An Epiphany of Invisibility: On Turning Points in Episodes of Anarchy

As with the study of crimes committed by individuals, the study of collective violence in the form of riots, rebellions, or most generally and perhaps least judgmentally, episodes of anarchy, has often focused on “structural” conditions such as ethnic group relations, socio-economic conditions, and tensions or transitions in political regimes.¹ But whether the focus is on robbery or riot, a search for explanations in social conditions that are in the distant temporal background or in the ongoing social ecology of the behavior to be explained is virtually guaranteed to fail, or at best, to explain very little of the phenomenon’s variation. Common crimes of violence and property theft are momentary events. Episodes of anarchy typically last from 3 to 5 days. On a parallel with the explanation of physical phenomena, it is conceivable that some types of social behavior, like some diseases, are caused by momentary exposures which consistently produce harmful effects only after long-term delays, but no study of crime or collective behavior has ever found time-delayed social causes that can explain significant variation in people’s conduct. ² It appears that to explain episodes of anarchy, we must search for causes that rise and fall in temporal parallel to what we would explain.³

After the U.S. urban race riots of the 1960s, the top sociology journals published a wave of studies arguing for deterministic background explanations. The articles demonstrated earnest hard work and methodological ingenuity, but critical reviews, especially those undertaken by scholars studying violent racial and ethnic group conflicts outside of the U.S., found them inconclusive.⁴ Researchers working in the tradition of “symbolic interaction” and “collective behavior,” which draw attention to the social processes of social phenomena, were not surprised at the inadequacies of relying for explanation on background factors such as socioeconomic status and race group segregations and inequalities, which do not change with the historical rapidity that characterize episodes of crowd violence. Instead they emphasized “norms” that emerge and change as protests develop.⁵

A naturalistic approach to anarchic forms of collective behavior would take each interaction situation and each stage of an episode as equally significant for testing explanatory ideas. As a close student of social life in the wild has noted, “Every moment is of moment when you’re in the woods.”⁶ The emphasis in social research on riots on whether or not they occur and on how they start reflects the political relevance of the phenomenon. As with the study of crime, social science has followed the bias in popular discussions, in which the overwhelmingly important questions are about causes of outbreak rather than conditions and mechanisms of transition, patterned evolution, disintegration and reestablished quiescence.

Alternatively we might follow the natural scientist’s primary concern, which, applied in sociology, I take to be: to examine the phenomenon of interest as closely as is practical, to describe variations of instances as finely as possible, and to make empirically grounded distinctions among what the researcher initially perceived to be the same phenomenon. In application to the social phenomena of anarchy, the goal is to find regularities in the interaction processes through which participants collaboratively shape the history of an episode. A naturalist sociology also appreciates that the boundaries of all forms of social life are constantly negotiated. For the study of episodes of anarchy, this means departing from the one-sided view that is traditional in sociology, where the investigator looks
solely for causes in the actions and backgrounds of rioters, protestors and rebels, and including in the study the behavior of the forces of order, which along with the people on the street collaborate in shaping episodes of anarchy.

An adequate explanation of episodes of anarchy, however, requires specification of a changing condition that fits with the sudden emergence, phase transitions, and short-lived persistence of the episode. How does participation in anarchy suddenly become attractive to masses of people? How does the appeal develop and differentiate for participants as an episode is sustained? And how does participation lose its seductive quality? How do masses of people remain indifferent to the possibilities of anarchy; then find participation easily accessible, even compelling; then after a short while, return to ways of life in which anarchic behavior is outside the range of contemplated possibilities? How do the official forces of order respond as they interact with people on the street over the stages of the episode?

In this writing I ignore the ongoing conditions that frame the emergence of episodes of anarchy. Instead I focus on a neglected feature of crowd violence, an “epiphany of invisibility”. An epiphany of invisibility captures a paradoxical, almost magical state of mind that is at the heart of anarchic collective behavior: the realization by a large number of individuals that so many individuals are so visible in their commission of culpable action that any single participant will be effectively invisible to repressive authority. In all societies, patterned grievances, whether they characterize relationships between populations differentiated by ethnic group or race, clan or socioeconomic class, religion or region, are always readily at hand. But it remains a rare achievement to have the confidence that one can with impunity, openly, without stealth, in situations where one knows that masses of strangers will be able to identify you personally, enact what otherwise would be culpable behavior. Epiphanies of invisibility are as rare and evanescent as the phenomena they would explain.

In the history of social psychological thought, this fragile contingency of anarchic behavior has been glossed with mystical ideas about “mob” psychology, with sterile analogies to biological processes such as “contagion,” and with an insufficiently developed discussion of “anonymity.” But during an episode of anarchy, as before and after, individuals act in existential loneliness, never escaping the need to make their conduct meaningful to themselves. If one will be effectively invisible to Authority, i.e., to enforcement powers in the generality and impersonality in which the individual senses their presence or absence, it can make personal sense to act in ways that otherwise would be unthinkable.

For evidence to develop the argument, I draw on the so-called “Rodney King riots.” In Los Angeles in the spring of 1992, thousands of local residents protested the acquittal, by a jury containing no African Americans, of white police officers who had been charged criminally for beating an African American, Rodney King. Over the next several days, more than 50 homicides were linked to what was variously described as a riot or a rebellion. When the embers went cold, hundreds of millions of dollars of property were counted as lost to looting and arson.

**A brief chronology of the episode**
1991 March 3. Two police officers chase a car driven by Rodney King, who is seeking to avoid arrest for driving while intoxicated. The chase is on highways and local streets, and at high and dangerous speeds. By the time his car is stopped, the number of officers present has increased. In the course of effecting an arrest, at least four beat King and eight participate in a “swarm” (group tackle).

1991 March 5. A videotape of the police beating of King begins to air on local and international television and globally. It becomes the most widely seen documentation of police brutality in history.

1992 April 29. Wednesday. Three of four policemen charged with crimes for attacking King are acquitted after a trial held in Simi Valley, a predominately white suburban area located just beyond Los Angeles County. The jury “hangs” (fails to reach a legally conclusive verdict) on the fourth defendant.

The verdict is announced to the public at 3:15 p.m. Within two hours, masses gather near police headquarters in the downtown Los Angeles business center. Some protestors attack property: store windows are broken; police cars are overturned and burned.

Later in the afternoon, young African American men physically attack whites, Asians and Latinos in the historically African American area of South Central, beating pedestrians and pulling motorists from their vehicles. The most famous incident, televised as it occurred, becomes an attack by multiple assailants on a white truck driver, Reginald Denny.

With darkness, “rioting” develops in South Central in the form of large scale looting and widespread arson.


By 8 a.m., the state’s National Guard, called out by the governor, assembles at armories in Los Angeles. At 6 p.m. the military force begins to take positions in “hot spots.”

1992. May 1. Friday. Looting and arson rage in Koreatown and Hollywood, both of which, despite their names and popular images, are majority low income Latino in their residential populations. Isolated instances of gunshots from moving cars aim at homes in higher income neighborhoods.

1992 May 2. Saturday. The National Guard is out in force. Arson and looting have become sporadic.

1992 May 3. Sunday. The National Guard peacefully patrols streets in what had been the “riot” areas.
Constructing the epiphany of invisibility

In the hours immediately following the announcement of the Simi Valley verdict, activists deployed various strategic efforts to establish an epiphany of invisibility. That night another set of actions developed to bolster the practical invisibility of anarchic actors. By Friday, as anarchic action spread north and entered a different social geography, it became at once overt and masked in a miasma of individual motives. At this final stage of mass anarchic action, for the greatest number of participants, the episode had become carnivalesque, an open inversion of the social order in which attacks on property and the defiance of authority were common yet undertaken in a euphoric, frequently playful spirit.

“Prelude to an Epiphany: the Weakening of Presumptive Authority”

The sociological understanding that the existence of norms or laws are dependent on contingencies of power, that they are never self-actualizing and thus are always negotiable in their implementation, is typically hidden behind a myth of the ongoing, passively existing character of the moral order. The law, like God, “is.” There are legal “structures,” which exist independent of the legal processes that invoke them. In this mythological understanding of social order, the law does not have to be realized to be real. In the taken-for-granted rhetoric of popular culture, behavior is thought to be criminal even before it is so defined by the authorities, and even when those escaping law enforcement attention, such as many users of contraband drugs and financial market manipulators, do not consider their behavior to be criminal.

Sociology sustains the myth of law’s passive, positivist ontology when it presumes to study the contingencies of crime without taking into account the contingencies of law enforcement. A critique along these lines was the foundation of what, some 40 years ago, raged as “labeling theory.” Once sociologists grasped that the contingencies of law enforcement made it problematic to presume a person’s identity as criminal, some were inspired to research how individuals came to regard their own conduct as deviant.x

At some historical moments, it becomes obvious to a wide swath of the public that it is a myth to presume that crime and deviance are obvious facts, capable of being detected (and routinely coded by a researcher) independent of how the people in question are treating the conduct in question. For example, when “the spirit of the 60s” was on the land (as it was in the early 1970s in “Old Town” on the near North of Chicago where the following incident occurred), one could come across an individual openly seeking to break into a store on an otherwise ordinary day, within inches of passersby who were present in large numbers. If one stopped to observe silently, the individual might interrupt his application of crowbar to lock and offer an explanation along the line that as a poor person he needed the items inside more than did the owner, supplemented by a theorized justification citing a history of collective oppression of class and race. The undisguised act was not theft; it was a return of what had been stolen, albeit not by the immediate victim.

The myth that the line between order and disorder is non-negotiable had started to erode long before the Simi Valley verdict was delivered. On March 7, 1991, soon after the videotape began to play,
Rodney King was released. King had been clocked at a speed indicating reckless driving, recorded as having a blood alcohol count that substantiated drunk driving, and threatened with a host of other offenses related to the high speed police chase and resistance that preceded his arrest. In fact, what reflected the furor that followed the broadcast of the videotape of his beating on March 4, was the post-arrest treatment of King. Not coincidentally, without any judgment from a court, the LAPD (Los Angeles Police Department) dropped charges, in effect acknowledging that the gravitas of the law had significantly diminished.

“The Opening Scenes: Brazen Attacks on Authority”

On the day the verdict was announced, the initial protests and property attacks occurred downtown, in front of city hall and near police headquarters, which was known as Parker Center. The geographic siting of initial protests was not spontaneously chosen. There was no outpouring of local residents in the downtown business district. Like other such areas in U.S. cities at the time, downtown L.A. housed a sizeable number of homeless individuals but not a local residential population that could mount a mass protest.

In the days before the verdict was announced, groups which for decades had been radical critics of L.A.’s power structure organized members to congregate at the symbolic institutional center of Los Angeles. Socialist workers and organizations with roots in 60s era Black Panther resistance to police power appreciated the historic opportunity to press for what they hoped would be a revolution. Their opposition was to U.S. government policies in the most general sense. The catapulting of the local police abuse case into a revolutionary theme was symbolized by the burning of American flags.

In a documentary made in the wake of the events, Michael Zinzun, a veteran Black Panther, head of “the Coalition against Police Abuse,” and a well-known nemesis of Southern California law enforcement, spoke of the careful planning that set up the downtown focus. For public broadcast film makers, he described the decision, made days before the verdict, that a not-guilty verdict would trigger an assembly downtown, where his contacts would try to “paralyze” Parker Center. The strategy was to situate destruction downtown and encircle the police at their headquarters, in order to avoid confining destruction to the black residential areas and enabling the police to repeat the Watts experience of encircling residents. Contemporary recordings made by residents indicate that young black men in South Central heeded the call. After initial looting and attacks around their own neighborhoods, many went downtown, and some promised to attack police and whites anywhere in the city, issuing sensational threats such as plans to target the affluent west side.¹¹

Around Parker Center, police retreated or stood by as buildings were attacked. The police did not intervene even as (empty) police vehicles were turned over and set on fire.¹² As journalists picked up the dramatic images, which were conveyed instantly on television, an encouraging message could not have been more clearly broadcast. Behavior that the day before would have been quickly repressed as felonious could now be undertaken with impunity.

Simultaneous with the crowd actions downtown, residents were filling the streets in South Central. Late Wednesday afternoon, as observing journalists hovered on the fringes of attacks on
property and person and wondered aloud on live broadcasts where the LAPD was, local police leadership determined that their forces were inadequate to the challenge. A news broadcast Wednesday at 5:43 p.m. enabled everyone in L.A. to hear a police lieutenant, who had arrived on the scene with 25 officers, announcing: “I want everyone out of there. Florence and Normandie. Everybody, get out! Now!”

At this intersection, the trucker Reginald Denny was attacked at 6:30 p.m. When two policemen attempted a rescue, they were impeded by barriers that residents had placed in the streets, and they were driven off by sniper fire. Sunset would not come until 7:30 p.m. The assault on the myth of a firm line between law and order was occurring in broad daylight, as was law enforcement’s concession. Such neighborhood-based scenes reinforced the heady epiphany of invisibility that had been first and most clearly generated by the planned siting of protests downtown.

Even before protesters downtown began attacking property, they had evidence that the police had abandoned enforcing the law. The assembly had no permit and was blocking traffic at a time when business elites would normally make their commutes out of downtown. Non-violent behavior that on any other day would immediately be treated as criminal was now conceded in an understanding that the unlawful assembly could not be cured as a practical matter. The guardians of publicly visible order appeared to be restraining themselves in the desperate hope that the protests the symbolic F.I.R.E. (finance, insurance, real estate) and legal center of LA would burn out before arson developed.

“Working on Invisibility”

As daylight ended and darkness obscured personal identity, a variety of strategies were enacted to enhance participants’ invisibility. White activists who had traveled to South Central to join the protests were warned that they might be attacked; others they met at the scene told them to leave point blank. These warnings helped the outsiders avoid victimization, and reduced risks that locals’ violations of person and property might be reported.

Likewise, news photographers were shot at, despite their expressions of sympathy with the protest. Spontaneously, i.e., without any central leadership or directive, young African Americans in South Central were forcefully defining who was on which side of the developing conflict. While only a few defined outsiders as presumptively suspicious based on their physiology, they did so in a sufficiently threatening way that demographic lines were effectively drawn around the street level response.

When firemen arrived to arson scenes, they were also shot at. This aggression at once draw a sharp contrast between protestors and Authority in general and projected an image of lawlessness beyond visible individual actions. Unextinguished fires became non-human agents promoting the impression that the anarchy was growing. In a segregated city, where low income minority neighborhoods existed within a few minutes’ drive from elite neighborhoods like Beverly Hills and Hancock Park, the smoke from arson demonstrated a transcendence of the social order that was at once obvious and anonymous, physically obnoxious and symbolically impersonal. In neighborhoods further away, the message above everyone was legible in smoke signals, which were as densely dark in their
polluting particles as they were clear in showing that official power capable of holding criminals accountable had dissolved. Sirens racing through the city gave the sky writing an audible track.

For looters, fire had the specific attraction of destroying evidence of personal participation in theft. Of more immediate general appeal, arson would make everything under the resulting smoke hidden to all but those close-by on the ground. At the down-to-earth level of self-preservation, it made sense to attack firemen before they could restore the visibility of looters, vandals and violent aggressors. Fire destroys fingerprints and security cameras, and becomes a barrier to police intervention. As a matter of operational procedures, the firemen would not enter without police protection, and the police could not effectively patrol and arrest where fires were out of control.

Nightfall made the firmament a backdrop that gave the fires a fascinating, eerie, deeply disturbing beauty. For most of the population in Los Angeles, the only aspect of the anarchy that was personally observable was the smoke and the fire debris that air currents delivered to neighborhoods miles away from the burning buildings. Evidence of the power of the destruction was intimate and undeniable, coming in various forms: 3 foot pieces of charred building materials landing in backyards, a choking atmosphere, the need to wash soot off of cars parked outside. If we consider anarchy as a collective act that exists in all instances when it becomes a contingency of people’s behavior, the participants included those who left the city, brought their children inside out of polluted air, and altered routines that would have brought them to the areas that television showed as riot afflicted. In a strict sociological sense, the largest number of participants constructing the state of anarchy were not those looting, burning, or attacking, but those who for self-protection reacted to impersonal evidence of the anarchy by changing their everyday routines.

The imposition of curfews, which is a common governmental response in episodes of anarchy, is part of the process in which participants and the state indirectly negotiate over the critical issue of personal visibility. Curfews are not necessarily tied to sunset but they do typically attack the masking that night provides. They make a person’s mere presence on the streets a basis for arrest. The police need not detect one in the act of what the state’s laws specifically define as criminal behavior in order to treat one as a criminal.

But imposed too soon, and without enforcement to back them up, curfews can backfire: they convert otherwise innocent behavior into participation in anarchy. A curfew converts people who are only out on the streets as observers into what the state regards as anarchists. If they fail to deter masses of people from coming onto the streets, curfews powerfully feed an epiphany of invisibility. Local residents, observing masses out on the streets, in general have no means of distinguishing between curious observers and eager participants in protests. Even while each individual is clear with regard to his own involvement, knowing whether he shares the opposition represented by the protests and whether he has looted or not, no individual can know what all the others out in violation of a curfew believe and have done, whether they are observers or participants. But with a curfew, each can know that all others on the street are outlaws.
The very spectacle created by arson, looting, and vicious attacks on persons has a double effect in promoting the episode as “us against them.” The spectacle scared outsiders from coming into the affected areas and drew locals out of their homes to become observers.\textsuperscript{xvi} Indeed, so long as arson and looting was rampant, residents interested in self-protection had reason to be outside of their homes and monitoring the threat level. In this way, the very process of anarchy created new dynamics toward its persistence.

“The Visibility of Anonymous Disorder”

By throwing rocks through windows, writing graffiti, and otherwise vandalizing property in highly visible ways, young men acting in pairs or alone contributed to the impression of general disorder. Their transgressive behavior was not unlike conduct on “devil’s night,” the night before Halloween, which in some US cities had become a local tradition. (In the 1990s, Detroit became nationally infamous for waves of arson set on devil’s nights.) Some of the patterns of vandalism that appeared in Los Angeles were similar to attacks on store windows that have become institutionalized in some Scandinavian towns on some weekend nights: alcohol intoxicated young men rampage through downtown areas in what is widely understood to be a pattern marking life cycle passage. In effect, traditions of tolerance grant a measure of anonymity.

Devil’s night, traditions of college students rampaging in rural towns after homecoming football games, and institutionalized episodes of anarchy during carnival times indicate that social order is negotiated in an ongoing way. Where such outbreaks are expected, individual vandals have reason to understand that they can maintain a measure of personal invisibility even as they participate in a mass that will produce highly visible evidence of attacks on order.

In Los Angeles in spring 1992, the critical message was not about a past tolerance of disorder but about what would happen in the future. As the Simi Valley verdict was widely rejected—it was subject to expressions of disbelief even by the Republican president of the country—the destruction of property was regarded as inevitable by large segments of the public. It was not unreasonable for vandals, looters and even physical aggressors to anticipate that their actions would be understood as “expressions of justified rage,” even if criminal responses were not explicitly condoned.

The proliferation of signs of destruction is another way that the process of anarchy itself gives rise to dynamics supporting its persistence. A broken window which on another occasion might be meaningless now had a new value as meaningfully contributing to an overall impression of burgeoning disorder. Upon observing large numbers of broken windows, a person contemplating vandalism could, without ever contacting other transgressors personally, understand that he would be “with” many others, part of a vast team effort, another link in an electrifying network of invisible rebels. Broken windows, graffiti, burned buildings, boarded up storefronts, abandoned cars, emptied stores, and trash scattered on sidewalks and roadways are inanimate. Even so, in a kind of anarchic magic, they powerfully suggest a dynamic progression of anonymity. The proliferation of impersonal signs of destruction both stems from and fuels an expanded sense that the area is in anarchy.\textsuperscript{xvii}
By Thursday evening, large areas in South Central and Koreatown had taken on the aspect of a ghostly landscape. Following the beating of Rodney King, a sense of dread had grown for a year, with apprehension intensifying as the Simi Valley verdict approached. Respectable community spokespersons had alluded to the dangers of anarchy even as they pleaded for restraint, in the process inadvertently reinforcing the eerie sense that destructive spirits were all about, as inexorable as they were invisible. Now burnt and looted stretches of the urban landscape dramatized a subsequent stage in this other-worldly drama. Vast stretches of the city took on a cemetery-like character, displaying a stillness which referenced the vibrant social life that had been destroyed. Anarchy was visible in a new dialectical relationship: there were evident signs of destruction created by actors who had become invisible.

Homeless individuals were smoked out of their usual discreet locations. Some had been robbed by arsonists who saw potential fuel in the mobile caches stored in shopping carts. The homeless flowed onto public streets, increasing a mass whose visibility indicated the daunting magnitude of the job facing a law enforcement effort that would restore order.

Fires burned on, sending up smoke signals of destructive forces that had already, mysteriously moved on. The region's topography seemed to collaborate, holding the air born particles into an especially pernicious smog that stretched far beyond the sites of arson and looting, implicating the city in general in the tragedy. Anonymous destructiveness ruled the skies.

Episodes of anarchy show great differences in the substantive conflicts that they tap, which may be conflicts of ethnic, religious, national identities; superiors attacking inferiors, inferiors attacking superiors; political disputes or athletic competitions. Some of the oppositions in the backgrounds of episodes of anarchy reflect generations of group injustice; others are as brief as a sports season. But independent of the animating or underlying oppositions and conflicts, the tenure of anarchy is usually short, a matter of hours or days. In all cases there is a distinctive aesthetic created by anarchic behavior, which breeds a distinctive series of attractions to participate. The centrality and difficulty of sustaining aesthetic appeal in acts of destruction is a significant part of the explanation of the brief life of anarchic episodes. Chief among the emergent inspiring appeals is the principle of inversion.

The second stage in the Rodney King episode of anarchy was dominated by an inversion principle: in the aesthetics of arson, in unexpected reversals of social control mechanisms, and in the social geography that the anarchy traced. Part of the fascination in arson is that a spark can become transformed into a devastating conflagration. The hidden power that is released in the ensuing fire parallels the political message in anarchy, which is always that there is much more to reckon with than any personification which might become visible, that the forces of discontent are infinitely larger than any set of people who might be arrested.

Specific to the anarchy in spring, 1992 in L.A. was the inversion of the meaning of helicopters hovering over inner-city neighborhoods. For years, police helicopters had been a familiar presence in the skies above close-in L.A. neighborhoods. Residents understood that when a helicopter was hovering or making small circles, a police hunt was in progress. Now the helicopter switched from being a sign of
social control to a resource for anarchic action. People on the ground could see what was happening on
local streets outside of their neighborhood because, from Wednesday afternoon on, news media
helicopters were disseminating live images of chaos. The helicopters were a key instrumentality in the
creation of the mass epiphany of invisibility: one could see that looters and vandals were rampaging at
will in countless locations, unimpeded by law enforcement. That they were so easily visible, and still
unhindered in their motivations and practical abilities, meant that an individual would be effectively
invisible when joining in the anarchy.

The path of the anarchy demonstrated the potential for inversion that was built into L.A.’s social
geography. Anarchy is readily analogized to a beast that is short-lived because it must continuously
grow rapidly or it will quickly die. Without new and expanding edges to the destruction, the forces of
order can assemble and quash the uprising. By Thursday, the concentration of poverty in dense, low
income residential areas, which had been an indication of the segregating power of socio-economic
inequality, became the key facilitating condition for the survival of this episode of anarchy.

As large stretches of South Central became looted, Spanish speaking urban poverty became the
cutting edge of the anarchy. Without any formal plan managed by government, over the prior twenty-
five years, immigrants from Mexico and Central America had been massing around continuous corridors
along Western and Vermont avenues. Now masses of Latino immigrants emerged from their homes and
created a pattern of looting that followed these heavily trafficked north/south avenues, extending the
anarchy rapidly in an uphill direction, through Koreatown, on to central Hollywood, and then into the
foothills above Hollywood Boulevard. Just above the historic center of Hollywood, apartment buildings
in the 1980s had become residences for very low income Latino immigrants as rent payers, and, in the
many abandoned buildings around Yucca street, as squatters. (The “Yucca Corridor,” near the iconic
Columbia records building, had become infamous for high rates of violence, street prostitution, and
open drug dealing markets organized by Latino gangs.) The logic of the trajectory of the anarchy was
rooted in the ability to sense oneself invisible even while undisguised: dense residential poverty made it
possible to see that “everyone” was doing “it”, such that each could reasonably anticipate being blurred
in the mass.

In the eyes of potential participants, the ability to be invisible while undisguised was a gentle
seduction and yet a powerful draw. One could simply venture onto the street as an observer, at first
innocent both subjectively and objectively, and then take a short step into looting. If it were necessary
to wear a disguise in order to achieve invisibility, one would have to make the self-conscious choice to
be on the negative side of social order. But anarchy creates its own spectacles that facilitate the entry
process by masking a resident’s motives to come out on the street. This was the most profound
inversion at the essence of the anarchic episode: anarchy began as a resistance to be controlled by the
forces of order, and then began to generate novel social forces capable of sustaining anarchy
independent of the motivations established before and at the start of the episode. As Latino poverty
north of South Central became a mass that the curious could openly hide within, anarchy became a self-
sustaining phenomenon.

“Moral Invisibility in a Surreal Context”
Initial protests and attacks on both property and persons were mixed with race themes. Violence against person and property expressed an aggressive rejection of the black/white, cop/citizen narratives as expressed in the beating of Rodney King and the outcome of the Simi Valley trial. By mid-day Thursday and through much of Friday, as the Latin American residents of the close-in city came out and began to participate en masse, the narrative as lived on the streets changed dramatically.

What was happening in the mobilization that constituted the anarchy was hidden not by the anarchy’s smoke as much as by the smog fed by L.A.’s popular and political, journalistic and academic culture. The African-American population had spokespersons who could readily be tapped for explanation of what was going on. The commentary which had been aired in the Watts riots was easily recalled 25 years later; it was pre-perfected and not dependent on close attention to the facts on the ground. Likewise for what academics had to say, and also likewise for the well-known Mexican-American figures that journalists designated as representatives of the Latino population. Reviving James Baldwin’s trope, which had been frequently invoked in commentary on the Watts riots, arson smoke was once again “the fire this time.” But the masses on the streets were not only recent Latin American immigrants rather than native blacks or Mexican-Americans, many were immigrants of Central American origin without legal grants of residency who had, despite their awareness of their “illegal” status, been left undisturbed by the LAPD, which had adopted a formal policy not to enforce immigration laws. There were no publicly heard voices from this population to make a connection with Rodney King’s suffering, with the long continuing inequalities among U.S.-born populations, or even with historic abuses by the LAPD of LA’s Mexican-origin population.

T.v. news coverage began showing live scenes of Latino looters gleefully making off with stores’ goods. On Thursday afternoon, I was encouraged to make my own observations by indications from the news media and from friends living in the area that there was an atmosphere in Koreatown and Hollywood, areas within a few minutes from my home, that was chaotic but not personally threatening. Taking a notepad, I went to streets that since the late 1980s I had come to know well.

On Western between 3rd Street and Melrose, it was apparent that, as a matter of social ontology, the line between lawful and unlawful, between moral and immoral behavior, between being aggressively anti-social or respectfully social, had dissolved. People now could steal without being either thieves or revolutionaries in their own minds. Looting did not entail aligning with the “no peace no justice” protestors who initially sought to import political positions, and for whom attacks on property were admittedly unlawful ways of responding to the Simi Valley verdict with righteous indignation. Residents could come onto the street and move into taking property they knew was not rightfully theirs without ever considering themselves to be deviant.

Looting was sometimes professional and purposeful, but for most it was a spontaneous situational response, and looting generally expressed no anger. To the extent that there was evidence of violence, it took the form of Latino residents bringing out machetes to defend their homes and families. Using their kinship grapevines, Hollywood’s immigrant Latinos had learned of home invasions by armed blacks in South Central who held residents at bay while their property was stolen. The machetes reflected wariness about something similar coming up north.
A variety of meanings and motivations animated the looting. There was no need to choose one, since it was reasonable to expect that no one would ask for an explanation. For given individuals, motives mixed. Even more than the rationalizations that a participant could come up with for his or her own behavior, what someone on the street could attribute to others as their motive was important as a cause of his or her own looting. Here street level hermeneutics, i.e., how one read what was going on and why it was happening, was an active contingency in the formulation of individual lines of action. All of the following morally neutralizing readings were grounded in readily visible street scenes.

a. If I don’t take it, someone else will (and they are likely to be less worthy).

b. There is no one to pay and I need the thing.

c. This is a historic moment and I want to be part of it. More than any specific thing, what I am taking is narrative material, stories to tell others, which itself is free.

d. I’ll take stuff now but later I can pay or help the owner by bringing it back. (In fact, during the week after the anarchy ended, many people did return looted items.)

e. A policeman is visible, standing by, not intervening, even while looting is going on under his nose. There must be official consent to the stealing, a sense that it is inevitable and so will be treated as officially invisible.

f. In some stores, the merchant is present, inviting looters in. Why would he? Because he is accepting the inevitable without stirring up more trouble. He is avoiding the damage of broken down doors, and he is avoiding personal attacks from people obviously intent on barging in. He also can be seen to be preparing to restart business after the riot ended by continuing amicable relations with the local residents he will have to receive. The readable statement was: “Here, I know you. Take it before someone I don’t know does.” Anyway, if the merchant is acquiescing, it can’t be stealing.

In this phase of the anarchy, the context was a hyper-stimulated moment for doing folk sociology. Everyone on the streets was acting based not on what they thought of the overall episode’s precipitating event but on how they understood what others around them were doing. On Thursday at about 3:30 p.m., on Rampart above Wilshire (in L.A. news, “Rampart,” the name of a street and of a police division, had become known as a notorious “gang” area), about 20 adolescent Latinos, dressed in white shirts and black pants that bystanders would see as a gang uniform, were banging with their bodies on a folding metal door protecting an auto stereo shop. They entered by sheer force. With such scenes all around, a merchant would reasonably decide to let looters in by gracious invitation.

As the rationale elaborated looting into an innocuous activity, the moral atmosphere became free floating, unanchored from the usual boundaries between right and wrong. A variety of extraordinary events became possible. These occurred on both sides of the anarchy, looters aiding looters, owners aiding owners by innovating unprecedented forms of cooperation. These new forms became the essence of anarchy.
On the participants’ side, the dissolution of order meant that the usual solutions to practical problems were no longer available. To get things done practically, looters helped each other. They recruited acquaintances and also strangers to help haul out pianos and sofa beds.

Likewise, those fearing they would be attacked reached out to each other in unprecedented ways. Retail stores shut down on a massive basis. Some had been looted. But at others, windows and doors were boarded up as protective measures. Some large supermarkets closed down and boarded up, which was wise given the liability claims they had reason to fear should violence break out at their site while they remained open and receiving paying customers.

Graffiti soon appeared on the new, bare, plywood surfaces. To the passerby, it became impossible to distinguish whether a supermarket was displaying cautious prevention or post-looting wooden scars. The plywood storefronts created a new ambiguity in the landscape. And they conferred a collective benefit on adjacent store owners, as they dissuaded would-be looters from stopping and exploiting opportunities in the area.

In affluent residential areas that were in proximity to arson and looting on commercial avenues, underlying resources for conserving social order were newly revealed. Some of these were like the disaster-prevention measures which, through government-enforced construction regulations and related insurance requirements, had been put in place to keep gas stations from exploding. Safety measures that were instituted for general security reasons now frustrated would-be arsonists who pushed burning supermarket carts in front of gas pumps.

A variety of deeply instituted conservative measures showed unanticipated value. In the 1960s, residents of an area that had been the most elite in the city in the early 1920s used their collective power to create unique zoning. They prohibited retail business on a stretch of five highly trafficked, east/west through-streets that bounded and intersected their neighborhoods. Originally created in a period of economic decline in an intra-class dispute—as a means of blocking dense residential and commercial development that was being proposed by capitalists who in social class terms were similar to the area’s leading residents—the special zoning silently and for the most part effectively guided the lower class propelled anarchy outside of the 1.5 mile wide non-retail rectangle that insulated the elite district.

Deprived of the major resource that fueled the anarchy on Thursday and Friday—retail stores to loot and then burn—would-be participants in the anarchy were reduced to drive-by attacks on homes. Isolated gun shots and the general shut down of retail on commercial streets led homeowners to innovate mutual self-help. On Saturday, at a T-ball (baseball for 4-6 year olds) game on a public school playground in the elite area, parents on the sidelines worked out trades in which surplus guns in locked cabinets were exchanged for extra chickens in freezers.

As a distinctive sociological phenomenon, anarchy existed not only in the negative forms of violent personal attacks and property destruction, but also in what were for the individuals involved, and for the area, unprecedented ways of solving practical problems. Drivers made up ways of
navigating around the city. In this extraordinary historical moment, it was not unusual to see cars driving along sidewalks in order to get around the masses of individuals on street roadbeds.

Adding to the surreal character of street scenes, looters would emerge from supermarkets with cases of beer, which they would then sell can-by-can to onlookers watching from cars. Market rules were reinstated a few feet away from the sites where they had vanished. Beer that had been delivered to “convenience stores” on a wholesale basis, to be sold as individual items, was reunited in bulk aggregations by looters equipped with duffel bags, and then disaggregated once again to be sold by the piece outside. In a matter-of-fact spirit, a market form of economy instantly reemerged moments after looting, in the taken-for-granted expectation shared by buyer and seller that money had to be paid in order to transfer items, no matter that the items were obviously stolen. Virtually everyone understood that looters instantly “owned” what they had stolen. There was no war of all against all; no survival of the fittest; no order-disabling chaos on the streets. The overall episode was anarchic but the institution of property rights was being recreated in face-to-face relations just after it had been defied in the impersonal takings that made up most of the looting.

For shaping the climate on the streets, the meanings of interactions for the immediate participants were overwhelmed by the meanings for the much more numerous observers. By Friday, the initially negative, aggressive, angry protest aspects which had dominated the start of this episode of anarchy had been transformed into a surreal social world. Carnival spirit prevailed. A range of innovative responses to familiar everyday situations on the streets thickened the miasma of moral meanings.

A woman in her thirties rushed along a crowded sidewalk, her 4’10” frame bowed down under the weight of a bulging plastic bag which she stabilized with one hand as she held onto her young child with the other. Ahead on her trajectory was a 6’ tall policeman. What would she do? She brushed past him, visibly less anxious that she might be arrested than indignant about his failure to courteously step aside in anticipation of her need to pass.

Another looter emerged from a variety store with a large duffel bag, which he proceeded to auction off on the sidewalk, insisting on a single price for the whole collection, resisting efforts by prospective buyers to find out precisely what was in the sack. We may ask why an auction took place. Not everyone on the street was equally comfortable entering stores to loot. Those who were could only take out so much. Their specific challenge was posed not by the police nor by moral restraints but by other looters, who would predictably ransack the place until it became empty. By not pausing to choose items carefully and by quickly selling what they could bring out in one trip, those willing to loot could then reenter to obtain some of what remained. Those reluctant to see themselves as looters could enjoy the looting but to a lesser degree, by purchasing the usufruct of anarchy at a discount.

In these scenes, it became clear that anarchy is not coterminous with chaos, frenzy, irrationality, destruction, or anything scary. Economic rationality was consistent with the surreal, as it is in the arts. Surrealistic paintings are not abstract in their expressions; they alter the boundaries and time/space relationships among objects, but the objects, even if sometimes distorted, are realistic enough to be
recognized. Surrealism can be confusing, even unnerving, but rarely if ever is it tragic in spirit. Gaiety seems to go with the genre.\textsuperscript{xxi}

As the episode of anarchy turned surrealistic, street scenes remained anarchic in the sense that established, officially backed forms of social order were absent. The upshot of a loss of control by the police and by property owners was the emergence of a kind of primordial, protean context for experimenting with new forms for ordering social relations. Some were vicious in spirit, like rapes, which I learned of from some “old Lefty” friends living in the Venice/Santa Monica area. Others, revealed by investigations conducted in the wake of the riots, were instances of violence occurring within pre-existing disputes that had nothing to do with police abuse of African Americans. Some of the actions I observed appeared to be the mobilization of gang members and other self-styled criminals into “crews” dedicated to professional theft and to workmanlike arson. While predominantly self-serving, arson following theft had an altruistic side, effectively making a gift to other participants. By drawing police and fire services away from non-violent actions, the thief-arsonists contributed to sustaining the epiphany of invisibility for amateur thieves.

Some of the ways that looters cooperated with each other were charming, even joyous. A series of actions in densely populated, Latino immigrant streets sustained the oppositional theme that was essential to keep the anarchy going as an episode of collective behavior, but not by opposing the police, racial or ethnic others, nor by attacking another social class. In Latino Hollywood, the oppositional theme emerged primarily in the playful way that surrealism challenges the taken-for-granted assumptions of everyday social life.

Looting ushers in surrealism by reversing the social psychology of shoplifting, which is focused on getting away with theft in a sneaky manner. Shoplifting doubly defeats property ownership in that the shoplifter not only makes off with another’s goods but also, and unlike the robber, steals even while the victim is unaware of the theft in process. While for the robber the “getaway” happens after the theft, the shoplifter gets away with the crime on the way to committing the crime. But the smog of anarchy changes the experience of theft fundamentally: there is no need for a getaway, either before or after the theft. Without stealth, and all the furtive, disguised, strategic action that goes with it, all the social psychological darkness of non-violent, non-confrontational theft disappears.

In order to appreciate the empirical reality of an epiphany of invisibility, we need to dwell a moment on the phenomenological social psychology of theft and looting. Consider: Thieves are self-consciously deviant long before they steal, in the preparatory actions they take, which include burglar tools, getaway plans, clothes adjusted to prevent the detection of stolen items, etc. For thieves, a self-regard as deviant does not actually depend on the moment of laying hands on another’s property or of crossing a legal threshold; self-labeling as deviant arises in moments before the other’s property is taken. You can know you are a thief even if, after such preparations, the unexpected presence of a security guard discourages you and you do not go through with the plan. In contrast, in looting, the aura of deviance often vanishes from the preparatory stages.
On Thursday and Friday, in Koreatown and Hollywood, taking others’ property required neither force nor guile. Theft required only collaborative action from masses of strangers acting similarly. Thus the experience of stealing—all looters knew they were taking someone else’s property without paying—no longer carried a penumbra of deviance.

Instead of seeing themselves as outsiders posed against the forces of social order, looters ride on the social order they can work out among themselves. That is not always easy to arrange; in some looting scenes, looters banged against each other to get in and out of narrow entry ways, and some turned guns on other looters to rob what they had taken. But, in the scenes that became safe for an outsider to observe as the anarchy moved north from South Central, forms of social order emerged that were new in the episode of anarchy, yet familiar to residents, but never before put to work in sustaining looting.

At the Sears department store in Hollywood, which was situated on Santa Monica Blvd. a block west of Western, family relations and immigrant cultural traditions were drawn upon in a spirit that played with the possibilities of recreating social order in a more charming, personally meaningful, ethnically enriched way. As the forces of control faded away—the police who were present were overwhelmed in number relative to the residents on the street; shop managers and employees had failed to come to work and had left commercial properties unattended—a carnival spirit sustained the epiphany of invisibility. The presumptive understanding was that with so many participating in the looting, one would not be seen as deviant by participating. And the very gaiety of the moment gave a reassuring encouragement that no one would see what was happening as seriously malevolent.

Outside the Sears department store, new meanings were being rapidly negotiated. A middle aged woman pleaded with her mate. She wanted to go in while he adopted a stern moralistic line, condemning the looters as disgraceful. “Solo para ver” (only to see), she pleaded. Once in the store, as she began to pick up items, the negotiations continued: “Un recuerdo, nada más.” (“Just a souvenir.”). As these negotiations followed their intimate course, any orientation to what had happened to Rodney King and his police attackers, indeed any form of rebellious anger, was displaced by another spirit. On the ground floor of the two story department store, looters who broke from their frantic scavenging long enough to appreciate the scene could see a fellow sporting a well-used Mexican cowboy hat casually descending a broad staircase while singing ranchero songs, his vocalization accompanied by a guitar whose price sticker fluttered with the strumming.

“Closure”

Episodes of anarchy have never been properly conceptualized for systematic sociological investigation. Historians commonly focus on documenting the antecedents that they believe set up the outbreak of anarchy, emphasizing the changing balance of power in the political regime of the region or state, the changing state of tensions among ethnic, class or geographically defined populations, and contradictions or confusions in the organization of police and military administrations charged with keeping the peace. Sociologists usually focus on the “hot” segment in episodes of anarchy, characterizing instances as a whole or studying interaction processes that mobilize the behavior of
protest, looting or violence. Scholars of racial and ethnic populations have given unusual attention to the changing meaning of episodes of anarchy in the decades after they erupted and went cold. But an episode of anarchy, considered as a social phenomenon has all of these phases. Sociologists rarely attend to the process of ending episodes of anarchy, even though the decline of the phenomenon should be as valuable for causal assessment as evidence about the start. An episode of anarchy is an anticipated event, an event that emerges and terminates over a few days, and a remembered event.

In this writing, my focus has been on showing how the experience of invisibility ran a changing course through the course of hot segments of the Rodney King-related “riots.” A more extensive examination would be required to show how social processes in the year preceding the outbreak set the stage so that, upon the announcement of the Simi Valley verdict, individuals on a mass level could reasonably anticipate that their open participation in arson, looting and violent attacks on others might be effectively invisible to law enforcement authorities. It would also be valuable to describe what happened in the wake of the Rodney King anarchy, in comparison with the short-term post phase of other episodes.

An extended writing would also be necessary to show the workings of the social psychology that led to the end of this episode of anarchy. Here it must suffice to offer a few brief notes on the issue. Various emergent conditions led to the realization by participants that they were losing the cover of mass collaboration.

--As initial targets were emptied, burned out and otherwise disappeared, fuel for continuity was no longer immediately at hand.

--Compelled to expand or die, the collective looting and arson that was the life blood of the monster entered social geographies where residential demographics were no longer supportive through supplying collaborators.

--Sets of locals in targeted areas spontaneously developed strategies of resistance that included showing riot participants that they were documenting events, so that they would be identifiable to law enforcement in the long run.

--The national guard was deployed in a massive way, effectively repopulating the afflicted urban ecology with an overwhelming “show of force” that displaced the riot participant as the chief protagonist.

The Nature and Contingencies of Personal Invisibility in Group Action

The perspective in this essay is insistently interactionist but also phenomenological in presuming that the explanation of a short-lived form of behavior, one that arises and disappears even as background conditions remain constant, must be found in a distinctive form of experience. The conceptualization of an epiphany of invisibility departs from prior approaches in several ways. It avoids the lack of specificity of attributing riots to emergent norms. Norms are always emergent in the sense of being recognized as relevant, edited, transformed and applied in a situationally contingent manner.
The concept of an epiphany may recall that of “effervescence,” but the latter has been too mystical, too much torn out of the stuff of social interaction. When stimulated by a sense of being part of a powerful whole, how does the individual adjust his behavior in relation to his perception of how he or she is likely to be seen and responded to by others? Likewise, concepts of contagion, imitation, or of a frenzy that releases a collectively shared, historically built-up tension discount the individual-level, self-adjustment, self-defining project that is a constant in social life.

Being personally invisible by becoming blurred into the group is not necessarily an exotic, rare, or mysterious phenomenon. It occurs routinely when in the banal minutiae of everyday life, for example when one joins others in laughter which responds to a provocation that one recognizes as such but does not understand, and even more clearly when one abruptly falls silent so as to avoid being the last person laughing. Everyone is highly sensitive to and skilled in the techniques of losing personal visibility in the collective events of social life. As analysts, we may specify the situationally specific, interaction processes of blurring individual and group identity.

Social research that would explain behavior that is distinctive to the experience of being in a group requires a conceptualization that appreciates the dialectics of the phenomenon. On the one hand, each individual anticipates that others will perceive him or her in a de-individuated way, through a dominant perception of a group in action. On the other hand, folding one’s identity into a group requires the individual to monitor his or her own behavior so as to coordinate with the action of others. When this happens in the absence of guidance by a pre-designated conductor, each participant must work out the coordination on his or her own, and the specifics of the process will be more difficult for a researcher to grasp. The phenomenon is at once improvisational on the individual level and productive of a theme identifiable as collective, a kind of jazz in social interaction.

In the history of the social thought that became known in U.S. academic sociology as “collective behavior,” analytic focus has increasingly appreciated the need to concentrate on how the individuals interacts in a crowd situation. Park played down Le Bon’s rhetoric of unconscious emotion released in crowds. Blumer advanced on Park by adding precision to the analysis of crowd-contextualized interaction with his conceptualization of circular interaction. After mid-century, Turner, McPhail and Snow improved on Blumer by documenting the pre-crowd, small set and network relations that shape members participation even in riots, establishing that participants in crowds generally are not present as isolated individuals but arrive and interact with others based on pre-existing, small set relationships.

Yet there is another, still neglected need for making progress in studying collective behavior. The study of collective behavior in general, and of riots and rebellions in particular, requires researchers to appreciate the folk sociological basis of the phenomena. Whether in joining fashion fads or when moving to participate in anarchic aggression, individuals use their theories of social life to figure out what others are doing and are likely to do next. If “everyone is doing it,” then the individual can sensibly, if in a sub voce manner, reach the conclusion that “so I will not stand out if I do too.” Moral neutralizations easily follow.
How to build a formal sociology on the folk sociology of these phenomena? The appropriate theoretical perspective might be game theoretic, if only that tradition were not distorted by having taken on the burden of carrying an artificial and unnecessary image of a rational actor weighing costs and benefits. The critical issue, for participants and thus for social theory, is a particular dilemma of collective action. If all will attack, each will be effectively insulated; the last one resisting a return to conformity will be vulnerable to arrest. What happened in the “Rodney King riots” was a vicious game of musical chairs: in the end, police cases featured immigrant Latinos arrested for theft more than the African-Americans who kicked off the episode, and numerous murders went unsolved.

In sum, the study of anarchic episodes needs three lines of inquiry. One is an appreciation of the dialectical nature of participation, or the individual’s existentially unique actions of becoming blurred into what will be perceived as group action. Another, closely related investigation is into the folk sociology used to solve the dilemma of organizing collective action that otherwise impedes participation: how do individuals come to be confident that others are confident that “everyone” is doing it? A third feature of adequate explanations is also required. As long term students of race riots have come to understand, the police response to riots has changed over time. In the early 20th century urban U.S., the police joined the rioters, aiding whites in attacking blacks. Then in the so-called “police riots” of the 1960s and 1970s, when urban unrest was set off by police arrests and turned toward “the pigs,” law enforcement responded by seeking to suppress perceived illegal behavior with mass arrests secured at any cost. Since the 1990s, the police and the political powers that work with the police have shifted to “negotiated management” policies. The police have developed techniques (tear gas, rubber bullets, barricade strategies, fire hoses) to hold off rioting, in the process sacrificing possibilities for making arrests. In effect, the forces of order have accepted the invisibility of masses of participants in anarchic behaviors as a strategy for truncating the episode. The police now go after a few rather than attempting to corral all for arrest, trying to avoid forceful responses to the many that might further escalate the anarchy.

In light of this history, when protestors have an epiphany of invisibility, they are not being transported by crowd emotions nor are they self-delusional; they are making a sensible guess that if collective behavior can be mounted to a level that incapacitates the police from enforcing the law, then usually incriminating behaviors—such as trespassing, blocking traffic, throwing rocks at the police, overturning police cars, setting arson, projecting Molotov cocktails, breaking into stores, physically overwhelming resisting merchants, attempting to stampede through or over police, even murdering perceived oppressors and obstacles to looting—will, even when undertaken without any effort to disguise personal identity and in ways that are visible to all around in the immediate context, not be treated effectively as crimes. The epiphany of invisibility is the micro, social psychological side of the macro reality of anarchy: the individual’s tactics in anarchy recognize that the seemingly unmovable hierarchical order prevailing a moment ago no longer obtains but almost always returns in the next.


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i The use of the term “structure” is a persistent feature in sociological writing, one much less frequently encountered in social thought outside the academy. Like “concrete,” an adjective applied to what authors would have readers take as obdurate facts, “structure” is or should be an obviously artificial metaphor. But it seems indispensable to sociologists, who otherwise would have to produce evidence for the causal or obdurate force that the term adds on to observed patterns or repetitions of action.

ii For an example of what not long ago was a high profile, academically prestigious explanation of rates of crimes by city variations of a favorite sociological demon, racial inequality, see Blau, J. and Blau, P. (1982). "The Cost of Inequality: Metropolitan Structure and Violent Crime." American Sociological Review. 47(February): 114-129. After the inverse relationship of inequality, increasing, and crime rates, declining, in the last twenty five years, such studies have lost their substantive appeal. But they have become invaluable, unexploited resources for a sociology of sociology. They raise a challenge for explaining how such claims were made and greeted enthusiastically, and more importantly, how and why such claims are never reviewed after they have shown themselves to have been so seriously misguided.
Violence would seem especially suited for a micro-sociological explanation (see Collins, R. (2007). *Violence: a micro-sociological theory*. Princeton, Princeton University Press). Yet violence is always useful for political interpretations that reach far into large patterns in social life. As a result, the study of violent behavior is especially resistant to a sociology that focuses on situational and quickly changing causes.

For a rare, still unmatched, detailed naturalistic investigation cases of ethnic riots, see Horowitz, D. L. (2001). *The Deadly Ethnic Riot* (Berkeley, University of California Press), a study that took off from a powerful critique of about two decades of the most sophisticated efforts to explain US race riots by social structural conditions.


Stephen Sondheim. *Into the Woods*. In context, the composer is mocking an egocentric prince’s way of dismissing a peasant after a tryst: he is cooling the mark out with a princely flair of indifference. But if [only because?] the reference does not come from a classic of social science scholarship, we should not be similarly dismissive. Many artists have appreciated that the logics of social life as lived outside of civilized order require eventful [?] recognition, and some have even been recognized in academic discussions (see Rabelais as represented by Bakhtin [give reference]). If sociological writing is the best form to represent generalized truths about social life in falsifiable propositions, it is not necessarily the best tradition for making the discoveries that can set social research on new, productive paths. See Becker, H. S. (2007). *Telling about society*. Chicago, University of Chicago Press.

There are historical periods when, in certain regions of given societies, impunity is ongoing and widespread. A rough measure would be the percentage of homicides (even the most lawless contemporary Western societies systematically produce official definitions of homicides) that are defined as criminal events and that result in arrest and punishment. In contemporary Western societies, “clearance rates” for homicide generally run between 70 and 90%. Can lessons learned about the social dynamics of anarchy where impunity is an ongoing, pervasive, publicly recognized feature of regional life, as in areas of Mexico and Venezuela where homicide clearance rates have for extended periods been below 10%?


For example, McPhail, C. (1991). *The myth of the madding crowd*. New York, A. de Gruyter. As with “spontaneity,” the appreciation of epiphanies as a critical factor in anarchic episodes is a return to a theme, anonymity, that was advanced by Le Bon and other early contributors.


xiv Ibid., p. 52.

xv From accounts obtained from personal acquaintances shortly after the events.

xvi Some of these incidents were reported in Understanding the Riots, op cit.


xviii Recently, the hacker group, Anonymous, and its sympathizers have taken to wearing Guy Fawkes masks during protests. Like the use of “hoodies,” this practice is itself innocent; at least it has not yet been banned, unlike the official response to the use of Muslim veils in some Western settings. But the tactic, which makes personal invisibility visible, is of strategic value to those who would spike protest with violence. Wily nily, all using the masks become co-conspirators. Like a crowd surrounding a rock or Molotov cocktail thrower in a way that blocks access by police who would effect an arrest, the mass of masked protesters provides insulation that complicates law enforcement efforts to isolate those who are violent.

xix For an early and rare appreciation of the processual commonalities in substantively very different forms of conflict, such as race riots and riots after sports events, see Marx, G. T. (1970). "Issueless Riots." The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science 391(September): 21-33.

xx The following is based on observations made while literally rubbing shoulders with looters. I did not try to interview people at the time. Interviews were possible; many were broadcast live as they were conducted by journalists who accosted or ran along with looters and asked for their response. The results were efforts by the looters to find a conventional rhetoric to explain their action. While informative, such interviews misrepresent the meaning of looting at the time of the action because they are verbal accountings for non-verbal actions, and were geared toward media microphones which made clear to the looters that they were speaking not just to another person but to an infinite audience. My understanding is based on the existential situation—what being there indicated that it meant to engage in various lines of action in the immediate situation—and on conversations on site and in subsequent days with Central American residents of the area whom I had met some ten years earlier.

xxi According to an account by an ex-graduate student who was then working as an elementary school teacher near Hoover, and was describing what she saw on her way home after work.
But the genre is important, or, to use a familiar phrase, the medium is the message. Those who would convert the interaction in anarchy into cost/benefit analyses made by rational actors will gloss the phenomenology of the situation and miss the specific motivations of anarchy, which in part is the fascination with exploring the possibilities of historically unique moments.


On arrest statistics, Morrison, P. A. and I. S. Lowry (1994). A Riot of Color: The Demographic Setting. The LA Riots. M. Baldassare, pp. 34-36. While the news media reported that over 50 homicides occurred during the riots, several were in auto accidents, about ten were police shootings, some others were heart attacks, drug overdoses (ambulances could not reach the dying) and errant shots by defenders that killed colleagues, and some were revenge responses to pre-riot conflicts. The sketchy evidence available (the LAPD usually solves 70% of homicides; the clearance rate of those associated with the Rodney King riots was closer to 40%) indicates that about fifteen killings were conducted in the spirit of furthering anarchy: to remove obstacles to looting; in targeting victims for death based on race, class or ethnicity; and as a result of shots fired in the absence of any other interaction, past or present, between killer and victim (e.g., driver killed by shot from a passing vehicle). Lacey, M. and P. Feldman (1992). Delays, Chaos Add to Woes in Solving Riot Homicides. *Los Angeles Times.* Los Angeles, Times Mirror Company. Twenty years later, 22 of the 53 homicides identified by police as riot-related remained unsolved. Jim Crogan, “For 22 murder victims, LA Riots leave legacy of justice eluded.” April 29, 2012. FoxNews.com http://www.foxnews.com/us/2012/04/29/for-22-murder-victims-la-riots-leave-legacy-justice-eluded/ downloaded 17dec2014.