

Why People Riot

LOUIS BOLCE

On the sweltering evening of August 11, 1965, a routine drunken-driving arrest, in the Watts section of Los Angeles, touched off an outburst of lawlessness that radically changed the nature of racial violence in the United States.¹ The conflagration raged for six days, resulting in thirty-four deaths, thousands of personal injuries, and damages estimated at \$40 million. An estimated 31,000 blacks participated in the disorder, cheered on by another 64,000 to 72,000 "close spectators." About 4,000 rioters were arrested.² For the next five years, rampages of looting and arson would explode across inner-city streets like fireballs in the night, depositing in the ashes and rubble losses of life and property unequalled since the Civil War. And every spring hence, with numbing familiarity, speculation about the threat of more "long-hot summers" would become a favorite pastime of pundits, politicians, and civil rights leaders.³ Clearly, the mood of black America had changed radically. Why?

That the riots erupted on the heels of the most far-reaching civil-rights legislation enacted in the United States struck most white Americans as surprising, if not outright shocking. That most disorders did not occur in the South, the bastion of resistance, but instead erupted in states and cities generally known for their liberalism and progressive views on race, added to the sense of confusion. The mass public, at a loss for explanation, generally expressed anger and bewilderment at the escalation of black violence; these were not the feelings expressed in the articles and books by social scientists.

"Ghetto rioting," write social scientists Joe Feagin and Harlan

1. A technical version of this article can be found in "Uncertainty and the Black Urban Riots," paper presented at the Annual CUNY Political Science Conference, December 11, 1981.

2. David O. Sears and John B. McConahay, *The Politics of Violence* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1973), pp. 9-13.

3. Some recent examples of riot speculation are found in Melinda Beck et al., "A Long Jobless Summer," *Newsweek*, May 31, 1982, pp. 28-29; Iver Peterson, "Young Seen Facing Dim Prospect on Summer Jobs," *New York Times*, June 5, 1982, p. 9; and Nicholas Pileggi, "A Long Smoldery Summer?" *New Yorker*, June 21, 1982, pp. 28-31.

Hahn, "reflected more than a strong hope that the political system would respond peacefully and favorably to black needs and demands. Rather, rioting appeared more as a desperate and concerted effort to compel political authorities to change not only their policies but to force alterations in the process by which those decisions are made."⁴ And the rioters? According to social scientists, they were "the cream of urban Negro youth in particular and urban citizens in general."⁵ This view sees the riots as a legitimate form of political protest and explains the disorders as the black man's angry reply to a history of long-standing and long-ignored grievances, most notably his feelings of being treated unjustly by white people. This is the view that prevails in the social science literature and textbooks today and is the one that received the imprimatur of the Kerner Commission.⁶

I have a different view about the rioting. Explaining the riots as protests exaggerates the importance that political motives played in the riots, motivations belied by the paucity of demands and grievances put forth by the rioters⁷ and by the objects of their wrath—mainly retail commercial establishments and liquor stores. This view underemphasizes the tendencies towards asocial behavior of inner-city slum dwellers⁸ and does not adequately take into account the disorientation produced throughout the black community since the mid-1950s by the momentous change in government racial policies and the inconsistent and contradictory evolution in white racial attitudes. The riots can be better understood as lower-class rampages caused by a pervasive and intolerable

4. Joe R. Feagin and Harlan Hahn, *The Ghetto Revolts* (New York: MacMillan Publishing Company, 1973), p. 27.

5. See, for example, T. M. Tomlinson, "The Development of a Riot Ideology among Urban Negroes," *American Behavioral Scientist II* (March-April 1968), pp. 27-34; Sears and McConahay *op. cit.*; Nathan Caplan, "The New Ghetto Man: A Review of Recent Empirical Studies," *Journal of Social Issues* 26 (1970) pp. 59-73; and Feagin and Hahn, *op. cit.*

6. Tomlinson *op. cit.*; Sears and McConahay, *op. cit.*; Caplan *op. cit.*; Jerome Skolnick, *The Politics of Protest* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1969); Peter H. Rossi, ed., *Ghetto Revolts* (Chicago: Aldine Publishing Company, 1970); and National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, *Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1968).

7. Edward Banfield, *The Unheavenly City Revisited* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1974), p. 220.

8. *Ibid.* Eleanor Pavenstedt, ed., *The Drifters: Children of Disorganized Lower-class Families* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1967).

sense of uncertainty that had been building for a decade in the inner cities across America.

Uncertainty and Violence

Uncertainty is any ambiguity in meaning, value, or expectation. It may vary in terms of intensity, duration, removability,⁹ and importance of the thing about which we are in doubt (say the top-rated punk rock group as compared to our job tenure, self-worth, or physical safety, for example). It is frustrating to experience and most people hate it.¹⁰ In its chronic form, uncertainty is characterized by a lack of constructive and realizable goals and appropriate methods for the attainment of goals. As it hinders the capacity for assessment, foresight, and anticipation, chronic uncertainty makes planning virtually impossible;¹¹ we do not know what we must do to get what we need and want. The person experiencing chronic uncertainty is thus a person who is chronically frustrated. He is also a person who is unable to control his impulses.¹² He is an insecure, unstable person prone to violence.

Everyone experiences uncertainty, and it is my belief that we feel it most intensely when we experience change. Change brings on the new, the different, the unfamiliar. Change requires us to adjust but offers no sure guide for action. That is why most people

9. Anthony Downs, *An Economic Theory of Democracy* (New York: Harper and Row, 1957), p. 77.

10. Ivo K. Feierabend, Rosalind L. Feierabend and Rosaline Nesvold, "Social Change and Political Violence: Cross National Patterns," *The History of Violence in America*, eds., Hugh Davis Graham and Ted Robert Gurr (New York: Bantam Books, 1970), p. 607.

11. Pavenstedt *op. cit.*, p. 133 ff.

12. Reinforcement theory states that self-control involves delaying present gratification for a future reward. The expectation that our self-controlling behavior will result in this delayed reward buttresses our capacity to withstand present frustrations. Giving up "hanging out" and "getting high" everyday with the gang over at Betty Lou's, for example, does not seem so intolerable when considering that the long, tedious hours spent instead in school or at home studying might pay off in a decent and well-paying job after graduation. But when the worthwhileness of a future goal is uncertain vis-à-vis the gratification deferred, we lose our motivation for self-restraint. Everyone needs some sense of certainty (reinforcer) to motivate him to think about the future consequences of his actions. Without it, we become impetuous and our behavior impulsively destructive. See, for example, Frederick H. Kafner, "Self-Regulation, Research, Issues and Speculation," *Behavior Modification in Clinical Psychology*, eds., C. Neuringer and J. L. Michael (New York: Appelton, Century and Croft, 1970) and Elliot Liebow, *Tally's Corner* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1967), pp. 67-68.

fear it. In fact, even positive change can be a cause of great apprehension. According to Professor R. H. Rahe, getting married (a life change most would evaluate positively and as something freely chosen) causes roughly the same amount of stress as being fired from one's job. Even distinguishing oneself with some outstanding achievement produces stress—about as much as having one's mortgage foreclosed.¹³ The point here is not that positive change is bad and should therefore be avoided, but that all change disorients and requires adaptation, *even* if it is positive and expected. When we experience it, we feel a foundation of our well-being threatened by the unfamiliar, and we do not immediately know what to do to relieve our distress. For people undergoing drastic change, especially change forced upon them, or a rapid succession of changes touching the full spectrum of their lives, the uncertainty is of course deeper, more pervasive, and longer lasting.¹⁴

It is my contention that the causes underlying the black urban riots can be traced to fluctuation and change in black experiences throughout the 1950s and 1960s, disruptive changes that destabilized black expectations, particularly those of the lower classes. These rapid and discordant patterns of change ran the gamut from their migration to the northern and midwestern industrial cities, through changing political, family, and employment experiences, to the inconsistent evolution in racial attitudes of whites and shifting self-perceptions of blacks. From any perspective, the fluctuations were massive and initiated an unsettled course for black America. Analysis of census and public opinion data demonstrates that uncertainty was the fundamental psychological characteristic of rioters, and that its origins can be traced to fluctuation and change in their social, political, and economic experiences. Before I display data on black perceptions and their relationship to riot participation, I will first present evidence documenting some of the destabilizing changes experienced by the black community.

Hardly anyone today argues that work and money are unimportant matters in people's lives. Job security and earning a decent living have always been incessant preoccupations of the American

13. R. H. Rahe, "Life Changes and Near-Future Illness Reports," *Emotions—Their Parameters and Measurement*, ed., L. Levi (New York: Raven, 1975).

14. Eric Hoffer, *The Ordeal of Change* (New York: Harper and Row, 1963), pp. 4–5; and Bernard N. Grofman and Edward Muller, "The Strange Case of Relative Gratification and the Potential for Political Violence: The V-Curve Hypothesis," *American Political Science Review* 67 (1973), pp. 514–539.

people, and there is little evidence to indicate that they will not be dominant concerns in the future. Having a steady job allows one to pay the rent, to provide for a family, to accrue material objects. It allows one to organize one's life around a familiar, predictable routine. It allows one to *plan* for the future and indeed have one. For most, a life without stable employment is a frustrating one lacking structure and security.

The economic performance of black America throughout the 1950s and 1960s offers a case in point. Even the casual observer, from whatever perspective, would probably acknowledge that during this era, black economic progress was, at best, erratic with each long stride forward, offset by a step or two in retreat.

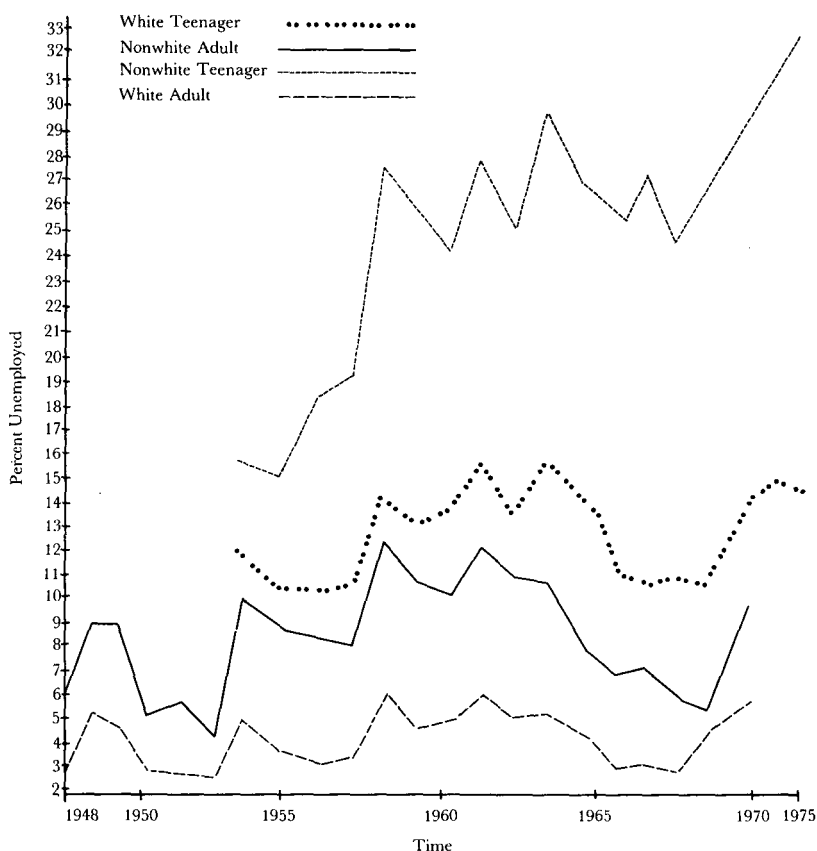
A glimpse of the erratic pattern of black economic progress can be seen from data comparing nonwhite unemployment rates between 1948 and 1972 with the unemployment rates of whites during this same period. (See Figure 1.) The data lead to two conclusions: unemployment hit nonwhites harder than whites for many years, and fluctuation in employment experiences hit nonwhites even harder. Popular opinion generally focuses our attention on the former—that since 1948, for example, the rate of black joblessness has been double the rates for whites. Job instability is usually overlooked or ignored. Both figures are important social indicators, but it is the pattern of employment experiences that most enlightens our understanding of the frustrated, insecure person prone to violence.¹⁵

Swings in America's economic activity and/or attachment to the work ethic affect nonwhites to a much greater extent than whites, shuffling nonwhites in and out of the job force at roughly double the rate for whites. Between 1950 and 1951, for example, nonwhite unemployment dropped 3.7 percent, down from 9 percent to 5.3 percent; white unemployment during the same period fell 1.8 percent. Adult nonwhite unemployment leaped 4.4 percent between 1953 and 1954, and 4.7 percent between 1958 and 1959; the increase in white joblessness for both two-year periods was 2.3 percent. This pattern continued on through the 1960s. The percentage of adult nonwhites looking for work but not finding it during the decade and a half from 1954 oscillated between 6.6

15. Michael Aiken, L. A. Ferman and H. L. Sheppard, *Economic Failure, Alienation and Extremism* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1968), pp. 76-77.

Figure One

Unemployment Rates of Nonwhite and White Adults and Teenagers



Source: Current Population Report Series P-23 N. 42, p. 52 and *Manpower Report of the President*, April 1974, p. 259.

percent and 12.6 percent, compared to the relatively modest fluctuation in the adult, white unemployment rate.

Job instability is even more striking in figures on unemployment rates for nonwhite teenagers, teenagers being important as they constitute the most riot-prone age group. As with the data on adults, the figure shows a declining, yet fluctuating, pattern in the rate of nonwhite, teenage unemployment from 1957 through the 1965-1968 riot era followed by a sharp upturn in unemployment

thereafter.¹⁶ From 1954, the joblessness rate for nonwhite youths seesawed convulsively between 15.8 and 33.5 percent, compared to the 10.2 to 15.5 percent fluctuation for white teenagers. Patterns of fluctuation and instability are apparent in many indicators describing black social and economic experiences during the 1950s and 1960s.

Black males, particularly in the lower class, for example, have experienced destabilizing economic fluctuation relative to black females. Throughout the period, when black females were making enormous strides in income relative to white females, black males saw little gain in their standing compared to white males. Indeed, in some areas black males were actually losing ground. Change in the economy was not just moving black males and females at a different pace, but thrusting them in opposite directions.¹⁷ Some have characterized this trend as indicating a growing economic dependence of the black male on the black female and have called attention to its repercussions on the family life of lower class blacks. One effect is the disruption of traditional roles. Another is the collapse of the family as a nuclear unit with all the tragic ramifications that a disorganized unstable family setting means for the socialization of children.¹⁸

Desegregation and Black Upheaval

Probably the greatest cause of upheaval for the black American was fluctuation and change in society's attitudes toward him. The mid-1950s to the mid-1960s was a decade unprecedented in federal

16. Naturally these unemployment data are hardly consistent with either a J-Curve or absolute deprivation explanation of the riots. While feelings of deprivation served as aggravating factors, they were not sufficient to have caused the riots. Nonwhite unemployment, for example, fluctuated downward between 1961 and 1969, rather than sharply increasing as these theories would lead us to expect. Nonwhites were more likely to have jobs during the three-year riots period than for any other three-year period since 1963. Moreover, although nonwhites experienced a sharp increase in joblessness after 1968, this upturn in unemployment was not followed by an outbreak of rioting.

17. See, for example, Alan Batchelder, "Decline in the Relative Income of Negro Men Relative to Negro Women," *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* 78, 4 (November 1969), pp. 525-548.

18. Identity confusion, mental illness, truancy, promiscuity, delinquency, and alcohol and drug abuse are some of the more serious childhood pathologies often attributed to being reared in unstable broken homes. See, for example, Pavenstedt *op. cit.*, p. 231 ff; Daniel Patrick Moynihan, "Employment, Income and the Ordeal of the Negro Family," *Daedalus* (Fall 1965), pp. 745-770; and Banfield *op. cit.*, p. 83 ff.

legislation and court action on his behalf. The 1954 landmark *Brown* decision initiating the beginning of the end of Jim Crow, the enforcement of *Brown* with federal troops three years later by President Eisenhower, the 1964 Civil Rights Acts and the 1965 Voting Rights Act were clearly momentous changes. Their after-shocks would ripple through the American social fabric for many years to come. The black person had at last achieved the status of citizen in the American political community. His political and legal rights were written into federal law, protected by the federal courts, and enforced by the federal government. His status as an accepted and respected member in the wider social community, however, was not as clear cut. This decade was also characterized by fluctuating and contradictory white attitudes toward blacks and policies created to help blacks. These were not small matters, considering the scholarly attention given to the detrimental effects of white actions and racial attitudes on the self-perceptions of black youngsters and adults.¹⁹

Perhaps no issue has, at once, been more of a cause of hope, apprehension, self-doubt, and bewilderment for the black American than the issue of integration. And probably no issue better reflects white vacillation and ambivalence in his attitudes toward blacks.²⁰ Since 1956, the Survey Research Center (SRC) at the University of Michigan has repeatedly sampled the opinions of the American public on the propriety of government intervention concerning school integration. This issue can be used as a rough barometer to gauge the drift in popular support for an active government role in promoting the integration of black and white school children. We can also use this as an indirect barometer of northern and southern white attitudes toward blacks and policies designed with the intent to advance their cause.

19. William H. Grier and Price Cobbs, *Black Rage* (New York: Basic Books, 1968), and David J. Armor, "Unwillingly to School," *Policy Review* 18 (Fall 1972), pp. 99-111.

20. According to public opinion polls carried out by the Survey Research Center at the University of Michigan, most whites when offered a choice between an integrated society, a segregated one, or "something in between," prefer "something in between." The percentage was 46 percent in 1964 and it has not budged since. The percentage favoring a desegregated society was 27 percent in 1964 and 31 percent in 1968. In contrast, seven out of ten blacks selected an integrated society as their preference in these surveys. For a discussion of white and black attitudes toward integration see, for example, C. Vann Woodward, *The Strange Career of Jim Crow* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974).

The data displayed in Figure 2 show a fluctuation cycle in white attitudes toward school integration, particularly among northern whites. Between 1956 and 1962, the percentage of northern whites supporting this policy swelled upward from 48 percent approving it in 1956, to 73 percent supporting it in 1962. This trend reversed in 1964 and fluctuated precipitously downward to 43 percent by 1968, the lowest point of northern white approval. Southern white attitudes toward school integration were noticeably less volatile, though decisively more negative. Unlike his counterpart in the South, whose racial beliefs were more deeply etched and resistant to change, the white northerner's racial attitudes vacillated more and reflected greater ambivalence, no doubt adding to the overall sense of uncertainty and frustration of the northern black.²¹

These are a few examples of some of the convulsive fluctuations experienced by black Americans during the 1950s and 1960s. While it is obvious that not every datum on blacks in the United States was examined, and that some of these unexamined data could show different patterns, the examples describing trends in economic progress, employment and family instability, changes in governmental racial policies, and vacillating white racial attitudes demonstrate that change was momentous, inconsistent, and touched virtually every aspect of their lives. The next section examines some of the psychological consequences of social and economic fluctuation, with particular attention given to their linkages to violence proneness.

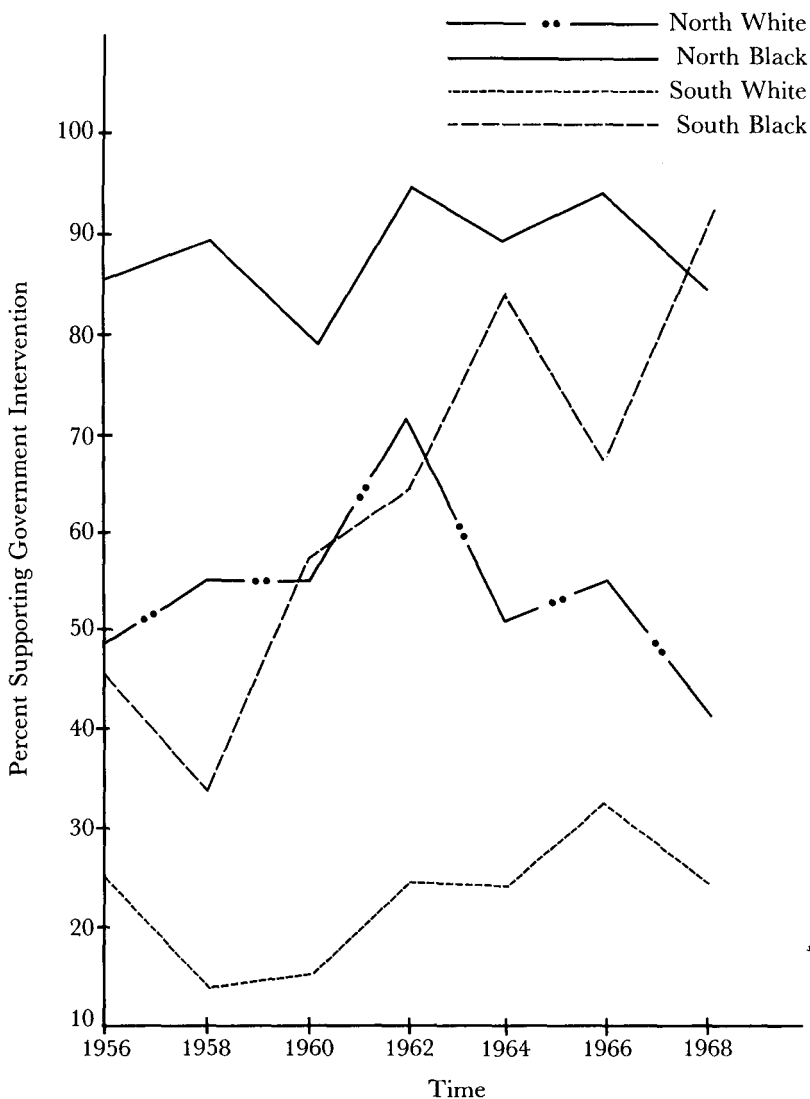
Underlying the relationship between fluctuation, uncertainty, and violence is the assumption that a stable, consistent, and intelligible frame of reference is fundamental to our well-being. It is vital not only for making goal orientation possible, but also for creating a sense of predictability and certainty that helps to assure our sanity. Without a stable frame of reference, we can neither plan, assess, nor anticipate. Judgment gives way to impulse as an instigation to action. Environment is thus important because nearly every facet of it has a parallel counterpart in subjective life.²² Our experiences at home, at work, with friends, or in the wider social milieu shape our perceptions of the world and of ourselves and, when reinforced over time, shape our expectations: the more

21. Murray Edelman, *Politics as Symbolic Action: Mass Arousal and Quiescence* (Chicago: Markham Publishing Company, 1972), p. 123.

22. Pavenstedt *op. cit.*, pp. 132-133 ff.

Figure Two

Support for Desegregation by Race and Region, 1956-1968.



Source: Computed from data collected in the 1956-1968 Center for Political Studies Election Surveys, University of Michigan.

stable and predictable the environment, the more stable our perceptions and expectations. Since expectations mirror the environment in its entirety, the obverse is also true. Environments characterized by change, or by shifting and confusing patterns of behavior, produce perceptions that are ambiguous and unstable: hence uncertainty.

No one adjusts easily to drastic change, especially if it is sudden or inconsistent. In fact, most of us find change disorienting. When we experience it, we do not know how to behave. We become misfits, to use Hoffer's phrase.²³ Little wonder that throughout history, civil disorder has generally followed rather than preceded drastic change, even when that change has been in the direction of reform and redress of grievances.²⁴

If these ideas are correct, the inconsistency characterizing the social and economic experiences of black Americans should also be found in black social and economic perceptions and expectations, particularly in those of poor and marginally poor blacks who experienced the greatest overall fluctuation and change. Black responses to survey questions asked in SRC's biannual election studies demonstrate clearly and emphatically that this was in fact the case. The findings illustrate that the instability seen in the economic and social life of blacks is reflected in their perceptions of how they fare socially and economically.

The greatest instability in economic perceptions was experienced by northern blacks—indicated by the number of fluctuations in their economic perceptions and by the magnitude of these fluctuations. Between 1956 and 1968, the northern black/white fluctuation ratio²⁵ was greater than 3 to 1. Fluctuation in the northern black's perceptions of his personal financial situation was greater than three times the fluctuation in the northern white's perceptions.

The same pattern of black perceptual instability compared to the trend in white perceptions holds, but to a lesser extent, among southerners. The instability in the southern black's economic perceptions was double that of the southern white's but roughly one half that of the northern black's.

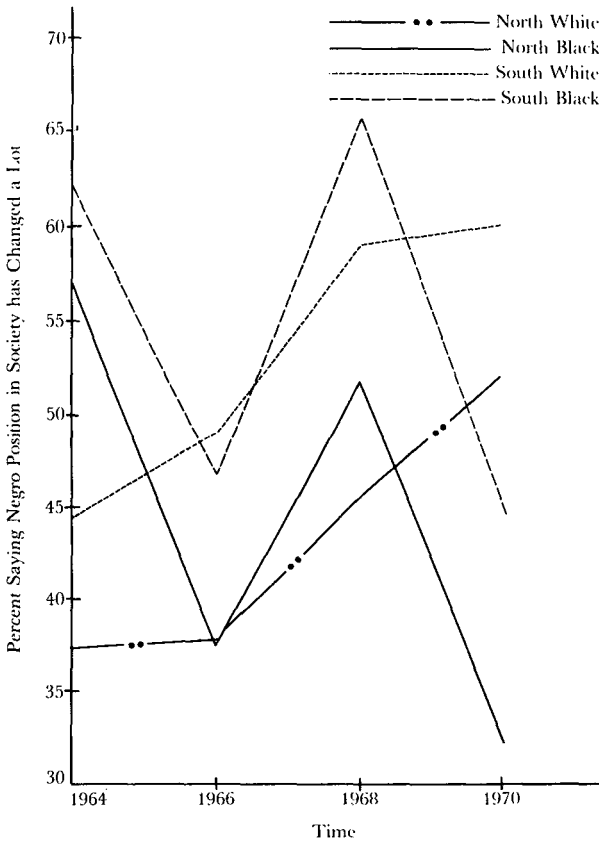
23. *op. cit.*, p. 2.

24. *Ibid.*, and Alexis de Tocqueville, *The Old Regime and the French Revolution*, translated by Stuart Gilbert (Garden City: Doubleday Anchor, 1955).

25. The fluctuation ratio is computed by multiplying the number of reversals in the linear trend by their magnitude, dividing this figure by the total number of years, and then comparing the black and white quotients.

Figure Three

Perception of Negro's Position in Society by Race and Region, 1964-1968.



Source: Computed from data collected in the 1964-1968 Center for Political Studies Election Surveys, University of Michigan.

Fluctuation can also be seen in black perceptions of the direction of change in the status of black America. Since 1964, SRC has asked respondents whether they think the black person's position in America has improved "a lot." The responses, plotted in Figure 3, point up to two trends: Across all years, northern blacks and whites were much less willing than their southern counterparts to say that the condition of black Americans had improved a lot. And, unlike blacks, whose perceptions of change fluctuated sharply from

year to year, whites showed a gradual and steady recognition of positive change in the status of blacks. The ebbs and flows of black economic progress, coupled with vacillating white racial attitudes, no doubt contributed to much of the ambiguity in the black person's perceptions of change by making it difficult for him to decide whether things were improving or getting worse.

Given that people's expectations are shaped by their perceptions of the past and present, it is not surprising that black economic expectations were markedly more unstable than the white person's. (See Figure 4.) Between 1956 and 1968, the financial expectations of northern blacks were roughly nine times more volatile than the financial expectations of northern whites, and fluctuation in southern black expectations was approximately four times as great as white southerners'.

One reason why black economic expectations were more unstable than those of whites is that the expectations of low-income blacks are *extraordinarily* unstable, and during this period most blacks were concentrated at the bottom rungs of the income ladder. Although at each income level black expectations are noticeably more unstable than those of white people, the difference between black and white orientations toward the future is most apparent at the lowest income levels. (See Figure 5.)

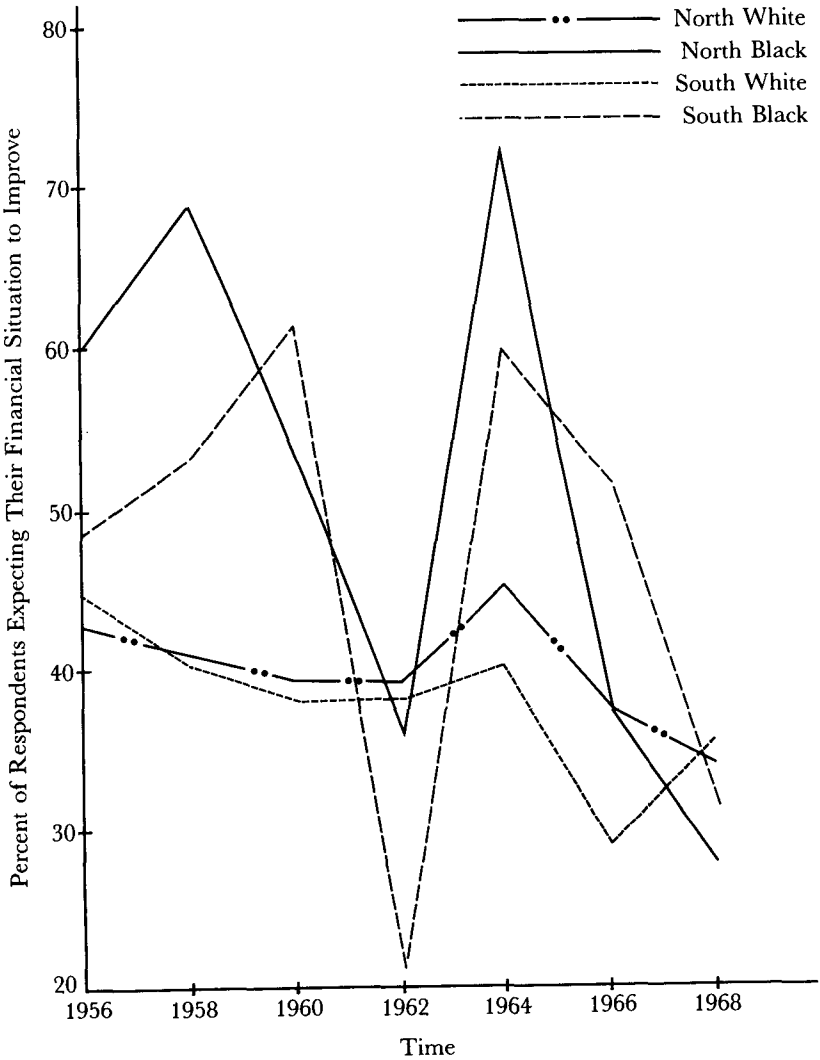
Low-income whites are decidedly and consistently the most pessimistic of all groups in terms of their financial outlook; low-income blacks, whose personal and financial expectations fluctuate wildly up and down from year to year, are clearly the most erratic in theirs. In some years, the financial aspirations of low-income blacks fall below those of poor whites; in other years, their expectations *exceed* those of upper-income whites. What all of this means is not altogether clear, but two things are certain. Many low-income blacks do not possess stable orientations toward the future, and this absence of a stable frame of reference cannot help but be a cause of uncertainty and frustration.²⁶ These ideas are borne out by black responses to additional questions included in the SRC election studies.

Figure 6 displays SRC data assessing uncertainty in financial expectations. Figure 7 presents black and white responses to an SRC question which asks respondents whether they feel *sure* that their lives will work all right. These items can be used to gauge black and white feelings of confidence in their ability to shape

26. Banfield op. cit., pp. 61-63 ff.

Figure Four

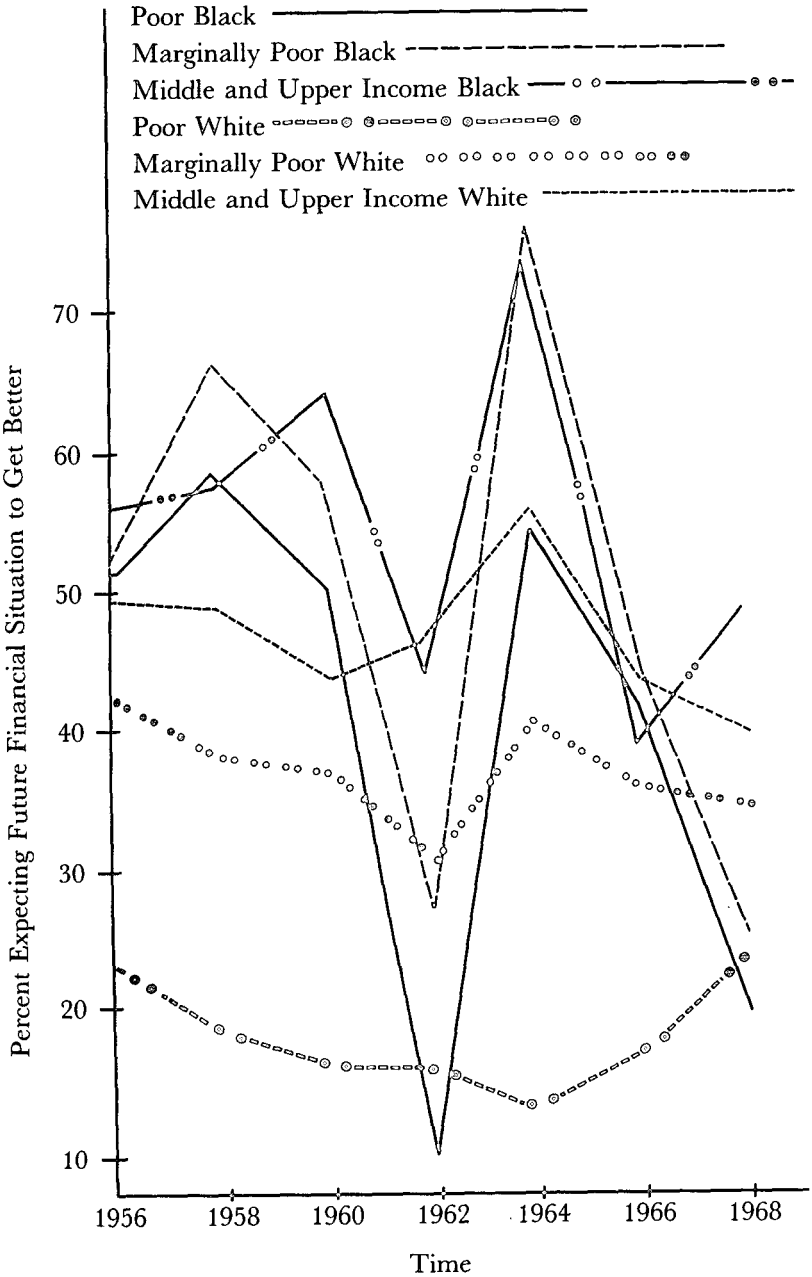
Future Financial Expectations by Race and Region, 1956-1968.



Source: Computed from data collected in the 1956-1968 Center for Political Studies Election Surveys, University of Michigan.

Figure Five

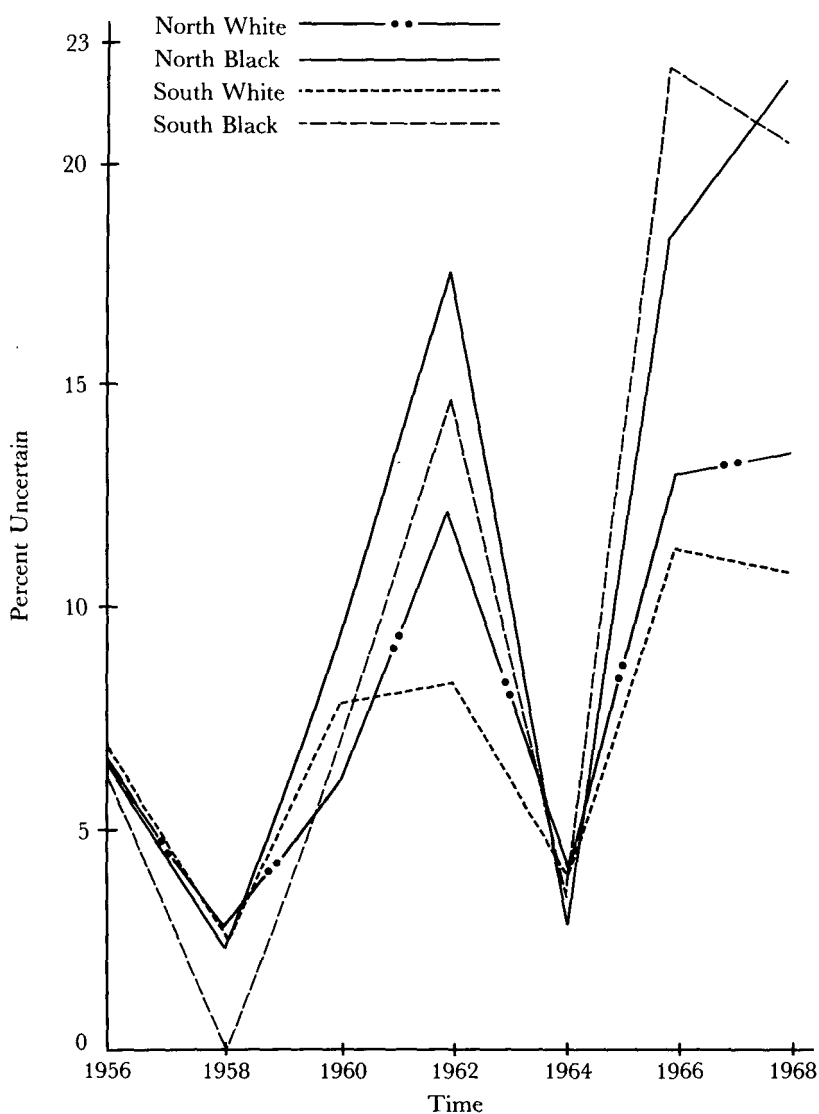
Future Financial Expectations by Race and Income, 1956-1968.



Source: Computed from data collected in the 1956-1968 Center for Political Studies Election Surveys, University of Michigan.

Figure Six

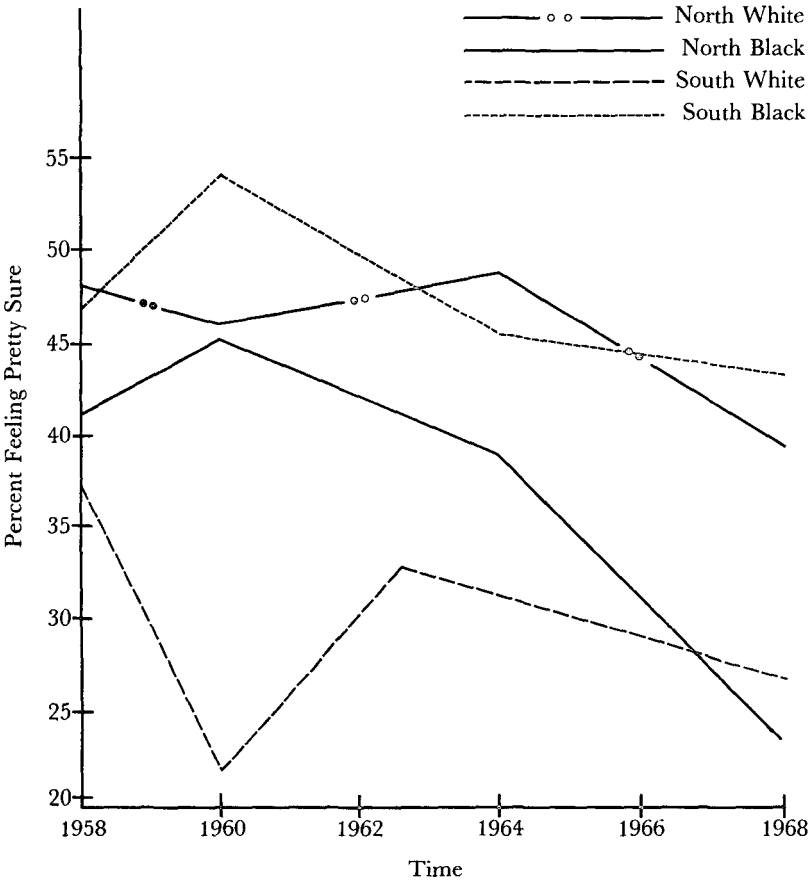
Financial Uncertainty by Race and Region, 1956-1968.



Source: Computed from data collected in the 1956-1968 Center for Political Studies Election Surveys, University of Michigan.

Figure Seven

Personal Uncertainty by Race and Region, 1958-1968.



Source: Computed from data collected in the 1958-1968 Center for Political Studies Election Surveys, University of Michigan.

their lives in personally satisfying and purposeful ways. The findings are revealing. Black uncertainty grew in fits and starts throughout the 1960s, and more noteworthy, the sharpest increase occurred *after* 1964. This trend is especially apparent among northern blacks, who experienced the highest levels of economic and personal uncertainty towards the latter part of the decade. Among northern blacks, it was the lower-class black who experienced the greatest overall uncertainty during this period.²⁷ As demonstrated below, his uncertainty greatly affected his orientation toward violence.

The Black Urban Riots

The data employed to examine the role of uncertainty in the riots are taken from Campbell and Schuman's survey of "Racial Attitudes in 15 Riot Cities" obtained through Inter-University Consortium for Political Research from the University of Michigan. This survey contains several items that can be used to create a measure of riot proneness²⁸ as well as to indicate uncertainty, relative deprivation, and other psychological and political attitudes that might explain why a black person would participate in a riot. Since most of the violence committed during the riots was carried out by teenage and adult males,²⁹ my analysis is performed on males only, grouped by age.

The statistics displayed in Table 1 are gamma coefficients. A gamma coefficient measures the degree to which one variable, say uncertainty, is related to another variable, say riot proneness.

27. A difference of means test was performed on the responses of northern blacks with incomes under \$7,500 and on those with incomes above \$7,500 in SRC's 1968 election study. Personal uncertainty was significantly higher among the low-income group, .01 > p. > .001.

28. The number of black respondents in the sample who reported actual involvement in the riots, 77, was too small to allow for control procedures. Introducing partition design controls on a sample this small would reduce cell entries so severely that meaningful interpretation would be suspect. However, since Campbell and Schuman's survey also contained items tapping various dimensions of riot proneness—ranging from whether the respondent said he would participate in a future riot to his orientation toward committing violence—these violence-prone blacks were added to the group of actual rioters. An analysis performed on these individuals revealed that, in terms of demographic and attitudinal characteristics examined, these violence-prone blacks were substantively no different from those who actually reported having participated in the riots. For a discussion on this matter see, Abraham H. Miller, Louis H. Bolce and Mark Halligan, "The New Urban Blacks," *Ethnicity* 3 (December 1976), pp. 338–368.

29. National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders *op. cit.*, p. 173.

TABLE 1

Ordinal Measures of Propensity to Riot Among Black Males
by Various Attitudinal Characteristics (Age Controlled)

	<u>Age</u>	<u>Gamma</u>	<u>N</u>
Personal Uncertainty	16-29	.47 ^a	375
	30-44	.65	347
	45 +	.56	378
System Unresponsiveness	16-29	.24	305
	30-44	.11	289
	45 +	-.19	313
Political Efficacy	16-29	.19	390
	30-44	-.20	365
	45 +	-.02	403
White Antipathy	16-29	.41	342
	30-44	.39	316
	45 +	-.17	344
Relative Deprivation	16-29	.43	316
	30-44	.27	285
	45 +	.57	329
Life Satisfaction	16-29	.20	263
	30-44	.28	335
	45 +	-.28	364

^aPositive valence means that the more likely the individual was to have a negative attribute on the independent variable the more likely he was to riot.

Source: Computed from data collected in Campbell and Schuman's study "Racial Attitudes in 15 Riot Cities," Center for Political Studies, University of Michigan.

The coefficients range from 0 to +1.0 or -1.0. A zero gamma means that the two variables are unrelated. A 1.0 gamma means that the two variables are perfectly related. In this analysis the gamma coefficients summarize statistically the extent to which each of the attitudinal variables distinguishes riot-prone from nonriot-prone black males. The stronger the relationship, the greater the difference between rioters and nonrioters on that attitudinal characteristic.

The data are entirely consistent with my thesis. Uncertainty

was not only the most important attitudinal characteristic distinguishing rioters from nonrioters, but its influence extended across all age groups. Black males between sixteen and twenty-nine years old who scored high on the personal uncertainty index, for example, were two and one-half times as likely as their counterparts who scored low on the uncertainty measure to participate in the riots. Among the two older groups, those who experienced high levels of uncertainty were three times more likely to be rioters. Feelings of relative deprivation appear to be the second most important attitudinal variable that consistently distinguished rioters from nonrioters, followed by perceptions of white hostility towards blacks and personal life dissatisfaction.

The data show that black political grievances and negative attitudes toward the political system were *not* major factors in the riots. Black males between thirty and forty-four years of age who held positive attitudes toward the political system, for example, were just as likely to participate as those who believed that government was unresponsive to black grievances. And among older black males, those most likely to riot tended to be those who believed that government *was* responsive to the needs of blacks. Political powerlessness also appears not to have played an important role, at least in any consistent way. Its relationship was, at best, marginal and varied by age group.

These data, when examined as a whole, offer little support for the "riots-as-protests" notion of the disorders. Feelings of injustice may have inspired some blacks to participate, and for others the riots may have served as a "functional alternative" to blocked grievance redress mechanisms. For most rioters, however, political grievances were largely incidental to their participation. By and large, rioters were drawn from the least politically sophisticated segments of the black lower classes.³⁰

Uncertainty is endemic to the human condition. Situations change, the best laid plans are wrecked by unforeseen events. We can never be sure when something is really beginning, and something else is happening, and what it all means. Yet, for most, uncertainty is not an unremitting, ever-present factor which must be constantly dealt with. We feel it intermittently during life changes and acute crises. But its disruption is short-lived, manageable, and not decisively destructive to our well-being. In one class, how-

30. Banfield *op. cit.*, pp. 220 and Midge Decter, "Looting and Liberal Racism," *Commentary* 64 (September 1977), pp. 48-54.

ever—the urban lower class—uncertainty is chronic. Predatory crime, family instability, poverty, joblessness, and the myriad of pathologies common to inner-city slums, engender and sustain a perception of the world as something which is unpredictable, menacing, and beyond control. Lower-class uncertainty, in turn, produces behavior which reinforces the social conditions largely responsible for the instability and squalor we observe in slums—notably, social disorganization and violent crime.

Because chronic uncertainty is incompatible with planning for the future, it gives rise to a combination of interacting and reinforcing attitudes which tend to increase the threat of lower-class violence and lawlessness. Not being able to plan ahead or to assess the probable consequences of his behavior, the lower-class person is likely to be frustrated in all but his most short-term endeavors. Drifting from one short-term goal to another adds to the general episodic quality of his life, exacerbating his overall sense of powerlessness, frustration, and social isolation. Feeling powerless and frustrated, committed to nothing, and faced with an uncertain future loaded with trouble, he has little incentive for self-restraint and every reason to act on his impulses, whatever their consequences, for they too are uncertain. Add to this his lack of steady work and income and long blocks of unstructured time, and the result is a complex of dispositional and situational inducements to impulsive lawlessness.

While these factors help to explain why crime rates are high in urban slums, they do not explain the destructive pattern of lawlessness that exploded across northern inner cities during the late 1960s. Lawlessness has always been common among lower-class slum inhabitants. But rarely has it displayed the proportion and violence of large-scale street rioting. Two additional factors help to explain the escalation of violence in black slums. These factors are fluctuation and change in the black experience, and moral uncertainty.

The situation of the black lower class was aggravated during the 1960s by fluctuations in their socio-economic status and civil rights and change in society's attitudes toward them. The anxieties, hopes, and ambiguities inherent in the realization of change, and the sense of bewilderment over what racial equality would actually mean for him and require of him, destabilized his social and economic expectations, thus compounding his uncertainty and frustration, and thereby overwhelming his internal inhibitions against violence.

The moral uncertainty that engulfed America during the 1960s also contributed to the black urban riots. Beginning with the civil rights movement and the discovery of poverty amidst affluence, and fueled by student agitation over Vietnam and the assault on middle America by a tradition-flouting counterculture, many Americans came to believe that American institutions and rulers were unjust and wrong. A moral consensus that had been decades in the making was suddenly shattered, almost overnight. Such periods marked by sustained and impassioned conflict over values tend to create uncertainty as to what the legitimate functions and policies of government should be and to confound social definitions of lawful and deviant behavior. Moral uncertainty created a climate of social and political opinion conducive to civil disorder, as violence and lawlessness became acceptable or excusable in some political and intellectual circles.³¹ For the black lower class—a group whose attachments to conventional morality and mainstream values were already tenuous at best³²—moral uncertainty provided a rationale for plunder and violence by accentuating their feelings of discrimination, deprivation, and injustice.

When the moral basis of government and law disappears for a sizable fraction of society, law enforcement becomes exceedingly difficult, not only because more people are breaking the law, but because officials charged with enforcing the law are no longer certain as to what constitutes proper methods of enforcement. Techniques that have suffered little criticism in the past evoke cries of outrage and calls for protest and retribution. Indeed, enforcement may be seen as brutally unjustified.

Placed in this context, any group with a sense of inequality and status apprehension will find its insecurities and feelings of injustice aggravated by the moral uncertainty of the society in which it lives. Add to this group another—a large lower class—whose vision of the future is tied inextricably to the present by its sense of purposelessness and feelings of uncertainty and frustration, each feeding upon the other and compounding daily, and it is easy to see how everyday, commonplace events, or the slightest provocation, can touch off rampages of destructiveness and lawlessness as exhibited in the 1960s urban riots and more recently by the looting and arson that caught New York City by surprise during the 1977 blackout and Miami, Florida three years later.

31. *Ibid.*

32. For a discussion of lower-class morality, see Banfield *op. cit.*, pp. 182–183.

Every Man a Capitalist

W. H. HUTT

Why should not the workers be allowed the right to “participate” in the making, changing, and enforcing of the rules to which they are subject in the industrial and commercial world? The answer is that that right exists! The workers do not have to *fight* for it. They can, if they wish, make and themselves enforce *all* the rules. It is not necessary that they shall own the assets with which they work in order to delegate to managers of their own election the authority to direct the process of production (which is what Marxists would assume). They can do so by hiring the assets. That they never actually do this in practice is because the arrangement of risk-taking under the present system of entrepreneurial direction is so much better. That is, the workers benefit enormously from contracts under which they agree to accept the commands of others in return for no risk. But there is no *legal* obstacle to their setting up businesses controlled by themselves, and there never has been. Nor, I think, has there ever been any private opposition or any contrived obstacle to their undertaking the whole of the planning and direction of industrial or other enterprises if they think that that would be to their advantage.

If they wish to shoulder a major part of the entrepreneurial function, the workers have simply to *accept responsibility* for the decisions of the managers to whom they would delegate decision-making powers. This means that, in a free society, they must accept the consequences of those decisions in the sense of meeting contractual obligations, taking the profits, and bearing the losses. All that is necessary is that they shall rent or hire the fixed assets with which they work and borrow capital for self-liquidating assets like materials and work in progress and for the drawings they make (as wages) in prospect of profit. If they are prepared to accept the residue and to pledge future earnings to cover possible losses (thereby accepting the risk), paying a contractual income, i.e. rent or interest, to the providers of capital, it will be the legal right of those workers to appoint and direct the managers. In assuming the right to manage, they will of course have to contract to pay interest to those who, by refraining from consuming the capital they have saved or inherited, provide the “other re-