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Are Structural Factors Sufficient?

– The 1992 Los Angeles Riots and its Causes

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to understand the reasons behind the extremely violent riots that broke out in Los Angeles in 1992. The starting point is taken in established contemporary theories within riot research, where structural factors such as residential segregation are particularly emphasized. The empirical data presented here supports that theories of this kind are necessary to understand the Los Angeles case: the riot occurred in socioeconomically disadvantaged neighborhoods, whose residents also were greatly underprivileged by the prevailing power structures. The presented findings however indicate that structural theories are not sufficient in order to understand the occurrence of the violence: social actors and their actions must also be considered, such as the police and the courts in Los Angeles, and possibly also minority inhabitants in these areas, in particular young men. In the concluding part, the need for theoretical development concerning actor-oriented explanations is argued for, when it comes to future riot research.

INTRODUCTION

In riot research there is a dominant approach focusing on structural factors. When it comes to understanding violence of this kind, factors such as segregation and power structures, and to some extent also ethnic structures, are usually put forward (see, e.g., Myers 2013; Shihadeh 2009; Olzak & Shanahan 1996). Also, quantitative methods are rather dominant, in contemporary studies, especially when there is an explanatory ambition. Different kinds of segregation data are usually analyzed together with information on violence occurrence in many (preferably American) cities and over time, in one single data set (see e.g., Shihadeh 2009; Krivo et al. 2009; Stretesky et al. 2004; Holloway & McNulty 2003).

This paper uses a somewhat different perspective on riots. It involves an in-depth study of a single case, the 1992 riots in Los Angeles. This event took many people by surprise. It 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 and 2400 injured, making it the most violent riot in the U.S.A. since the 1960s. 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?

The purpose of this paper is to use established theories within previous riot research in order to understand why the riot occurred. Although much has been written on these riots an approach similar to this one – using many different theories and perspectives – has not previously been undertaken in a systematical and scientific way, to my knowledge.

The conclusion in this paper is that several structurally oriented theories seem relevant and necessary to understand this case, such as residential segregation and political power structures. More precisely, they seem to be of varying importance during different stages of the riots: in the earlier phases political alienation and protest against lack of power seemed prominent, while at later stages looting and securing some material goods points to poverty being more involved in the violence. On the other hand, these structural factors do not seem to be sufficient for understanding the riots. Attention must also be paid to actors such as the police and local courts and possibly also minority inhabitants in these areas, in particular young men. Their actions, and social interaction, seemed to have a decisive influence, on the outbreak of the riot and probably also on later stages (although less is known about these later phases).

The role of actors have to some extent been observed by prior riot research, but rarely theorized. In the end of this paper it is therefore suggested that future riot research could benefit from paying more attention to the social interaction between actors such as – on the one hand – the police and other local government actors such as the courts, and – on the other hand – primarily young men belonging to minority groups, in order to reach a fuller understanding of violent outbursts of this kind.

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 text begins by a short overview of the definition of riots and the events before and during the Los Angeles riots in 1992. Next, this case is analyzed in more detail, from the perspective of different structural and actor oriented theories. The following section discusses and summarizes the findings and also suggests some possible paths for future riot research. The paper ends with a concluding section.

SHORT BACKGROUND

Riots have occurred periodically throughout history. These outbreaks of spontaneous and large-scale violence continue to take place, 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. 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.

Here riots are defined 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.

The events in Los Angeles in 1992 constitute an especially violent case. 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).

The riots started on 29 April 1992, when the media was paying close attention to the announcement of a court verdict in Los Angeles (for a detailed description, 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.

In the next section, socioeconomic explanations of riots will be presented, and it will be considered whether these factors seem relevant in the case of the Los Angeles riots.

SOCIOECONOMIC FACTORS

Previous research. Riots tend to occur in disadvantaged districts in bigger cities, so it is not surprising that economic factors and residential segregation have 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, and 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; Schneider 2008). 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).

With reference to theories on deprivation, both absolute and relative levels have been put forward: the former basically emphasizes class, and regards riots as revolts undertaken by the most socioeconomically disadvantaged (cf. Spilerman 1970). The latter focuses on the relative differences between different groups, and argues that violence such as riots occur out of comparisons and expectations: disadvantaged groups may adopt the more advantaged groups' living standards as their on point of reference, and when the gap between this standard and one's own conditions is large, violence is likely to take place.¹

¹ Rapidly improving conditions may lead to even higher expectations, causing an even bigger gap between what one think one is ought to have and what one actually has, according to these theories.

Socioeconomic conditions in the riot area. 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 the students dropped out of high school. The South

Central district was one of the most underprivileged of the 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 mostly consisted of 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).² Hence, it seems like both absolute and relative socioeconomic deprivation theories are relevant. Conditions

² In an opinion poll of African Americans in the riot-affected areas, 90% saw the riot 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).

were hard and had been worsening in the years before the riot, both in absolute and relative terms.

POLITICAL POWER STRUCTURES

Previous research. Particularly research into riots of the 1960s and early 1970s 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).³ More or less absent channels for political influence, as well as more or less non-existing political representation among leaders and the local elites were thought to cause severe political alienation. 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.

Political conditions in the riot area. 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

³ Cf. later discussions of the concept of political opportunity structures (see e.g., Eisinger 1973).

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. 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. In line with this the public inquiry severely criticized local politicians for not having paid enough attention to the serious situation in the inner city (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: 15, 39–40; *New York Times* 4/5-92; Clark & Morrison 1991:713 and 716–717; Taagapera & Soberg Shugart 1989:16).

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 Daryl Gates to resign, but without success, as the latter had city council support. (Oliver et al. 1993:122 and 137; *The City in Crisis* 1992:15, 39–40 and 47; *Washington Post* 2/5-92; *New York Times* 1/5-92).

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, and dissatisfaction with the situation (*The City in Crisis* 1992:15 and Appendix 17). 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?" (*Los Angeles Times* 13/5-93).⁴

However, if the riot was essentially a political protest against lack of power, 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). Still, to conclude, it seems like the severely restricted power structures may have been connected with the violence.

⁴ 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" (Pryby & Scavo 1993:79).

ETHNIC CONFLICT THEORIES

Previous research. Ethnic structures have also been connected with collective violence such as riots (cf. Horowitz 2001). A suggested mechanism is so called ethnic competition: if competition occurs, especially on the labor market, then it may lead to conflict escalation and eventually violence such as riots, in particular when one group tries to improve or maintain its position relative another group (for an overview, see Olzak & Shanahan 1996; see also Spilerman 1970). Moreover, ethnicity is a social boundary which is particularly likely to be the ground upon which these groups are formed, and violence may especially occur if there is an economic recession at the same time as the population increases, in particular the influx of one or several minorities.

The situation in the riot area. As noted above, during the years before the riot there was an economic recession and high unemployment in this area. Also the increase of migrants was significant, especially from Latin America and also Asia. Hence, the general conditions more or less existed for 'ethnic conflict', according to the competition theory. Some voices in the debate actually claimed that the riot was essentially the result of ethnic conflict, some focusing on the relationship between African and Korean Americans, others on the relationship between African and Latin Americans, and still others the relationship between Korean and Latin Americans (e.g., Bergesen & Herman 1998; Bobo et al. 1994; Chang 1993; Stewart 1993).

A closer look shows definitely that the riot were not solely about two opposing groups. African and Latin Americans constituted most of the rioters, 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 police 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.⁵ Still, it cannot be excluded that some of the violence that took place during the riot may have resulted from ethnic tensions. The triggering incident may of course be connected with racial discrimination and tensions between African Americans and the white majority. And later during the riot, tensions between other ethnic groups may have been present some extent (Horowitz 2001:27; Bergesen & Herman 1998; Turner 1994:311; Davis 1993b: 142–143; Navarro 1993; Watts 1993: 243; *The City in Crisis* 1992: 23, 38 and Appendix 8.12).

In sum, the structural theories discussed here do seem to be relevant, in particular theories focusing on socioeconomic conditions and political power structures, and maybe also theories focusing on ethnic structures. Let us now turn to other – usually less emphasized – explanations of riots, which concern various kinds of actors: the police, social movements, and criminal actors.

⁵ Data about those arrested during the riot may be of some interest. Of the first 5000 arrested, 38% were African American, 9% white, 2% Asian, and up to 51% Latin American., i.e. judging from this data the participants were rather ethnically representative of the inhabitants in the riot area. However, 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 (*The City in Crisis* 1992: 23, 38 and Appendix 8.12).

THE POLICE

Previous research. Government actors are very often involved when it comes to the events that actually trigger a riot; and mostly the police (for a short overview, see Myers 2013; see also Schneider 2008). No clear relationships have been found when it comes to the size of police forces and the occurrence of riots. More important seem to be how they exercise their power and the character of the relationship with the community members. Riots are more common in areas with a history of conflict between the police and some of the inhabitants (usually young men). In disadvantaged neighborhoods the police often have many direct contacts with residents, and violent confrontations may take place more or less constantly between police and certain residents, especially young men.

The situation in the riot area. 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 (*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 (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).

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 Daryl 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). 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 riot 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). In an opinion poll conducted one year after the unrest, 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).

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 (*The City in Crisis* 1992:3 and 138). 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 groups among the inner-city population.

Apparently, the police were not the only relevant social control actor in this case; the riots did occur after the verdict of the police officers not being guilty was announced. The police officers who assaulted King had been charged on the initiative of Mayor Bradley. The defense had 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 were 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).⁶

In an opinion poll conducted in early 1993 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. And in another opinion poll, all responding African Americans from South Central Los Angeles said that they were very upset about the acquittal in the King case (Bobo et al. 1994; Fukurai et al. 1994; Murty et al. 1994:15 and 91–96). 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 (Fukurai et al. 1994; Murty et al. 1994:93–100). Also 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 City in Crisis* 1992:12).

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).

⁶ 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).

In sum then, the evidence rather clearly seems to support the relevance of the factors discussed in this section: it seems like actions undertaken by the police, but also within the local judiciary, were connected with the outbreak of the violence.

SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

Previous research. Within social movements research the idea has been put forward that riots are one of the ways that social movements try to affect society and politics. The violence would then be part of a more continuous ongoing challenge to existing power structures, carried out by one or several relatively large societal groups, groups which more or less completely lack influence (cf. Tarrow 1996: 874; see also Tarrow 1994; Tilly 1984).

Conditions in the riot areas. Some voices in the debate put forward the idea that, for example, the so-called Nation of Islam movement was involved in the riot (cf. Davis 1992). Nothing in the empirical material does however suggest that any – in a more formal sense – organized groups or organizations had any significant effect on the course of events. Neither Latin Americans nor African Americans, in the inner city riots area, seem to have taken part in any group mobilization. Moreover, the public inquiry concluded that the riot was not planned or organized (*The City in Crisis* 1992: 24).⁷

⁷ Of course other actors have been suggested, when it comes to explaining riots, such as the media. Live broadcasts from violence in the streets may attract other potential participants to join, as it is mainly through the media or direct contacts with friends and family that information spreads before and during a riot (Myers 2013; Andrews & Biggs 2006; National Advisory Commission 1968). Indeed, the Los Angeles riot did follow after intense media coverage of the triggering issues: Nine of ten Americans had seen the filmed King 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). However, it does not seem that media had any direct part in the violence except for undertaking normal coverage of the events (to my knowledge the media has not been put forward as a decisive explanatory factor in any academic discussions of these riots; cf. Thierny 1994).

CRIMINAL ACTORS AND GANGS

Previous research. Another actor that has been discussed in relation to riots is criminal groups. Especially during the riots in the U.S.A. in the 1960s the so called ‘riff-raff’ theory where heavily debated, arguing that rioters were non-representative of habitants in riot areas in being particularly ill-educated and unemployed individuals with comprehensive criminal records, often addicted to drugs and being members of criminal gangs (for a short description of the theory, see Santoro & Broidy 2014, and Sears & McConahay 1969).

Conditions in the riot areas. 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 the riot was basically only undertaken by gang members, 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, like in more or less all riots, 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 (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).⁸

Furthermore, in an opinion poll conducted in the riot areas 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 (Bobo et al. 1994; Fukurai et al. 1994; Murty et al. 1994:15 and 91–96). Hence, the impression among inhabitants in general was not that the violence basically was conducted by criminal gangs or by some other group being cut off from other community members (cf. Thierny 1994). Moreover, the public inquiry 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 (*The City in Crisis* 1992:23–24 and Appendices 8.13, 8.14, and 9.2).

Gangs as such were not, then, an important actor causing the violence. On the other hand did minority inhabitants in the riot areas, in particular young men, seem to play a crucial role, not the least in the early stages of the violence. Conflicts, of a more or less violent character, between these individuals and especially the police probably took place on an almost daily basis in these parts of the city. A key question is under what rare circumstances a larger crowd, more mixed in socioeconomic composition, joins these young men in behaving violently, resulting in a full-scale riot. The actions, and maybe even strategies, employed by

⁸ 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.

these young men, in interaction with the police, is something future studies should pay more attention to, I believe. I will return to this topic at the end of the next and concluding section of the paper.

CONCLUDING DISCUSSION

In riot research there is a dominant approach focusing on structural factors, using quantitative methods. This paper instead used a qualitative in-depth approach, focusing on only one case, namely the heavily debated riots in Los Angeles in 1992. These very violent riots took many people by surprise. Why did they occur? Judging from the evidence presented here, several explanations may be at work. Social conditions were harsh. Moreover, 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.

Political alienation, discontent and distrust seemed widespread and many community members furthermore argued that political and socioeconomic factors indeed were connected with the violence. Ethnic structures and conflicts may also have been involved. Hence, in line with previous riot research structural factors of this kind most likely played a substantial part in creating basic conditions for the riots.

But factors such as socioeconomic segregation and political alienation, probably more or less necessary for violence of this kind to occur (as also pointed out by, among others, Myers 2013), are seemingly not sufficient in understanding these events. Without the involvement of certain actors, the riots would most likely not have occurred. Here I refer to, on the one hand, agents of social control, such as the police, and, on the other hand, people living in these disadvantaged city areas, in particular young men. Conflicts between these different actors did

without question cause the inception of the violence, and probably had an impact also in later phases.

Moreover, as has been pointed out by Wilkinson concerning riots in general (2009), different explanations seemed to have various relevance at different stages of the violence. The conflicts between the police and young African American men living in these areas, were as just pointed out definitely involved when it comes to the starting phase. In the early stages, the violence also seemed to have the character of a more general political protest against discrimination and political neglect (although not part of a more organized protest conducted by a social movement). In later stages, ethnic conflicts between different minority groups probably caused some of the violence. Furthermore, the extensive looting even brings to mind something like a food riot: poor people trying to get hold of whatever material goods are to be found, in order to improve their difficult living conditions at least to some extent (and not only members of criminal gangs but other community members as well, who normally did not conduct criminal acts). Hence, it is not only difficult to point out one single factor explaining the riots; it also seems like different factors had various impact at various stages of the violence, something that usually is hard to discover in large scale quantitative studies which has been the dominating approach in later riot research with an explanatory focus.

For future riot research more theorizing seems beneficial when it comes to actor explanations. In particular this concerns the social interaction taking place between agents of social control – such as the police and the local courts – and people living in ‘riot areas’ (Adman 2011). Yet prior studies do not offer much theoretical discussion on how and when this interaction may turn into large scale violence. This suggested theory development may, furthermore, benefit from using the concepts of over- and under-policing (see, e.g., Ben-Porat, 2008; Brunson & Miller, 2006; Reiner 2000, chapter 4). The former refers to excessive and selective behavior

toward minority groups, such as arresting individuals simply because of their ethnic background, or acting provocatively and using excessive force, especially against young men. 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. The impact on residents' attitudes and feelings may be very significant, especially when the police is perceived as offensive, use derogatory language, or make sweeping statements describing whole groups of people as criminals, or appear indifferent to or unable to do anything about crime and social order. The many incidents, preceding the Los Angeles riots, with the police and local courts involved, were most likely – for many inhabitants in these inner city areas – examples of the racial injustices characterizing the legal system including the police.⁹ Actions undertaken by 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 (cf. Turner 1994). Studies do suggest 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). Empirical studies also suggest that such norms are causally related to other violent activities, such as violent and illegal demonstrations, wildcat strikes, and occupation of buildings (e.g., Finkel et al 1989; Muller 1979: chapter 4; however, see Finkel & Muller 1998). Although less investigated, it is likely that similar correlations may be found also when it comes to riot participation.

⁹ The actions of local and 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 – that by many inhabitants in

This suggested future research may discover that the way this interaction takes place is very important, and that it might even have a decisive impact on whether large-scale violence occurs or not; if the actions and statements by local actors of social control, and politicians, are perceived as respectful, riots may not take place. Moreover, 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. The fact that street-level bureaucrats often belong to the majority group increases the likelihood that provocative incidents will occur. On the other hand, 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.

Judging from the Los Angeles case, it might be that the more often provocative incidents occur, and the more provocative each incident is, the higher the probability of rioting. Investigating, more thoroughly, if and how a possible escalation of this kind may lead up to riot outbreaks, may be a fruitful path for future research to take, in order to increase our understanding of the triggers behind riots.

Finally, the counterpart to the police (and other state actors) in the social interaction should not be forgotten, i.e. usually minority members in these city areas and in particular young men. Individuals with leading roles in these social contexts – may it be a very informal leadership – and their actions (and perhaps even strategies) in the situations when provocative situations recently have occurred, may be crucial in understanding when a smaller conflict, typically with the police, develops into a full-scale riot. Although the material on the Los Angeles case does not reveal much on this matter, in later stages, the social interaction

the riot areas probably seemed unfair and very provocative – may have led to intensified protests.

between the police and rioters may also be very decisive, concerning how violent and lasting the riots will be. In general then, I believe the actions (and strategies) of these individuals – as well as the police and other state actors, and the social interaction between these different actors – should be more in focus in future riot studies, in order to increase our understanding of violent events of this kind.

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