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NOTES UNDER CURFEW: WEST COAST RIOTS INDICT BOTH RIGHT AND LEFT

Anthony K. 'Van' Jones*

In this country, two big illusions get people through the night: the Mighty State and the American Left. Some folks enjoy the idea of a Big Brother keeping them safe from the masses; others sleep soundly imagining a Left Opposition keeping them safe from Big Brother. But the "Rodney King" uprisings in L.A. (and here in the Bay Area) have exposed us all, leaving both sets of people cringing in the firelight, our precious myths melted by the heat of L.A. burning.

After the Verdict, the pro-establishment folks were horrified as the rioting drove home one single truth: if "they" can get enough people out into the streets, they can do whatever they want to. Thus San Francisco's Dukakis-backing, tofu-eating, Greenpeace-loving, sandal-wearing citizenry sighed with relief when the mayor snuffed out everyone's rights and declared martial law. Fear embraces fascism, and — even though police swept up and arrested hundreds of innocent people on live TV — not a peep of protest went up. At least not until we had all tested the neighborhood air for smoke, and checked our tires in the morning. In the meantime, most of us retreated peaceably into our homes, glad that our submission was hastening the return of Law and Order, of our dearly departed Big Bro'. As instructed, we barred our doors, obeyed the curfew and peered through our TV screens into the hostile night. Well, at least, that's what I did.

But before that, I was out in the streets. There I watched my illusion of a vibrant, credible Left pop like a big soap bubble. And, sadly, no mayoral fiat, no national guard, no federal troops can resurrect my happy delusion.

Looking back, there was a moment — a brief, flickering instant that lasted several hours — when the People could do whatever We wanted. Our moment had finally come! We were righteous, fired up, weren't takin' no more! One thousand strong on Market Street, with the Bay Bridge shut down in rush hour traffic and the grounds around the state building swarming with angry mobs. Our rallying cry was for justice; our demand was that the System be changed! Yes, the Great Revolutionary Moment had at long last come, and the time, clearly, was ours!

So we stole stuff.

Y'know, stole stuff. Radios, tennis shoes. Well, not everybody, of course. The vast majority (me in-

cluded) just marched around and chanted slogans. But some set trash cans on fire. And smashed in car windows. And some kids stoned a few passing cars pretty good. And stole stuff, like I said.

Now, I had always dreamed that I would revel in such a riot, but I didn't. I got a safe ride home . . . and wept. I cried because at that Moment — when some Great Revolutionary Leader was supposed to have emerged from the crowd, grabbed the megaphone, spoken to our hearts and hopes, set out our program to overthrow the old order and build a new one — nobody had anything to say. Even though the entire judicial system had been exposed as a sham, and people of all classes and colors had taken to the streets in outrage, nobody was able to stand up and articulate a viable, opposing, social vision — or even offer a real plan to fix things. Nobody, including me.

Those of us on the streets had rattled the bucket of radical ideas and were shocked to find it empty. Bone dry empty. Sure, there was that old thing still left in there about racism being bad — which we shook out and held up for the cameras — but there were no new solutions. And no one *really* believed that the old panacea — Black self-help plus a Marshall Plan for the ghetto — was a prescription that we would ever see filled. Oh, well, we called for it, just the same. We chanted our "no justice, no peace," blamed Reagan, blamed Bush, trashed downtown, and went home (or to jail). Still oppressed. Still clueless as to what to do about it.

Let's be clear: the riots were understandable, unavoidable, even necessary — but they were not laudable. Los Angeles' great self-immolation, and its mini-versions elsewhere, give us nothing to cheer about. These rudderless insurrections were a sad indictment of us all: of that State, for its failure to provide justice and opportunity — and of the Left, as well, for our inability to point out a path that might someday guarantee that justice, ensure that opportunity.

These riots were not revolution; without revolutionary values and revolutionary organization, they were merely sharp outcroppings of the systemic chaos that social injustice breeds. But flashpoints of rage can never substitute for radical social vision or grassroots coordination. And yet those were the two things missing on the streets of San Francisco, and Los Angeles,

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and Berkeley, and Seattle, and Atlanta. And they are still missing.

In this 1990's post-industrial, post-modern, post-Cold War, post-integration new jack world (dis)order, there is simply, somehow, not much Left left. Here, I am not speaking only of our political defeats, but also of our ideological surrenders. We no longer feel comfortable saying, "Feed the children because they're neat little people who deserve to eat." Instead, we say, "Feed them because it's an investment in the country's future economic competitiveness." But when we base our arguments for social change on profit-mongering and American nationalism, we have already admitted defeat. By conceding the very terms of the debate, we may get a policy initiative pushed through here or there, but we leave dominant values unchallenged, and dominant institutions intact. Thus we have no real answers when

racist juries acquit racist cops, because we have already accepted the system that makes racism and police abuse necessary and inevitable. And, having abandoned socialism as unworkable (or at least unfashionable), we no longer have a credible, well-developed, counter-view of how we would like to see wealth created and distributed.

Therefore, standing in the ashes and rubble of Los Angeles, we must blame ourselves as much as the state. We must recognize that our opposition has become ideologically, tactically and morally bankrupt. As we rebuild that proud city, let us also build a radically feminist, anti-racist, green and humanitarian people's movement, complete with a revolutionary theory that will at once describe our dilemma and point a way out. The other side has won back its illusion of Order; let us build a real Opposition that can take down their paper tiger, once and for all.