



**OUTRAGE AND REVOLT IN 1992:  
REMEMBRANCE AND CONTINUING THE STRUGGLE**

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**DR. MAULANA KARENGA**

**A**S WE GATHER TO REMEMBER AND MARK the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the 1992 Los Angeles Revolt and to discuss the course of history after it, it is important to place it in the context of the long history of Black resistance in which revolt is a central and defining feature. Indeed, ours is a history of resistance through which revolts run like a bright red line, stretching from the age of colonialism, imperialism and the Holocaust of enslavement through segregation and the Black Freedom Movement of the 60s to the revolts and other forms of resistance in our time, from Ferguson onward. Such critical remembering is at the heart of the article below, previously published as a 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary assessment and reveals how history does not exactly repeat itself, but retains features of things and thoughts which remain stubbornly among us and require continuing righteous resistance for their removal and the radical transformation toward which revolts point and push us and history.

Each person and people remembers and recounts the narrative of the April 29 1992 Revolt, which raged for three days, according to the position and perspective from which they view and evaluate what was seen, countered and experienced: the death of 53 persons (25 African Americans), many innocents targeted or accidentally killed; the 2500 injuries; the loss of livelihoods and life works caused intentionally or accidentally, especially for Koreans, but also African Americans and Latinos; the deepening alienation of ethnic groups; and the continuing larger conditions of injustice and inequities out of which the Revolt rose. Thus, this momentous historical event is called by various names most definitive and useful to those who speak of it, i.e., as revolt, *sa-i-gu*, uprising, unrest and riot. But the morality of remembrance requires, especially in terms of life, death and struggle, not only that we remember those and that of central and sustained value to us, but also that our remembering and recounting be as accurate as possible, as inclusive as warranted, and as ex-

pansive as the complexity of social life and struggle requires.

Clearly, the 1992 Revolt cannot be explained using the media stereotypical and scapegoating focus on the Black/Korean conflict for several reasons. For it ignores the facts that Latinos were the other main residents and hostile actors in Koreatown, not Blacks; that whatever concerns Blacks had about Black/Korean relations, it was police racist brutality and legal injustice that were the essential spark that ignited the Revolt; and that the smaller ethnic conflict and the Revolt itself are rooted in larger concerns of systemic oppression and White dominance in areas of wealth, power and status which disadvantage and destroy the life chances and lives of peoples of color.

It is in this context of racist and racializing concepts and systemic injustice, inequities and oppression the Revolt is rooted and emerges, and is defined by several factors. First, the Revolt was another recurrent expression of an accumulation of dissatisfaction and anger at the injustices and inequities of the life conditions suffered by Blacks and other peoples of color in the city and country as a whole. It understandably began with a profound sense of moral outrage at an act of inhumanity and injustice, the sustained brutal beating of Rodney King seen on TV and the shocking and unjust acquittal of the policemen involved. The beating appeared both savage and senseless with no justification and a vivid and violent expression of police abuse and brutality. And the acquittal and the reasons given appeared to provide a racialized social sanction for this and other forms of police violence and abuse.

Secondly, a critical socio-historical understanding of the Revolt reveals that the brutal beating and racialized acquittal by the jury in Simi Valley were not isolated and unrelated events, but rather were rooted in and reflective of a context of race and class disparities and disadvantages of wealth, power and status. The

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video camera had captured an example of a defining feature of the lived experience of the African American community and other communities of color: a persistent pattern of police violence and abuse that demonstrated a reckless and deadly disregard for their lives and rights. But it also reminded us of community vulnerabilities, not only in regard to police abuse and brutality, but also systemic issues of poverty, asymmetrical power relations, unemployment, poor housing, an ineffective and underfunded educational system, lack of access to affordable health care, an unequal and oppressive legal and criminal justice system, a racially degraded status, and other sources of suffering and problems in the communities of color who would respond in revolt. And such response in revolt to real and perceived social oppression and injustice has been the case throughout our history, not simply in 1992, or in the 1960s which witnessed numerous revolts throughout the country.

Thirdly, it is good to remember that there was, for a brief moment, also a shared sense of opportunity to move collectively to correct or at least alleviate the problems which provoked the Revolt. Indeed, there were the usual proliferations of community, interracial, interfaith and governmental meetings to search for answers, calls for calm and healing, and press conferences and media stories on these and a host of related issues and events. And there were joint projects and numerous plans and efforts which our organization Us participated in to better interracial and interethnic relations, rebuild the city and begin a new chapter in police, government and community relations and cooperation for common good.

However, joined to this sense of opportunity was an understandable and informed suspicion and apprehension that the cooperative spirit and efforts and the rightful attentiveness of the problems which provided both the social

foundation and sustaining fuel of the Revolt would not last. For there was a sense of déjà vu to it all, since it was essentially *an immediate disaster response, rather than a long-term developmental planning* for the city and county that self-consciously concerned itself with the lives and future of all the people, especially the most vulnerable among us. Certainly, there were good ideas and intentions in these post-Revolt efforts and initiatives, but the problems were and are long-term and require a determined, ongoing and persistent demonstration of ethical commitment, political will and relentless social struggle to achieve any real, serious and enduring social change. And there is a need for White people to imagine and accept an alternative system of social relations in which they are not politically, economically or culturally dominant nor require racial, religious or class deference from others.

**F**inally, in spite of a healthy and correct suspicion that these immediate-focused disaster-response efforts would go the way of their predecessors, my colleagues and allies in struggle and I maintained and continue to maintain a hopeful determination. We know that the struggle for justice and good in society and the world is a long, difficult and demanding one, and we are determined to continue this struggle. For our work is in self-conscious committed response to the ancient and ongoing African ethical mandate “to bear witness to truth and set the scales of justice in their proper place, especially among those who have no voice”. Indeed, our people’s history is a history of righteous struggle for good in the world and we strive to honor it. Thus, we ask ourselves daily, in the tradition of our ancestors, “What is our duty”? And we answer in that same tradition: “it is to know our past and honor it; to engage our present and improve it; and to imagine a new future and forge it in the most ethical, effective and expansive ways.”

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