The Watts Riot, 1965

The Decline and Fall of the Spectacle-Commodity Economy

SITUATIONIST
INTERNATIONAL
December 1965

Newly translated and reissued July 1992 (in the aftermath of the second Los Angeles riot) by Ken Knabb. Reprinted from *Public Secrets* (1997). This translation supersedes the version in the *Situationist International Anthology* (1981).

No copyright.

firestarter press, 2003

August 13th, 1965, the blacks of Los Angeles revolted. An incident between traffic police and pedestrians developed into two days of spontaneous riots. Despite increasing reinforcements, the forces of order were unable to regain control of the streets. By the third day the blacks had armed themselves by looting accessible gun stores, enabling them to fire even on police helicopters. It took thousands of police and soldiers, including an entire infantry division supported by tanks, to confine the riot to the Watts area, and several more days of street fighting to finally bring it under control. Stores were massively plundered and many were burned. Official sources listed 32 dead (including 27 blacks), more than 800 wounded and 3000 arrests.

Reactions from all sides were most revealing: a revolutionary event, by bringing existing problems into the open, provokes its opponents into an unhabitual lucidity. Police Chief William Parker, for example, rejected all the major black organizations' offers of mediation, correctly asserting: "These rioters don't have any leaders." Since the blacks no longer had any leaders, it was the moment of truth for both sides. What did one of those unemployed leaders, NAACP general secretary Roy Wilkins, have to say? He declared that the riot "should be put down with all necessary force." And Los Angeles Cardinal McIntyre, who protested loudly, did not protest against the violence of the repression, which one might have supposed the most tactful policy at a time when the Roman Church is modernizing its image; he denounced "this premeditated revolt against the rights of one's neighbor and against respect for law and order," calling on Catholics to oppose the looting and "this violence without any apparent justification." And all those who went so far as to recognize the "apparent justifications" of the rage of the Los Angeles blacks (but never their real ones), all the ideologists and "spokesmen" of the vacuous international Left, deplored the irresponsibility, the disorder, the looting (especially the fact that *arms and alcohol* were the first targets) and the 2000 fires with which the blacks lit up their battle and their ball. But who has defended the Los Angeles rioters in the terms they deserve? We will. Let the economists fret over the $27 million lost, and the city planners sigh over one of their most beautiful supermarkets gone up in smoke, and McIntyre blubber over his slain deputy sheriff. Let the sociologists bemoan the absurdity and intoxication of this

rebellion. The role of a revolutionary publication is not only to justify the Los Angeles insurgents, but to help elucidate their perspectives, to explain theoretically the truth for which such practical action expresses the search.

In Algiers in July 1965, following Boumédienne's coup d'état, the situationists issued an address to the Algerians and to revolutionaries all over the world which interpreted conditions in Algeria and the rest of the world *as a whole*. Among other examples we mentioned the movement of the American blacks, stating that if it could "assert itself incisively" it would unmask the contradictions of the most advanced capitalist system. Five weeks later this incisiveness was in the streets. Modern theoretical criticism of modern society and criticism in acts of the same society already coexist; still separated but both advancing toward the same realities, both talking about the same thing. These two critiques are mutually explanatory, and neither can be understood without the other. Our theory of "survival" and of "the spectacle" is illuminated and verified by these actions which are so incomprehensible to American false consciousness. One day these actions will in turn be illuminated by this theory.

Until the Watts explosion, black civil rights demonstrations had been kept by their leaders within the limits of a legal system that tolerates the most appalling violence on the part of the police and the racists — as in last March's march on Montgomery, Alabama. Even after the latter scandal, a discreet agreement between the federal government, Governor Wallace and Martin Luther King led the Selma marchers on March 10 to stand back at the first police warning, in dignity and prayer. The confrontation

expected by the demonstrators was reduced to a mere spectacle of a potential confrontation. In that moment nonviolence reached the pitiful limit of its courage: first you expose yourself to the enemy's blows, then you push your moral nobility to the point of sparing him the trouble of using any more force. But the main point is that the civil rights movement only addressed legal problems by legal means. It is logical to make legal appeals regarding legal questions. What is irrational is to appeal legally against a blatant illegality as if it was a mere oversight that would be corrected if pointed out. It is obvious that the crude and glaring illegality from which blacks still suffer in many American states has its roots in a socioeconomic contradiction that is not within the scope of existing laws, and that no future *judicial* law will be able to get rid of this contradiction in the face of the more fundamental laws of this society. What American blacks are really daring to demand is the right to really live, and in the final analysis this requires nothing less than the total subversion of this society. This becomes increasingly evident as blacks in their everyday lives find themselves forced to use increasingly subversive methods. The issue is no longer the condition of American blacks, but the condition of America, which merely happens to find its first expression among the blacks. The Watts riot was not a *racial* conflict: the rioters left alone the whites that were in their path, attacking only the white policemen, while on the other hand black solidarity did not extend to black store-owners or even to black car-drivers. Martin Luther King himself

had to admit that the revolt went beyond the limits of his specialty. Speaking in Paris last October, he said: "This was not a race riot. It was a class riot."

The Los Angeles rebellion was a rebellion against the commodity, against the world of the commodity in which worker-consumers are *hierarchically* subordinated to commodity standards. Like the young delinquents of all the advanced countries, but more radically because they are part of a class without a future, a sector of the proletariat unable to believe in any significant chance of integration or promotion, the Los Angeles blacks take modern capitalist propaganda, its publicity of abundance, *literally*. They want to possess *now* all the objects shown and abstractly accessible, because they want to *use* them. In this way they are challenging their exchange-value, the *commodity reality* which molds them and marshals them to its own ends, and which has *preselected everything*. Through theft and gift they rediscover a use that immediately refutes the oppressive rationality of the commodity, revealing its relations and even its production to be arbitrary and unnecessary. The looting of the Watts district was the most direct realization of the distorted principle: "To each according to their *false* needs" — needs determined and produced by the economic system which the very act of looting rejects. But once the vaunted abundance is taken at face value and directly *seized*, instead of being eternally pursued in the rat-race of alienated labor and increasing unmet social needs, real desires begin to be expressed in festive celebration, in playful self-assertion, in the *potlatch* of destruction. People who destroy commodities show their human superiority over commodities. They stop submitting to the arbitrary forms that distortedly reflect their real needs. The flames of Watts *consummated* the system of consumption. The theft of large refrigerators by people with no electricity, or with their electricity cut off, is the best image of the lie of affluence transformed into a truth *in play*. Once it is no longer bought, the commodity lies open to criticism and alteration, whatever particular form it may take. Only when it is paid for with money is it respected as an admirable fetish, as a symbol of status within the world of survival.

Looting is a *natural* response to the unnatural and inhuman society of commodity abundance. It instantly undermines the commodity as such, and it also exposes what the commodity

ultimately implies: the army, the police and the other specialized detachments of the state's monopoly of armed violence. What is a policeman? He is the active servant of the commodity, the man in complete submission to the commodity, whose job it is to ensure that a given product of human labor remains a commodity, with the magical property of having to be paid for, instead of becoming a mere refrigerator or rifle — a passive, inanimate object, subject to anyone who comes along to make use of it. In rejecting the humiliation of being subject to police, the blacks are at the same time rejecting the humiliation of being subject to commodities. The Watts youth, having no future in market terms, grasped another *quality* of the present, and that quality was so incontestable and irresistible that it drew in the whole population — women, children, and even sociologists who happened to be on the scene. Bobbi Hollon, a young black sociologist of the neighborhood, had this to say to the *Herald Tribune* in October: "Before, people were ashamed to say they came from Watts. They'd mumble it. Now they say it with pride. Boys who used to go around with their shirts open to the waist, and who'd have cut you to pieces in half a second, showed up here every morning at seven o'clock to organize the distribution of food. Of course, it's no use pretending that food wasn't looted. . . . All that Christian blah has been used too long against blacks. These people could loot for ten years and they wouldn't get back half the money those stores have stolen from them over all these years. . . . Me, I'm only a little black girl." Bobbi Hollon, who has sworn never to wash off the blood that splashed on her sandals during the rioting, adds: "Now the whole world is watching Watts."

How do people make history under conditions designed to dissuade them from intervening in it? Los Angeles blacks are better paid than any others in the United States, but they are also the most *separated* from the California superopulence that is flaunted all around them. Hollywood, the pole of the global spectacle, is right next door. They are promised that, with patience, they will join in America's prosperity, but they come to see that this prosperity is not a fixed state but an endless ladder. The higher they climb, the farther they get from the top, because they start off disadvantaged, because they are less qualified and thus more numerous among the unemployed, and finally because the hierarchy that crushes them is not based on economic buying

power alone: they are also treated as *inherently* inferior in every area of daily life by the customs and prejudices of a society in which all human power is based on buying power. Just as the human riches of the American blacks are despised and treated as criminal, monetary riches will never make them completely acceptable in America's alienated society: individual wealth will only make a *rich nigger* because blacks as a whole must *represent poverty* in a society of hierarchized wealth. Every witness noted the cry proclaiming the global significance of the uprising: "This is a black revolution and we want the world to know it!" *Freedom Now* is the password of all the revolutions of history, but now for the first time the problem is not to overcome scarcity, but to master material abundance according to new principles. Mastering abundance is not just changing the way it is shared out, but *totally reorienting it.* This is the first step of a vast, all-embracing struggle.

The blacks are not alone in their struggle, because a *new proletarian consciousness* (the consciousness that they are not at all the masters of their own activities, of their own lives) is developing in America among strata which in their rejection of modern capitalism resemble the blacks. It was, in fact, the first phase of the black struggle which happened to be the signal for the more general movement of contestation that is now spreading. In December 1964 the students of Berkeley, harassed for their participation in the civil rights movement, initiated a strike [the FSM] challenging the functioning of California's "multiversity" and ultimately calling into question the entire American social

system in which they are being programmed to play such a passive role. The spectacle promptly responded with exposés of widespread student drinking, drug use and sexual immorality — the same activities for which blacks have long been reproached. This generation of students has gone on to invent a new form of struggle against the dominant spectacle, the *teach-in*, a form taken up October 20 in Great Britain at the University of Edinburgh during the Rhodesian crisis. This obviously primitive and imperfect form represents the stage at which people *refuse to confine their discussion of problems* within academic limits or fixed time periods; the stage when they strive to pursue issues to their ultimate consequences and are thus led to practical activity. The same month tens of thousands of anti-Vietnam war demonstrators appeared in the streets of Berkeley and New York, their cries echoing those of the Watts rioters: "Get out of our district and out of Vietnam!" Becoming more radical, many of the whites are finally going outside the law: "courses" are given on how to hoodwink army recruiting boards (*Le Monde*, 19 October 1965) and draft cards are burned in front of television cameras. In the affluent society disgust is being expressed for this affluence and *for its price*. The spectacle is being spat on by an advanced sector whose autonomous activity denies its values. The classical proletariat, to the very extent to which it had been provisionally integrated into the capitalist system, had itself failed to integrate the blacks (several Los Angeles unions refused blacks until 1959); now the blacks are the rallying point for all those who refuse the logic of this integration into capitalism, which is all that the promise of racial integration amounts to. Comfort will never be comfortable enough for those who seek what is not on the market, what in fact the market specifically eliminates. The level attained by the technology of the most privileged becomes an insult, and one more easily grasped and resented than is that most fundamental insult: reification. The Los Angeles rebellion is the first in history to justify itself with the argument that there was no air conditioning during a heat wave.

The American blacks have their own particular spectacle, their own black newspapers, magazines and stars, and if they are rejecting it in disgust as a fraud and as an expression of their humiliation, it is because they see it as a *minority* spectacle, a mere appendage of a general spectacle. Recognizing that their own

spectacle of desirable consumption is a colony of the white one enables them to see more quickly through the falsehood of the whole economic-cultural spectacle. By wanting to participate really and immediately in the affluence that is the official value of every American, they are really demanding the egalitarian *actualization* of the American spectacle of everyday life — they are demanding that the half-heavenly, half-earthly values of the spectacle be put to the test. But it is in the nature of the spectacle that it cannot be actualized either immediately or equally, *not even for the whites.* (The blacks in fact function as a perfect spectacular object-lesson: the threat of falling into such wretchedness spurs others on in the rat-race.) In taking the capitalist spectacle at its face value, the blacks are already rejecting the spectacle itself. The spectacle is a drug for slaves. It is designed not to be taken literally, but to be followed from just out of reach; when this separation is eliminated, the hoax is revealed. In the United States today the whites are enslaved to the commodity while the blacks are negating it. The blacks are asking for *more than the whites* — this is the core of a problem that has no solution except the dissolution of the white social system. This is why those whites who want to escape their own slavery must first of all rally to the black revolt — not, obviously, in racial solidarity, but in a joint global rejection of the commodity and of the state. The economic and psychological distance between blacks and whites enables blacks to see white consumers for what they are, and their justified contempt for whites develops into a contempt for passive consumers in general. The whites who reject this role have no chance unless they link their struggle more and more to that of the blacks, uncovering its most fundamental implications and supporting them all the way. If, with the radicalization of the struggle, such a convergence is not sustained, black nationalist tendencies will be reinforced, leading to the futile interethnic antagonism so characteristic of the old society. Mutual slaughter is the other possible outcome of the present situation, once resignation is no longer tolerable.

The attempts to build a separatist or pro-African black nationalism are dreams giving no answer to the real oppression. The American blacks have no fatherland. They are *in their own country* and they are *alienated.* So are the rest of the population, but the blacks are aware of it. In this sense they are not the most

backward sector of American society, but the most advanced. They are the negation at work, "the bad side that initiates the struggles that change history" (*The Poverty of Philosophy*). Africa has no special monopoly on that.

The American blacks are a product of modern industry, just like electronics or advertising or the cyclotron. And they embody its contradictions. They are the people that the spectacle paradise must simultaneously integrate and reject, with the result that the antagonism between the spectacle and human activity is totally revealed through them. The spectacle is *universal*, it pervades the globe just as the commodity does. But since the world of the commodity is based on class conflict, the commodity itself is hierarchical. The necessity for the commodity (and hence for the spectacle, whose role is to *inform* the commodity world) to be both universal and hierarchical leads to a universal hierarchization. But because this hierarchization must remain *unavowed*, it is expressed in the form of unavowable, because *irrational*, hierarchical value

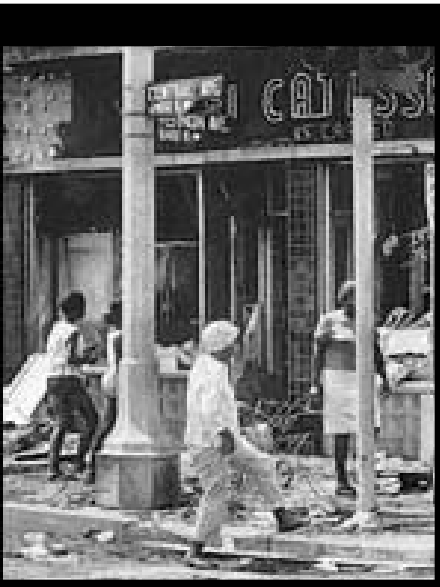
judgments in a world of *irrational rationalization.* It is this hierarchization that creates *racisms* everywhere. The British Labour government has come to the point of restricting nonwhite immigration, while the industrially advanced countries of Europe are once again becoming racist as they import their subproletariat from the Mediterranean area, developing a colonial exploitation within their own borders. And if Russia continues to be anti-Semitic it is because it continues to be a hierarchical society in which labor must be bought and sold as a commodity. The commodity is constantly extending its domain and engendering new forms of hierarchy, whether between labor leader and worker or between two car-owners with artificially distinguished models. This is the original flaw in commodity rationality, the sickness of bourgeois reason, a sickness which has been inherited by the bureaucratic class. But the repulsive absurdity of certain hierarchies, and the fact that the entire commodity world is directed blindly and automatically to their protection, leads people to see — the moment they engage in a negating practice — that every hierarchy is absurd.

The rational world produced by the Industrial Revolution has rationally liberated individuals from their local and national limitations and linked them on a global scale; but it irrationally separates them once again, in accordance with a hidden logic that finds its expression in insane ideas and grotesque values. Estranged from their own world, people are everywhere surrounded by strangers. The barbarians are no longer at the ends of the earth, they are among the general population, made into barbarians by their forced participation in the worldwide system of hierarchical consumption. The veneer of humanism that camouflages all this is inhuman, it is the negation of human activities and desires; it is the humanism of the commodity, the solicitous care of the parasitical commodity for its human host. For those who reduce people to objects, objects seem to acquire human qualities and truly human manifestations appear as unconscious "animal behavior." Thus the chief humanist of Los Angeles, William Parker, could say: "They started acting like a bunch of monkeys in a zoo."

When California authorities declared a "state of insurrection," the insurance companies recalled that they do not cover risks at that level — they guarantee nothing beyond survival. The

American blacks can rest assured that as long as they keep quiet they will in most cases be allowed to *survive*. Capitalism has become sufficiently concentrated and interlinked with the state to distribute "welfare" to the poorest. But by the very fact that they lag behind in the advance of socially organized survival, the blacks pose the problems of *life;* what they are really demanding is not to survive but to *live*. The blacks have nothing of their own to insure; their mission is to destroy all previous forms of private insurance and security. They appear as what they really are: the irreconcilable enemies, not of the great majority of Americans, but of the alienated way of life of the entire modern society. The most industrially advanced country only shows us the road that will be followed everywhere unless the system is overthrown.

Certain black nationalist extremists, to show why they can accept nothing less than a separate nation, have argued that even if American society someday concedes total civil and economic equality, it will never, on a personal level, come around to accepting interracial marriage. This is why *this American society itself must disappear* — in America and everywhere else in the world. The end of all racial prejudice, like the end of so many other prejudices related to sexual inhibitions, can only lie beyond "marriage" itself, that is, beyond the *bourgeois family* (which has



largely fallen apart among American blacks) — the bourgeois family which prevails as much in Russia as in the United States, both as a model of hierarchical relations and as a structure for a stable *inheritance of power* (whether in the form of money or of social-bureaucratic status). It is now often said that American youth, after thirty years of silence, are rising again as a force of contestation, and that the black revolt is their Spanish Civil War. This time their "Lincoln Brigades" must understand the full significance of the struggle in which they are engaging and totally support its universal aspects. The Watts "excesses" are no more a political error in the black revolt than the POUM's May 1937 armed resistance in Barcelona was a betrayal of the anti-Franco war. A revolt against the spectacle — even if limited to a single district such as Watts — calls *everything* into question because it is a human protest against a dehumanized life, a protest of *real individuals* against their separation from a community that would fulfill their *true human and social nature* and transcend the spectacle.

republished and distributed by

firestarter

For more copies of this
and other material, write to:
firestarter press
po box 50217
baltimore, md 21211
usa