

Marxism and insurrection: When the people rebel against racism

written by Sam Marcy
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Minneapolis rebellion against racism, May 27-28.

On Memorial Day 2020, four Minneapolis police brutally murdered George Floyd. Video of the killing quickly spread around the world. On May 26, some 20,000

people marched in Minneapolis, where they were confronted with a violent police response, including rubber bullets and tear gas. The following day, the city erupted into a full-scale rebellion against the racist police. As of this writing, Minnesota's governor has called in the National Guard to help repress the ongoing uprising.

This article by Sam Marcy, a leading Marxist thinker and fighter of the second half of the 20th century, was written during the Los Angeles rebellion against racism in May 1992, following the acquittal of the cops who beat Black motorist Rodney King. It explains the revolutionary significance and class character of these popular rebellions against racist state violence that the corporate media and politicians seek to cover up.

The brutal suppression of the Los Angeles insurrection offers a classic example of the relationship of bourgeois democracy to the capitalist state. The statistics most eloquently demonstrate the relationship.

The number of arrests in Los Angeles County alone as of May 5 is 12,111 and still rising. The number of injuries has reached a staggering 2,383. Several hundred are critically wounded. Thus, the number of dead at present will undoubtedly continue to rise.

All this has to be seen in light of the repressive forces amassed by the city, state and federal government: 8,000 police, 9,800 National Guard troops, 1,400 Marines, 1,800 Army soldiers and 1,000 federal marshals. (Associated Press, May 5, 1992)

At the bottom of it all, Marxism differs from all forms of bourgeois sociology in this most fundamental way: all bourgeois social sciences are directed at covering up and concealing — sometimes in the most shameful way — the predatory class character of present-day capitalist society. Marxism, on the other hand, reveals in the clearest and sharpest manner not only the antagonisms that continually rend asunder present-day bourgeois society but also their basis — the ownership of the means of

production by a handful of millionaires and billionaires.

Bourgeois sociology must leave out of consideration the fact that society is divided into exploiter and exploited, oppressors of nationalities and oppressed. The basis for both the exploitation and oppression is the ownership of the means of production by an ever-diminishing group of the population that controls the vital arteries of contemporary society. They are the bourgeoisie, the ruling class. At the other end of the axis is the proletariat of all nationalities, the producer of all the fabulous wealth.

Material wealth has been vastly increasing along with the masses' productivity of labor. But only 1 percent of the population amasses the lion's share of what the workers produce while a greater and greater mass is impoverished.

Flattering 'the people'

Especially during periods of parliamentary elections as in the U.S. today, bourgeois sociologists are full of effusive praise for "the people." Each and every capitalist politician embraces "the people" with what often becomes disgusting flattery. The people are everything during periods when the bourgeoisie needs them most of all, as during its many predatory wars. Indeed, at no time is the bourgeoisie so attached to the people as when it is in its deepest crisis.

But the people — the unarmed masses — become nothing, not even human beings, when they are in the full throes of rebellion against the bourgeoisie's monstrous police and military machine. Does not the Los Angeles insurrection prove all this?

No amount of praise, no amount of flattery, can substitute for a clear-cut delineation of the class divisions that perpetually rend society apart.

To the bourgeois social scientists, the masses are the object of history. Marxist theory, on the other hand, demonstrates that the masses are the subject of history. Where they are the objects of history they are manipulated as raw material to suit

the aims of ruling-class exploitation. They become the subject of history only when they rise to the surface in mass revolutionary action.

Their rising, as in Los Angeles, is what Karl Marx called the locomotive of history. Their revolutionary struggle accelerates history, bringing to the fore the real character of the mass movement.

To speak of the people in general terms, without cutting through the propaganda to reveal the relations of exploiter to exploited, of oppressor to oppressed, is to participate in covering up the reality.

Oppression of a whole people

Most indispensable for an understanding of contemporary society is the relation between oppressor and oppressed nationalities. One cannot apply Marxism to any meaningful extent without first recognizing the existence of national oppression — the oppression of a whole people by capitalist imperialism. This is one of the most characteristic features of the present world reality.

This concept above all others must be kept foremost if we hope to understand what has happened in Los Angeles and in other major cities of this country.

The insurrection and the way it is being suppressed closely follow the exposition by Frederick Engels in his book ["The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State,"](#) and later brought up to date by Lenin in ["The State and Revolution."](#)

What is the state? What is democracy?

Bourgeois sociologists and scholars and above all capitalist politicians always confound the relationship between the two. They often treat them as a single phenomenon. In reality, the relation between democracy and the state is based on an inner struggle — between form and essence.

The state can take on many different forms. A state can have the form of a bourgeois democracy; it can be a monarchy; it may be ruled by a military junta. And in modern society, on the very edge of the 21st century, it may have a totalitarian or fascist form.

Whatever its form, its essence is determined by which class is dominant economically and consequently also dominant politically. In contemporary society, this means the rule of the imperialist bourgeoisie over the proletariat and the oppressed nationalities.

Bourgeoisie needs different forms of rule

The bourgeoisie cannot maintain its class rule by relying solely on one particular form of the state. It can't rely only on the governing officialdom — even those at the very summit of the state, even when they are solely millionaires and billionaires. Under such circumstances, should there be an imperialist war or a deep capitalist crisis that leads to ferment among the masses, the bourgeois state would be vulnerable to revolutionary overthrow.

But the state is not just the officialdom — who presume to govern in the interest of all the people. The state in its essential characteristics is the organization, to quote Engels, of a “special public force” that consists not merely of armed men and women but of material appendages, prisons and repressive institutions of all kinds.

The decisive basic ingredient of the state is the armed forces with all their material appendages and all who service them. Most noteworthy are the prisons — more and more of them — calculated to break the spirit of millions of the most oppressed while pretending to some mock forms of rehabilitation. All the most modern means — mental and physical — are used to demoralize and deprave the character of those incarcerated.

These repressive institutions, this public force, appears so omnipotent against the unarmed mass of the oppressed and exploited. But it stands out as the very epitome of gentility and humaneness when it comes to incarcerating favored individuals, especially the very rich, who have transgressed the norms of capitalist law.

In general then, the Los Angeles insurrection shows that democracy is a veil that hides the repressive character of the capitalist state. The state at all times is the state of the dominant class. And the objective of the special bodies of armed men and women is to secure, safeguard and uphold the domination of the bourgeoisie.

Growth of the state

Engels explained that in the course of development of capitalist society, as the class antagonisms grow sharper, the state — that is, the public force — grows stronger.

Said Engels, “We have only to look at our present-day Europe where class struggle, rivalry and conquest has screwed up the public power to such a pitch that it threatens to devour the whole of society and even the state itself.”

Written more than 100 years ago, this refers to the growth of militarism. The sharpening of class and national antagonisms had even then resulted in larger and larger appropriations for civilian and military personnel employed for the sole purpose of suppressing the civil population at home and waging adventurist imperialist wars abroad.

The state grows in proportion as class and national antagonisms develop. Democracy is merely a form which hides the predatory class character of the bourgeois state. Nothing so much proves this as the steady and consistent growth of militarism and the police forces in times of peace as well as war.

The ruling class continually cultivates racism to keep the working class divided, in order to maintain its domination. This is as true at home as it is abroad. The forces

of racism and national oppression have been deliberately stimulated by Pentagon and State Department policies all across the globe.

Marxism on violence

After every stage in the struggle of the workers and oppressed people, there follows an ideological struggle over what methods the masses should embrace to achieve their liberation from imperialist monopoly capital. There are always those who abjure violence while minimizing the initial use of violence by the ruling class. They denounce it in words, while in deeds they really cover it up. That's precisely what's happening now.

Yes indeed, they readily admit the verdict in the Rodney King beating was erroneous and unfair. But — and here their voices grow louder — “The masses should not have taken to the streets and taken matters into their own hands.” Their denunciation of the violence of the ruling class is subdued and muffled — above all it is hypocritical, a sheer formality. It's an indecent way of seeming to take both sides of the argument when what follows is in reality a condemnation of the masses.

In times when the bourgeoisie is up against the wall, when the masses have risen suddenly and unexpectedly, the bourgeoisie gets most lyrical in abjuring violence. It conjures up all sorts of lies and deceits about the unruliness of a few among the masses as against the orderly law-abiding many.

Marxism here again cuts through it all. The Marxist view of violence flows from an altogether different concept. It first of all distinguishes between the violence of the oppressors as against the responsive violence of the masses. Just to be able to formulate it that way is a giant step forward, away from disgusting bourgeois praise for nonviolence. It never occurs to any of them to show that the masses have never made any real leap forward with the theory of nonviolence. Timidity never made it in history.

Indeed, Marxists do prefer nonviolent methods if the objectives the masses seek — freedom from oppression and exploitation — can be obtained that way. But Marxism explains the historical evolution of the class struggle as well as the struggle of oppressed nations as against oppressors.

Revolutions, force and violence

As Marx put it, “force is the midwife to every great revolution.” This is what Marx derived from his study of the class struggle in general and of capitalist society in particular.

None of the great revolutions has ever occurred without being accompanied by force and violence. And it is always the oppressor — the ruling class and the oppressing nationality — that is most congenitally prone to use force as soon as the masses raise their heads.

In all the bourgeois revolutions in Europe, this new would-be ruling class used the masses to fight its battles against the feudal lords. Then, when the masses raised their heads to fight for their own liberation against the bourgeoisie, they were met with the most fearful and unmitigated violence. All European history is filled with such examples, from the revolutions of 1789 and 1848 to the Paris Commune of 1871. Does not the bourgeoisie, once it has tamed the proletariat at home, use force and violence through its vast military armada to more efficiently exploit and suppress the many underdeveloped nations throughout the world?

It is so illuminating that Iraq, the nation subjected to the most violent, truly genocidal military attack in recent times, has taken upon itself to press a formal complaint in the United Nations Security Council on behalf of the embattled masses in Los Angeles and other cities. Iraq called on that body to condemn and investigate the nature of the developments here and the irony is that the head of the Security Council felt obligated to accept the complaint. Not even the U.S. delegate, obviously

taken by surprise, objected.

How much real difference is there between the suppression of the Paris Commune in 1871 and that of the revolutionary rising of the masses in Los Angeles in 1992? The brutal suppression differs only in magnitude and not in essence. While it might seem that in Los Angeles national oppression alone is involved, in reality it derives from the class exploitation of the African American masses dating back to the days of slavery.

Watts and social legislation

Following the Watts insurrection, the bourgeoisie made lofty promises to improve the situation. The Watts, Detroit, Newark and other rebellions did win significant concessions that eventually were enacted into law. They became the basis for a temporary improvement in the economic and social situation of the oppressed people.

None of the progressive legislation, up to and including affirmative action, would have been enacted had it not been for the rebellions during the 1960s and the 1970s. Yet now, almost three decades after the Watts rebellion, the masses are in greater poverty and the repression is heavier than before. The fruits of what was won have withered on the vine as racism and the deterioration of economic conditions took hold once again.

Once more the bourgeois politicians attempted to mollify the masses with endless promises of improvements never destined to see the light of day. This evoked a profound revulsion among the masses. It took only an incident like the incredible verdict of the rigged jury that freed the four police officers in the Rodney King beating to ignite a storm of revolutionary protest.

If revolutionary measures are ever to have any validity, doesn't a case like this

justify the people taking destiny into their own hands?

Less workers, more cops

How interesting that technology everywhere displaces labor, reducing the number of personnel.

There was a time when it was hoped that the mere development of technical and industrial progress, the increase in mechanization and automation, would contribute to the well-being of the masses. This has once again shown itself to be a hollow mockery. The truth is that the development of higher and more sophisticated technology under capitalism doesn't contribute to the welfare of the masses but on the contrary, throws them into greater misery.

What has been the general trend? The growth of technology, particularly sophisticated high technology, has reduced the number of workers employed in industry as well as in the services. The introduction of labor-saving devices and methods has dramatically reduced the number of workers in all fields.

But the opposite trend prevails in the police forces. This is an absolutely incontestable fact. At one time the police patrolled the streets on foot. Maybe they used a public telephone for communications with headquarters. Today they are equipped with sophisticated gear. They ride either on motorcycles or in police cars or helicopters. They communicate by radio.

All this should reduce the number of police. But the trend is quite the contrary: to increase the forces of repression. This is not geared to productivity as in industry. Their growth is geared to the growth of national antagonisms, the growth of racism and the bourgeoisie's general anti-labor offensive.

In Los Angeles, the bourgeoisie is forced to bring in federal troops to assist city and state authorities. The social composition of the U.S. Army is not just a cross-section

of capitalist society. The Army and Marines, especially the infantry, have a preponderance of Black and Latinx soldiers. What does this signify?

The U.S. imperialists had to wage a technological war against Iraq out of fear that the preponderance of Black and Latinx soldiers could end up in a disastrous rebellion; they might refuse to engage in a war against their sisters and brothers in the interests of the class enemy. That's why the armed forces never really got into the ground war that seemed at first to be in the offing.

In Los Angeles, the local police and state forces were inadequate. Only because the masses were unarmed was the bourgeoisie able to suppress what was in truth an insurrection — a revolutionary uprising.

Spontaneity and consciousness

As Marx would put it, such a rising is a festival of the masses. The incidental harm is far outweighed by the fact that it raises the level of the struggle to a higher plateau. The wounds inflicted by the gendarmerie will be healed. The lessons will be learned: that a spontaneous uprising has to be supported with whatever means are available; that a great divide exists between the leaders and the masses.

No viable class or nation in modern capitalist society can hope to take destiny in its own hands by spontaneous struggles alone. Spontaneity as an element of social struggle must beget its own opposite: leadership and organization. Consciousness of this will inevitably grow.

