured Manuel Noriega in Panama as reinforcements for L.A.P.D. and F.B.I. efforts to track down the supposed gang instigators of the riot. But as a veteran of the 1965 riot said while watching SWAT teams arrest some of the hundreds of rival gang members trying to meet peacefully at Watts's Jordan Downs Housing Project: "That ole fool Bush think we as dumb as Saddam. Land Marines in Compton and get hisself re-elected. But this ain't Iraq. This is Vietnam, Jack."

### The Great Fear

A core grievance fueling the Watts rebellion and the subsequent urban insurrections of 1967-68 was rising black unemployment in the midst of a boom economy. What contemporary journalists fearfully described as the beginning of the "Second Civil War" was as much a protest against black America's exclusion from the military-Keynesian expansion of the 1960s as it was an uprising against police racism and de facto segregation in schools and housing. The 1992 riot and



its possible progenies must likewise be understood as insurrections against an intolerable political-economic order. As even the *Los Angeles Times*, main cheerleader for "World City L.A.," now editorially acknowledges, the "globalization of Los Angeles" has produced "devastating poverty for those weak in skills and resources."

Although the \$1 billion worth of liquor stores and mini-malls destroyed in L.A. may seem like chump change next to the \$2.6 trillion recently annihilated on the Tokyo Stock Exchange, the burning of Oz probably fits into the same Hegelian niche with the bursting of the Bubble Economy: not the "end of history" at the seacoast of Malibu but the beginning of an ominous dialectic on the rim of the Pacific. It was a hallucination in the first place to imagine that the wheel of the world economy could be turned indefinitely by a Himalaya of U.S. trade deficits and a fictitious yen.

This structural crisis of the Japan-California "co-prosperity sphere," however, threatens to translate class contradictions into interethnic conflict on both the national and local level. Culturally distinct "middleman" groups—ethnic entrepreneurs and the like—risk being seen as the personal representatives of the invisible hand that has looted local communities of economic autonomy. In the case of Los Angeles, it was tragically the neighborhood Korean liquor store, not the skyscraper corporate fortress downtown, that became the symbol of a despised new world order.

On their side, the half-million Korean-Americans in L.A. have been psychologically lacerated by the failure of the state to protect them against black rage. Indeed, several young Koreans told me that they were especially bitter that the South Central shopping malls controlled by Alexander Haagen, a wealthy contributor to local politics, were quickly defended by police and National Guard, while their stores were leisurely ransacked and burned to the ground. "Maybe this is what we get," a U.C.L.A. student said, "for uncritically buying into the white middle class's attitude toward blacks and its faith in the police."

The prospects for a multicultural reconciliation in Los Angeles depend much less on white knight Peter Ueberroth's committee of corporate rebuilders than upon a general economic recovery in Southern California. As the *Los Angeles Business Journal* complained (after noting that L.A. had lost 100,000 manufacturing jobs over the past three years), "The riots are like poison administered to a sick patient."

Forecasts still under wraps at the Southern California Association of Governments paint a dark future for the Land of Sunshine, as job growth, slowed by the decline of aerospace as well as manufacturing shifts to Mexico, lags far behind population increase. Unemployment rates—not counting the estimated 40,000 jobs lost from the riot, and the uprising's impact on the business climate—are predicted to remain at 8 to 10 percent (and 40 to 50 percent for minority youth) for the next generation, while the housing crisis, already the most acute in the nation, will spill over into new waves of homelessness. Thus, the "widening divide" of income inequality in Los Angeles County, described in a landmark 1988 study by U.C.L.A. professor Paul Ong, will become an unbridgeable chasm. Southern California's endless summer is finally over.

Affluent Angelenos instinctively sensed this as they patrolled their Hancock Park estates with shotguns or bolted in their BMWs for white sanctuaries in Orange and Ventura counties. From Palm Springs poolsides they anxiously awaited news of the burning of Beverly Hills by the Crips and Bloods, and fretted over the extra set of house keys they had foolishly entrusted to the Latina maid. Was she now an incendiary? Although their fears were hysterically magnified, tentacles of disorder did penetrate such sanctums of white life as the Beverly Center and Westwood Village, as well as the Melrose and Fairfax neighborhoods. Most alarmingly, the L.A.P.D.'s "thin blue line," which had protected them in 1965, was now little more than a defunct metaphor, the last of Chief Gates's bad jokes. □

■ FAX FROM L.A.

## Images of the Surreal City

JEN NESSEL

**I** looted. I took a pair of plastic dangly clip-on earrings from the rubble I was sweeping from a burned-out, low-rent store on Santa Monica and Western. Those earrings are my souvenirs of the L.A. riots of '92.

Los Angeles has to be about the most surreal place in the world a person could experience rioting. On Thursday afternoon, in the midst of torchings, beatings and rampaging, our Mayor urged us—no, implored us all—to stay home and watch *The Cosby Show*. Arsenio Hall was hangin' in the missions and Edward James Olmos was taking a broom to the streets. Over on a soundstage in Burbank, celebrities were lining up to film public service announcements to stop the violence: Debbie Allen; Wesley Snipes; Chris Rock from *Saturday Night Live*; Luke Perry, teen heartthrob from *Beverly Hills 90210* (probably the ZIP code least affected during the whole insurrection); Anjelica Huston (Anjelica Huston?); and Sean Penn. The pugnacious Penn telling us that violence wasn't the way to deal with our anger wasn't even the height of absurdity during the crisis. I'm not sure what was. Maybe it was the Scientologists in their paramilitary uniforms forming a human barricade around the twelve-story L. Ron Hubbard Life Exhibition building on Hollywood and Ivar Friday night. Or maybe it was the brainless woman interviewing Blair Underwood of *L.A. Law* who asked him to make a comparison with the Watts riots of '65 based on his having been in a movie about them (too many years of Reagan's movie war stories, I guess).

The most absurd moment I witnessed personally came during a break in the cleanup in South Central on Saturday afternoon. A young actress who once starred in a long-running sitcom and later in a babes-in-a-band-at-the-beach movie felt

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