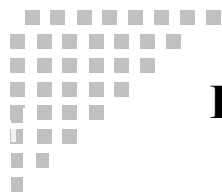




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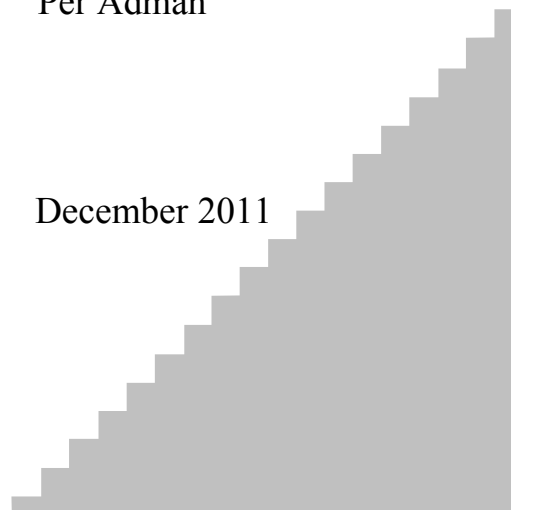


Riots, Segregation, and Local Government Actions:

A Missing Theoretical Perspective

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ABSTRACT

Previous research has convincingly shown that residential segregation and unfavorable political structures are important factors when explaining the occurrence of riots. Still, structural factors such as these cannot, in themselves, explain why riots take place instead of peaceful protests or complete inactivity. In this paper I argue that more scholarly attention should be paid to the immediate triggers of riots, specific events that almost always involve actors within local government institutions of social control—in the form of the police, politicians, or the courts. The actions undertaken by these actors must be considered, because these actions are crucial in causing riot outbreaks and are undertheorized in previous research, I argue. The aim of this paper is to develop this theoretical approach and illustrating the approach with empirical data on the 1992 Los Angeles riot, the most violent riot in the U.S.A. since the 1960s.

INTRODUCTION

Residential segregation is associated with many unwanted phenomena: unemployment, crime, welfare dependency, political alienation, and riots. Regarding the last item, outbreaks of spontaneous and large-scale violence have occurred periodically throughout history and continue to do so, even in relatively affluent and democratically established states. In the Western world, particular attention has been paid to the wave of riots that swept across the United States in the late 1960s, but more recent cases include London (Brixton) in 1981, Lyon in 1990, Los Angeles in 1992, Paris in 2005, and several British cities including London in 2011. The reaction to these events—in the media and the general public—is often one of surprise, dismay, and condemnation (e.g., Snow et al. 2007). Although potential causes such as segregation may be mentioned, many participants in the public debate seem to believe that such events are both difficult to comprehend and represent the actions of a limited number of criminal individuals. Political science and sociological researchers view the phenomenon differently, mostly considering riots as political protests and rioters' motives as at least partly political (for an overview, see Wilkinson 2009). The evidence is convincing that it is generally adequate to look at riots and rioters in this way.

What are the reasons, then, for these violent outbreaks? Previous research has focused primarily on structural factors; residential segregation and unfavorable political structures, sometimes connected with attitudes such as political alienation, have been paid most attention (see, e.g., Shihadeh 2009; Olzak & Shanahan 1996). It seems reasonable that factors such as these may be involved, though I believe that, in themselves, they cannot explain why aggressive and violent acts occur instead of peaceful protests or complete inactivity. Difficult circumstances and widespread political alienation prevail in many districts of big cities

around the world without such violence occurring (a criticism leveled by, among others, Muller 1979, chapter 1). In fact, such events occur very rarely even in riot-prone cities.

I argue that more scholarly attention should be paid to the immediate triggers of riots, specific events that almost always involve local government—in the form of the police, politicians, or the courts. Though segregation may indeed cause strong discontent and deep political alienation, as claimed in former research, to understand riot outbreaks we must also consider specific actions undertaken by local government actors, particularly actors from its institutions of social control. I believe that these actors and actions are crucial in causing riot outbreaks and that they are undertheorized in previous research, which has focused too narrowly on structural factors (a point also made by Wilkinson 2009:336). When seeking to explain riot outbreaks, I suggest that such disturbances result from the interaction effect between severe residential segregation and provocative actions undertaken by local government actors. These actions, some of which may be infuriating, can lead to great anger, a strong sense of injustice, an immediate need to protest, and the emergence of norms according to which riot activities are defensible. Violent protests, normally not an option for most people, are now regarded as a possible and justifiable alternative.

The aim of this paper is to develop this theoretical approach, and illustrating the approach with empirical data on the 1992 Los Angeles riot. This riot began after the announcement of the verdict that four white police officers were not guilty of using excessive force when arresting Rodney King, a young African American. During the riot, over 50 people were killed, 2400 injured, and 16,000 arrested, making it the most violent riot in the U.S.A. since the 1960s. The empirical material consists mainly of earlier case studies, journal articles, and a public inquiry into the role of the police before and during the riot: *The City in Crisis: A*

Report by the Special Advisor to the Board of Police Commissioners on the Civil Disorder in Los Angeles (1992).

The present paper begins by surveying previous research. Next, theory is discussed and illustrated empirically with the case of Los Angeles in 1992, after which several other riot cases are briefly discussed. The article ends with a concluding discussion and some concerns about further research into riots.

PREVIOUS RESEARCH

I define riots in the same way as in most previous political science research, as denoting spontaneous, collective violence carried out by ordinary members of society who have at least partly political intentions (Wilkinson 2009). Violent actions led by an organization (such as the protests led by the ATTAC movement in Seattle in 1999 or in Gothenburg in 2001) or some part of the political elite do not qualify as riots, according to this definition.

Furthermore, the requirement for political motives implies that collective violence such as football hooliganism does not fall within the definition.

Riots are politically relevant in several ways. First, a main task of government is to provide basic social order and guarantee the security of its citizens. The outbreak of a riot can put the government's capacity in this regard to a difficult test. Events such as these may involve the burning of cars, destruction of stores and property, and injury or even killing of people. Major riots often cause considerable material damage and are equivalent to minor natural disasters in terms of the resources needed to fight them and repair the damage. For example, the value of material damage caused by the 1992 Los Angeles riot was estimated at one billion dollars.

Riots may also be politically relevant from the rioter's perspective. Participation can be based on various motives: some people might take the opportunity to loot a shop exclusively for their own gain, while others want to express deep distrust of the government and its policies. Riots may also be a reaction to (seemingly) non-existent opportunities to influence society and one's own situation, in which case participation is a form of political activity (see, e.g., Brady 1999; Muller 1979). A combination of various factors may of course motivate individual rioters. Furthermore, riots may affect political decision making and have a significant effect on politics and society. For example, the riots in the U.S.A. in the 1960s probably led to increased welfare spending in the affected areas (Fording 1997; Isaac & Kelly 1981).

Riots tend to occur in disadvantaged districts in bigger cities, so it is not surprising that residential segregation has been emphasized in previous political science and sociological research. Several district-level studies of U.S. cities found positive correlations between riot-like violence and high concentrations of socioeconomically disadvantaged and immigrant/ethnic minority groups (Shihadeh 2009; Krivo et al. 2009, Lee & Ousey 2007; Stretesky et al. 2004; Holloway & McNulty 2003). The residents of such areas are believed to have inadequate access to social networks that might provide them with jobs, while unemployment, political alienation, and crime spread, while potential role models move to other areas. A hotbed for riots is created, according to this research. Studies of rioting in Paris suburbs in 2005 suggest similar explanations: segregation, poor education, unemployment, crime, and lack of satisfaction were identified as important causes (Haddad & Balz 2006; but see Schneider 2008, discussed below). Investigations of the massive unrest in the cities of Bradford, Oldham, and Burnley in the U.K. in the summer of 2001 focused on the effect of school segregation (Burgess & Wilson 2003). These suggested mechanisms have rarely been

tested, however, as this research mainly studies the correlation between various local demographic factors and the occurrence of riots using quantitative methods (Wilkinson 2009:338).

Furthermore, research into riots of the 1960s and early 1970s, particularly in the U.S.A., emphasized the importance of political structures severely restricting the political power of the residents of disadvantaged districts (for an overview of this research, see Olzak & Shanahan 1996).¹ Severe subjective political alienation was linked to such restricting structures. Positive correlations were found between self-reported political alienation and involvement in riots in areas where they had recently occurred (see, e.g., Wright 1981, Ransford 1968). Hence, some have suggested that unfavorable political structures give rise to subjective alienation and frustration, which in turn increase the risk of riots.²

Earlier studies have moreover made some valuable theoretical contributions on why riots may grow. To witness more and more people taking part may lead to expectations that by participating one may in fact contribute to change—“if there are many protesters, perhaps they will finally pay attention to us” (Frohlich & Oppenheimer 1970). Moreover, it is difficult for the police to arrest thousands of people (see, e.g., Chalmers & Shelton 1975).³ Both these circumstances may lead to a large number of riot participants. After some time, however, the violence usually meets with massive police or military force. The large crowds disappear, and the riot gradually ends.

¹ Cf. later discussions of the concept of political opportunity structures (see e.g., Eisinger 1973).

² Some attempts have been made to explain riots from a rational choice perspective that emphasizes looting (see, e.g., DiPasquale & Glaeser 1998; Chalmers & Shelton 1975; Gunning 1972). These attempts have been rightly criticized for being unable to explain the inception of riots or to clarify why many other activities take place during riots, such as fights with the police or property destruction (McPhail 1994:13–16; Mason 1984).

³ As discussed above, at this stage some individuals may also loot shops simply for their immediate private gain (see, e.g., Chalmers & Shelton 1975; Gunning 1972).

Previous research has identified some important factors, and it seems reasonable that segregation, unfavorable political structures, and political alienation may be involved in some way. However, I argue that such factors are insufficient reasons. On their own, they cannot explain why aggressive and violent rioting takes place instead of peaceful protests or complete inactivity. Difficult circumstances and widespread political alienation prevail in many districts of big cities around the world without such violence (a criticism leveled by, among others, Muller 1979, chapter 1). In fact, such events occur very rarely even in riot-prone cities. I do not want to downplay the significance of structural factors, but in the following section, I argue that government actors and their actions also must be taken into consideration if we are to understand riots in a satisfactory manner.

ACTIONS BY LOCAL GOVERNMENT ACTORS

Several scholars have attempted to determine how general state capacity affects the likelihood of ethnic riots (for an overview, see Wilkinson 2004: 63 f). For example, it has been demonstrated that riots are more frequent where government is weaker and less effective and hence has fewer resources with which to arrest and punish rioters (see, e.g., Beissinger 1998; DiPasquale & Glaeser 1998). However, my perspective is somewhat different, as I pay specific attention to—and theorize about—the mechanisms that actually trigger a riot. Government actors are almost always involved,⁴ often the police, but also the judiciary or politicians. This is not surprising: at the local level, government representatives often see themselves as forced to act in interventionist and selective ways (see, e.g., Rothstein 1998).

⁴ I also consider verbal comments and statements expressed in official or public contexts as “actions”. Moreover, even though I believe that the actions of local government actors are particularly crucial here, the actions and statements of national politicians may also be relevant. E.g., the statements made by Sarkozy during the 2005 Paris riots or by President George Bush during the 1992 Los Angeles riots may have led to intensified protests.

Such actions may be perceived as stigmatizing, i.e., clients perceive themselves as “different” and less well treated. By necessity, many street-level bureaucrats are provided with broad discretion; at the same time, they often have difficulties realizing the government’s overall intentions. National politicians may have articulated a goal of reducing crime, but lack of resources and problematic social contexts may make it difficult to achieve the goal at the local level. Consequently, actions undertaken by street-level bureaucrats may seem clumsy, inadequate, or even ignorant to their clients. This is particularly the case when these actions in some way concern—or even involve pointing out—certain individuals based on socioeconomic or demographic characteristics such as race, “immigrants,” or social class (Ben-Porat 2008; Howell et al. 2004). The fact that politicians and street-level bureaucrats often belong to the society’s majority group, while the residents of disadvantaged districts are usually part of a minority, increases the risk that these government actions may appear unfair and provocative.⁵ Actions undertaken by the state institutions of social control are particularly likely to cause anger and violent protests, as they impinge on basic rights and needs, such as physical safety and freedom (e.g., when being arrested).

Moreover, crime is often widespread in disadvantaged neighborhoods. This makes questions of law and order especially sensitive, and the related decisions and actions of politicians and civil servants working in government social control institutions are crucial (see, e.g., Karlsson & Tahvilzadeh 2010). The impact on residents’ attitudes and feelings may be very significant, especially when politicians are perceived as offensive, use derogatory language, or make

⁵ Moreover, the distinguishing factor does not have to be either ethnicity or class; it could well be a combination of factors (see the concept of intersectionality). Middle-class members of an ethnic minority often move to other districts and stop identifying with the less economically well-off within their own minority. Left in the disadvantaged area is an ethnic minority underclass, whose members perceive local politicians and street-level bureaucrats—regardless of ethnicity—as indifferent or even malicious.

sweeping statements describing whole groups of people as criminals, or appear indifferent to or unable to do anything about crime and social order.

Court actions are also important. Negative emotions such as anger may increase if court decisions seem to favor members of the majority group and discriminate against minority individuals (see, e.g., Turner 1994; see also Olzak & Shanahan 2003). This is also the case if legal procedures seem flawed and unfair, such as when jury composition is unrepresentative.

Finally, the police also play a crucial role (see especially Schneider 2008). They are very important government representatives, especially in disadvantaged neighborhoods where they often have many direct contacts with residents. Actually, in many disadvantaged areas, violent confrontations may take place more or less constantly between police and certain residents, especially young men. A key question is under what rare circumstances does a larger crowd, mixed in socioeconomic and demographic composition, join these young men in behaving violently, resulting in a riot.

Scholars have recently paid increased attention to the role and behavior of the police more generally in disadvantaged city areas. As far as I know, such research has made few theoretical connections between police behavior and riot occurrence (however, see Schneider 2008⁶). Such connections may increase our understanding of riot outbreaks, I argue. Over- and under-policing are distinguished, within this research. The former refers to excessive and selective behavior toward minority groups, such as more often arresting individuals simply because of their ethnic background, or acting provocatively and using excessive force,

especially against young men. An example is racial profiling, in which external markers such as skin color, gender and age (young men are particularly targeted), clothing, language, and behavior are used to identify potential criminals. Under-policing, on the other hand, denotes low interest in and scant knowledge of factors such as racism and discrimination, as well as general passivity on the part of police officers. It can also signify when the police are only interested in preventing crime from spreading to other districts, while ignoring crime in disadvantaged areas. Both over- and under-policing often affect disadvantaged neighborhoods (see, e.g., Ben-Porat, 2008; Brunson & Miller, 2006; Reiner 2000, chapter 4).

Briefly stated, I propose that the actions of courts, politicians, and policymakers—as well as particularly provocative examples of over-policing—can evoke very strong anger, a strong sense of injustice, an immediate need to protest, and the emergence of norms according to which riot activities are defensible. Under “normal circumstances,” most residents consider violent protests unjustifiable, but behavioral norms can temporarily shift and induce ordinary people to join in violent activities that they otherwise would avoid.⁷ As Turner argues, “when the police and the justice system are seen widely as the enemy rather than as agents for justice, established law loses its moral imperative. Charges of police brutality, or of a double standard of justice according to race, have preceded most American race riots” (1994:313). Here one may add the examples of riots in other countries, such as Paris in 2005 and in several British cities including London in 2011, where similar incidents triggered riots. I

⁶ Schneider discusses this connection when it comes to the police, but does not theorize as to how the actions of government actors may affect riots more generally (see also United States National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders 1968:1 and 10).

⁷ Empirical studies suggest that such norms are causally related to other violent activities, such as violent and illegal demonstrations, wildcat strikes, and the occupation of buildings (e.g., Finkel et al 1989; Muller 1979: chapter 4; however, see Finkel & Muller 1998).

argue that the more often such government action occurs, and the more provocative each incident, the higher the probability of rioting.

When local government representatives act in a way that appears prejudicial, the incident becomes a powerful reminder of the unjust conditions under which residents suffer (cf. Turner 1994). Violent protests appear justifiable because of the extremely unfair actions of government representatives, and the strength of the anger leads to an immediate need to act and protest. Furthermore, there are studies suggesting that anger increases the probability of participating in violent activities and of assessing particular violent behaviors as not particularly risky (see, e.g., Huddy et al. 2007; Tiedens 2001). Young men are particularly prone to react with strong feelings of anger, so they usually initiate violent protests.

In the next section, I will illustrate my theory with the 1992 Los Angeles riot. I will first describe the socioeconomic conditions and political structures that prevailed in the areas where the riot occurred. Next, I will discuss several controversial actions undertaken by the police, local politicians, and judiciary in the years preceding the riot. Finally, I present the empirical evidence I found concerning the levels and characteristics of the political alienation, discontent, and participatory norms of residents of the affected area.

LOS ANGELES IN 1992

On 29 April 1992, the media was paying close attention to the announcement of a court verdict in Los Angeles (for a detailed description of the events during the riot, see Cannon 1999, chapter 11). Four white police officers were accused of using excessive force when arresting Rodney King, a young African American. When the verdict of not guilty was announced, South Central Los Angeles erupted into a violent inferno in just a few hours.

Several African American youths began throwing bottles and stones at passing cars, and white

drivers were dragged out of their vehicles and beaten. As the violence intensified, windows of vehicles and buildings were broken, liquor stores, shops, and gas stations were robbed and destroyed, and fires were set. Some of the violence was directed against police officers, but civilians as well as shop owners and employees were also attacked. The riot took place mostly in this poor area of Los Angeles, but more affluent districts were also somewhat affected.

As many as 150,000 people may have been involved in the riot. More than 6000 buildings were destroyed, and the value of the material damage was estimated at one billion dollars.

Over 50 people were killed, 2400 injured, and 16,000 arrested, making it the most violent riot in the U.S.A. since the 1960s. The whole city was covered in thick smoke for several days.

The National Guard and the Marine Corps were called in to help the Los Angeles Police; in total, approximately 20,000 people were involved in regaining control of the city. President George Bush declared Los Angeles an emergency area, and a curfew was imposed in the most troubled districts. It took about four days before some sort of order was restored (Murty et al. 1994; Davis 1993b:144; Oliver et al. 1993; *The City In Crisis* 1992: 11, 19 and Appendix 8.15; *New York Times* 3/5-92).

Though the riot initially seemed to be a protest against racial discrimination, closer examination problematizes this interpretation. How else are we to understand why many Latin Americans and even some white people living in this district participated? Why was the violence not primarily directed against the courts, police, and politicians, but also against shop owners and civilians? Why did these poor individuals destroy their own neighborhoods, and how could they—most of whom normally behaved peacefully and lawfully—engage in such violent activities?

Segregation and political structures. In the early 1990s, socio-political debate in southern California focused on the economy. To the surprise of many, a recession had struck this part

of the U.S.A., which had long been regarded as a region of constant growth. Financial resources for social programs had fallen sharply, due to city and state budget cuts. In the economic downturn, many jobs had been lost in a wave of small industry closures, including in the aerospace industry. In 1991 alone, California lost 330,000 jobs, while 600,000 people immigrated to this state. African and Latin Americans were especially hard hit by increasing unemployment (Baldassare 1994; Oliver et al. 1993:122 and 137; *The City in Crisis* 1992:13–14 and 36–40; *New York Times*, 4/5-92).

In Los Angeles, whites were no longer in the majority, largely due to the large-scale immigration of Latin Americans and—to a lesser extent—Asians in the 1980s (for convenience, I still refer to whites as the “majority group”). Many recently arrived Latin Americans were illegal immigrants. The district where the riot mostly took place, South Central Los Angeles, was traditionally African American but had been significantly affected by Latin-American immigration: 48% of the residents were now African American, 45% Latin American, 4% white, and 3% Asian (see, e.g., Baldassare 1994; *The City in Crisis* 1992:13–14 and 36; *New York Times* 4/5-92).

California, in particular, Los Angeles, was among the most ethnically diverse and segregated areas of the United States. Housing and income gaps had increased dramatically for decades, and conditions were very difficult in almost all inner-city areas. African and Latin Americans in South Central Los Angeles had only one third of the purchasing power of other Los Angeles residents. Most apartment buildings in the area were in very poor condition. The schools were overcrowded because of the large-scale immigration and cuts to municipal budgets, and approximately 70% of students dropped out of high school. The South Central district was one of the most underprivileged of poor inner-city areas, 31% of its residents being below the poverty line, compared with 18.5% for the entire city. In 1990,

unemployment was over 50% among men in some parts of South Central Los Angeles.

According to estimates, as many as 50,000 men aged 16–34 years were unemployed in South Central at the time of the riot (Baldassare 1994; Morrison & Lowry 1994; Williams 1993:38, 82–96; Oliver et al. 1993:135; *The City in Crisis* 1992: 39–40; Hacker 1992; 162–163; *New York Times* 29/5-92).

In the 1980s, the relocation of white middle class residents and businesses from the inner city to the suburbs was more extensive than ever. The newly formed suburbs consisted almost entirely of real estate and single family homes. The African American middle-class had moved to the suburbs or to areas that the whites had left. Latin Americans often filled the spaces left in the inner city. Most property owners did not live in the inner city, and increases in rateable values and housing shortage had led to high rents and overcrowding. The average monthly rent in South Central Los Angeles amounted to approximately 70% of the minimum wage in the area. Many department stores and shops had also moved to the suburbs. In the inner city liquor stores were established, where some food and basic goods were sold at relatively high prices. White store owners had been replaced by Korean Americans. The public transport system was inadequate, making it difficult for inner city residents to get to the suburbs where most of the jobs and cheaper supermarkets were located (Baldassare 1994; Nakano 1993:167–170; *The City in Crisis* 1992:36, 152 and Appendix 13; Davis 1990:20 and 164–170).

The political influence of the ethnic groups had been affected by the massive demographic changes. According to the public inquiry, both the Republican and Democratic parties—as in many other U.S. cities—were increasingly seeking support in the suburbs. The city center had lost strategic value, and the parties had no incentives to engage in and represent the poor inner-city population: these individuals voted less often and lost political influence. Elderly

and white voters were clearly overrepresented among Los Angeles voters in the early 1990s, while Latin Americans were particularly underrepresented. In 1992 Latin Americans constituted 40% of the residents of the city but only 8% of its registered voters. This had to do with the large number of illegal immigrants without voting rights and with the relatively complicated procedures for voter registration, for which instructions were only available in English (Oliver et al. 1993:131; Davis 1993a:52–3; *The City in Crisis* 1992: 41; Clark & Morrison 1991:713–720).

Tom Bradley, an African American, was Mayor of Los Angeles at this time, but Bradley and his party coalition primarily represented the educated African American middle class. African Americans in the inner city were largely overlooked, according to many critics.

Gerrymandering was common, and Latin Americans seem to have been particularly negatively affected. Between 1973 and 1985, there were no Latin Americans among the 15 city councilors in Los Angeles, and Asian-American representation was also low. Existing multiethnic coalition-building efforts were criticized for being run mostly by community elites. Furthermore, a number of programs had been launched to improve inner-city conditions, but the minorities concerned were strongly underrepresented among program leaders (Jackson et al. 1994; Regalado 1994; Sonenshein 1994; Watts 1993:243; Davis 1993a:44; Oliver et al. 1993:122 and 137; *The City in Crisis* 1992: 39–40; *New York Times* 4/5-92; Clark & Morrison 1991:713 and 716–717; Taagapera & Soberg Shugart 1989:16).

In sum, the conditions in the riot-affected areas of Los Angeles in 1992 were highly problematic in terms of both segregation and political structure. The residents suffered from poor socioeconomic circumstances and had very limited opportunities to exert political influence. Let us shift our attention to actions undertaken by local government representatives, to see whether their behavior was also in line with the theory outlined above.

Local government actions. On March 3, 1991, i.e., just over a year before the riot, Rodney King was arrested by four white police officers on a freeway in the Los Angeles outskirts. King had been driving too fast and was found to be drunk. At first he refused to leave the car, but the police officers forced him out, pushed him to the ground, and continued to beat him even though he soon was unconscious. A private citizen videotaped the incident, and the film was soon broadcast repeatedly on television news; it revealed that King had received 56 blows. When the court verdict was announced, the King case had long been public knowledge and media coverage was extensive. Nine of ten Americans had seen the filmed assault at least once, and about as many people knew of the verdict the day after the announcement (*The City in Crisis* 1992:1 and 11; *Washington Post* 1/5-92).

The Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) had been involved in several other controversial incidents in the years before the riot. For example, in 1988 a large-scale drug-seizure operation in a number of large residential buildings in the inner city led to extensive property damage. A 1990 operation concerning 400 striking janitors turned violent, and resulted in 16 injured individuals. Between 1986 and 1990, 1440 cases of excessive police force were reported. In almost half of these cases, the abuse was claimed to have occurred after the suspects had already been arrested or imprisoned. Less than one percent of the reported police officers were convicted by the police disciplinary board—a low proportion compared with other police forces. Over the same period, approximately USD 20 million was paid in compensation to police assault victims, who mainly belonged to ethnic minorities.

Furthermore, in the 1980s, 18 people—16 of whom were African Americans—were killed while being arrested due to the LAPD's use of the "carotid choke hold method" on individuals suspected of being particularly dangerous. Police Chief Bill Gates stated that the high percentage of dead African Americans was probably caused by a physical defect among these

individuals: “We may be finding that in some blacks when the carotid choke hold is applied the veins or arteries do not open up as fast as they do on normal people” (quotation from Watts 1993: 241; for the paragraph in general, see Murty et al. 1994:91; Oliver et al. 1993:121; *The City in Crisis* 1992:4, 32–4, 96 and 188; *Washington Post* 2/5-92; *New York Times* 1/5-92).

According to the Christopher Commission, which conducted its investigations after the King assault but before the riot, the LAPD was characterized by a “siege mentality”: police officers verbally insulted minority members, used excessive force, and often arrested African and Latin Americans simply because they looked like suspects. Gates was described as unfit to be police chief. The public inquiry into the riots reached a similar conclusion, stating that the LAPD had moved away from the society and its needs, becoming almost hostile to the general public (concerning the Commission’s report, see *Washington Post* 2/5-92 and *New York Times* 1/5-92; for the paragraph in general, see Fukurai et al. 1994; *The City in Crisis* 1992:3).

The public inquiry concluded that the tense relationship between parts of the inner city population and the LAPD was one important factor explaining the riot; furthermore, the beating of Rodney King had arguably become a symbol of this relationship. Certain facts, however, speak against the violence being caused *only* by this conflict. Of the approximately 50 deaths that occurred during the riot, only ten directly involved the police or National Guard. Moreover, area residents in general did not have a particularly negative view of the LAPD. In South Central Los Angeles, most African and Latin Americans regarded the police force positively, according to a survey conducted one year after the riot: 54% of African Americans and 64% of Latin Americans expressed approval of the LAPD (*Los Angeles Times* 13/5-93; *The City in Crisis* 1992:3 and 138). Very negative attitudes were probably limited to particular segments of the inner-city population.

It is likely that actions undertaken also by the local judiciary aroused strong negative feelings. The police officers who assaulted King were charged on the initiative of Mayor Bradley. The defense managed to have the trial moved from the ethnically mixed Los Angeles County to Simi Valley, claiming that publicity would prevent a fair trial in Los Angeles County. Simi Valley was a small and mostly white middle-class suburb including an unusually high proportion of retired police officers and only two percent African Americans among its residents. None of the twelve jurors—selected to be representative of this district—was African American. During the trial, one police officer testified against the others. Among the evidence was the film of the beating and a transcript of a conversation between two of the police officers, in which one of them described the incident as “a big-time use of force.” After about three months the verdict was announced. The jury unanimously accepted the defense line that the police officers had used only as much force as was needed to overpower King, and they were acquitted of all charges (Fukurai et al. 1994; *The City in Crisis* 1992:11–12; *Time Magazine* 11/5-92).⁸

One more incident, which occurred about a year before the riot broke out, is noteworthy. A 15-year-old African American girl was shot to death in a Korean-owned grocery store. The store owner, who fired the gun, thought she was shoplifting a bottle of juice; he was sentenced to only a fine and community service. The verdict was announced a few months before the riot and helped undermine confidence in the police and judiciary, according to the public inquiry (Davis 1993b:143; Aubry 1993:151; Stewart 1993:23–24, 28 and 33–36; *The City in Crisis* 1992:14).

⁸ Two of the involved police officers were convicted in a federal court a year later for infringing on King’s civil rights and were sentenced to long prison terms (*Newsweek* 26/4-93).

With respect to the local politicians and leaders, in the early 1990s, Los Angeles was considered to have a strong city council and a weak mayor. An indication of this was that Mayor Bradley tried to force the very unpopular police chief Gates to resign, but without success, as the latter had city council support. A number of programs had been launched to improve inner-city conditions, but these programs had recently experienced major cuts, and critics claimed that they were ineffective and inadequate. The public inquiry severely criticized local politicians for not having paid enough attention to the serious situation in the inner city (Oliver et al. 1993:122 and 137; *The City in Crisis* 1992:15, 39–40 and 47; *New York Times* 4/5-92; *Washington Post* 2/5-92; *New York Times* 1/5-92).

In sum, there is evidence that several actions preceding the riot—especially ones undertaken by the judiciary and the police—were very provocative. Does the data collected also indicate the existence of feelings and attitudes in line with the theoretical expectations?

Attitudes among residents. In an opinion poll conducted one year after the unrest, 82% of respondents answered “only a little” or “not at all” to the question “How much do you feel Los Angeles’ government and political leaders care about the problems of your neighborhood?” In the same study, 84% of the African Americans and 55% of the Latin Americans surveyed indicated negative attitudes toward Police Chief Gates (*Los Angeles Times* 13/5-93).⁹ The public inquiry held several community meetings after the riot, and the inquiry’s report presents many comments from these meetings, at which residents of the riot-affected areas spoke of the causes of the riot. The residents particularly accused local political leaders of being insufficiently involved, and said that there were no channels of communication to the city council and its members. Residents expressed anger, frustration,

⁹ The results can be compared with those of a national voter survey in 1992 in which 52% agreed with the statement: “I do not think public officials care very much what people like me think” (Prysbey & Scavo 1993:79).

and dissatisfaction with the situation. And according to additional sources African and Latin Americans generally believed that the legal system did not punish police officers who acted wrongly toward minority individuals. In another opinion poll of African Americans in the riot-affected areas, 90% saw the riots as a desperate expression of the tremendous need for socioeconomic improvement and reduced racial discrimination (Fukurai et al. 1994; Murty et al. 1994:93–100; *The City in Crisis* 1992:15 and Appendix 17).

Hence there are several indications of strong discontent and deep political alienation among the residents of the riot-affected areas at the time of the disturbance. There is also evidence of attitudes rationalizing and defending the violence. In an opinion poll, all responding African Americans from South Central Los Angeles said that they were very upset about the acquittal in the King case. Furthermore, 75% thought that the rioters were morally justified and 85% said they believed that change for the better would result from the riot. Only 10% condemned the participants and thought they should be punished, even though 80% opposed violent protests in general. Moreover, the public inquiry found that the relocation of the King trial and the jury composition had obviously attracted considerable attention and angered many residents, who evidently did not believe that conditions existed for a fair trial. The whole process was seen as exemplifying the racial injustices characterizing the legal system. This was reflected in an opinion poll conducted in early 1993 in which approximately 75% of respondents—African Americans from the riot-affected area of South Central Los Angeles—expressed disappointment and anger over the relocation of the trial. In another survey of Los Angeles residents, 96% disagreed with the jury verdict (Bobo et al. 1994; Fukurai et al. 1994; Murty et al. 1994:15 and 91–96).

However, if the riot was essentially a political protest, and in one way a spontaneous reaction to local government actions, why did the riot participants not direct their discontent and

frustration mainly toward governmental institutions, such as the city council, police stations, and courts? Here some circumstances should be considered. The riot was spontaneous and unorganized, and area residents were at home or at work, as usual, when it all started.

Furthermore, Los Angeles is a very large and segregated city. Most governmental institutions were far away, in places difficult to reach without a car. Nearby and more or less unattended property and shops were much easier targets than were heavily guarded governmental institutions (cf Beissinger 1998; DiPasquale & Glaeser 1998). Even so, violence was reported outside the city hall and a police station, but was met with massive resistance from the police force and the National Guard (Watts 1993:245; *Newsweek* 11/5-92).

Alternative hypotheses. Many individuals who participated in the riot had previously been arrested. In line with this, some claimed that gangs in Los Angeles actually caused the riot. In the early 1990s, some 150,000 young men and boys belonged to youth gangs in Los Angeles. The dominant gangs were the Crips and Bloods, both of which had been growing steadily since the late 1960s. They were not hierarchically organized, but comprised a large number of loosely organized neighborhood gangs. The Crips and Bloods competed over the illicit drug market in Los Angeles, and had been locked in a bloody feud for several decades. In 1991, an estimated 775 people were killed in gang-related violence in Los Angeles (Murty et al. 1994:94–100; Oliver et al. 1993:127; *The City in Crisis* 1992:13 f; *The New York Times* 12/5-92; Davis 1990:309–310).

The gangs were undoubtedly widespread in Los Angeles and gang members were involved in many illegal activities. Speaking against the claim that gangs caused the riot, however, is the sheer number of rioters. Approximately 150,000 people took part, representing at least a quarter of South Central Los Angeles residents. Among these were ordinary workers and non-criminal people. Entire families engaged in looting, for example, amassing food and valuable

goods. Inspections of apartment buildings in the area indicated that three quarters of residents possessed stolen goods from the riot at home. Admittedly, young men were over-represented among those arrested, constituting 87% of the 5000 initially arrested (most of them were between 15 and 30 years old). However, all ages between 10 and 65 years were represented, as were women. One explanation for the high rates of previously arrested among the arrested rioters is the police department's extensive and sometimes completely indiscriminate arrests, mostly of young African- and Latin-American men, totaling approximately 50,000 individuals between 1987 and 1990. Moreover, the public inquiry and other observers noted that youth gangs seemed to have played no central role in the riot, gang members participating mainly with other rioters and not specifically with their gangs (Morrison & Lowry 1994; *The City in Crisis* 1992:23–24 and Appendices 8.13, 8.14, and 9.2; *New York Times* 2/5-92, 7/5-92 and 12/5-92).¹⁰

Others claimed that the Los Angeles riot was essentially the result of ethnic conflict, not only between whites and African Americans but also between African and Korean Americans, between African and Latin Americans, and between Korean and Latin Americans (e.g., Bergesen & Herman 1998; Bobo et al. 1994; Chang 1993; Stewart 1993). Research into riots in countries such as India often use the term “ethnic riot” when discussing this kind of violence. In such contexts, ethnic conflict is indeed related to the violence, as has been demonstrated (Wilkinson 2004; Horowitz 2001). In the case of Los Angeles, however, data about those arrested during the riot are revealing. Of the first 5000 arrested, 38% were African American, 9% white, 2% Asian, and up to 51% Latin American. Indeed, those arrested may not have been completely representative of the rioters, and the LAPD may have taken advantage of the opportunity to arrest illegal immigrants. Nevertheless, the riot does not seem

¹⁰ Forty-two percent were arrested for theft of various kinds and another 41% for violating the curfew, whereas “only” 17% were arrested for various violent crimes.

to have been solely about two opposing groups. Of course, existing ethnic conflicts may have been reflected in some of the violence during the riot. African and Latin Americans constituted most of the participants, but according to eyewitnesses, they participated side by side. Initially, whites were attacked by African Americans, but after a while the violence was directed toward many different targets. Businesses owned by Korean Americans were attacked, but this is not surprising since many of the stores in the area were run by them. Korean store owners probably felt forced to defend themselves because they did not expect the LAPD to protect them and their stores. Moreover, Latin American-owned businesses were affected too, and approximately 30–40% of the looted shops were owned by Latin Americans. In fact, even shops owned by African Americans were attacked, many of which had signs indicating their owners' ethnicity. Still, some of the violence that took place during the riot may indeed have resulted from ethnic tensions, though as far as the *outbreak* of the riot is concerned—which is the focus here—these tensions were not decisive (Bergesen & Herman 1998; Turner 1994:311; Davis 1993b: 142–143; Navarro 1993; Watts 1993: 243; *Los Angeles Times* 13/5-93; *The City in Crisis* 1992: 23, 38 and Appendix 8.12; *Washington Post* 2/5-92; *New York Times* 11/5-92).

A final alternative hypothesis concerns the media. The riot did follow intense media coverage of the triggering issues, and it is mainly through the media or direct contacts with friends and family that information spreads before and during a riot (Andrews & Biggs 2006; Spilerman 1970; National Advisory Commission 1968). However, media coverage is not sufficient to explain outbreaks of rioting, as most events covered by the media trigger no violence. There must be something particularly infuriating about the precipitating event itself for a riot to ensue. Furthermore, in several other riot outbreaks, the media were not involved at all (such as Los Angeles in 1965 and Lyon in 1990).

In sum, although gang members were involved in the riot, tensions did exist between ethnic groups, and media coverage of the court verdict was intense, no convincing evidence suggests that any one of these factors decisively influenced the outbreak of the riot (this point is also made by Thierney 1994; see also Horowitz 2001:27).

OTHER CASES OF RIOTS

Riots occurred in Los Angeles on an earlier occasion. In 1965, a major outbreak of violence occurred in more or less the same neighborhoods as in 1992. The triggering incident in 1965 was the arrest of an African American man carried out by white police officers. Segregation was widespread in the 1960s, and, as in the early 1990s, residents' relations with the police, police chief, and local political leaders were characterized by distrust and frustration.

Furthermore, the triggering incident was preceded by several incidents considered provocative by residents (see, e.g., Sears 1970; Sears and McConahay 1970; Oberschall 1968: *Violence in the City* 1965).

Several other U.S. riots were triggered by similar incidents. As mentioned above, events involving the police were involved in triggering most riots in the 1960s, and the 1980 unrest in Miami arose after a verdict that largely resembled that of the King case (Baldassare 1994).

Similar examples are found in other Western countries. In the Lyon suburb of Vaulx-en-Velin, rioting occurred for two days in October 1990. This suburb was largely inhabited by immigrants, young people, and the unemployed, and the per capita income was low. The violence started after two young men were knocked off a motorbike by a police car, and one of them was killed. Rumors spread that the police had acted intentionally, and young men then began to burn cars, loot shops, fight the police, and so on. Residents of the suburb

claimed that the police were largely responsible for the violence, because of how they treated ethnic minorities in the area (Bleich et al. 2010). Another French example occurred in November 2005 in the suburbs of Paris, where, as mentioned above, segregation and difficult socioeconomic conditions prevailed. The unrest broke out after a confrontation between police and adolescents of Arab background. Schneider (2008) argues that the riot was linked to years of police brutality and that the triggering incident was particularly egregious. Several policymakers, including the then Interior Minister Sarkozy, acted at this stage in ways probably perceived as very provocative (ibid. 147–148).

In several riots in the United Kingdom, the triggering incidents involved police officers and young black men; for example, in London (Brixton) in 1981 and 1985, Liverpool in 1985, and London again in 2011. In the last case, Mark Duggan was killed by armed police officers in Tottenham, in north London, after they stopped his minicab as part of a planned operation. Rumors spread that the police had lied when they claimed that Duggan also fired a gun. The violence started when some participants in an otherwise peaceful demonstration attacked the Tottenham police station. Similar incidents triggered the other English riots mentioned here (*The Guardian* 10/8-11¹¹).

These cases need additional careful investigation to determine whether or not they support the theory outlined here. From this quick review, however, they appear to be in line with the theory in terms of triggering incidents and structural factors.

¹¹ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/blog/2011/aug/10/riots-righteous-game-blame> accessed on August 10, 2011.

CONCLUSION

Riots are connected with segregation. Disturbances of this kind occur almost exclusively in disadvantaged areas of bigger cities. Residential segregation is often associated with circumstances such as unemployment, lack of opportunities to exert political influence, and widespread political alienation. These last two factors seem to be connected with the occurrence of riots. This is, in short, what much previous research claims, and the case of Los Angeles in 1992 seems to illustrate this clearly. Social conditions were harsh, political structures did not allow residents of the South Central area much influence, and local political leaders were seen as incapable of improving these conditions and not interested in even trying to do so.

However, I argue that identifying these factors and circumstances is not sufficient.

Problematic conditions and lack of political influence characterize the situations of residents of many disadvantaged areas in cities around the world where violent or peaceful protests do not occur. In Los Angeles too, except for events during the riot, residents of riot-affected areas were in general politically passive and deeply politically alienated. The poor generally do not protest, either in Los Angeles or elsewhere. To improve our understanding of why they sometimes do, more attention should be paid to the triggering incidents and the actions of local government actors, especially those of institutions of social control and their representatives, such as the police, courts, and local politicians. I argue that previous research has been too preoccupied with structural factors; it has underestimated the importance of these government actors, resulting in a lack of theorizing about their actions as a factor. In many cases, the riot-triggering incidents involve local government actors, including in Los Angeles in 1992. The film of four white police officers beating an African American unconscious evoked strong anger and the verdict of not guilty was so provocative that it triggered a violent reaction.

In disadvantaged areas, there is always the risk of local government actions appearing prejudicial, because of insufficient resources and difficult socioeconomic environments (including high crime levels). The fact that street-level bureaucrats often belong to the majority group increases the likelihood that provocative incidents will occur. Actions that touch on certain categories, such as ethnicity or “immigrants,” could be especially sensitive, as is well illustrated in the case of Los Angeles in 1992. Incidents such as the beating of Rodney King evoke strong feelings of anger, a strong sense of injustice, and an immediate need to protest, prompting the emergence of norms according to which rioting is defensible. Violent protests, inconceivable for most residents under normal circumstances, suddenly appear justifiable.

The case study of Los Angeles presented here illustrates these theoretical claims fairly well. I have found indications of strong anger, discontent, general political alienation, and norms defending the violent acts undertaken. To be fair, though, more data are needed to prove the causal links included in the theory, and in-depth interviews with riot participants are especially called for. We also need more detailed theoretical elaboration on the relationships between triggering incidents, attitudes, norms, and violent actions.

Admittedly, this theory does not identify exactly how provocative an act must be, or how many incidents must occur within a certain period, to trigger a riot. However, I still argue that a theoretical contribution has been made, as previous research has been incapable of explaining riot outbreaks: with an overemphasis on socioeconomic and political factors, it lacked the ability to clarify why political passivity sometimes is turned into violent protests.

Finally, a word on the societal consequences if the suggested theory is correct: I argue that the more often provocative government actions occur, and the more provocative each incident, the higher the probability of rioting. This also suggests that well-functioning courts and police

forces, as well as dedicated and wise decision makers, can reduce the risk of riots, despite permanently harsh conditions. Does this mean that riots can be avoided, as long as the police, courts, and local policymakers are able to behave in a nuanced and respectful way? I believe that such a conclusion is premature. The difficulties faced by street-level bureaucrats who must act in areas marked by widespread crime and serious social problems should not be underestimated. Some governmental action may almost inevitably be perceived as provocative, even if street-level bureaucrats have very good intentions. The problem of segregation must also be addressed if the risk of riot-related violence is to be minimized.

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