The Nature of Riots: Socioeconomic and Political Conditions Inherent in Collective Action

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On April 29, 1992, four Los Angeles Police Department officers were acquitted in the beating of Rodney King. The beating, which was videotaped by a witness, brought to light the claims of police brutality and institutional racism that had long been ignored in Los Angeles. The verdict, however, brought the issue to the forefront for the entire country. African-Americans were outraged by the result and subsequently took to the streets in protest. Scores of African-American residents from the Southeast and South Central areas of the city began to form large crowds, and the intersection of Florence and Normandie streets in South Central Los Angeles became the epicenter for the movement. Reports of violence soon followed. Stores were looted, cars were torched to block intersections, and motorists were pulled from cars and beaten by the crowds. Surveying the destruction, 53 were reported dead and thousands were injured, about 1,000 buildings were burned to the ground, 5,000 people were arrested, and Los Angeles suffered approximately $1 billion in damages (Garcia, 2000).

It would be easy to suggest that the Rodney King trial and verdict was the cause of the rioting, considering the immediate reaction to the news. However, although the acquittal of the police officers was the immediate precipitant, the Los Angeles riots of 1992 were the result of many underlying social conditions - specifically racism, social injustice, and poverty. The living conditions in South Central Los Angeles in the years prior to the riots were below average. The per capita income was less than half that of Los Angeles as a whole, and poverty and unemployment rates were more than twice as high. Additionally, drugs, crime, and gang violence had all become visible problems in South Central Los Angeles (Staten, 1992).
The 1992 Los Angeles riots will forever be linked to Rodney King. On March 4, 1991, videotape captured four Los Angeles Police Department officers beating King after he was pulled over following a car chase and refused to submit. On April 29, 1992, the long-awaited verdict of the officers’ trial was finally announced: the cops were acquitted of police brutality - an outcome that ignited black tempers. Immediately afterward, Mayor Tom Bradley, an African-American, said, “we must express our profound anger and outrage, but we also must not endanger the reforms that have been made by striking out blindly.” However, his words fell on deaf ears, and the people of Los Angeles took to the streets (Staten, 1992).

Theoretical Perspectives on Riots

While a riot can seemingly start in a split-second – the announcement of an unfavorable trial verdict, the crack of a gunshot in a prison, or the buzzer-beating shot at the NCAA Finals – in most cases, there are conditions long set in place that slowly build to a breaking point. The Los Angeles Riots were not borne overnight. In fact, amidst the chaos of the rioting one can see definitive social theories of collective action in place.

*Breakdown Theory* emerged as the dominant explanation for the cause of collective violence and riots. Breakdown Theory states that events such as riots, rebellions and civil violence occur when the mechanisms of social control lose their restraining power (Useem, 1998). Essentially, social problems including chronic unemployment, family instability, and disruptive migration cause a diffusive collective identity and weak social networks. Community members are no longer proud of their neighborhoods, and let things continue to breakdown. Trash is no longer picked up,
children are no longer supervised, drugs and crime become prevalent, and relationships with the police deteriorate.

Breakdown Theory has inherent problems in that it assumes a society breaks down, explaining that the area goes from good to bad, or bad to worse. The problem is that this only relates to a society that is in a state of deterioration. It fails to take into account a society that has remained in a consistently poor environment. In many cases, the urban living conditions of African-Americans has always been a problem. As blacks relocated from the rural south to urban cities in the Northeast, there were not many employment options for them. They were issued the lowliest of jobs and given the least favorable places to live. An influx of blacks into white neighborhoods was usually followed by an exodus of whites out of the neighborhood (Seitles, 1996). Therefore, from the outset, blacks had to deal with poor living conditions and unemployment. It is hard to track the deterioration of urban neighborhoods because the unfavorable conditions appear to have always existed. Therefore, Breakdown Theory does not appear to be the most appropriate explanation of collective violence.

The living conditions of African-Americans were caused in part by a practice known as residential segregation. As African-Americans moved into industrial communities after World Wars I and II, the local, state, and federal governments used public improvement projects, redevelopment projects, public housing programs and urban renewal policies to accomplish racial segregation (Seitles, 1996). Manufacturing jobs were slowly moved away from the inner-city with promises of cheap land and low taxes, allowing the whites who were trying to flee from the African-Americans to move into the suburban areas outside the city limits. Keeping African-Americans out of the
The suburbs was a systematic plan. The Federal Housing Administration (FHA) used “red-lining,” a discriminatory rating system, to ensure residential segregation. “Red-lining” evaluated the risks of the loans they gave out for home purchase by creating four categories. The first category was for homes in all-white neighborhoods with no threat of African-American in-migration, which received the most favorable loans, while houses closer to African-American neighborhoods received less favorable loans (Seitles, 1996).

Between 1930 and 1950, over three-fifths of the homes purchased in the United States were funded by FHA. Their impact on residential segregation was quite significant. Exclusionary zoning practices were acted out often, with interstate highways used to segregate African-Americans and zoning ordinances that divided streets by race. The practice of residential segregation increased the concentration of poverty among the minorities, causing serious effects (Seitles, 1996).

Additional barriers kept African-Americans from living the American Dream. Educational and employment opportunities were far inferior to those available in white neighborhoods, houses were dilapidated, there was a lack of commercial facilities and businesses, and crime was more prevalent in these neighborhoods. The act of residential segregation is not just a problem of our past. In 1987 there were 800 complaints of housing discrimination in Los Angeles alone (Seitles, 1996).

While poor housing and other unfavorable conditions can be at the root of riots, these conditions exist in a far greater number than the amount of riots that have taken place. In response to this, *Structural Strain Theory* emerged as a collective action theory that states that the tensions and pressures an individual feels toward social matters produces a strain that reduces their interests, desires, and abilities to operate within
normal pre-established limits (Marx and Wood, 1975). This theory states that people who commit crimes have the same basic values as everyone else – with an emphasis on achievement and success. However, these goals are greatly restricted to people in the lower class. Therefore, they must either abandon the American Dream and its values of success and prosperity, or they must abandon the obedience of the law and resort to criminal acts to achieve the American Dream.

The American Dream theory was first put forth by Merton/Rosenfeld (Miller, Schreck, and Tewksbury, 2006). They believed that too much emphasis was placed on material and monetary success while not enough was placed on the proper ways of achieving this success. Although we are not born with any desire for a fancy sports car or a mansion on a lake, our culture embeds these goals in our belief system. Therefore, common goals are inherent in Americans. The media depicts an American reality that is not true, one where everyone is rich, happy, and wearing fancy clothes. Although many people cannot afford the luxuries of the American Dream, they still desire them.

The American Dream not only tells us what we want, it also tells us how to achieve it – through the American ideals of hard work, deferred gratification, and honesty. Although these are not necessarily bad things, Merton believes that our society stresses the importance of having these things, as opposed to following the rules to get them. Therefore, winning at any cost is a natural progression for Americans (Miller, et al., 2006).

When we are only concerned with results, than we will only follow the rules as long as they are helping us reach our goals. While this may explain why a poor young
man could rob a bank in order to buy a house or a car, it does not necessarily explain why a group of people will come together to riot.

*Structural Strain Theory* provides an underlying cause for collective action – that is, pressure is being put on the individuals who cannot afford to live the desired American life (Miller, et al., 2006). If they cannot reach this goal, people become unhappy with their lot in life. They see those in the classes above with better cars, homes, and jobs, and become increasingly frustrated. The frustration can turn to aggression in what is known as the *Relative Deprivation (or Frustration-Aggression) Theory*. For this reason, the most important factors when looking at a city or neighborhood for riot potential are population growth and density, unemployment, income level, and occupation (Crosby, 1979).

Smelser described structural strain as ambiguities, deprivations, tensions, conflicts, and discrepancies in the social order (Smelser, 1963). He argued that, at the individual level, it only requires *perceived* discrepancies in the social order. Although a modern theory, Structural Strain has its roots in early political literature. In fact, both Karl Marx and Tocqueville utilized Structural Strain as an indicator of revolution (Goldstein, 1994). Marx believed that revolutions would occur as conditions became worse, while Tocqueville believed that they occur after conditions improved. Modern scholars have tried to combine the theories of Marx and Tocqueville by explaining that revolutions are most likely to occur when a prolonged period of objective economic and social development is followed by a short period of sharp reversal (Crosby, 1979). This combination of growth followed by rapid reversal is referred to as *progressive relative deprivation*. Therefore, The Relative Deprivation Theory complements the Structural
Strain Theory in that the combination explain how the riot begins - less privileged individuals face the pressure of not having economic success, and this strain leads to frustration followed by aggression (Goldstein, 1994).

Relative-Deprivation Theory states that as conditions worsen for a group or community, frustration arises out of a sense of want. The frustration will often become aggression, as the individuals lash out at those they perceive as having more than them. According to deprivation theories, cities with high levels of African-Americans with low levels of education, or blacks employed in highly segregated and low-paying jobs, are more likely to experience racial unrest (Jenkins, 1983). In theory, poverty causes such grievances and unrest that it affects blacks much more than whites. Poverty that falls equally on whites and non-whites would produce class mobilization as opposed to racial or ethnic mobilization. In this case, the lower class would unite against the upper class instead of African-Americans or other minorities rebelling against the whites. Relative Deprivation theories suggest that racial unrest is more visible in cities with a substantial racial gap in income, education, and occupation (Jenkins, 1983).

While Structural Strain and Relative Deprivation theories help explain the factors leading to a riot, it is important to note that these factors alone do not cause a riot. There must be motivation that drives individuals to move from being discontent with the social inequities they are faced with to revolting against them. Blumer (Miller, Bolce, Halligan, 1977) believes this occurs when people see the social order as illegitimate, whether due to social inequities, corruptness, or ineffectiveness. A precipitating factor, such as a trial verdict, can exemplify this illegitimacy and precipitate a riot.
Marx refers to this collective violence as the uprising of the proletariat against the bourgeois (Miller et al., 1977). In modern times, this has become more evident in minority protests, often played out between blacks and whites. The race riots of the 1960’s provide strong examples of this phenomenon. In many large, urban environments, such as Newark, Detroit, Chicago, and Los Angeles, the black minority rioted against the white majority. At the time, many believed that it was simply a problem of ‘Riffraffs,” a term first used by Paul Screvane, the mayor of New York, and Nelson Rockefeller, the governor of New York, in response to the Harlem, Bedford-Stuyvesant, and Rochester riots (Upton, 1985). The Riff raff Theory stated that only a small fraction of the black population, approximately 2-3 percent, actually participated in the riots, that the rioters did not represent the black community as a whole (Upton, 1985). The belief is that the rioters were comprised of street thugs and petty thieves, and that the majority of the black population was opposed to riots. Along those lines, the Lower-Class Theory was another attempt to explain the rioting as a class phenomenon, and that the building of grievances eventually led the poor to protest violently (Upton, 1985).

Following the 1965 Watts riots, a commission was headed by John A. McConie to provide “an objective and dispassionate study of the Los Angeles riots, entitled: Violence in the City: An End or A Beginning? (Fogelson, 1967). The McConie Commission claimed that the rioters were marginal people, and that they were a small and underrepresented fraction of the African-American population. According to the Commission, the unemployed, ill-educated, juvenile, delinquent, and uprooted members of the society were the ones rioting, and they were not motivated by the racial inequities of the time (Fogelson, 1967). They saw the riots not as a problem with the ghetto but as a
problem with the immigrant, and the inherent resentment of police, insufficient skills, and inferior education that they share. In fact, the report claimed that Watts was not even a ghetto, and the protestors had no reason to riot. The report suggested that police-civilian relations be improved, unemployment reduced, education upgraded, and civil rights protests suppressed.

The McCone Commission was met with much criticism. First, it has been pointed out that a much larger and more representative segment of the ghetto population joined in the riots while many others supported it. While the report claimed that the African-Americans rioted because they were unprepared for urban life after moving out of the south, many believed they rioted because they could no longer accept the condition of the ghetto and had to act out. The Commission believed that the protests were unwarranted, while critics saw the rioting, in particular the looting and burning, as an articulation of their grievances, grievances which were indeed genuine. Finally, the critics disagreed with the Commission by stating that Watts is indeed a ghetto, and that the African-Americans were involuntarily segregated (Fogelson, 1967).

The Riff raff theory was implemented in the study of the Watts riots without much proper research. The number of African-Americans who participated in the riot, estimated at 2 percent, or 10,000 of the 650,000 African-Americans in Watts, was based on impressions from then-Mayor Samuel Yerty and Police Chief William Parker (Fogelson, 1967). Additionally, the conclusions that the participants were simply young street thugs was based on a statistical survey of the persons arrested during the rioting according to age, prior criminal record, and place of birth. These results were not compared to the statistics of south central Los Angeles. While many of those arrested
had prior criminal records, the number of prior offenders arrested was not disproportionate compared to the number of prior offenders living in the ghetto. Also, young adults, and not minors, made up the majority of arrests. Many of those who did not participate in the riots were highly supportive of it, and showed regret mainly at the number of African-Americans injured or arrested. In stark contrast to the McCone Commission, the Watts rioters were not the dregs of society, but rather members of the mainstream modern urban life (Fogelson, 1967).

The Los Angeles Riot Study of 1965 found that 15 percent of the black community participated in the riots, and that it included mature, employed, and better-educated individuals (Fogelson, 1967). In fact, research suggests that the social conditions of riot cities in the 60s was either the same of better off than non-riot cities. For this reason, sociologists have looked to other factors to determine the causes of riots, particularly riots utilizing racial/ethnic conflict as a precipitating cause.

Resource Mobilization Theory replaced Breakdown Theory as the dominant collective action theory. Resource Mobilization states that collective action flows not from breakdown but from groups vying for political position and advantages (Useem, 1998). Rebellion is an attempt at politics through other means. Pre-existing organizations, both formal and informal, facilitate collective action. In this sense, riots do not occur when the economic and living conditions between two groups widens, but when it begins to even out. As poor minorities begin to earn more money, they have more resources available and stronger organizational structures. Therefore, individuals are better able to pool their collective resources and make their voice heard in more effective ways (Jenkins, 1983).
Resource Mobilization is defined as “non-institutionalized, collective actions consciously oriented towards social change (or resisting change), and possessing a minimum of organization” as well as “rational actions oriented towards clearly defined, fixed goals with centralized organizational control over resources (Olzak, 1989, 124).” In contrast to Breakdown Theory, it concedes that grievances always exist, and that the deciding factor in a riot is the availability of resources. Many scholars have attempted to define the resources that social movements use. McCarthy and Zald (1977) list money, facilities, labor, and legitimacy as the chief resources, while Tilly (1978) recognizes land, labor, capital, and technical expertise.

The leveling out of the economic gap can be an indicator of worsening economic conditions, as more and more white workers are forced to compete with minorities for the lowest paying jobs. The competition between these groups can ignite a riot.

Resource Mobilization is more appropriate as an explanation of riots than Breakdown Theory because it realized that rioting is a multifaceted issue: arguing that riots occur due to simple discontentment seems too narrow a view. Resource Mobilization tries to explain the individual’s participation in a social movement, especially when an individual may not stand to gain as much as a group. Resource mobilization is a “rational, adaptive response generated by individual grievances caused by structural strain.” (cite) Since these grievances are often similar in both riot and non-riot cities, some claim that the formation and mobilization of movements depends on the resources available, the organization of the group or groups in charge, and the opportunities available for collective action. In this sense, they attempt to explain how one city can suffer a riot while a similar city will remain at peace. Resource mobilization
theorists believe that effective, centralized organizations are more effective than decentralized, informal movement structures. However, strategic factors and the political processes that the movement becomes involved with often determine the success of the movement (Jenkins, 1983).

Although this theory helps explain why one city will riot and another will not, there are questions as to the amount of resources available to poor people. Piven and Cloward (1977) believe that Resource Mobilization does not apply to poor people because they are unable to construct permanent political organizations. Further, they argue against its application for the disenfranchised because of the demobilizing effects of organization building. They believe that the mobility available to poor people, who have no central headquarters, is one of their most effective assets. Poor people “derive their gains solely from mass defiance – building permanent membership is inherently counterproductive (Piven and Cloward, 1977).

Unlike most collective action, such as protests and strikes, riots involve an assault on persons and property simply for being part of a given sub-group of the community. Race riots in particular almost always involve confrontation between the groups in which members of one race are ‘deeply wronged in fact or in rumor.’ In Lieberson and Silverman’s analysis of race riots in the first half of the 20th Century, they determined several precipitants that were common among the different cities (1965). The first was the common claim that the other group had molested one of its girls, followed by offenses committed by white law enforcement officials against African-Americans, and finally, other inter-racial murders or shootings (Lieberson and Silverman, 1965).
Lieberson and Silverman set out to determine the location and timing of riots compared to non-riots and determined the following factors as causes of riots, including the rapidly expanding African-American population, economic hardships, police brutality, job ceilings, African-American competition with whites for jobs, slums, and unsympathetic city officials. By comparing riot cities with non-riot cities of similar demographics, they utilized selected variables of population growth and control, work situation, housing, and government to determine if there were differences between the cities. What they found is that deprivation levels were not distinguishable between the riot and non-riot cities. Although recent riots have occurred in minority communities with high rates of unemployment, widespread poverty, and poor housing, deprivation is not necessarily the cause (Lieberson and Silverman, 1965).

Building on this work, Olzak and Shanahan (1996), find little evidence that black poverty or racial disparities in income, education, and occupation caused race riots. In fact, they believe that these factors actually depress the rate of racial unrest. As a result, they find fault with the relative deprivation theory, arguing that race riots peaked during a period in which average levels of income for blacks were approaching those of whites. They posit that resource mobilization theory is the most appropriate way to explain the increase in mobilization at a time when inequality rates are declining. However, though resource mobilization provides an avenue for protest – the increase in income and organization - it does not provide a reason for the rioting. There is no clear answer as to why improving conditions would incite racial unrest as opposed to mobilization along class, occupation, gender, or other boundaries. In response to the faults of relative deprivation and the limits of resource mobilization, Olzak and Shanahan create their own
theory, combining resource mobilization theory with competition theories of race relations.

*Competition Theory* originally focused on racial and ethnic unrest in which the advantaged groups attack minorities to contain or restrict competition (Olzak and Shanahan, 1996). Olzak and Shanahan instead utilize Competition Theory as an explanation of collective action by the disadvantaged. The theory states that the initial overlapping of habitats will intensify competition among groups. The competition is followed by an attempt at excluding the competitors, which can often result in violence.

“When groups come to occupy the same niche, the historically more powerful or advantaged group attempts to exclude competitors. When the less powerful resist these attempts, racial conflict and violence ensues (Olzak and Shanahan, 1996, pg. 937).” Though a desegregated community will not necessarily riot, the chances do increase when economic competition heats up. Economic recessions force minorities to compete with each other for similar jobs, and the willingness of minorities to work at lower wages intensifies this competition. Olzak and Shanahan believe that there are two conditions that result in this competition. First, they believe that when population increases at the same time that unemployment rises. Second, competition arises when economic contraction within the minority niche would reduce the number of jobs open to immigrants, minorities, and other less-skilled workers (Olzak and Shanahan, 1996).

Olzak and Shanahan measure four variables to test relative deprivation. These variables, used to measure the relative position in the community of whites to non-whites, include the ratio of the percentage of nonwhite males working in traditionally black occupations to the percentage of white male laborers employed in similar
occupations; the ratio of nonwhite median family income to white median family income; the ratio of nonwhite male unemployment rate to the white male unemployment rate; and the ratio of nonwhite median education to white median education. By examining various claims of relative deprivation theorists regarding the cause of riots, they conclude that neither low levels of attainment nor relative gaps in attainment for blacks apparently affect the likelihood of race riots. In contrast to relative deprivation theory, cities with less dilapidated housing and cities where nonwhites have incomes closer to whites experience higher rates of race riots. These results signify that improving conditions in the black neighborhoods are associated with race riots, as opposed to worsening conditions. The one factor consistent with riots that relative deprivation theorists do cite is the effect of black unemployment. Cities with higher rates of unemployment for blacks had significantly higher rates of unrest (Olzak and Shanahan, 1996).

These findings support the assertion that rates of racial protest arise when racial disadvantages are relatively low. These cities allow for the competition of blacks with whites for similar jobs, and, combined with the contraction of labor force demand and the rising supply of labor from migration, intensifies interracial competition and conflict (Olzak and Shanahan, 1996).

The work done by Olzak and Shanahan was linked to the 1992 Los Angeles riots by Bergesen and Herman. They state that while African-Americans are minorities at the national level, that is not always the case at the local neighborhood level. South Central Los Angeles, where the riots were instigated, is 60.4 percent black, making them the majority compared to the Mexican, Central American, and Korean minority (Bergesen
and Herman, 1998). As Olzak stated, desegregation following initially high levels of segregation sparks racial tensions that lead to rioting. Bergesen and Herman disagree with Olzak and Shanahan in that they name African-Americans the majority, but also by declaring competition for jobs and housing as secondary to rates of residential in-migration. Utilizing the research of Rudwick, they cite waves of race riots from 1900-1920 as an example:

During the years immediately preceding its race riot each city experienced large increases in Negro population primarily because of the influx from the South. Between 1910 and 1917 the East St. Louis community grew from nearly 6,000 to perhaps as many as 13,000. In Chicago there were nearly 110,000 Negroes in 1920 compared to 44,000 a decade earlier. Detroit in 1940 had about 160,000 Negro residents, but three years later there were an estimated 220,100 Negroes (Bergesen and Herman, 1998, p. 41).

Similar factors can be seen in the 1992 riots, as the 1980s had the highest immigration rates since 1900-1910. Immigrants to Los Angeles were typically from Mexico, Central Mexico, and Asia, and settled in predominantly black neighborhoods. The demographic shift in Los Angeles was rather significant, as the 1980 population was 28 percent Latino and 48 percent white, while those numbers jumped to 40 percent Latino and 37 percent white in 1990. Further, the African-American percentage dropped from 17 to 13 percent while the Asian population grew from 7 to 13 percent. According to competition theory, a defensive reaction among the host residential majority may occur given rapid in-migration (Bergesen and Herman, 1998).

Olzak, Shanahan, and McEneaney (1996) attempted to analyze the roles of poverty and segregation in race riots. They believed that the factors that reduce the segregation of minorities increases competition for jobs, housing, schools, and other
resources. As the African-American urban population expanded as a result of massive in-migration to the North, cities were met with housing shortages. While whites tried to segregate the African-Americans by forcing them to live in isolation, the large numbers of migrants caused these ghettos to overcrowd, and African-Americans began to move into ethnic working-class communities. Whites and African-Americans began to experience more frequent contact as a result of this (Olzak, Shanahan, and McEneaney, 1996).

Encounters outside of their homes and neighborhood and in the workplace led to racial antagonism based on competition for scarce social facilities. Olzak, Shanahan and McEneaney noted that cities with high or rising populations of African-Americans experienced more attacks by whites on African-Americans. Further, they experienced more participation in race riots by African-Americans than cities with lower proportions of African-Americans (Olzak et al., 1996).

The rising number of ethnic minorities in an urban center can affect the rate of ethnic or racial antagonism through their effect on labor market competition. Willing to work for lower pay, minorities are viewed as a threat to the livelihood of the native workers. When an economy weakens, competition will intensify even more so, leading to racial unrest. Unemployment rates are the best way to track the condition of an economy. A weakening economy can be caused by economic recessions, depressions, and waves of business failure which shrink the number of jobs available. The lack of jobs will then force middle-level workers to seek unskilled jobs, oftentimes pitting the white majority against the migrating minority (Olzak et al., 1996).
Olzak, Shanahan, and McEneaney attempted to explain the role of racial segregation as well as poverty in race riots. Their study tracked all ethnic or racial unrest reported in the New York Times from 1960 to 1993. They set the criteria as race riots that must have at least 50 people involved as instigators in a public setting. The study focused on the location, timing, and number of participants, as well as the magnitude of the violence. Standardized Metropolitan Statistical Areas (SMSAs) were used to ensure consistent data. To analyze their data, Olzak, Shanahan, and McEneaney used empirical testing. The Dissimilarity Index was used to measure the rate of residential segregation. The results range from 0, where the amount of African-Americans and whites are in the same proportion in each census tract as they were in the entire SMSA, to 1, where the tracts are either exclusively African-American or exclusively white (Olzak, et al., 1996).

Comparing these results to the census tracts of each decade caused a problem in that the 1960 census classified Hispanics as both white and non-white. The Dissimilarity Index is often defined as the proportion of a minority group that would have to change residence in order to create an even distribution with the majority members in that SMSA. The Isolation Index was used to measure the Residential Isolation for African-Americans. Like the Dissimilarity Index, the scale ranges from 0 to 1, with 1 being a situation of extreme isolation for an African-American. High levels of the Residential Isolation Index indicate that African-Americans are more likely to share residence solely with other African-Americans. Olzak, Shanahan, and McEneaney also use the African-American poverty rate, which is the standardized number of persons below the poverty line (for non-whites) divided by the total number of persons in that racial category, as well as the Unemployment Rate, which was defined as the number of civilians 14 years
and older who are out of work for the 1960 census, and 16 years and older for the 1970 census and beyond. These rates help to determine the effects of poverty and unemployment on racial unrest (Olzak, et al., 1996).

Olzak, Shanahan, and McEneaney recorded information on 1,770 ethnic/racial events (including protests, attacks, marches, and rallies, as well as African-American instigated race riots) in 55 SMSAs from 1960-1993. Of the 1,770, 154 were race riots with African-American involvement. The results show that only 6 percent of these riots involved less than 50 instigators, while 98 percent involved weapons, property damage, personal injury, and/or deaths. 26.6 percent of the riots focused on some prior police action that was deemed illegitimate, 16 percent were directed against members of different racial/ethnic groups, and 55 percent involved claims of racial discrimination with multiple claims of racism against the system. African-American riots, then, are typically large-scale, violent crowd events driven by racial grievances (Olzak, et al., 1996).

Overall, the study found that SMSAs with high rates of poverty and unemployment did not have a significant influence on race riots, but SMSAs where African-Americans were most segregated in 1960 had significant higher rates of race riots over the following decades. Their studies claim that race riots are more sensitive to processes of residential segregation and desegregation than African-American poverty rates, SMSAs with high Isolation Indexes have a high rate of race rioting, and that initial segregation followed by desegregation increases unrest (Olzak, et al., 1996).

The Los Angeles Riots
Almost immediately after the verdict was announced, small crowds began to form around Los Angeles, with the intersection of Florence and Normandie Avenues becoming the epicenter. Chants of “King, King, King!” broke out, and around 5:20 p.m., officers responded to a radio call that protestors were assaulting passing motorists. After arriving at the scene, officers chased a 16-year-old African-American for throwing rocks at the car. Reports state that the youth kicked and wrestled with the officers and that the officers used force in return. With his mother present, screaming, “Don’t take my baby, that’s my son,” the initial arrest incited the crowd even more. Soon, the officers retreated, as they were outnumbered and lacking riot gear. The gathering of a mob does not necessarily make a riot, but as events continued, with little or no response from the unprepared police, events began to escalate. The events at Florence and Normandie were significant as they set a precedent for the crowd. At this intersection, rioters were engaged in numerous acts of violence against people, including assault, robbery, and assault with a deadly weapon, while illegal acts in other parts of the city were mostly property destruction and disorderly conduct. Also, after committing crimes, the rioters remained in the area, establishing dominance and possession of the intersection while driving the police out. In other locations, the rioters fled after committing crimes or after the police arrived. The initial ‘victory’ of the protestors over the police was a catalyst for the city-wide riot that was about to occur (Useem, 1997).

Although the acquittal of the four officers was the immediate precipitant of the 1992 riots, there were many factors that had a part in the violence. First of all, the living conditions of poor, urban blacks had not improved in the past 10 years, racial tensions were high due to personal prejudices and institutional racism, and an increased foreign
immigration led to inter-ethnic hostility. In many ways, these riots were similar to the
race riots of the 1960s. They were triggered by conflict between members of minority
community and the justice system, the violence was initiated by members of the minority
community, and the looting and burning of businesses were the major forms of property
crimes (Fogelson, 1967).

The Watts Riot of 1965 has much in common with the riot almost 30 years later.
On August 11, 1965, a young African-American was pulled over in the south central
neighborhood of Watts by a white California highway patrolman on presumption of
drunk driving. A minor altercation ensued, and the boy’s mother rushed out to witness
the use of force between the officer and her son. Emotions became high, and a large
crowd of mostly African-Americans gathered to watch as the Los Angeles Police
Department arrived. From eight P.M. until one A.M., the mob remained, throwing stones
at passing automobiles, assaulting white motorists and threatening a police command
post that was set up. After days of violence, the National Guard was called in and a
curfew was imposed to slowly begin stopping the riots. After four days of violence, the
riots finally ended with 34 dead, over 1,000 injured, almost 4,000 arrested, 600 buildings
damaged, and $20-40 million in property destroyed (Useem, 1997).

The fact that many Korean-owned stores were the target of looting and burning
suggests that the ethnic competition theory holds up. On March 16, 1991, a few weeks
after the Rodney King tape aired, a young black woman was shot by a Korean store
owner. Latasha Harlins, a 13-year-old African-American, was shot and killed by Soon Ja
Do, a Korean storeowner. Soon Ja Do was charged with voluntary manslaughter and
sentenced to five years probation, after originally facing murder charges with eleven
years in prison (Garcia, 2000). The shooting ignited the tenuous relations between Asian Americans and African-Americans. Blacks began to object to the large number of Korean American stores in their neighborhoods, and eventual organized boycotting of Korean American stores began later in the year. The Los Angeles riots displayed the fighting of minority groups against each other, as opposed to the white majority. Since they are forced to compete against each other for jobs, housing, resources, and political power, these groups have become bitter enemies. South Central Los Angeles, home to many of these minorities, never recovered from the Watts riots. Per capita income was less than half that of Los Angeles as a whole, and poverty and unemployment rates were more than twice as high (Garcia, 2000).

When looking at the victims of the 1992 riots, it is important to note that not all of them were white. In fact, of the 30 individuals beaten at the intersection of Florence and Normandie, only two were white. The rest were all people of color, including a Mexican couple and their one-year-old child; a Japanese-American man; and a Latino family with children. Although the violence was a result of the white police officers being acquitted of beating a black man, other minorities quickly became targets. These attacks are a sign that the African-Americans were frustrated not only with the white institution responsible for acquitting the officers, but also the immigrants who had moved into their neighborhoods (Useem, 1997).

*Competition Theory* states that when there is competition between ethnic groups for jobs, then riots have a better chance of occurring. Therefore, cities in which the economic condition of racial/ethnic groups is relatively close provide more chances for a riot to start. These conditions occur with a decline in employment and a rise in
migration. The exodus of blacks from the South into the Northeast during the first half of
the 1900s created these conditions in many cities, and the ensuing riots were a result of
close proximity between ethnic groups competing for similar jobs (Olzak, et al., 1996).

The 1992 Los Angeles riots were preceded by a massive influx of Mexican,
Hispanic, and Korean immigrants. These immigrants settled in the predominantly black
areas of Southeast and South central L.A. While the targets of the riots were the white
upper-class, many of the recent immigrants, specifically the Koreans, suffered as a result.
The burning and looting of many Korean-owned stores in the South central area shows
the hostility the blacks had to their new neighbors (Bergesen and Herman, 1998).

When observing these conditions that the minorities are forced to deal with, it is
important to understand the reasoning behind them. One of the biggest problems leading
up to the 1992 riots was the city government and political institutions. Los Angeles
developed the mostly white Westside but not the South, where jobs were lost on a
massive scale. The ensuing poverty kept large retail and chain stores out of the area, one
of the reasons why many Korean stores opened up. Institutional racism was also a
serious claim made against the city of Los Angeles, specifically the Los Angeles Police
Department. After the Rodney King videotape, Mayor Bradley issued an investigation
concerning police brutality and institutional racism known as the Christopher
Commission. It documented the “systematic use of excessive force by a relatively small
number of officers,” who all went unpunished, and called for structural reforms of the
Los Angeles Police Department, along with the resignation of Police Chief Daryl Gates
(HRW, 1998).
Institutional racism was a term coined by the black activist Stokely Carmichael in the late 1960s in response to the racism that occurs in institutions such as public bodies and corporations (Cox, 2006). He defined it as the collective failure of an organization to provide an appropriate and professional service to people because of their color, culture, or ethnic origin. Institutional racism uses systematic yet covert policies to disadvantage certain racial or ethnic groups, whether accidental or deliberate. According to transcripts of the beating, Officers Powell and Wind bragged about their brutality, claiming they “hadn’t beaten anybody like that in a long time (HRW, 1998, p. 2).” The trial itself was criticized as another example of institutional racism: a black judge was replaced with a white one, and the trial was moved to Ventura County, a conservative community with an almost entirely white population. The jury consisted of ten whites, one Hispanic, and one Asian. If held in the Central Superior Court District in Los Angeles, a greater representation of ethnic minorities could have been ensured (HRW, 1998).

The Christopher Commission was formed to conduct a full and fair examination of the structure and operation of the LADP (HRW, 2006). The commission found “significant number of officers in the LADP who repetitively use excessive force against the public and persistently ignore the written guidelines of the department regarding force (HRW, 2006, p. 3).” The Commission stated that the failure of the department in controlling these individuals is at the heart of the problem. It suggested a breakdown in the management and leadership of the Department. The report also found that many of the problems stemmed from repeat offenders: of the 1800 officers with allegations of excessive force, 1400 had only one or two complaints while 183 officers “had four or more allegations.” One officer had 16 counts of excessive force, while forty-four with 6
or more received positive performance evaluations that failed to record the sustained complaints (HRW, 2006).

The act of police brutality is a serious charge. It represents the corruption of the law itself. When the law, the purveyors of justice, is corrupt, there are no other means for social justice than taking to the streets. Along with the Los Angeles riots of 1992, the riot in Miami in 1980 also occurred not after a case of police brutality, but after a verdict dismissing it. On December 17, 1979, an African-American motorcyclist named Arthur McDuffie was involved in a high-speed chase with local law enforcement. The cops claimed that the chase ended when McDuffie crashed his motorcycle and died, but the coroner’s report said otherwise. A pursuing officer eventually testified that five of his fellow officers beat McDuffie to death with their flashlights. The officers claimed that McDuffie had forcefully resisted arrest, and that is what prompted the beating. After a brief deliberation, an all-white jury acquitted the officers of all charges. The verdict caused people to pour into the streets in Liberty City, the Black Grove, Overtown, and Brownsville, neighborhoods in Miami. The protest started out peaceful but turned violent. After three days of rioting, the city was left with 18 dead, 400 injured, 1,100 arrested, and over 100 million dollars in damage (Porter, Bruce, and Dunn, 1984).

Crowd Behavior

While poor social conditions can cause a group to demand change, and an isolated incident can cause them to gather in a crowd, it is still not unreasonable to ask why an individual would resort to behavior otherwise considered evil or against the law. As in Le Bon’s work in 1903, people have attempted to explain mob behavior. Le Bon, in his book “The Crowd” (Goldstein, 1994), created what is known as Contagion Theory, based
loosely on germ theory which was gaining popularity at the time, as a way to explain the central mechanism governing mob formation and behavior. Contagion theory states that specific behaviors and levels of arousal begin with a few individuals in the larger crowd, which then spread out through the group. Individuals are essentially “catching” the bug that causes them to act out. “In the mass, the individual is radically transformed, loses his or her conscious personality, and it is in the grip of the law of mental unity of crowds that primitive, irrational elements emerge…what emerges is a collective mind that makes people feel, think, and act in a uniform or homogeneous way (Goldstein, 1994, p. 111).”

Contagion Theory was amended by Forsyth (1983), in what he defined as *Convergence Theory*. Forsyth states that people sharing certain predispositions, attitudes, or beliefs are drawn together to express their shared conscious or unconscious needs. The convergence of these people, with compatible needs, desires, motivations, and emotions, leads to the spontaneous release of previously controlled behaviors, such as looting and burning, with the crowd situation acting as the release (Goldstein, 1994).

*Emergent Norm Theory*, developed by Turner and Killian (1972), states that members all adhere to norms that are not general social standards but are relevant nonetheless in the given situation. The norms could in fact be in sharp contrast to the general social standards. This also accounts for the continued action of the crowd and the increase in violence associated with riots, as the members have an increase in the perceived legitimacy of their beliefs and attitudes following a lack of repercussions (Goldstein, 1994).

The *Deindividuation Theory*, developed by Festinger, Pepitone, and Newcombe (1952), accounts for the individual’s behavior in a crowd. Individuals behave almost as
if ‘submerged’ in the crowd. They experience a reduction of inhibited behavior and inner restraint, as well as a heightened freedom to engage in aggressive and other deviant behaviors. Factors like anonymity play a role in their behavior, as the individual believes that darkness, disguise, masks, uniforms, or the sheer number of other participants will render them almost invisible. Due to this personal responsibility is minimized. An individual may reason that if they do not burn that store, then somebody else will anyway (Goldstein, 1994).

Conclusion

Riots are not caused by one factor, but are an amalgam of various individual and social variables. Although studies have shown that the unfavorable conditions long set in place in urban ghettos are common among riots, and that poor housing, a weakening economy, and high levels of unemployed African-Americans can be the beginning of a riot, these factors alone cannot predict or cause an end to riots.

The Los Angeles Riots of 1992 began with the first stone thrown through a window. They began with the announcement of the trial verdict and the beating of Rodney King. They began when immigrants moved into Los Angeles, and when African-Americans moved into Los Angeles before them. They began with the worsening economic conditions of the 1980s, the practice of residential segregation in the 30s and 40s, and the institutional racism that was embedded in our government from day one. The riots can be traced back to Plessy v. Ferguson, Jim Crow, or the Civil War, and when slaves were brought to America.
Although there are many causes, many factors leading to riots, and still even more excuses, the problem of riots comes down to one problem, and one solution. Throughout history, certain groups have been oppressed, while others have been oppressors. Whether as slaves, indentured servants, or second-class citizens, the role of human behavior is the main cause of riots. It is easy to say that one should not riot, one should have more respect for human life, but it goes deeper than that. In America alone, our history is filled with tumultuous times, embarrassing practices, and bigoted beliefs. Acts from the 30s and 40s can legitimately be classified as causes of the riots almost 60 years later.

Riots can be seen as an inevitable result based on the way African-Americans and other minorities have been treated in the United States. Slaves were freed after the Civil War, their descendents granted equal status in the 1960s, and yet they are still trying to make up ground to catch up to their white peers. The racial injustices in our society that have existed forever cause riots.

The act of suppressing another due to color or creed, and the prejudices we refuse to let go, are the spark for riots, setting our hastily constructed society ablaze. Our forefathers were wrong in suppressing minorities, wrong in letting power take rule over morals. The result was a society in which one group constantly felt like unwanted outsiders. And even after slavery was overturned, they still could not walk with their heads high. Instead, they faced the label of separate but equal, forced to drink out of separate drinking fountains, and forced to live in crowded, dilapidated ghettoes, away from their white neighbors. From there they were forced to work the most menial jobs, attend the poorest schools, and receive unequal treatment from the law enforcement agencies erected to protect and serve them.
When a community or group feels that they have no rights in a society, and when their own society turns against them, using illegitimate means such as police brutality and institutional racism, there appear to be no means other than collective violence to make their point. As a result, American cities exploded in the 1960s, as riots erupted across the country. However, problems still existed, and the pressures and tribulations continued to mount until the next riot. Although conditions for minorities seem to be improving currently, another riot could very well take place in the near future.

As recently as April 18, 2006, millions of illegal immigrants and minorities are gathering together in American cities to protest a proposed bill that would make illegal immigration a felony. The crowds are drawing a large police presence, and tension is sure to exist. Demonstrations in different languages are not uncommon at these rallies, and they could mark the beginning of another series of racially triggered riots. It is not hard to parallel the native vs. foreign theme present in this issue with riots of the past. And in France, there have been many reported riots in the past 10 months in regards to a bill that would make it easier to fire employees under the age of 26. The youths, who exposed the high level of youth unemployment in France, have been taking to the streets tirelessly, and the bill was recently vetoed. Also on American soil, a racial controversy surrounds the Duke University campus, as tensions are growing between the town, which is 44 percent African-American, and the school, which is 10 percent African-American, following the alleged rape of a local African-American woman by members of the schools’ Lacrosse team, which consists of 46 white players and one African-American.

While it is not hard to watch the news or read the newspaper and find images of violence and racial or ethnic unrest, there is hope. Although people do riot when
conditions are extremely unfavorable, and can act without remorse in committing violence against another human, the amount of riots over the course of history is minimal. For the most part, humans respect life and will do anything to avoid a violent confrontation. And as our society evolves, hopefully there will be even less reports of collective violence and rioting.

Although there are strains, conducive social arrangements, beliefs, and precipitating factors, a social movement has not yet arisen until the affected group is actually organized to obtain collective goals. In fact, riots are the culmination of many factors. As the pressures of poor living conditions, unemployment, and in-migration build up, people become frustrated with their lot in life. Adding social injustice and a corrupt political system to the mix can bring this frustration to anger. However, the conditions must be right for a group to mobilize their resources and effectively protest or riot. In the 1992 Los Angeles riots, the pre-existing conditions formed a hotbed for racial unrest. The announcement of the acquittal of the four police officers brought things to a head, as the minority population could no longer believe that the system was working for them. Finding the current political structure to be illegitimate and corrupt, they took to the streets to take justice into their own hands, venting their frustration through aggression. The mobs that formed were outraged at the verdict, and from there, it was only a matter of time before the first acts of collective violence occurred.

In the future, riots can only be prevented through communication and equality among differing groups and communities. We can not go back to prevent the institutions of slavery and Jim Crow from ever having existed, but we can look forward to see how these blights on American history can be corrected. Steps can be taken at every level to
prevent a riot, from the daily interactions between a man and his neighbor to the laws passed by the federal government. Positive actions dealing with the economic and social conditions of urban living can help prevent riots, as well as trained and effective riot control units. While a riot can be stopped at any level, including that moment directly before violence occurs, it is much more safe and effective to help curb riots before they show any signs of occurring. In order to do this, humanity must continue to find ways to co-exist.

Over the course of time, humanity has overcome extreme oppressions and discriminations against many different cultures, religions, and ethnicities. From slavery to genocide, the innocent people in this world have been resisting the evils of hatred and oppression from the dawn of time. While this evil has always existed, the good to overcome the evils is just as prevalent. Preventing riots is not a matter of increasing the number of police officers or supplying more riot gear, or even changing the amount of federal funding for welfare. The prevention of a riot lies in the daily interaction of all human beings, and in the knowledge that we are all sharing the same land, and are all equal in the eyes of God.
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