

# The Los Angeles Revolt: Its Lessons for the World

By Alvin and Heidi Toffler  
World Monitor

*Cy.Rev Appendix: While several years old, we thought this article by the Tofflers from the June 1992 issue of World Monitor helped to illuminate the application of their theories to current events. It places Newt Gingrich's popularization of a right wing approach to the Third Wave in a broader perspective.*

The flames that swept America from Los Angeles to Atlanta in the Spring of 1992 hold unnoticed lessons for Europe, with its rising ethnicism, its skinheads and ultra-nationalists, and even for Japan and other currently peaceful societies. The fact that an all-white jury exonerated a gang of white police who sadistically beat up a young black man named Rodney King in California may have provided the trigger, but the explosive charge that powered the Los Angeles riot is not a local, nor even an American phenomenon. It is a global event linked to a basic redistribution of economic and political power. It has its roots not merely in racism, but in the techno social revolution now sweeping across the earth.

American cities were torched in racial rioting in the late 1960s, too. Despite the passage of a generation, the explanations offered for the latest round of arson and looting were virtually the same. From George Bush one heard conventional calls for law and order. From his opponents came a string of clichés about poverty, unemployment, racism, and urban hopelessness.

All these elements were and are unquestionably present, but they form only a small part of a much larger story. For this latest upheaval is more than a protest against police brutality or a symptom of age-old ills. It reflects (1) a dangerous new kind of racism and (2) a new, far more intractable kind of unemployment both with implications that reach beyond the United States.

The new racism and the new unemployment spring from a new system of wealth creation that is spreading swiftly through all the affluent nations, destroying the "mass society" of the industrial past.

The invention of agriculture thousands of years ago launched the First Wave of social transformation in history. The industrial revolution triggered a Second Wave. Today a Third Wave of techno social change is sweeping through all the high-tech countries, hitting the US the hardest, and California even harder.

The industrial revolution created mass societies. In them, mass distribution, mass consumption, mass education, mass political parties, mass communications, mass entertainment, and mass welfare services paralleled mass production. Homogeneity was their ruling principle.

Today's Third Wave of change shatters the industrial mass society. The new governing principle is heterogeneity. Thus today in the US, Japan, and Europe alike, mass production is increasingly being replaced by "de-massified" manufacture based on short runs of heterogeneous and even customized products made in flexible, computer-driven factories. The mass market is simultaneously breaking into "niche" markets defined and organized by computers. Consumption is being de-massified in parallel with production.

The media, too, are de-massifying. In the US, for example, almost 60% of American homes now receive video imagery from an average of almost 30 different channels instead of from only three giant TV net works. And the latest TV sets are designed to provide more than 100 channels.

Prime-time viewer ship for the once dominant networks has been slipping, their mass audience breaking into parts. Even their news gathering competence is now challenged. Thus the fact that the Rodney King beating came to world attention because a private citizen videotaped the event or that private citizens with hand-held video cameras documented the subsequent riots is perfectly symbolic of the decline of the traditional mass media as new media come on stream and diversify the imagery consumed by the public.

## **Radical Change in Family Structure**

The standard industrial family unit of the mass society - into which almost everyone was supposed to fit - was the "nuclear" family, composed of a working father, a stay-at-home mom, and two children under the age of 18. Today only about 5% of American families fit into this Second Wave model, and perhaps even fewer in California.

Today's society gives rise to a wide variety of familial relationships, ranging from single motherhood to serial or successive marriage, and so-called "sandwich" families in which a middle-aged couple takes responsibility for both its children and its parents. In the poorest of American communities, single mothers and out-of-wed lock children are virtually the norm.

The family has not "died." Instead, the once homogeneous family system has de massified along with production, consumption, and the media as the Third Wave economy and society have developed and spread.

The deep de-massification process, which is now hitting many countries, has direct impacts on ethnic or race relations.

During the Second Wave era, the industrial economy needed a standardized, mass labor force. During the early period of industrialization, the US, unlike Europe, suffered from frequent labor shortages as workers migrated westward. The rising industrial elites solved this problem by substituting energy and innovative technology for labor. Politically, they enacted open immigration policies. Thus, polyglot workers flooded into the US from all over the world.

To increase labor efficiency, it was necessary to homogenize or massify the workers. Hence there arose the "melting pot" ideal, which told immigrants to slough off their old culture and to reemerge with new, wholly American identities. But while many different cultures and religions were assimilated, Americans, including the new ones, resisted the integration of non-Caucasian races into the society. African-Americans in particular had to fight every inch for entry into the economy and society on an equal basis with others - and, despite some notable exceptions, have not yet succeeded. For generations they formed the last reserve of the labor force, given jobs only when all other labor pools were exhausted, as was the case during World War II.

One result of all this was continuing conflict between the white majority and the black minority as each competed for employment and the income that flowed from it.

This was the background for old industrial-style racism, and it has some similarities to the situation in Germany, France, and other European nations that invited Turks, North Africans, and others to fill jobs at the bottom of the ladder during the years of economic expansion in the 1960s and 1970s.

As the Third Wave of change arrived, however, the needs of the advanced economies shifted, and so did public attitudes toward immigration, integration, and assimilation.

In the US, and especially in Los Angeles where the recent violence erupted, the melting pot has been replaced by the so-called "salad bowl" concept under which ethnic, religious, racial, and other groups retain their cultural identity yet, at the same time, demand dignity, justice, and equal access to economic opportunity.

This Third Wave alternative to the Second Wave melting pot is, in fact, nothing more than de-massification applied to inter-group relations as the whole society becomes more heterogeneous. In the US, it has produced a far more complex mosaic of racial and ethnic groupings. Tensions between majority and minority are now overlaid by minority vs. minority conflicts, is between Koreans and blacks in Los Angeles and New York, or between Cubans and Haitians in Miami.

All these community conflicts are intensified by a structural change in the economy that has been virtually ignored in the entire post-riot tooth gnashing and hand wringing. A Third Wave economy simply does not have enough routine factory jobs for the Rodney Kings of the world - or, for that matter, for the racist skinheads who beat up blacks and Asians in California or Turks and North Africans in Europe.

Second Wave smokestack societies, based on rote repetitive labor, need such workers. The Third Wave economy, by contrast, is simply closed to larger and larger numbers of unskilled workers, irrespective of pigmentation.

On April 28, 1992, just one day before the Rodney King riots broke out and produced more than fifty deaths and over half a billion dollars worth of damage, the Los Angeles Times published a list of California's top 100 companies. Second Wave industries were conspicuously absent from the list.

Not a steel company or in automaker or a tire factory among them. Not a textile mill or a cement company. The key companies in the economy inhabited by Rodney King and by the ghetto young people who rushed into the streets to loot and burn are in fields like pharmaceuticals...computer software...medical insurance...investment services...medical laboratories...games and toys...semiconductors...medical imaging... management consulting...equipment leasing...banking...printed circuits...aircraft...radio and TV broadcasting... surgical supplies... title insurance...oil and gas... measuring instruments...telecommunications...and films....

There were a scattering of retail organizations, some construction, a bit of food processing, and a handful of others. But the list gives a perfect picture of an economy rapidly transitioning out of Second Wave low-skilled labor requirements and into the high-skill world created by the Third Wave.

These newer companies are the "basics" of the Third Wave economy spreading swiftly across the US, Europe, Japan and other regions. It is an economy whose primary resources are educated brain power, innovative creativity, rapidly learned and unlearned skills, organizational transience, and

post-bureaucratic forms of authority. It is an economy dependent on instantaneous communication through phone and fax; on computerization; on a vast, fast, globe-girdling electronic infrastructure; on computers, databases; and, above all, on new attitudes and even newer (and ever-changing) skills.

## **Many Jobs Are Gone Forever**

This Third Wave economy - a new system for creating wealth - is not going to go away. The smokestacks and assembly lines of the Second Wave past are not going to reappear. They, and the jobs they supplied, are gone forever. Those old manufacturing industries that do return to profitability will do so with information-based technology, robots, and fewer unskilled workers.

Having failed to prepare for the Third Wave economy that futurists and others foresaw as early as the beginning of the 1960s, today's politicians stoop to demagoguery. They demand protectionism as though that would put autoworkers back on the old-fashioned, pre-robotic assembly lines. They demand more mass welfare - as though more bureaucratic programs could solve the larger problem. Or they brandish free-market banners, as though the free market alone, without intelligent support and direction, would solve all the ills produced by the greatest techno-social transformation since the industrial revolution.

Politicians seem unaware (or unwilling to admit) that all their old Second Wave nostrums for unemployment are obsolete. In the old muscle-based, mass-manufacturing economy, if a country had 1 million unemployed workers, politicians could employ Keynesian or monetarist measures to stimulate the economy. This might create 1 million jobs, and the jobless workers would return to the factory or office.

Contrast this with today. In today's Third Wave economies you can create 5 million or even 10 million jobs - but the 1 million jobless workers won't be able to fill them. They lack the requisite skills. What's more, the needs keep changing so that even workers who have high skills face obsolescence unless they learn still higher ones. (Just ask the laid-off engineers in California's defense industries!)

The fact is that, in Third Wave societies, unemployment goes from quantitative to qualitative, which is why it is structural, intractable, and incurable with the remedies proposed by economists and politicians still trapped in Second Wave thinking.

Maybe education has to become distributed through all institutions of society, rather than schools alone.

The change from quantitative to qualitative unemployment is also why the upheaval in Los Angeles is likely to be repeated elsewhere again and again until political leaders recognize that the Third Wave is here to stay - that it is overhauling whole economies and the very structure of society. Finally, this kind of unemployment is why there can be no solution until a Third Wave revolution sweeps away today's Second Wave schools and replaces them with completely new learning institutions that no longer resemble the rust-belt factories of yesterday.

More money for schools without a deep re-conceptualization of education itself is to throw resources into the past, rather than the future.

More homework, more hours in the classroom, merit pay - all the usual suggestions are designed to make the factory schools run more efficiently with out attacking the fundamental incongruence between factory-style education and a society in which factories and factory jobs may no longer be there for our children, black or white.

What is needed is a daring experiment with everything from vouchers, to home education, to new relationships with parents, to the use of computers not merely for drill, but for helping children to think and create. Maybe corporations have to adopt 11-year-olds and serve as para-parents, working with the real parents, where possible and actually teaching and training the children for Third Wave work in their own organizations. Maybe education has to become holographically distributed through all the institutions of society, rather than allocated to schools alone.

Maybe teenagers, as part of their education, need to become part of community service teams working to clean up the environment, build and reconstruct neighborhood facilities, manage traffic, care for the elderly, then return to the classroom for education linked to the actual solution of community problems.

The GI Bill, which gave US veterans of World War II vouchers for education in everything from Ivy League universities to automotive repair schools, was perhaps the single best piece of social legislation in the US since the 1940s. Why not use it as a model for young people generally?

There can be no permanent peace in the black and Latino ghettos of America, the North African banlieues of France, the barrios and immigrant slums of the rest of the high-tech world until all industrial-style institutions, from health systems and justice systems to transportation systems and, yes, political systems, are redesigned for a Third Wave society congruent with the new Third Wave system for creating wealth.

It is not merely the pitiful choice between a Bush and a Clinton (or even a Perot) that depresses and frightens Americans today. It is not merely anger in the streets that is tearing the country apart. It is the failure of any political leadership to come to terms with a future that stares America-and all the other high tech nations in the face. Where there is no vision, clichés proliferate, people perish-and cities burn.

ALVIN AND HEIDI TOFFLER are co-authors of the global bestsellers "Powershift," "The Third Wave," and "Future Shock."