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Riots, Protest, and Organizing: Lessons From the 20th Anniversary of the LA Riots

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The 20th anniversary of the Los Angeles riots have triggered a number of fascinating reports examining the underlying causes of the unrest and the changes (in attitudes and actions) that have taken place in the past two decades.

Scholars at the University of Southern California [produced a report](#) called "*L.A. Rising: The 1992 Civil Unrest, the Arc of Social Justice Organizing, and the Lessons for Today's Movement Building*." Their counterparts at LA's Loyola Marymount University, [published](#) "*20th Anniversary of the Los Angeles Riots Survey*." And my colleagues at the Los Angeles Alliance for a New Economy (on whose board I proudly serve) [published a series of reflections](#) by LA activists called "*Rage and Reflection: Meditations on LA's 1992 Civil Unrest and the Ongoing Transformation of a City*." (I [weighed in on this topic](#) ten years ago with an article in the *National Civic Review*, "America's Urban Crisis A Decade After the LA Riots").

Even the word "riots" is controversial. Since the urban upheavals of the 1960s, academics and activists have debated whether such events should be called "riots," "uprisings," "rebellions," "civil disorders," or "civil unrest."

What we call them is less important than how we think about them. In my new book, *The 100 Greatest Americans of the 20th Century: A Social Justice Hall of Fame*, which Nation Books is publishing this month, I write the following:

"Riots are expressions of hot anger -- outrage about social conditions -- but they are not truly political protests. They do not have a clear objective, a policy agenda, or a strategy for bringing about change. They only bring more hardship. The Los Angeles riots in April 1992 left fifty-five people dead and caused more than \$1 billion in property damage in inner-city neighborhoods.

"Social protest movements, in contrast, reflect cold anger. They are intentional, organized, and strategic. Activists carefully select the target to raise public awareness about an issue. A handful of people may engage in nonviolent civil disobedience, which could result in fines and jail time, but most participants find other ways to contribute to the cause. They attend rallies and marches, donate money, make phone calls and lick envelopes, distribute leaflets, write letters to newspapers, meet with and lobby elected officials, and encourage friends to vote.

"Riots occur when people are hopeless. Protest takes place when people are hopeful -- when people believe not only that things *should* be different but also that they *can* be different. The major protests during the 20th century -- the women's suffragists who chained themselves to the fence outside the White House in the early 1900s, the farmers who showed up at their neighbors' homes during the Depression and stopped banks from carrying out foreclosures, the auto workers who occupied the Flint, Michigan, GM plant in 1937 to protest wage cuts and layoffs, the college students who waged sit-ins at segregated lunch counters in the early 1960s, the antiwar activists who protested the Vietnam War by disrupting military induction centers and defense contractors' offices, and the environmentalists who blocked the construction of nuclear power plants in the 1970s -- helped bring about much-needed change."

The most recent link in this chain of change is Occupy Wall Street. It began last September as a form of civil disobedience and protest, *not* a riot. Although a handful of anarchists within the Occupy movement sought to escalate the protest by resorting to violence, the overwhelming number of Occupiers resisted that tactic in favor of militant but peaceful protest.

As it spread around the country, the Occupy movement has had incredible ripple effects, changing public opinion, getting the media to pay more attention to the concentration of wealth and inequalities of income, encouraging some politicians to challenge the banks and big business, and emboldening existing community groups and unions to push harder.

The latest wave of mass protests at various corporate headquarters and shareholder meetings led by the [99% Spring Coalition](#), along with the [recent protest at Treasury Secretary Tim Geithner's house](#), underscores the importance of activist groups using protest as part of an overall strategy to wrest concessions from powerful people and institutions, not an end in itself.

What brings about positive change -- especially for the poor and working class -- is the slow, gradual, difficult work of union organizing, community organizing, and participation in electoral politics. The 1992 LA civil unrest was a wake-up call. But to the extent that Los Angeles is a better city today than it was 20 years ago, it is due to the grassroots activists -- and their allies

among foundations, media, clergy and public officials -- who have worked in the trenches pushing for change against difficult obstacles. That's the lesson we should take from these reports on the legacy of the LA riots.

Peter Dreier is professor of politics and chair of the Urban & Environmental Policy Department at Occidental College. His new book, [The 100 Greatest Americans of the 20th Century: A Social Justice Hall of Fame](#), will be published by Nation Books later this month.

Been to Occupy Wall Street?

If you've been to an Occupy Wall Street event anywhere in the country, we'd like to hear from you. Send OfftheBus your photos, links to videos or first-hand accounts of what you've seen for possible inclusion in The Huffington Posts's coverage.

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BenGoyim

46 Fans

A bunch of black racists rioting. Nothing more. Burned their own town down. I was proud of the Koreans who shot back!

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