Anatomy of a Rebellion: A Political-Economic Analysis

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James H. Johnson, Jr.,
and
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It is quite impossible to understand the events surrounding the acquittal of the four police officers accused of brutally beating Rodney King without placing them within the local and national circumstances and forces that have deepened class and racial inequalities over the past two decades. Both at the local and national level, the trajectory of economic, political, and social trends has exacerbated the ever-so-fragile social fabric of our nation's cities, making ripe the conditions that kindled the social explosion that occurred in Los Angeles on 29 April 1992.

In this essay, we reflect on the Los Angeles civil disorder of 1992 from an urban political economy perspective. It is our contention that the course and magnitude of changes in the urban political economy of American cities in general, and Los Angeles in particular, were crucial in bringing to the forefront the contradictions underlying the Los Angeles urban rebellion. Thus, this essay is an anatomy of the civil unrest that seeks to unravel its relationship to rebellions of the past, highlighting both the ever-changing and unchanging nature of the relationship of black Americans to the economic and political order, and the consequences of the introduction of new actors into the sociopolitical mix of large American cities. In order to accomplish this, we situate the civil unrest within

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the broader context of the recent demographic, social, and economic changes occurring in the Los Angeles milieu. The object of this analysis is to ground the rebellion in the context of a political system that is frayed at the edges in its attempt to integrate new voices into the body politic and, at the same time, is incapable of bringing into the economic mainstream significant portions of the African-American community (traditionally one of the most economically marginal segments of American society). Can the efforts that have been spawned as a consequence of the urban rebellion achieve a modicum of success in confronting these difficult challenges? We address this issue in a brief but critical review of existing policies and proposals that have been advanced to "rebuild" Los Angeles. Finally, we outline our own strategy for redeveloping South Central Los Angeles, one which is designed to address the real "seeds" of the civil unrest.

ANATOMY OF THE REBELLION

The recent civil unrest in Los Angeles was the worst such event in recent U.S. history. None of the major civil disorders of the 1960s, including the Watts rebellion of 1965, required a level of emergency response or exacted a toll—in terms of loss of life, injuries, and property damage and loss—comparable to the Los Angeles rebellion of 1992 (table 1). The burning, looting, and violence that ensued following the rendering of a not-guilty verdict in the police-brutality trial required the deployment of not only the full forces of the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) and the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department, but also 10,000 National Guardsmen and 3,500 military personnel (table 2). The Fire Department received 5,537 structure fire calls and responded to an estimated 500 fires. An estimated 4,000 businesses were destroyed. Fifty-two people died and 2,383 people were injured, including 20 law-enforcement and fire personnel. Property damage and loss have been estimated at between $785 million and $1 billion (table 1).

In contrast to the civil disorders of the 1960s, this was a multiethnic rebellion. The diversity is reflected in table 3, which depicts, for the period 30 April through 4 May, arrests by race/ethnicity. It has been estimated that 1,200 of the 16,000 plus arrested were illegal aliens, roughly 40% of whom were handover to INS officials for immediate deportation (table 4). Also in contrast to the civil disorders of the 1960s, the burning and looting were neither random nor limited to a single neighborhood; rather, the response was targeted, systematic, and widespread, encompassing much of the legal city. This fact has lead us to purposefully and consistently refer to the civil unrest as a rebellion as opposed to a riot.

THE VERDICT AND THE REBELLION IN RETROSPECT

We think it is safe to say that both the verdict rendered in the police-brutality trial, and the widespread burning, looting, and violence which ensued after the jury issued its decision, shocked most Americans. In retrospect, however, we would like to suggest that both the verdict and the subsequent rebellion were quite predictable. The treatment of black suspects by the police and black defendants by the courts represents a continuity in the experience of blacks in relationship to the criminal-justice system.

The outcome of the trial, in our view, was predictable for two reasons. The first pertains to the defense attorneys' successful bid for a change of venue for the trial. Simi Valley, the site of the trial, and Ventura County more generally, is a predominantly white community known for its strong stance on law and order, as evidenced by the fact that a significant number of LAPD officers live there. Thus, the four white police officers were truly judged by a jury of their peers. Viewed in this context, the verdict should not have been unanticipated.

The second development that made the outcome of the trial predictable, in retrospect, was the defense attorneys' ability to put Mr. King, instead of the four white police officers, on trial. (We should note here, parenthetically, that the media is also guilty in this regard, as evidenced by its consistent characterization of the case as "the Rodney King trial.") The defense attorneys, in effect, played the so-called "race card"; they painted Mr. King as unpredictable, dangerous, and uncontrollable, much as Mr. Bush, in the 1988 presidential campaign, used Willie Horton, the convicted rapist released on a temporary work furlough only to commit another heinous crime, to paint Mr. Dukakis as being soft on crime. In today's society, the Willie Horton stereotype, recent surveys tell us, is often applied categorically to black males, irrespective of their social and economic status, but especially if they reside in the inner city. It is our contention that the
jury agreed with the defense attorneys' portrayal of Mr. King as dangerous and uncontrollable, and thus rendered a verdict in favor of the four white police officers, notwithstanding the seemingly irrefutable videotaped evidence.

Why do we think, in hindsight, that the civil unrest following the verdict in the police-brutality trial was predictable? We believe that the response was not about the verdict in the police-brutality trial per se; rather, the civil unrest reflected the high degree of frustration and alienation that had built up among the citizens of South Central Los Angeles over the last 20 years. The rebellion, as we view it in retrospect, was a response not to a single but rather to repeated acts of what is widely perceived in the community to be blatant abuse of power by the police and the criminal-justice system more generally.5

The civil unrest was also a response to a number of broader, external forces which have increasingly isolated the South Central Los Angeles community, geographically and economically, from the mainstream of the Los Angeles society.6 These forces include: recent structural changes in the local (and national) economy; wholesale disinvestment in the South Central Los Angeles community by banks and other institutions, including the local city government; and nearly two decades of conservative federal policies which have simultaneously affected adversely the quality of life of the residents of South Central Los Angeles and accelerated the decline and deterioration of their neighborhoods.

Moreover, these developments were occurring at a time when the community was experiencing a radical demographic transformation, an unprecedented change in population accompanied by considerable tensions and conflict between long-term residents and the more recent arrivals.7 Viewed from this perspective, the verdict in the police-brutality trial was merely the proverbial straw that broke the camel’s back.8

**SEEDS OF THE REBELLION**

The videotaped beating of Mr. Rodney King was only the most recent case in which there were serious questions about whether LAPD officers used excessive force to subdue or arrest a black citizen. For several years, the City of Los Angeles has had to pay out millions of taxpayers' dollars to settle the complaints and lawsuits of citizens who were victims of LAPD abuse. Moreover, the black citizens of the city of Los Angeles have been disproportionately victimized by the LAPD's use of the choke hold, a tactic employed to subdue individuals who are perceived to be uncooperative. During the 1980s, 18 citizens of Los Angeles died as a result of LAPD officers' use of the choke hold; 16 of them reportedly were black.9

Accordingly, the not-guilty verdict rendered in the police-brutality trial was also only the most recent in a series of cases in which the decisions emanating from the criminal-justice system were widely perceived in the black community to be grossly unjust. This decision came closely on the heels of another controversial verdict in the Latasha Harlins case. A video-tape revealed that Ms. Harlins—an honor student at a local high school—was fatally shot in the back of the head by a Korean shopkeeper following an altercation over a carton of orange juice. The shopkeeper received a six month suspended sentence and was ordered to do six months of community service.10

These and related events have occurred in the midst of drastic demographic change in South Central Los Angeles. Over the last two decades, the community has been transformed from a predominantly black to a mixed black and Latino area (figure 1). Today, nearly one-half of the South Central Los Angeles population is Latino. In addition, there also has been an ethnic succession in the local business environment, characterized by the exodus of many of the Jewish shopkeepers and a substantial influx of small, family-run Korean businesses. This ethnic succession in both the residential environment and the business community has not been particularly smooth. The three ethnic groups—blacks, Latinos, and Koreans—have found themselves in conflict and competition with one another over jobs, housing, and scarce public resources.11

Part of this conflict stems from the fact that the Los Angeles economy has undergone a fairly drastic restructuring over the last two decades.12 This restructuring includes, on the one hand, the decline of traditional, highly unionized high-wage manufacturing employment; and on the other, the growth of employment in the high-technology-manufacturing, the craft-specialty, and the advanced-
service sectors of the economy. As figure 2 shows, South Central Los Angeles—
the traditional industrial core of the city—bore the brunt of the decline in man-
ufacturing employment, losing 70,000 high-wage, stable jobs between 1978 and
1982.13

At the same time these well-paying and stable jobs were disappearing from
South Central Los Angeles, local employers were seeking alternative sites for
their manufacturing activities. As a consequence of these seemingly routine de-
cisions, new employment growth nodes or "technopoles" emerged in the San
Fernando Valley, in the San Gabriel Valley, and in El Segundo near the airport
in Los Angeles County, as well as in nearby Orange County (figure 3).14 In
addition, a number of Los Angeles–based employers established production fac-
ilities in the Mexican border towns of Tijuana, Ensenada, and Tecate. Between
1978 and 1982, over 200 Los Angeles–based firms, including Hughes Aircraft,
Northrop, and Rockwell, as well as a host of smaller firms, participated in this
deconcentration process.15 Such capital flight, in conjunction with the plant clos-
ings, has essentially closed off to the residents of South Central Los Angeles access
to what were formerly well-paying, unionized jobs.16

It is important to note that, while new industrial spaces were being established
elsewhere in Los Angeles County (and in nearby Orange County as well as along
the U.S.-Mexico border), new employment opportunities were emerging within
or near the traditional industrial core in South Central Los Angeles (figure 3).
But, unlike the manufacturing jobs that disappeared from this area, the new jobs
are in competitive sector industries, which rely primarily on undocumented labor
and pay, at best, minimum wage.

In part as a consequence of these developments, and partly as a function of
employers' openly negative attitudes toward black workers, the black-male jobless
rate in some residential areas of South Central Los Angeles hovers around 50%.17
Whereas joblessness is the central problem for black males in South Central Los
Angeles, concentration in low-paying, bad jobs in competitive sector industries
is the main problem for the Latino residents of the area. Both groups share a

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Table 9.4. Los Angeles Rebellion, 1992: Illegal Aliens Arrested and Deported by Country of
Origin

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mexico</td>
<td>360</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>El Salvador</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guatemala</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Honduras</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jamaica</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Countries</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>477</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: George Ramos and Tracy Wilkinson, "Unrest Widens Rifts in Latino Populations," Los Angeles Times,
common fate: incomes below the poverty level (figure 4). Whereas one group is the working poor (Latinos), the other is the jobless poor (blacks). 17

In addition to the adverse impact of structural changes in the local economy, South Central Los Angeles also has suffered from the failure of local institutions to devise and implement a plan to redevelop and revitalize the community. In fact, over the last two decades, the local city government has consciously pursued a policy of downtown and westside redevelopment at the expense of South Central Los Angeles. One needs only to look at the skyline of downtown and the so-called Wilshire corridor—that twenty-mile stretch extending along Wilshire Boulevard from downtown to the Pacific Ocean—to see the impact of this policy. 18

Finally, the seeds of the rebellion are rooted in nearly two decades of conservative policy making and implementation at the federal level. Many policy analysts talk about the adverse impact on minorities and their communities of Democratic president Lyndon Johnson’s “War on Poverty” programs of the 1960s, but we must not lose sight of the fact that the Republicans have been in control of the White House for all but four (the Carter years) of the past 20 years. 19 A number of public policies implemented during this period, and especially during the years when Mr. Reagan was president, we contend, served as sparks for the recent civil unrest. Three of these policy domains are worthy of note here.

The first pertains to the federal government’s establishment of a laissez-faire business climate in order to facilitate the competitiveness of U.S. firms. Such a policy, in retrospect, appears to have facilitated the large number of plant closings in South Central Los Angeles and capital flight to the U.S./Mexico border and various Third World countries. Between 1982 and 1989 there were 131 plant closings in Los Angeles, idling 124,000 workers. Fifteen of these plants moved to Mexico or overseas. 20

The second involved the federal government’s dismantling of the social safety
functional behavior, over the past decade or so, the federal government has pursued a policy of resolving the problems of the inner city through the criminal-justice system.

Given this shift in policy orientation, it should not be surprising that, nationally, 25% of prime-working-age young black males (ages 18–35) are either in prison, in jail, on probation, or otherwise connected to the criminal-justice system. Although reliable statistics are hard to come by, the anecdotal evidence suggests that at least 25% of the young black males in South Central Los Angeles have had a brush with the law. What are the prospects of landing a job if you have a criminal record? Incarceration breeds despair and in the employment arena, it is the scarlet letter of unemployability.

Educational initiatives enacted during the late 1970s and early 1980s, which were designed to address the so-called “crisis” in American education, constitute the third policy domain. There is actually a very large body of social-science evidence which shows that such policies as tracking by ability group, grade retention, and the increasing reliance on standardized tests as the ultimate arbiter of educational success have, in fact, disenfranchised large numbers of black and brown youth. In urban school systems, they are disproportionately placed in special-education classes and are more likely than their white counterparts to be subjected to extreme disciplinary sanctions.

The effects of these policies in the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) are evident in the data on school-leaving behavior. For the Los Angeles Unified School district as a whole, 39.2% of all of the students in the class of 1988 dropped out at some point during their high-school years. However, for high schools in South Central Los Angeles, the drop-out rates were substantially higher, between 63% and 79% (figure 5). It is important to note that the drop-out problem is not limited to the high-school population. According to data compiled by LAUSD, approximately 25% of the students in the junior high schools in South Central Los Angeles dropped out during the 1987–88 academic year (figure 6).

Twenty years ago it was possible to drop out of school before graduation and find a well-paying job in heavy manufacturing in South Central Los Angeles. Today, however, those types of jobs are no longer available in the community, as we noted previously. Juxtaposing the adverse effects of a restructured economy and the discriminatory aspects of education reforms, what emerges is a rather substantial pool of inner-city males of color who are neither at work nor in school. These individuals are, in effect, idle; and previous research shows us that it is this population which is most likely to be in gangs, to engage in drug trafficking, and to participate in a range of other criminal behavior. Moreover, we know that it is this population of idle, minority males that experiences the most difficulty...
Dropout Rates in LAUSD Senior High Schools, for the Class of 1988

Prepared by the UCLA Center for the Study of Urban Poverty
Chase Langford, Cartographer


Figure 9.5  Drop-out Rates in LAUSD Senior High Schools, for the Class of 1988

Dropout Rates in LAUSD Junior High Schools, 1987-88

Prepared by the UCLA Center for the Study of Urban Poverty
Chase Langford, Cartographer


Figure 9.6  Drop-out Rates in LAUSD Junior High Schools, 1987–88
forming and maintaining stable families, which accounts, at least in part, for the high percentage of female-headed families with incomes below the poverty level in South Central Los Angeles.

EXPLAINING THE SOURCES OF A MULTIETHNIC REBELLION

The most distinctive aspect of the Los Angeles rebellion was its multiethnic character. While blacks were the source of the disturbances as they broke out on the first night of the rebellion, by the second evening it was clear that the discontent that emerged initially was shared by many of the city’s largest racial group, the Latino community. As we have just pointed out, the economically depressed Latinos in Los Angeles are comprised of a working-poor population, characterized by a large and significant core of Mexican and Central American immigrants. But what is interesting is that the rebellion did not encompass the traditional Mexican American community of East Los Angeles. Indeed, the fires and protest were silent in these communities as political leaders and local residents ardently cautioned residents against “burning your own community.” Nevertheless, Latinos in South Central Los Angeles did not hesitate to participate in looting, particularly against Korean merchants. How do we explain this pattern?8

One important element necessary to explain the uneven participation of Latinos in the rebellion is to place the Latino experience into the context of struggles to incorporate that community politically into the electoral system in Los Angeles city and county. With the largest Latino population outside of Mexico City, Latinos have been severely underrepresented in city and county governments. In a struggle emanating from the 1960s, Latinos, particularly Mexican Americans, have been involved in protesting this situation, in ways ranging from street-level, grassroots activity to highly coordinated court challenges to racially biased redistricting schemes that have unfairly diluted Latino voting strength.9 That struggle has just recently begun to bear fruit. In the important court case Garza et al. v. County of Los Angeles, Los Angeles County was found guilty of racial bias in the redistricting process and ordered to accept an alternative redistricting plan that led to the election of Gloria Molina as the first Latino(s) to serve on the powerful five-person Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors.10 Recent maneuvering at the city level will ensure significant representation of Latinos on the Los Angeles City Council, but not without considerable conflict between entrenched black and Latino City Council leaders over communities that are racially mixed.11 Los Angeles is a city in flux politically.

While it is clear that an emerging Latino majority will assume greater political power over time, the political empowerment process has left several portions of the Latino population behind. In particular, Mexican Americans in Los Angeles, who have a longer history there and are more likely to constitute greater portions of the voting-age-citizen population, are the key recipients of the political spoils that have come in the Latino struggle for electoral power. All the elected officials to come into power as a consequence of these struggles are Mexican, and while they articulate a “Latino” perspective on the issues, they also tend to represent a narrow “Mexican” nationalism.12 The growing Central American population, which is residentially based in South Central Los Angeles and not in the traditional core of East Los Angeles, has not benefited for the most part from the political empowerment of Mexicans in Los Angeles. They are recent immigrants, not able to vote, and thus have become the pawns in negotiations with the county and city over the composition of political districts. Black and white politicians now represent districts with up to 50% of the population being Latino. But because they are unable to vote, a declining black or white population of 25% to 35% can maintain control over these districts without addressing the unique need of a majority of the community. The upshot has been the political neglect of a growing community whose problems of poverty have been just as overlooked as those of the black poor.

This contrast was easily observed during the rebellion as traditional Mexican-American community leaders were either silent or negative toward the mass participation of Latinos in the rebellion. Those Latinos in South Central had little stake in the existing political and economic order while East Los Angeles was riding the crest of a successful struggle to incorporate their political demands into the electoral system. Just as the black community is divided into a middle and a working class that are connected to the system by way of their political and economic ties, the Latino community in Los Angeles is increasingly divided by income, ethnicity, and citizenship.

The second element necessary to understand the involvement of Latinos, particularly Central American and Mexican immigrants, in the rebellions is the existence of interethnic hostilities between these groups and Korean Americans. While much is made of African-American and Korean-American conflict, little is said about an equally and potentially more volatile conflict between Latinos and Koreans.13 While the crux of African-American and Korean-American conflict is based on the uneasy relationship between merchant and customer, the Latino-Korean conflict has the added dimensions of residential and workplace conflict. Latino involvement in the rebellion was most intense in Koreatown. Koreatown is an ethnic enclave demarcated by both the Korean control of businesses and a dwindling Korean residential presence. The community, in fact, is residentially mixed, with large portions of Latinos and Koreans. Latinos in this community come into contact with Koreans on multiple levels and, from all we know from current research, experience considerable hostility in each level.14 First, in terms
of residence, Latinos complain of discrimination on the part of Korean landlords as buildings and apartments are rented according to racial background. Second, as customers in Korean establishments, Latinos complain of forms of disrespectful treatment similar to that about which black customers complain. Third, as employees in Korean small businesses, Latinos point to high levels of exploitation by their employers. Thus, in this context, it was not surprising to see the vehemence and anger that the Latino community in South Central Los Angeles expressed, especially toward the Korean community.

THE FEDERAL BLUEPRINT

How do we simultaneously deal with the seeds of the rebellion, as we have characterized them above, and rebuild the physical infrastructure of South Central Los Angeles? In attempting to answer this question, we shall limit the discussion here to the federal government’s blueprint, as the local “Rebuild L.A.” initiative remains somewhat vague in both scope and content.\textsuperscript{15}

Table 9.5 highlights the Bush administration’s plan to revitalize the South Central Los Angeles community. In actuality, the main elements of the plan constitute what Secretary of Housing and Urban Development Jack Kemp termed, prior to the Los Angeles rebellion, his blueprint for a “Conservative War on Poverty.”\textsuperscript{16}

Mr. Kemp promotes enterprise zones, as table 9.5 shows, as being the key to job creation and retention in the inner cities. He proposes to eliminate capital-gains taxes and reduce levies for business that will locate in specified inner-city areas. However, there is no history of success of such strategies in poor communities like South Central Los Angeles.

Moreover, recent research has indicated, as we noted earlier, that those white businesses in the inner city are especially reluctant to hire black males. Employer responses to a field survey in Chicago showed that they generally embrace the prevailing racial stereotypes about this group—that they are lazy, lack a good work ethic, are indiscutable, and perhaps most important, dangerous.\textsuperscript{17}

Couple this social reality with the fact that the major priorities for businesses when making locational decisions are access to markets, access to a quality labor force (code words for no blacks), infrastructure, and crime rates. These business factors are considered to be much more important in site selection than tax rates. And where enterprise zones have been successful, employers have brought their work force with them rather than employing community residents, or they have used these enterprise locations as warehouse points where there is a need for few workers.\textsuperscript{18}

Secretary Kemp has had a long-term commitment to empowering the poor by making them homeowners—the theory being that individuals will have a stronger

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Program</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>$ Allocation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Emergency Aid</td>
<td>To address immediate needs of citizens impacted by the crisis</td>
<td>$600 million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Weed and Seed&quot;</td>
<td>Beef up law enforcement and social services (Headstart, Job Corps, WIC, Safe Haven Program) in the inner city</td>
<td>$500 million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Project HOPE&quot;</td>
<td>Encourage home ownership among residents of public-housing projects</td>
<td>$1 billion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Move to Opportunity&quot;</td>
<td>Five-city plan to subsidize welfare families that move from depressed inner-city areas, using housing vouchers and providing advice</td>
<td>$20 million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Welfare reform</td>
<td>Raise to $10,000 from $1,000 the amount of assets that welfare recipients may accumulate without losing benefits. Builds on Wisconsin Plan to discourage welfare mothers from having more babies</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urban Enterprise Zones</td>
<td>Establishment of specifically designated areas where investment and job creation would be encouraged through incentives such as tax breaks and regulation relief</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Jessica Lee, “Bush Presents His Urban Policy,” USA Today, 6 May 1992, 8A.

commitment to maintaining that which they own and to joining in other efforts to enhance their general neighborhood environment. Project HOPE, as it is called, would make home ownership affordable (table 5). This idea had languished in the Bush administration for the last four years, until the Los Angeles rebellion pushed it to center stage.\textsuperscript{19}

However, this program would lock poor people into communities that are isolated, socially and economically, from mainstream employment and educational opportunities. And it would do nothing to expand the housing stock. Project HOPE is analogous to the reservation status provided to Native Americans in the government’s effort to empower them. As a result, in part, of their isolation over time, Native Americans currently have some of the highest rates of unemployment, alcoholism, and domestic abuse of any American ethnic or racial group.

The federal blueprint, as table 5 shows, also includes monies to give the poor, inner-city residents of South Central Los Angeles greater choice in deciding what school their children will attend. The encouragement of educational choice among public and private schools—using public dollars—needs to be carefully monitored. Although promoted as the solution to the crisis in public education, poor parents are at risk of being losers in a system where choice is “unchecked.” The much-heralded Wisconsin Parental Choice Plan has achieved a modicum of success because this public/private initiative was carefully designed to meet the educational needs of poor children.

The Wisconsin legislature structured this plan to mandate that private educa-
tional providers develop their recruitment strategies and curricular offerings specifically to accommodate poor students. Since nonpoor youngsters already had a wide range of educational choice, it was appropriate that poor children—who are the least well served in our educational system—have their interests served. Educational choice should be driven by the needs of the poor if we are to revitalize education in inner cities.40

Finally, the Bush administration proposes to spend $500 million on a “Weed and Seed Program,” which is designed to rid the community of the violent criminal element and to provide support for programs like Headstart and the Job Corps which are known to benefit the urban disadvantaged and their communities (table 5). As it is currently envisioned, however, the program places too much emphasis on the “weed” component and not enough on the “seed” component. Of the $500 million proposed for the program, only $109 million is targeted for “seed” programs like Headstart. With nearly 80% of the proposed funding targeted for the “weed” component, the primary goal of the program is, clearly, to continue the warehousing of large numbers of poor inner-city youth in the penal system.41

This, in our view, is a misplaced programmatic focus, as it is ever so clear that harsher jail and prison terms are not deterrents to crime in inner-city areas like South Central Los Angeles. What is needed in South Central Los Angeles, instead, is more “seed” money; to the extent that increased police power is deployed in South Central Los Angeles, it should be via a community policing construct where officers are on the street, interfacing with community residents prior to the commission of a crime.

We are, quite frankly, dubious of the so-called conservative war on poverty and, in particular, of its likely impact in South Central Los Angeles. The federal blueprint, and apparently the local “Rebuild L.A.” initiative headed by Mr. Peter Ueberroth as well, is built on the central premise that, if the proper incentives are offered, the private sector will, in fact, play the leading role in the revitalization and redevelopment of South Central Los Angeles. We do not think this is going to happen for the reasons stated earlier: the types of governmental incentives currently under consideration in Washington are not high on private businesses’ locational priority lists.

In view of these facts, and the social-science evidence is clear on the ineffectiveness of enterprise-zone legislation both in Britain and in 36 states in this country,42 we firmly believe that what is needed to rebuild South Central Los Angeles is a comprehensive public-works service-employment program, modeled on President Roosevelt’s Works Progress Administration program of the 1930s. Jobs to rebuild the infrastructure of South Central Los Angeles can provide meaningful employment for the jobless in the community, including the hard-core disadvantaged, and can be linked to the skilled trades’ apprenticeship-training programs.

To incorporate the hard-core disadvantaged into such a program would require a restructuring of the Private Industry Council’s Job Training Partnership Act Program (JTPA). The program must dispense with its performance-based approach in training where funding is tied to job placement. This approach does not work for the hard-core disadvantaged because training agencies, under the current structure, have consistently engaged in creaming—recruiting the most “job-ready” segment of the inner-city population—to ensure their continued success and funding. Meanwhile, the hard-core unemployed have received scant attention and educational upgrading.43

We are now convinced that a WPA-type initiative, combined with a restructured JTPA program, will go a long way toward resolving the chronic jobless problem, especially among young males of color in the community, and toward rebuilding the infrastructure of South Central Los Angeles.

Such a program would have several goals that would enhance the social and economic viability of South Central Los Angeles. First, it would create meaningful jobs that could provide the jobless with skills transferable to the private sector. Second, it would rebuild a neglected infrastructure, making South Central Los Angeles an attractive place to locate for business and commerce. Finally, and most important, by reconnecting this isolated part of the city to the major arteries of transportation, by building a physical infrastructure that could support the social and cultural life of this richly multicultural area (e.g., museums, public buildings, housing), and by enhancing the ability of community and educational institutions to educate and socialize the young, this plan would go far in providing a sustainable “public space” in the community. For it is our contention, that only when South Central Los Angeles is perceived as a public space that is economically vibrant and socially attractive will the promise of this multicultural community be fulfilled. Thus far, private-sector actions and federal-government programs and proposals have done nothing to bring us nearer to reaching this goal.

CONCLUSIONS

The fires have been extinguished in South Central Los Angeles and other cities, but the anger and rage continue to escalate, and they are likely to reemerge over time to the extent that the underlying political and economic causes are left to fester. While political, business, and civic leaders have rushed to advance old and new strategies and solutions to this latest urban explosion, much of what is being proposed is simply disjointed and/or déjà vu.

Clearly there is a need for additional money to resolve the underlying causes
of this urban despair and devastation, but money alone is not enough. Government is constitutionally mandated to ensure “domestic tranquility,” but government alone cannot empower poor communities. And although blacks and other people of color have a special role and obligation to rebuild their neighborhoods because they are the majority of the victims and the vandals, they cannot solely assume this burden of responsibility.

What is needed, in our view, is a reconceptualization of problem solving where we meld together, and invest with full potential, those strategies offered from liberals and conservatives, from Democrats and Republicans, and from whites and people of color. Three cities (Milwaukee, Los Angeles, and Detroit, respectively) have served, individually and collectively, as urban laboratories where we have engaged in action research and proffered solutions to the urban problems which have generated violent outbursts.

The contentious state of police/minority-community relations has served as the linchpin of urban unrest in each instance. While relations have improved in several large cities in recent years, the Los Angeles Police Department has been frozen in time. Black and Hispanic males have been particularly brutalized in their encounters with police, the majority of whom are white males. But more disconcerting is the fact that poor, central-city minority communities have become more crime-ridden of late. Thus, minorities find themselves in the ambiguous situation of needing greater police service on the one hand and protection from the excesses of those same services on the other. This contradictory situation had kept relations between these groups at a race/class boiling point.

More police officers are desperately needed in high-crime communities that are disproportionately populated by the poor. Local, state, and federal dollars (federal funds for this initiative are in the crime bill before Congress) need to be allocated quickly toward this end. At present, violent felons are beginning to outnumber police officers in many of our urban centers. As we noted previously, this increase in police power should be deployed via a community policing program. Such an effort can serve to control minor offenses and to build trust between police and community residents. Community policing has evidenced positive results in Detroit and Philadelphia and is showing encouraging signs in Milwaukee and numerous other large and small cities. In addition, the intensive recruitment of minority officers and specific, ongoing (and evaluated) diversity training will further reduce police/minority community tensions. But most important in this effort is enlightened, decisive leadership from the office of the chief, a position of abysmal failure in Los Angeles.

The national administration’s initial response to the rebellion was to blame it on deficiencies among the urban poor, particularly on the supposed lack of “family values” and the predominance of female-headed households. This jaundiced view ignores the real sources of the conflict and concentrates instead on the symptomatology of growing up in concentrated-poverty communities where the social resources and assistance necessary to negotiate mainstream society successfully are either totally lacking or insufficient. Thus, the policy implication that needs to be drawn from the rebellion is that, in order to bring the poor and disenfranchised into mainstream society, in order to enhance their acceptance of personal responsibility, and in order to promote personal values consistent with those of the wider society, we must find a way to provide a comprehensive program of meaningful assistance to this population. But clearly, a change in personal values along, as suggested by some right-wing analysts, will not substitute for job training, job creation, and the removal of racial stereotypes and discrimination. The spatial concentration of contemporary poverty presents significant challenges to policy makers and human-service providers alike. Although numerous programs and initiatives have been instituted to combat these problems, they suffer from three important weaknesses.

First, there is a lack of coordination among programs aimed at improving the life chances of citizens in poor communities. Second, no systematic steps have been taken to evaluate existing efforts, to ensure that the programs are effectively targeting the “hardest to serve,” adults with low skills and limited work history, and youth who are teen parents or school dropouts. Third, there is no comprehensive strategy for planning future resource allocations as needs change and as these communities expand in size.

A recent national study of training and employment programs, under the Job Training Partnership Act, revealed that little has been done to address the remedial educational needs of high-school drop-outs and that those with the greatest need for training and employment services are not targeted. However, overcoming these and other program weaknesses is not sufficient to solve these complex problems. A strategic plan is needed to alleviate the social ills associated with concentrated poverty.

There is a need to conduct a comprehensive inventory of agencies and institutions that provide services to populations in poverty areas. We also need to assess and evaluate the service providers' performance in an attempt to identify strengths, weaknesses, and missing links in their service-delivery systems. On the basis of these findings, a strategy should be devised for a more effective and coordinated use of existing resources and for generating new resources to address unmet needs. Finally, we need to propose a plan of action that would encourage development in the 1990s that links together the various program initiatives.

And, most important, representatives of the affected ethnic and racial groups must be in key decision-making roles if these efforts are to achieve success. Citizens of color, individually and through their community, civic and religious
institutions, bear a responsibility to promote positive values and lifestyles in their communities and to socialize their youth into the mainstream. But they cannot do this alone.

They cannot be held accountable for the massive plant closings, disinvestments, and exportation of jobs from our urban centers to Third World countries. There must be an equality in status, responsibility, and authority across race and class lines if we are to resolve our urban crises. Government, in a bipartisan fashion, must direct its resources to those programs determined to be successful with the poor, the poor must be permitted to participate in the design of programs for their benefit, and society at all levels must embrace personal responsibility and a commitment to race and gender equity.

How likely are these reforms to be implemented? If one were to analyze the prospects of these changes from the perspective offered in this paper, the answer would not be an optimistic one. However, an important consequence of the rebellion was to shake the very foundation of the taken-for-granted quality of our discourse and practice about race and class in American society. It opens up the opportunity for reassessing positions, organizing constituencies, and collectively engaging issues that have been buried from sight until now. Given these new openings, the Los Angeles urban rebellion of 1992 gives us all the opportunity to work on building a society in which “we can all get along.”

Notes


7. See Oliver and Johnson, “Interethnic Conflict in an Urban Ghetto,” and Johnson and Oliver, “Interethnic Minority Conflict in Urban America.”


9. See Farrell, Johnson, and Jones, “Field Notes.”


16. See Johnson and Oliver, “Economic Restructuring and Black Male Joblessness.”


20. These statistics for the years 1982–1989 were extracted from The Data Center’s Plant Shutdown Monitor Directory (Oakland, CA: The Data Center, 1978–1982).


24. See John and Oliver, "Economic Restructuring and Black Male Joblessness."
33. See Kwong, "The First Multicultural Riots."
34. In focus groups conducted immediately following the rebellion, Spanish-speaking, mostly immigrant respondents spoke eloquently of their interactions with Koreans in terms of housing, business, and work. While none of the participants condemned the violence, and only one respondent admitted participating in the looting, many expressed in graphic terms incidents of being harassed by Korean-American shopkeepers because of the assumption they would steal, or of being turned down for housing because the Korean-American landlord wanted to keep the apartment complex all Korean-American, or of being forced to work overtime for a Korean-American employer. This form of interethnic conflict has rarely surfaced, but we believe it is central to understanding the multi-ethnic character of the L.A. rebellion.
37. See Kirschenman and Neckerman, "We'd Love to Hire Them But . . ."
42. See Osborne, "The Kemp Cure-All."