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USA

Detroit's Rebellion & Rise of the Neoliberal State

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The following account of the Detroit uprising of 1967 is occasioned by the 50th anniversary of the events. It describes the suppression of the revolt as being symptomatic of a broader counterinsurgency against radical social movements in the United States. In turn, it considers how the repression accelerated punitive and authoritarian carceral policies. Through an examination of the cultural products of these social movements, it also suggests that alternative outcomes have been and continue to be possible. This account is excerpted from *Incarcerating the Crisis*.

In 1967 hundreds of uprisings circulated across U.S. cities with unprecedented power and intensity. Almost always the provocation was racist police violence — ranging from arrests to beatings to shootings. The expanding geography of the 1960s urban insurrections amid growing resistance to the U.S. war in Vietnam focused increased attention on the material conditions of the poor, working class, and people of color both at home and abroad.

Sparked by the self-activity and collective struggles of the masses on the move, the working class organized itself as communities of resistance in this decisive moment. Between 1967 and 1971 working people engaged in the most intensive strike activity in the postwar era in cities like Detroit. Race and class conflicts were being resolved by an urban proletariat led by organization such as the League of Revolutionary Black Workers (LRBW). Many workers began to turn to historical materialism to understand and confront the relationships between race and class, the police state, and capitalist political economy.

The overturning of Jim Crow, capitalism, and U.S. imperialism seemed like a possibility. Taken together these events represented a critical turning point in U.S. history, one from which there was no going back.

According to movement intellectuals and activists, the Detroit rebellion of July 1967 was essentially a working-class revolt. It was met with deadly force once state officials ordered National Guard troops, federal soldiers, and police officers to treat people deemed looters and arsonists as enemies of the state. Over forty people were killed.

While response to the events demonstrated the repressive power of the state, the rebellion also exposed the vulnerability of the auto corporations to the pressure of class struggle at the point of production. Nine months after the July rebellion in May of 1968, over four thousand workers shut down the Dodge Main plant. These events led to the formation of the Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement (DRUM), which later became the League.

The rebellion fired the imaginations of young organic intellectuals who made up the League such as Mike Hamlin, Kenneth Cockrel, John Watson, General Gordon Baker and Marian Kramer. As part of an effort to organize the energies unleashed by the insurrection and wildcat strikes into a social force at the point of production, the League printed leaflets, produced a newspaper *Inner City Voice*, distributed the Wayne State University paper *The South End*, and produced the independent film *Finally Got the News*.

They theorized strategies and tactics relevant to the workers' struggle at the point of production in the context of an entire community fighting for liberation. They demanded an end to racism in the plants as well as in the unions and were willing to call strikes on their own behalf.

The League consciously drew on collective memories of what W.E.B. Du Bois called the “general strike” of 1863–65, when one million Black workers freed themselves from slavery and sparked one of the most successful interracial

working-class movements in U.S. history. In that period workers ruptured a racial and labor regime that had been centuries in the making, and initiated the most dramatic effort at democracy, waged by the poor and for “the working millions that this world had ever seen.”

These episodes of working-class self-emancipation in the 1860s and the 1960s were, as C.L.R. James put it, “historical events of the first importance in the history of Black people at any time and today.”

In what follows, I offer an analysis of the struggle over the meaning of the Detroit uprising of 1967. I begin by looking at how the state and mass media interpreted and depicted the dramatic events. In turn, I explore how artists, activists and intellectuals connected to Black freedom, radical labor and socialist movements engaged in a class struggle in culture and ideology over the memory of this decisive turning point in the rise of the neoliberal carceral state. I conclude by suggesting that these interventions demonstrate that there could have been, and still could be, a different world in the making.

Insurgency and Counterinsurgency

Detroit’s political and expressive cultures were perhaps more interwoven than in any other North American industrial city. Dance halls and nightclubs provided spaces of leisure for industrial workers subjected to backbreaking labor as a workforce. On July 23, 1967 the Detroit rebellion began in a near West Side club.

The insurrection was sparked as city residents witnessed police harassment of a homecoming party for two Black soldiers returning from the U.S. imperialist war in Vietnam in a so-called “blind pig” (after hours club). All eighty-five people at the party were arrested. It did not take long for the working people of Detroit’s slums and nightclubs to resist this criminalization “on their own terms.”

Photos of the revolt documented what Dan Georgakas and Marvin Surkin described as “systematic and integrated looting” among Black and white workers “shopping for free.” Yet it was depicted in outlets such as the New York Times as a “riot” waged by “Negroes in Detroit,” which they asserted created a rampage of crime, violence, and chaos.

Soon after the uprising, U.S. attorney general Ramsey Clark was contacted by Michigan Governor George Romney in order to request federal troops be sent in to crush the rebellion. On July 27 President Lyndon Johnson addressed the nation, as part of an effort to ensure that order would be restored. His words offered no restraint: “First — let there be no mistake about it — the looting, arson, plunder and pillage which have occurred are not part of a civil-rights protest ... That is crime — and crime must be dealt with forcefully, swiftly, certainly.”

The President cited the Insurrection Act of 1807 as the legal basis for the deployment of troops in domestic territory. The revolt was met with deadly force as Detroit police officers, National Guard troops, federal soldiers and paratroopers fresh from battles in Vietnam shot people deemed looters and arsonists in the burning streets of Detroit.

Johnson’s attempt to distinguish between a legitimate civil rights protest and crime while calling on the Insurrection Act should compel us to reconsider the struggle over the meaning and memory of the moment. By defining the ghetto revolt against joblessness, police violence, and exploitation at the point of production in the way that it did, the narrative of counterinsurgency endorsed the expansion of militarized-carceral solutions to the crisis.

This counterinsurgent narrative depicted the event as an instance of crime, violence and chaos. In fact, it purported

that the revolt was not about civil rights violations or motivated by working-class grievances, but rather an outburst of criminality. This definition of the situation provided a distorted image. This distortion has had material consequences that are particularly critical for understanding the historically specific and contingent relationships between racial ordering, capitalist restructuring, and the formation of the neoliberal carceral state.

Such narratives depicted resistance as violent, irrational and futile expressions that justified violent reactions by the state apparatus to impose the rule of law and restore order. The capitalist state's subsequent expansion of counterinsurgency in cities can therefore be understood as a reaction to the crisis of hegemony.

Counterinsurgency and uneven capitalist development had been articulated as part of U.S. political and economic policy throughout W.W. Rostow's tenure as the U.S. national security advisor under President Johnson between 1964 and 1968. Rostow's "stages of economic development" theory purported that capitalist development first required security forces to impose order.

In the wake of the Detroit rebellion, Rostow wrote to President Johnson: "At home your appeal is for law and order as the framework for economic and social progress. Abroad we fight in Vietnam to make aggression unprofitable . . . [to] build a future of economic and social progress." In Rostow's words, national security counterinsurgency policies had a direct impact on the policing of the urban crisis.

Journalistic narratives often reproduced the state's counterinsurgent logic by deploying myths that had been used to rationalize military intervention in Vietnam. Consider for example Time and Newsweek's take on the events in the earliest hours of July 23: "The trouble burst on Detroit like a firestorm and turned the nation's fifth largest city into a theater of war. Whole streets lay ravaged by looters, whole blocks immolated by flames. Federal troops â€" the first sent into racial battle outside the South in a quarter of a century â€" occupied American streets at bayonet point."

Such narratives of burning and looting purported to legitimize the military occupation of domestic space. "If there is one point that has been proved repeatedly over four summers of ghetto riots," Time magazine suggested, "it is that when the police abandon the street, the crowd takes it over, and the crowd can swiftly become a mob. It happened in Watts, in Boston's Roxbury district, in Newark and in blood and fire in Detroit."

It was in this context that President Johnson gave a speech calling for the establishment of a commission to determine the causes of the events. He appointed Illinois governor Otto Kerner to lead the inquiry that would eventually be published as The Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders. Made up of representatives of political and economic elites from industry, government, labor, police and mainstream civil rights organizations, the commission was a critical force in the development of new strategies of crisis management.

When the document was released in early 1968 with a foreword by New York Times columnist Tom Wicker, it was extremely well received and sold as many as two million copies of the paperback edition. The Kerner commission provided a definition of the urban crisis of the 1960s that has become taken for granted. In one of its most often quoted phrases, the report claimed, "Our nation is moving toward two societies, one Black, one white â€" separate and unequal."

It famously argued that "what white Americans never understood â€" but what the Negro can never forget â€" is that white society is deeply implicated in the ghetto. White institutions created it, white institutions maintain it, and white society condones it." The Kerner Commission's conclusions were based on data primarily gathered during the Detroit rebellion, and were widely circulated in mass-media narratives.

Despite the commission's findings based on what most experts agreed was a sound assessment that white racism

and poverty were the key factors shaping the urban uprisings, the report still asserted that structural inequality could not fully explain the causes of the rebellions. It shifted its focus from politics and economics to family structures by claiming that conditions of unemployment among Black poor people produced a “culture of poverty.”

It claimed that a “culture of poverty . . . generates a system of ruthless exploitative relationships within the ghetto. Prostitution, dope addiction, and crime create an environmental ‘jungle’ characterized by personal insecurity and tension. Children growing up under such conditions are likely participants in civil disorder.”

In doing so, the report sanctified the common sense that criminality in poor communities of color was the product of their own “culture.” It further argued that counterintelligence units “staffed with full-time personnel should be established to gather, evaluate, analyze and disseminate information on potential as well as actual disorders. . . . It should use undercover police personnel and information.”

As such, these recommendations distorted the report’s message of race and class inequality conveyed in the two-nation thesis “and this distortion had a logic to it. The Kerner Commission’s call for expanding police surveillance as a tactical response to rebellions represented a shift in the hegemonic form of racialized crisis management, one that simultaneously named racial inequality as a problem and made counterinsurgent appeals to security to secure its legitimacy. Thus its definition of the crisis should compel us to consider how it dramatically clashed with the perspectives of Black Freedom, radical labor and socialist movements.

“Finally Got the News”

Filmed in the context of the events of 1968, and following the rebellion of the previous year, the film *Finally Got the News* provides an insurgent perspective voiced from within working class communities themselves. Produced, directed, and distributed in association with League members such as Cockrel, Watson and Hamlin, the film offers a class critique of the material conditions.

As an instance of independent filmmaking, the film delineates a distinct way of seeing how American Fordism’s promise of high wages and full employment was contradicted by the fact of punitive policing, precarious labor, perilous housing and structural unemployment in the period. It therefore serves as an alternative archive of this decisive historical moment.

In the opening vignette, set to a dramatic drumbeat, *Finally Got the News* presents a series of historical documents illustrating how the surplus produced by Black workers under slavery gave rise to U.S. industrial capitalism and imperialism.

Inspired by the historical and theoretical frameworks in Karl Marx’s *Capital* and W.E.B. Du Bois’ *Black Reconstruction in America*, it provides a cinematic representation of how the self-activity of Black workers quickened the step of the working class as a whole. As the intensity of a drumbeat increases, the audience is presented with scenes from the history of the class war that ultimately culminated in the formation of the CIO during the 1930s, when the working class created mass power of a kind unparalleled.

Emphasizing the dialectics of insurgency, these images are juxtaposed with the pervasive and persistent forms of state repression. These representations of the history of the class struggle provide the context for the film’s depiction of what was known among the working people of Detroit as the “great rebellion.”

In sharp contrast to the narratives of criminality, chaos and illegality presented in the narrative of counterinsurgency, the film presents images of workers engaged in a struggle for dignity against the police state. The uprising is depicted as a return of militancy among the working class. In these ways *Finally Got the News* expresses the radicalism sparked by the uprising in culture.

No one could have predicted how prophetic the League's analysis would remain a half-century later. They theorized earlier than most how capital would respond to the crisis of legitimacy by abandoning the workers and region that had been the source of its wealth and power. In the aftermath of the events, League members saw Richard Nixon ride a law and order agenda into the White House. Nixon's ensuing "war on crime" fanned the flames of white populist anger to legitimate authoritarian resolutions of crisis.

The racialized terms "riots," "looting" and "lawlessness" soon became symbolic for class antagonisms during the restructuring of the political economy. Spaces in cities once depicted as safe became redefined as dangerous territory that required security measures to control. This emergent carceral urbanism was defined through narratives of law and order.

Rather than being distracted by state discourses of crime, the League's analysis enables us to interrogate how the narrative of law and order displaced the anxieties that had been produced through economic insecurity. In this analysis, they were critically prescient.

The League's materialist analysis of the relations of forces has been vindicated, as the resulting unemployment devastated cities and hit the Black working class particularly hard during the neoliberal turn. While their victories in their struggle against racism and for economic justice represents a genuine historical advance, militants were not able to stop plant closures, capital flight, structural unemployment or the unprecedented expansion of policing and prisons in the political economy.

At the very moment that the victories of freedom and labor movements gave working people a new terrain from which to fight, the economic crisis of the late 1970s led to increases in poverty and unemployment not seen since the Great Depression. The prison population grew from about 200,000 people in the 1960s to over two million by the 2000s, despite declines in crime rates in the same period.

Increased spending on incarceration occurred alongside the reduction of expenditures for public education, transportation, healthcare, and public employment. Prison expansion coincided with a shift in the racial composition of prisoners from majority white to almost 70% people of color. The unemployed, underemployed, and never-employed Black, Brown and poor have been incarcerated at disproportionate rates.

With the highest rate of incarceration on the planet, U.S. prisons incarcerate more Black people than South Africa's did at the height of apartheid. These numbers bespeak a collision of race, class and state power without historical precedent, but certainly not without historical explanation.

The unprecedented prison expansion over the last four decades is inconceivable outside the context of mass antiracist and class struggle. The state's crushing of the urban insurrections of the 1960s was a critical turning point in the buildup of the largest carceral apparatus on the planet, but it was not an inevitable outcome. Through alternative archives, radical histories, and Marxist social theory we can begin to grasp how alternative responses were possible.

Against analysts who would parrot counterinsurgents and define the event as a riot that created a chaotic rampage of lawlessness, however, we need to engage directly with the perspectives of freedom, labor and socialist movements.

These provide a distinct challenge to the counterinsurgent logic that circulates not only in official state documents, but more insidiously through narratives circulated in magazines, newspapers, television, film, radio and even some scholarship.

These movements relay the types of visions and strategies needed to counter the hegemony of the neoliberal carceral state. That is not to say that “the arm of criticism” can “replace the criticism of arms,” since as Karl Marx put it, “material force can only be overthrown with material force, but theory itself becomes a material force when it has seized the masses.”

As such, we need to take seriously the politics of historical excavation and theoretical explication, attending to the contested meaning of the urban insurrections of the 1960s. This theoretical labor is critical for understanding the unfinished business of freedom, labor and socialist struggles in confronting authoritarian politics and austerity economics. To do so, we need to listen to the voices who have suggested that another city is not only possible, but a burning necessity.

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