The Many Meanings of Watts: Black Power, Wattstax, and the Carceral State

On August 11, 1965, the California Highway Patrol (CHP) flagged down two young African American men, Marquette Frye and his little brother Ronald. They were celebrating because the U.S. Air Force had just discharged the younger sibling. While accounts differed between the youths and the arresting officers, both would agree that after their encounter with police, the boys' mother became involved, along with a growing crowd of bystanders from the neighborhood. Within several hours, direct conflict broke out between growing numbers of African American residents of Watts and the three branches of local law enforcement: the CHP, Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD), and the county police. A violent uprising ensued that lasted a total of five days from August 11 to August 16 with the National Guard summoned to quell the protest.

Once a tally could be taken of the human and physical damage to the city, thirty-four people lay dead, the value of property losses exceeded two hundred million dollars and over a thousand people had been physically injured. Nearly all of the wounded and deceased were black, thereby revealing that while tens of thousands of residents participated, the police and National Guard perpetrated the overwhelming majority of violence against people. Equally alarming, the arrest statistics proved staggering. Police jailed over four thousand people for a number of offenses including "loitering, looting, and vandalism" or simply being in the wrong place at the wrong time. With such overwhelming destruction and chaos, discerning coherence in the barrage of events was left to hindsight.

Government inquiries, journalists, movement activists, historians, and ordinary people drew widely divergent conclusions.

When I teach the history of the Watts Rebellion, I juxtapose two starkly contrasting images: one apocalyptic and the other joyous (Figure 1). Taken in 1967, the first is a desolate image of a young black man cuffed and prostrate on the ground with three helmeted white officers standing over him. All four figures direct their gaze to the street behind them as dark smoke and bright orange flames consume neighboring storefronts and businesses. The second image is a Day-Glo movie poster from the film Wattstax (1972), which documents the 1972 Los Angeles music festival—sometimes called the "black Woodstock"—sponsored by Wattstax Records. The poster features a giant psychedelic silhouette of Isaac Hayes with smaller busts of Jesse Jackson, Richard Pryor, the Staple Singers, and Rufus Thomas nestled within. Taken together, these two pictures encompass not only the temporal era of the "long hot summers," but the multiple meanings of the 1965 events in Watts. As the contrast between these two images shows, it is important not only that students grapple with the causes, but also with the consequences. Ultimately, these legacies proved contradictory. On the one hand, Wattstax brilliantly captures how the urban rebellions nurtured a strong sense of community pride that reached its zenith in the Black Power and Black Arts movements of the late 1960s and early 1970s. Conversely, the vicious backlash by the state, law enforcement, and National Guard anticipated the rise of mass incarceration and the expansion of the modern "carceral" state in the decades to come.

Riot or Rebellion?

Among several generations of journalists and historians, the very naming of the urban popular uprisings of the 1960s has been hotly contested. As scholar Heather Thompson has shown, the choice to use the term...
"riots" as opposed to "rebellion" reflected conflicting assumptions about the meaning not only of the popular street protests, but the larger significance of the historical period that immediately followed the passage of the 1965 Voting Rights Act. By definition, riots are chaotic, spontaneous, and destructive, an attack on the established order culminating in an assault on property and people. Rebellions, on the other hand, are rational responses to legitimate grievances. In essence, this debate revealed a Manichean logic that pitted spontaneous vs. planned, irrational vs. rational, and in psychological terms, Thanatos vs. Eros (death vs. life instinct). Needless to say, these competing paradigms offer rich opportunities for teaching the history of the late sixties and linking it to previous eras of modern protest, including both the French and Industrial Revolutions, and to the "Occupy Everything" movements of today (5).

The contemporary assessment of whether the events in Watts constituted a riot or a rebellion hinged on whether or not a clear pattern could be seen in the actions of the crowd. In his definitive monograph, Fire This Time: The Watts Uprising and the 1960s (1997), historian Gerald Horne argued that loose structures of organization emerged in the looting and destruction of city infrastructure. Whites owned nearly all of the business that demonstrators attacked, and tellingly, those with reputations for fair pricing and ties to the community stood untouched, as did the spiraling modernist Watts Towers that became synonymous with community pride, Black Power, and Black Arts (6).

Looked at in hindsight, the long-term causes of urban rebellions revolved around two central issues: the political economy of race and the longstanding history of police abuse and criminalization of African Americans, Latinos, and other nonwhite groups on the West Coast and in other cities across the United States. Expressed most eloquently in a September 1966 Commentary magazine article, "Black Power and Coalition Politics," Bayard Rustin argued that "black power," and by implication the urban rebellions from which it sprang, responded to the more complex problems of housing, education, and jobs in northern cities (7).

Few places embodied the collective effects of the overlapping systems of racial discrimination more than Watts, an urban portal for the poorest and most recent migrants from the South. Eldridge Cleaver remembered his hometown of Watts as "a place of shame." The Panthers' short-lived Minister of Information later explained, "We used to use Watts as an epithet in much the same way as city boys used 'country' as a term of derision" (8). As newcomers settled at the social margins of America's second-largest city, they faced intense racial and class segregation, miserable schools, and large-scale joblessness. A hostile and overwhelmingly white police force engaged in routine traffic stops of motorists of color, beatings of neighborhood residents, and harassment of interracial couples. The LAPD chief's claims of black inferiority further exacerbated these everyday practices of intrusive policing (9).

During the rebellion itself, dramatic moments of conflict with law enforcement hinted that the imperial violence of the war abroad had transmuted into a war at home. "I distinctly remember during the Watts riots, young men firing directly on LAPD helicopters in emulation of the Southern Vietnamese Liberation Army," remembered white New Leftist Mike Myerson (10). This connection grew even more literal in subsequent years with the greater utilization of military hardware and integration of municipal police, county sheriffs, and state highway patrolmen with federal law enforcement. When the LAPD debuted its SWAT (Special Weapons and Tactics) team in a raid on the Los Angeles Black Panther Party on December 8, 1969, they used a battering ram, helicopter, and tank, foreshadowing the overarching militarization of domestic policing (11).

In his dystopian urban history, City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles (1992), popular historian Mike Davis dubbed this creeping tide of militarized public space "Fortress Los Angeles." A decade later, in a move that demonstrated the shocking conflation of the armed forces with domestic police, Chief Daryl Gates offered to deploy LAPD SWAT to Iran to help President Jimmy Carter liberate American hostages. "This is war," Gates declared. "We want to get the message out to cowards out there. . . . That's what we're coming to get them." Echoing this call to arms in 1988, the head of the Los Angeles District Attorney's Hardcore Drug Unit invoked similar language to describe its "war" on local gangs by proclaiming, "This is Vietnam here" (12). So while Watts stood at the crossroads of civil rights and Black Power, understood by most as a moment of internal transformation of the national black freedom movement, the actions of demonstrators and reactions of law enforcement also linked domestic politics to anti-colonial struggles and anti-communist foreign policy in ways that resonated well beyond 1965 (13).

Emergence of the Carceral State

As a new generation of historians explores the emergence of mass incarceration and the modern carceral state, the Watts rebellion is a pivotal moment. Scholars have chosen the term "carceral"—"of or belonging to prison"—to invoke a wide range of punitive state action. It includes aggressive policing; border patrol, military, and immigrant detention; public and private surveillance; imprisonment of adults, juveniles, and undocumented workers; courts, prosecution, and parole; and even restrictive and means-tested welfare and social service policy,

Figure 2. In the aftermath of the Watts rebellion, Ronald Reagan built his California backlash-based gubernatorial campaign by railing against "beautiks, taxes, riots and crime," convincing many whites to vote Republican. Joined here by wife Nancy at the Biltmore Hotel in downtown Los Angeles, Reagan celebrates his victory over incumbent liberal Democrat Pat Brown in the November 1966 election. Such post-Watts "law and order" campaigns were key to the rise of the carceral state. (Courtesy of University of Texas Archives)
with links to the broader systems of criminal and juvenile justice (14). The mass arrests and authoritarian response by police during Watts anticipated for this new era of the modern carceral state, marked by federal and local cooperation in law enforcement and the widespread use of military hardware for crowd control (15).

This growing tendency extended from public streets to the halls of state. During the 1966 California gubernatorial elections a year after Watts, Ronald Reagan denounced the urban uprisings and campus rebellions to powerful political effect (Figure 2). In a pioneering move that proved prophetic for the 1980 presidential election, his diatribes against “Beatniks, taxes, riots and crime” succeeded in convincing large numbers of whites to vote Republican, enabling Reagan to defeat liberal incumbent Pat Brown (16). The vicious political backlash against Watts, the subsequent urban rebellions, and the Black Power movement helped to fuel the longer term development of the New Right and the contemporary carceral state (17).

**Wattstax**

The bleakness of racial retrenchment should not overshadow the meaning of Watts to the participants themselves, the powerful cultural and political movements nurtured in its wake, and the larger African American community. For teaching, perhaps the single most compelling primary source for the response of local residents to the Watts rebellion is the documentary film, *Wattstax*, which centers on the August 20, 1972 Wattstax music festival held at the Los Angeles Memorial Coliseum. Made during the high tide of the Black Power movement, this musical extravaganza commemorated the Watts rebellion seven years before and interspersed live performances from the top Stax Records performers, including Isaac Hayes, the Staple Singers, and the Bar-Kays with interviews with ordinary citizens in Watts, many of whom participated or witnessed the rebellion as teenagers and children.

Featuring Richard Pryor with a special appearance by Jesse Jackson in full Afro, *Wattstax* provides a novel historical view of a well-known political figure as Jackson leads the crowd in a rousing call and response of “I am somebody. I am somebody, I may be Black. I may be on welfare, but I am Black. Beautiful and Proud.” Equally compelling are the beautiful montages of the streets of Watts, the Pentecostal storefront churches, and the shots of Black women with natural hair, clad in dashikis, babus, and the immaculate white headscarves of the Nation of Islam. Visionary mural with pyramid and sun announces to the viewer, “Africa is the Beginning.” Intercut with these utopian images are horrific scenes of police violence and urban destruction,
highlighting the power and elegance of Black culture that endured, and even thrived, in the face of oppression and state violence (18). In sum, Wat tress reveals that despite the asymmetry of physical force, fighting back meant something, ultimately inaugurating a new era of Black pride and creativity. In its aesthetics and interviews, Wattress underscores perhaps the most important lesson of the larger Black Power movement, that “Black is Beautiful.”

Conclusion
Bringing the Watts rebellion, the rise of the carceral state, and the celebration of Wattress into the same frame helps us to educate a new generation about the urban rebellions of the 1960s. As we work to incorporate the black freedom struggle “beyond Dixie” into our classrooms, seeing the many meanings of the events in Watts can provide students with new insight into both the past and the present moment. Given the wave of popular protests currently sweeping college campuses and the streets—and the outrage over recent pepper-spraying incidents by police—a revival of academic interest in urban rebellions seems inevitable. In the aftermath of last year’s social upheaval and massive public protest in the Middle East, Western Europe, and then the United States, celebrated by Wall Street demonstrators as the “Arab Spring, European Summer, and New York Fall,” what radical social historian E. P. Thompson so powerfully annotated “the moral economy of the crowd” has renewed meaning for many, both at home and abroad.

Endnotes
9. Martin Schiess, “Behind the Shield: Social Discontent and the Los Angeles Police since 1950” in City of Promise: Race and Historical Change in Los Angeles, ed. Martin Schiess and Mark M. Dodge, 137–74; Davis, City of Quartz: Munch, Living for the City, Horne, Fire This Time.
11. Washington Post, December 9, 1969, At; Mike Davis, City of Quartz, 298; Mike Davis’s account of this incident, see “Pigs Attack Southern California Chapter Of Black Panthers Party,” The Black Panther, December 13, 1969. For a more comprehensive account of this development in the second half of the twentieth century, see Michele Alexander, The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness (New York: The New Press, 2010).
12. Mike Davis, City of Quartz, 221–64, 268. Article dates are misquoted in Davis’s notes. For correct article citations, see Los Angeles Times April 3, 1988 and April 6, 1988.
17. This is not to imply that white anti-liberalism started in the late sixties. As Thomas Saguress’s Origins of the Urban Crisis, Heather Thompson’s “Mass Incarceration,” and my own book, Living for the City, have shown, white backlash had broader and deeper roots in postwar struggles over jobs, housing, schools, and black migration to northern cities that stretched back to the World War II era. Nevertheless, more historical scholarship is needed exploring specific national and regional responses by local, state, and federal law enforcement agencies to the radical social movements of the 1960s and 1970s. For important pioneering work in this regard, please see Christian Parenti, Lockdown America.
18. For a wealth of information about the film, including trailers and music clips, visit http://www.wattstax.com/specialedition.html.

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