

THE REBIRTH OF WATTS

BY RAOUL LOWERY CONTRERAS

Twenty-five years ago, South-Central Los Angeles, the Watts area, erupted into riots and flames. Across 100 square miles of the city, people ran amok, looting, burning, and killing. The country had not seen anything like it since the Detroit race riot of 1943. Watts became a symbol of explosive violence fed by social discontent.

The black leaders of the time rationalized the riots, the destruction, the deaths, as results of white America's entrenched racism, parasitic capitalism, and patronizing attitudes toward what are now called "people of color." Caught between black rioters, white police, and National Guardsmen sent in to restore peace, the city's Mexican-American population hunkered down and waited for the riots to spend their fury. The day after order was restored, Mexicans began a mass exodus from their traditional neighborhoods in South-Central Los Angeles, heading for East Los Angeles and the San Fernando Valley.

Los Angeles's white establishment turned its back on Watts, as did the black middle class, which moved out as quickly as the Mexicans had. Like the Mexicans, middle-class blacks refused to suffer because of perceived wrongs against a growing group of uneducated, unskilled blacks flooding in from the Southern states. White businessmen, particularly Jewish businessmen, the backbone of free enterprise in Watts, boarded up their shops as their leases ran out and left.

In the wake of the riots, block after block of what had been a thriving business district died overnight. Watts became a cultural and industrial wasteland.

After a quarter century, capitalism is returning to Watts, and it speaks Korean and Spanish. Capital, which speaks all languages, is finding its way into the neighborhood to provide shelter and



Korean and Latino entrepreneurs are bringing about a commercial renaissance in South-Central Los Angeles.

amenities for Koreans, Mexicans, and other Latinos determined to work for themselves.

In the 1980s, hundreds of thousands of Spanish-speaking immigrants flooded into Los Angeles. They spilled out of East Los Angeles to form barrios, Spanish-speaking communities, in the San Fernando Valley, Pomona, the Inland Empire of San Bernardino and Riverside, and Orange County. But most, looking for cheap housing, headed into South-Central Los Angeles—Watts.

On a recent visit to Watts, I interviewed a man who told me his earliest memory is of the riots. He is 32 years old, didn't finish high school, and hasn't worked for several months. At his last job, as a construction worker, he didn't always show up on time, so they fired him.

He says he applies for work everywhere, but no one will hire him because he wears a beard and isn't "clean-cut." He

says dust reddens his eyes and makes it look like he's on drugs. He doesn't use drugs, just drinks a little beer. He complains that Mexicans take all the jobs. He doesn't like the "rich" blacks who move out as soon as they can afford to. He says they should stay and help people like him.

A block away is a grocery store that a black family ran for 30 years. They recently closed the store because too many customers owed them money for groceries bought on credit. For a generation, children could pick up milk and bread, and the store would run tabs. For a generation, people would come in on payday or once a month, when their welfare or Social Security checks came, and settle their bills. But people stopped settling up, so the elderly black couple closed their store, and black capitalism lost two

more practitioners.

Korean grocers will probably reopen the store any day, but they won't give credit. Nor do the hundreds of Mexicans, Salvadorans, and Guatemalans renting space on Central Avenue in order to sell groceries, clothing, tacos, straw hats, radios, televisions, and furniture.

Central Avenue, the principal street of Watts, used to have the appearance of a bombed-out city. Plywood sheets were ubiquitous. Now Central Avenue is coming back to life. Investors who sense a commercial renaissance are building strip shopping centers and buying up land and buildings willy-nilly.

The new entrepreneurs not only rent stores, they rent or buy houses in Watts and fix them up so they can be close to their businesses. They are displacing the blacks. Those who can afford it move to the suburbs, to Riverside County, where the black population has increased by more than 30 percent in recent years. Or

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they move to the San Fernando Valley. Wherever they go, it's a long way from Watts. And they don't come back.

The second man I talked to in Watts was a longtime real estate broker, a black self-made millionaire who owns two dozen rental properties. His view of Mexicans: "I love them madly...Once in a while, they gang up on me. That is, I'll rent to one family and when I come back a month later to collect the rent, there'll be another family living with them. But

Central Avenue, the main street in Watts, used to look like a bombed-out city. Now the area is coming back to life.

they always pay their rent." The broker is retiring, selling his properties to Mexican immigrants for small down payments and carrying the mortgages.

He doesn't live in Watts. He hasn't in years. He only returns to collect his rents.

A few blocks away I met a young Mexican from Guanajuato, who was selling snow cones, *raspados*, from a pushcart. He told me he'd been in the United States for five months.

"How long have you been selling *raspados*?" I asked.

"Five months," he said. He started the day after he arrived, illegally, in Los Angeles. He sets his own hours, picks his territory, and works seven days a week. He makes \$30 to \$40 a day, sending half home to his wife and children in Mexico, where he used to work 10 hours a day for \$4.00.

The Watts riots? He'd never heard of them. He couldn't believe anyone would complain about conditions in America. "There's too much money to be made here," he said.

Raoul Lowery Contreras is a syndicated columnist based in San Diego.

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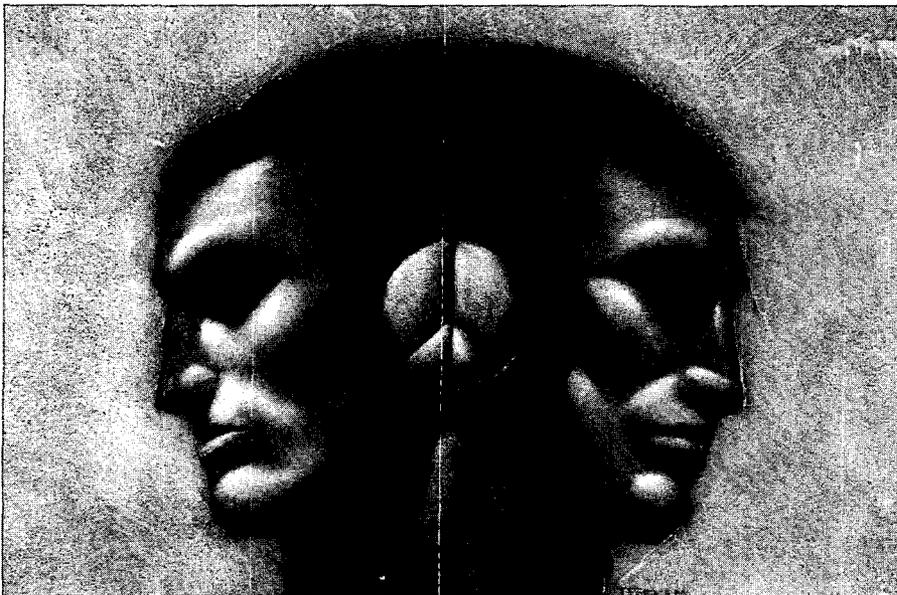
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Cloaking Device

BY JULIANA GERAN PILON

In Search of Civil Society: Independent Peace Movements in the Soviet Bloc, edited by Vladimir Tismaneanu, New York: Routledge, Chapman, and Hall, 193 pages, \$35.00



To understand the phoenix-like emergence of civil society in the former Soviet Bloc, one must appreciate the imaginative ways that individuals have found to circumvent the limits imposed by totalitarian governments. Vladimir Tismaneanu, a Romanian by birth and education who was recently named associate director of the Center for the Study of Post-Communist Societies at the University of Maryland, is eminently equipped to explore this theme. His examination of independent peace movements, which includes excellent analyses by Central-Eastern European scholars and activists, sheds light on the project of reconstruction after the fall of communism.

Peace movements offered an unusual opportunity for dissidents within the Soviet empire to escape the rigidity of the totalitarian system. Since "peace" was,

after all, the domain of official communist rhetoric, its traditionally anti-Western and anticapitalist overtones served to mask, at least temporarily, the true objectives of the independent movements. Thus, Tismaneanu writes, "single issues of broad social significance—human rights, peace, conscientious objection, ecology, preservation of historical monuments, and so on—are embraced and promoted by independent activists in the attempt to further their agenda for change without granting the government a rationale for overall repression."

The underlying goals of the independent peace movements in the Soviet Bloc distinguished them from their Western counterparts. The two sets of movements had different motivations, interests, and philosophical principles. The Eastern dissidents not only consistently

opposed the communist system in which they lived, they tended to identify with the capitalist and classical-liberal ideology to which the Western movements were hostile. This is not to deny, however, that in many areas the two sets of groups have cooperated, allowing the Eastern movements not only to survive but often to provide seeds for other organizations—the beginnings of a genuine civil society.

The independent movements are more than a decade old, dating at least as far back as the Charter 77 initiative in Czechoslovakia, whose main inspiration was profound opposition to Soviet occupation. The following year, the East German Evangelical Church signed a concordat with the ruling Socialist Union Party to try to temper East Germany's militaristic course. Futile as that particular initiative may have been, efforts within the GDR continued into the early 1980s, when a group called Social Service for Peace called for a civilian-service alternative to the draft.

Pacifism emerged even in the USSR, where 11 Moscow intellectuals founded the Group to Establish Trust between East and West. In May 1983, the group declared that true détente cannot exist until "international cooperation and contacts become part of the day-to-day existence of the average citizen."

In Poland, the birthplace of Central European anticommunist activism, pacifism took over by storm in the spring of 1985. A group of Polish independent pacifists formed the organization Freedom and Peace in response to the trial of Marek Adamkiewicz, a young draftee sentenced to a stiff prison term for refusing to take the military oath. A year later, the Chernobyl accident provoked a brush fire of pacifist actions throughout Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union.

Later that year, the supranational aspect of the movements became evident: