

Execution and Riot

Scenes from a California maul

Red Wood

Within the space of two weeks in April and May of this year, California was rocked by two events that shook its image as the locus and realization of the American dream. Coming on the heels of the damage caused by shifting tectonic plates in the northern and southern regions of the state, Californians were reminded that they were subject to cataclysmic changes in their political as well as their geological topography. That such subterranean violence broke out into the open was a reminder that notions about progress and stability were built on shaky material foundations.

Act I — State Violence and the Harris Execution

“The spectacle is the nightmare of imprisoned modern society which ultimately expresses nothing more than its desire to sleep.”

—Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*

A now-discredited 19th century philosopher once talked about history as appearing first as tragedy, then as farce. In the April 21, 1992 execution of Robert Alton Harris by the State of California, history was conflated into both tragedy and farce.

The tragedy of capital punishment was both exacerbated and mocked by the farce enacted by the vultures of the media and the patrons of patriarchal punishment. What unfolded in the cruel theater of the absurd which surrounded the first person in California to die in the gas chamber in over 25 years is not only further testimony of the all-too familiar horrors of the microphysics of state violence, but also the decadent end-game of a brutalized society of the spectacle.

Although civilization is replete with its pyramids of sacrifice built by degraded masses and piled high with tortured victims, what passed for state violence in pre-modern and modern times was intimately bound up with religious rituals and moral codes. Retribution and sacrifice were always measured within the limits of patriarchal pronouncements about the sacred and profane.

Both in its religious and civil embodiments, the state took on the role of Divine Judge, dispensing life and death with absolute certitude about right and wrong. Although the halo wrapped around the heads of state and their obedient servants hallowed nothing more than the naked power of the torture chamber, appeals could always be made to some code of law. The illusion of justice, especially after the Enlightenment and the revolutionary upheavals of the modern era, always seemed to wait outside the gate, knowing full well, like Joseph K in Kafka's *The Trial*, that the powerless were always guilty.

No one understood better than Kafka, as presented in his story “The Penal Colony,” that the change from the old system of harsh patriarchal punishment to a supposedly more humane system actually sacrificed the traditional code of Divine Judgment. In its place was a world of nihilistic retribution where the promise of justice was only a utopian wish of the dispossessed and punishment continued with fewer trappings of its past glorious gore.

Although Kafka glimpsed the shifting paradigm of the punitive retribution of state violence, he could not anticipate the resurrection of the ancient form of spectacle through the electronic media. At the same time that our senses have been wired to new electronic devices of discipline and punishment, we have entered a decadent stage of self-referential state violence bereft of any higher ethical justification. Now there is only nihilistic retribution even while simulating, between commercials, previous patriarchal authoritarian modes.

We are made to want punishment for its own sake, not out of any putative moral or legal code, but because it satisfies the narrative of the society of the spectacle and the lingering gasps of patriarchal justification for state violence.

The squalid chants of the ghouls who cheered the execution of Robert Alton Harris in the death chamber of San Quentin with taunts of “Plop, plop, fizz, fizz, oh what a relief it is,” not only attracted media attention, but also reenacted the commodification of imagination as the real currency in the society of the spectacle. Their invocation of the Alka-Seltzer effervescence of state violence was a reflection of the mediated nihilism of society and their own sadomasochism. Capital punishment has thus become both a resting place for the damaged and wounded of all kinds to play out their whimpering externalized and internalized aggression on the larger stage of sanctioned state violence. Thus their character structure comes to resemble that of some of the very murderers whose executions they celebrate.

“Take it like a man”

The last day of life for Robert Alton Harris was a curious day of bonding with both the capriciousness of the state and the particularly male lust for retribution. Outside the gas chamber, the detective father of one of the boys murdered by Alton Harris stared intently, waiting to see Harris gasp and gulp for his last seven minutes on earth. Outside the wall of the prison, supporters (practically all male) of the death penalty bellowed their demands that Alton Harris now “take it like a man,” while the much larger contingent of capital punishment opponents finally subsided into quiet sobs after the ups and downs of the late night and early morning death watch.

Because of last minute attempts to stay the execution, Harris was actually taken to the gas chamber twice—the farcical consequence of a criminal “justice” system gone haywire. Appealing to stop California’s first execution in over a quarter century, defense attorneys bombarded the Appeals Court in San Francisco only to have the Supreme Court rebuff them with extraordinary finality, refusing even to consider the Nazi-like gas chamber as “cruel and unusual punishment.”

America’s “criminal justice” (an interesting term) is part of the fundamental contradiction of a so-called affluent society that treats most of its members, but especially the poor, as if they were waste. Prisons have always been homes for the poor and mentally impaired, but in contemporary America there is no pretense any longer that those on death row have been victimized by society. The statistics, however, belie this convenient forgetting of state complicity in the creation of victims for capital punishment who, after being killed in spirit, then are murdered in the flesh. Although it is estimated that 20% of those on death row are mentally retarded, the US Supreme Court recently held that there was no constitutional exemption to executing them. Therefore, it was no surprise that the Supreme Court refused to hear the appeal of Harris’s lawyers to reconsider the death sentence in light of the fact that Harris had suffered from fetal alcohol syndrome and been abused as a child.

Moreover, the fact that Harris’s mother was a Cherokee Indian who was abused and abandoned by Harris’s father played little part in the public record and media sideshow. The class and ethnic/racial discrimination embedded in the criminal justice system (over half of the 300+ death row inmates of California prisons are members of a racial/ethnic minority) is either denied, as in a recent Supreme Court decision about the high number of blacks on death row in southern states, or dismissed by a media-jaded public out for quick fixes and immediate retribution against the unruly poor and people of color.

While acknowledging the punitive and racist attitudes toward the poor and people of color in America, no one should seek to cover up the violence that permeates all sectors of this society. Robert Alton Harris’ very real vicious murder of two teenage boys should not be swept under the rug of liberal or religious pieties about the unfortunate poor, or the hypocrisy of this system and/or the backwardness of this state.

The outrage that “our” country would stoop to the level of Iran, Iraq, China and other third world countries which continue to carry out state executions neglects not only the continuities of state violence, but the changes enacted by the society of the spectacle. A society that trumpets its riches and sanctifies its violence abroad in the sickening smugness of a “new world order” while it cannot summon the imagination or will to deal with its continuing internal exploitation and oppression is beyond hypocrisy. It becomes caught up in a curious mirroring of created internal and external monsters to slay with a righteous indignation totally lacking in any values beyond what feels good at the moment. We have become, thus, a tragic and farcical version of narcissism and sadism in which introjected state violence plays out its staging of the war of all against all for a briefly exhilarated, but hardly exalted, media audience.

Ultimately, we become victimized by such violence when we refuse to take responsibility for the crimes of the state and for our own spectatorship. The passive-aggressive condition rampant in contemporary America, perfectly simulated by the ordeal of Robert Alton Harris’s execution, fits neatly into both the character armor of punitive patriarchy and the society of the spectacle.

Capital punishment as practiced now in California and all along the watchtowers of fortress America embodies the tragedy and farce of regnant state violence, and there appears little hope for an immediate way out.

Act II — Urban Violence and the Los Angeles Dis(order)

“The present moment is already the moment of the self-destruction of the urban milieu.”

—Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*

In the aftermath of the most destructive urban disorder in modern America, efforts to reconstruct all of the factors that led to the events in Los Angeles from April 29-May 2 will be fragmentary and tentative. Moreover, the rhetorical debris of politicians, pundits, and the media will inevitably conceal the meaning of the events that transpired after the Simi Valley verdict exonerating the brutal police thuggery against Rodney King.

Nonetheless, critical incidents and facts emerging from LA reflect and refract certain truths about “race” and class in modern America. Connecting those incidents and facts to the social-economic realities of the inner cities of late 20th century capitalist America helps to reveal the framework within which people attempt to live out their lives.

The first task in trying to understand what happened in LA is to clear away the ideological rubbish of the right and the left. Attributing what transpired to a small handful of thugs or to the heroic uprising of a class-conscious proletariat are ridiculous distortions requiring no elaborate refutation. Anyone familiar with the scene in LA, especially with the pre-existing multiracial tensions, ethnic and class polarizations, and the extensive random involvement of large numbers of people in the events of the last few days of April and the first days of May, will look beyond those reductionist analyses. While some will attempt to label the disorders as either a riot, uprising, or rebellion, no single term or ideological slant can encompass the multifold reality of the events in LA.

On the other hand, the assaultive images purveyed by the TV media that reduced the frame of what happened to horrific snapshots of an underclass gone mad are more difficult to cast aside because of their insidious cumulative quality. By sensationalizing the drama of isolated incidents while masking the daily institutional violence of urban life and the grinding injustices of poverty, crime, and police harassment, the media perpetrate a decontextualization of inner city order and disorder.

Probing the historical context of the LA events can help one to understand reality much more than helicopter shots of the fiery thousand points of light broadcast on national TV. While it’s possible to focus on South Central LA as the crucible of the unrest, there is much that such a geographical designation already screens out; to give one example, the sprawl of the multiracial underclass throughout many other sections of the city. Just noting the changes in the ethnic composition of Watts from overwhelmingly black to over 50% Latino from 1965 to the present conveys some sense of the multicultural context of what lay behind the conflict that emerged at the end of April.

On the other hand, the poverty of the area has actually worsened since 1965, reflecting the increasing economic polarization spawned by the buccaneer capitalists of the 1980s and legislated by their political lackeys. Furthermore, the steel, rubber, and auto factories once located inside or bordering on South Central, have disappeared with the

erosion of the manufacturing base of US capital. Left in the wake are struggling small businesses, franchises, and pirate operations that employ low-wage and undocumented immigrant workers. In effect, the capitalist empire has created pockets of third world marginalization and isolated islands of immigrant small business in the midst of the glitzy wealth of post-industrial capitalism.

The very real “racial” cast to such disparities of wealth and power, along with the continued police harassment of people of color in LA, generated a smoldering rage and resentment toward the privileges bestowed by skin color and social status. While that racial resentment burst forth in the riots, especially that of young African-American males tossed aside by a vicious system, it was countered, sometimes heroically, by other blacks who risked life and limb to come to the rescue of those whites, Latinos, and Asians caught up in the vortex of resentment and rage. The question one must ask of whites is how many instances they can cite of a whites rescuing a black being beaten senseless by a white mob. Moreover, for all the very real tension between African-Americans and immigrant Koreans in LA, the only Korean to die was at the hands of other American-Koreans who mistook him for a looter.

Certainly the anger expressed, in particular by young blacks towards non-blacks, is a specter that haunts white America. But that specter has been with us for a long time; it is deeply embedded in the racist practices and policies of the American social system. And every social indicator one can cite about inner city black youth only reinforces how alienating, anomic and destructive the system is. While there is a continuity between Richard Wright’s character, Bigger Thomas and the “gangsta” rap of Ice Cube, the rising expectations that accompanied the post-World War II civil rights changes never materialized and the inequities of “race” and class remain.

Today there is even less cohesion within the black community than when Watts exploded in 1965. Then, at least, “soul brother” postings on storefronts protected most establishments from being torched. But the fires this time found no consistent racial solidarity.

As a consequence of the expanding immigration to the South Central area and the continuing plague of violence throughout every sector of society, one could certainly find “racial” overtones to the riots. But this was not a “race riot” by any stretch of the imagination, certainly not in the mold of the 1943 race riot in Detroit where whites went on a rampage against blacks, murdering scores in the process. In fact, two central aspects of the events in LA in the spring of 1992 were its multiracial character and its lack of organized political focus. Protests against the Rodney King verdict certainly led to isolated confrontations against the police and white establishment, but the major thrust of activities in LA continued the tradition of recent urban disorders towards a “shoppers holiday.” In effect, the LA uprising could be seen as the latest incarnation of class looting endemic to capitalism; only this time, for a change, it was the underclass and not the ruling class doing the looting.

Capitalism was born as a system of organized looting. The first real capitalist power, the city-state of Venice, gained its pre-eminence in the Middle Ages by robbing Asia Minor of its wealth and treasures. Venetian merchants and sailors ripped off everything they could find in the East and opportunistically employed the Crusades as a vehicle to enrich themselves and their republic. In this early accumulationist phase of capitalism, every shakedown and shyster practice found an eventual legal code to enshrine the organized system of looting.

By the early twentieth century, however, capitalism in the west had begun to turn from accumulation to disaccumulation. In other words, the productive apparatus of an economically frenetic system had exploited enough resources, both natural and human, to produce vast surpluses, albeit unevenly distributed. In the US during the 1920s the birth of mass advertising signaled a transformation of capitalism from a system of the production of goods to one of creating needs for new goods. In the words of one business executive of the time, US capitalism had to engender the “organized creation of dissatisfaction.”

The birth of instant gratification and self-indulgence through consumerism and the society of the spectacle marked a new phase of capitalism that still resonates today.

Seen within the consumerist drive promoted by twentieth century capitalism, the LA uprising becomes a crystal-clear reflection of the underclass version of the “shop till you drop” mentality that afflicts American capitalism’s addicted consumers. For the multiracial hordes scrambling for goods in South Central and elsewhere around the sprawling city of LA, it was “loot till you scoot.” And instead of the zombie-like existence one sees on the faces of middle class shoppers in malls throughout America (perfectly parodied in George Romero’s horror film, “Dawn of the Dead”), there was an intensity sparked by lifting of the lid of repression that the uprising unleashed.

Thus, looting became an expression of class vengeance. One Latino looter claimed in the *LA Times*, “The cops can do anything they want and nothing happens. Well, we got away with our stuff. [L.A. Police Chief] Daryl Gates can kiss my ass. It was fun, lots of fun.” A 15 year old Latina in the same article from the *Times* made clear her participation in the looting was “like a dream come true,” contending that “it was all free.” This same young woman got to the essence of the capitalist ethos of the uprising: “We wanted everything at the same time.” Wanting it all and not being able to have much of anything was what grated the underclass in an era when the power and privileges of the well-heeled were constantly bombarding them.

For those in power the wanton destruction and looting were abhorrent even if they were only a pale reflection of capital’s own far more monumental destruction and looting, from the S&L scandal to the thousand and one rip-offs that occur daily. That the underclass would have the audacity to break the disciplinary order that kept them in their place, happy with the rules and regulations that fed them crumbs from the table, was a shock and a threat that had to be put down.

But trying simultaneously to encourage and repress the “creation of dissatisfaction” is a difficult task for the masters of the system of organized looting. And that is why painting the looters as alien to the system is a crucial task for capitalism and its apologists.

Blaming the victim and harassing the alien has been undertaken with a vengeance by the forces of restored order. The INS and the police used the cover of the unrest to round-up undocumented immigrant workers and send them back to Mexico and Central America. Attempts to divide-and-conquer and to refashion emarginated Angelenos into either bad criminals or good consumers is continuing apace. Minimal attempts at cooptation are more than matched by the reimposition of disciplinary order. The sentencing of those caught up in the scramble for goods, especially black and Latino youth, has been extremely capricious and harsh, with felony charges for even the most minor offense. Moreover, the showcase arrest of the four African-American men involved in the Reginald Denny beating, the electronic icon used to resurrect white fear and hatred towards the black “other,” has only further divided a city smoldering with resentment and a nation simmering with racism.

While there were and continue to be some laudable efforts to create real dialogue and multicultural coalitions, most people are retreating into fortress mentalities. In the month after the “riots” handgun sales in Los Angeles County set record highs. Right-wing groups are mobilizing to harass Mexican immigrants and calling for borders to be closed. Fear and resentment on all sides have resulted in a series of ominous signs and warnings of further violence.

Capitalism’s apparent inability to provide even a minimum level of material goods for the increasing number of the poor, raises the question about what form the self-destruction of the urban milieu will take. Will the underclass become increasingly ghettoized and policed? Will the authorities accept periodic violent outbursts and looting of marginal enterprises as routine?

Since any spasm of revolt is used to justify further repression, it seems unlikely that the society of the spectacle will undertake to remove causes of discontent. We can be certain that there will be no shortage of images showing individual maulings (as R.A. Harris’s execution) or collective ones (as against L.A. and Iraqi populations).

We will have to start by doing away with the illusions (and the structures they maintain) that keep us passive and pacified. This means to stop being consumers of capital’s daily riot and victims of its daily rot—be it in the well-ordered malls of the society of the spectacle or in the disorderly mauls of that society’s failed promises.

Mauled of the World Unite! Down with Malls!

—Red Wood

San Diego/LA

May 1992

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Execution and Riot
Scenes from a California maul

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