



Handout 1 - Excerpt from *Set the Night on Fire: L.A. in the Sixties*

From *Set the Night on Fire: L.A. in the Sixties* by Mike Davis and Jon Wiener (2020):

[UCLA economist Paul] Bullock used a “thick” ethnographic approach to analyze the situation of young, jobless males in Watts and elsewhere in the ghetto. His work highlighted the destructive roles of segregated education and the LAPD’s “stop and frisk” policies. Black arrivals from the South bore all the scars of a wretched Jim Crow education, and some were completely unlettered. There was no public program to address their need for remedial instruction and vocational education. Neighborhood youth who had grown up in the LA school system, by contrast, were generally literate but dropped out of their underfunded high schools at rates ranging from 40 to 70 percent. In one paper, Bullock argued that many dropouts were actually “kick outs,” the victims of administrative policies that compelled students to transfer or leave school for offenses no more serious than learning problems, or, in one case, a single truancy.

Meanwhile, the LAPD operated the nation’s most successful negative employment scheme. While giving low priority to white collar crimes, whatever their impact on society, the department fastened a relentless dragnet on poor Black and Chicano neighborhoods. Without the slightest pretense of probable cause, the cops stopped and searched people, particularly young men, in the hope of finding some weed or a stolen item. Those who verbally defended themselves, however innocent, would usually be offered a ride to jail. The result was an extraordinary accumulation of petty arrests (but not necessarily convictions) that made a majority of young men unemployable. Thus stigmatized, youth entered the street economy, where they sold drugs, practiced petty theft, and inevitably earned further, more serious arrest records. Even in a booming economy (in June 1965 manufacturing employment and wages broke all peacetime records), there was no route to employment for a large minority of young Black men, except through minimum-wage job schemes that paid far less than selling pot or fencing goods from the trunk of a car.

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Another major obstacle to addressing the unemployment problem was Mayor Yorty’s stubborn refusal to accept federal guidelines that would have released millions of dollars of anti-poverty funds for youth jobs. . . The War on Poverty’s new Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO), headed by Sargent Shriver, had allocated millions for job programs in L.A., but it came with the stipulation (Title II) that the poor themselves, through open elections or town meetings, had to be represented on the required umbrella agency. Yorty, refusing to yield any power to Washington or local civil rights leaders, was unmovable in his insistence that he alone should have the power to appoint the members of such a board. Los Angeles thus became “the only major city in the United States,” Shriver declared in August 1965, that “has failed to organize effective local antipoverty programs ... Everywhere else in America, almost without exception, elected officials have been extremely helpful.” As a result, a summer program that would have organized recreation for 20,000 LA teenagers was canceled, and several thousand youth jobs, the funding already budgeted by the OEO, were left in limbo. Summer 1965, as Robert Conot later wrote in his account of the August uprising, was “the worst ever: one of chaos, disunity and suspicion ...”



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[City councilmen and future mayor] Tom Bradley believed that the likely epicenter of any explosion would be Watts, home to 80,000 of the poorest people in Los Angeles. . . Although the community was outside his multiracial Tenth District, Bradley decided to spend a day there fact-finding. "Taking the bus to emphasize his identification with the people he was serving," his biographers write, "he spent the day walking the streets and listening to members of the community." He was "surprised at the lack of even the most elementary reading and writing skills," and "moved by the depth of the hopelessness and the lack of self-esteem." He returned to his office "visibly shaken by the trip." Meanwhile [Mayor] Sam Yorty sat on \$22 million in OEO funds that represented thousands of youth jobs.

[Police Chief William H. Parker], for his part, made one small concession to ominous social reality. In June 1965, Alisa Kramer reports, Parker, seeking to "mollify black civic leaders and to attempt to discourage challenges to his authority," appointed a liaison to the Black community: Inspector James Fisk, commander of the bureau for stations in Black or mixed neighborhoods. Parker asked him to "do something about blacks in Watts and to gather all the intelligence he could about them." Parker told Fisk he had been selected because "he was the only one Parker knew who was interested in Blacks." Fisk later told a reporter that he "did not know whether to be flattered or appalled. At the time, Fisk said, having good relations with the black community was tantamount to treason." The UCLA graduate and Presbyterian elder had only a few weeks to settle into his new, underfunded role when the volcano, as Black activists had warned, erupted.