

Negro Digest

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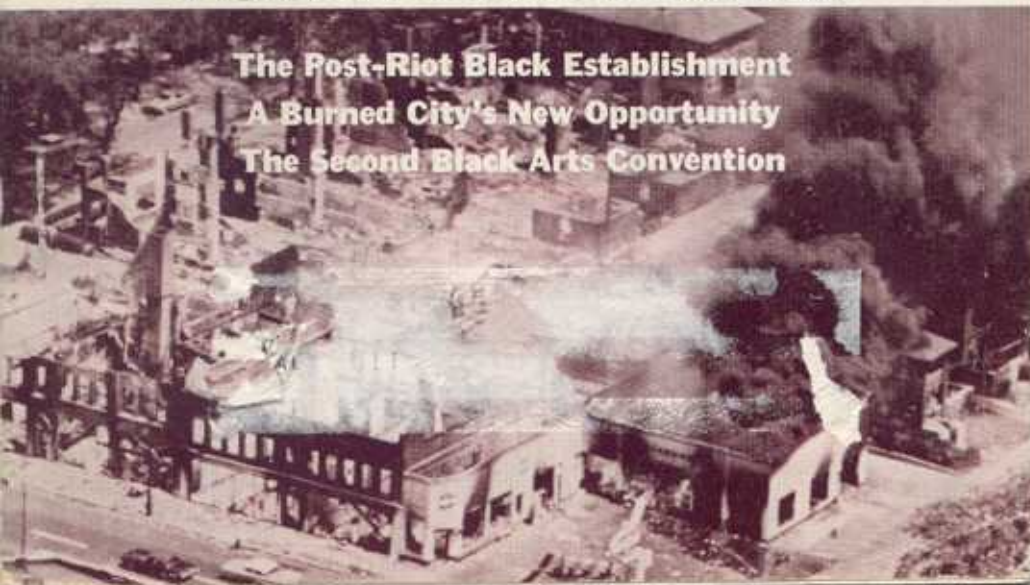
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FOCUS ON DETROIT:

The Post-Riot Black Establishment
A Burned City's New Opportunity
The Second Black Arts Convention





Viewpoint

THE DETROIT REALITY: A REVOLT AGAINST ALIENATION

BY DR. BROADUS N. BUTLER

"We are either going to broaden the [economic, health and educational] boundaries of America to include the exiles, or most of us are going to be joining them."—Joseph P. Lyford

SOMETHING happened to Detroit. It happened suddenly—though not without prior warning. It happened with thorough tactical professionalism—though apparently without leadership. It happened by invisible people whom even Ne-

groes generally did not know or recognize.

This something happened to the city, and the whole city, while all of the citizens—Negro and white—were baffled and unbelieving spectators upon their own paralysis. Before it is over, it will have cost the citizens possibly 40 lives

and over 200 million dollars in looted, vandalized and burned business establishments—and in burned and gutted homes and apartments.

An even greater cost will be the sudden sacrifice of the justified—and still justifiable—reputation of this city as being the only city among all the major cities of the whole nation which has taken as many creative initiatives in human and community relations and which has built as many strong bonds of interracial and interfaith coalitions. It is the one major city which escaped such violence for a quarter of a century. It still is farthest along in the establishment of a genuinely viable democratic community where almost everybody has a meaningful role in the total enterprise of community life. *That is, everybody except the totally alienated.*

What happened had no clearly enunciated rationale, and none has yet come forth from any participant or spokesman. It had no identifiable leadership. Yet it happened suddenly, swiftly, sweepingly, apparently without need of these.

Although the phrase "race riot" was used by communications media for lack of better terminology, it was clear even to the news media that this was neither a race riot nor a racial demonstration in any previous sense of that phrase, or by any parallel with any events of the past decade. *Yet it also could not be characterized as a rebellion or an*

insurrection by reference to any present experience. This is because too few are acquainted with Negro history—and particularly with the early revolts of both slave Negroes and white indentured servants. It takes this special knowledge of American history to see the precedents.

In connection with previous demonstrations and riots, we are accustomed to seeing the buildup of overt hostilities and to witnessing eloquent appeals of spokesmen being denied or ignored before the main event. There was none of this prelude. Moreover, the acts of vandalism, then burning, and then sniping generated neither ethnic, political, civil rights, moral, nor social rationale to sustain them; yet they were sustained.

One most baffling fact is that no apparent, and certainly no sustained, hostilities were aimed at either groups or persons other than those specifically charged with authority to restore order or to quell fires. There was no person against person fights, no gangs chasing either Negro or white persons, no racial encounters—and no general diminution of interracial communication and social intercourse at any level in the community. If anything, one became suddenly conscious of a heightened degree of interracial cooperation throughout the community.

This costly tragicomedy defies even symbolic association with the racial epithets of the Black Power

clique. It is strictly a "negative power demonstration by the alien within our midst. That alien has racial symbolism, but no race. We are yet to clearly understand this.

The phrase "black power" which cropped up early and disappeared of its own inappropriateness, really had no emotional force in an atmosphere of interracial looting, interracial vandalism, interracial incendiarism and interracial sniping. Except for the location of the initial incidents, the event cannot even be described geographically as a ghetto phenomenon; so quickly did it travel from the ghetto to the Avenue of Fashions and the Boulevards of luxury establishments. Even that move was highly selective in targets. The important thing is that, within the initial target area, and before the spreading flames took their own toll as a result of firemen being hampered, the targets were exclusively business establishments—and those were selected as though on a pre-determined *schema*. Moreover, the thoroughness of the selection and the completeness of the destruction of so many business establishments in so widely scattered parts of the city in so short a time had all of the earmarks of professionalism, well rehearsed timing, and even tactical pre-planning. Yet, supposedly no professional leaders were evident in any overt identification; in fact, no leaders or leadership types were evident.

Equally important, there were no acts of violence directed against

any private persons or racial groups as such during the entire course of events. There were none of the chasings, beatings, gang attacks, or killings of private persons such as characterized the Detroit race riot of 1943, or the many subsequent demonstrations and riots elsewhere throughout the nation that we have witnessed since 1954. In no sense was there person-to-person hostility. *On the contrary, there were constant and paradoxical observations of a peculiar sort of quasi-humorous circus atmosphere like the annual student riots at Fort Lauderdale, Florida—but different.* In addition, there was the specific absence of any gang patterns, even among the snipers.



Probably the most astounding and foreboding fact is that better than 98 per cent of the entire population of this metropolis was caught completely unaware of such a possibility, even as it was occurring. The few prior scattered week-end events with definite racial overtones on three or four successive week-ends were handled by due process of law, and were accepted by the community on the merit of that process. But those events did not involve the completely alienated. When this event struck upon us with all of its costly and devastating fury, its participants were

not recognizable to any of the more than 100 human relations, civic, religious, protest, and even extreme protest groups which have been vocal and active on social issues in Detroit. Nor did they enlist the support or participation of any of these groups or organizations in any cause that they represented as the looting and vandalism progressed. For, in truth, they did not represent a cause: they represented a fact.

What then is this fact? This fact is that the elusive "they" have many highly developed skills which the national society, even in the best city in the nation, will pay a dearer price for not using or for turning into expert destroyers rather than training them and using them constructively. We must not fail to see the symbolism in the simple fact that a "blind pig" raid provided the generating spark. So long as we continue to force a choice : who are alienated, which tells them that they can, in fact find a more lucrative life and more peer-group acceptance by engagement in illegal than in legal activity; so long as the school dropout cannot find acceptance among any respected and legitimate employers; and, so long as he knows that even if he does, that employer will not be able to compete in wages and personal fringe benefits with the illegal business enterprise; then, so long will it be a basic pragmatic and attractive choice—the same kind of choice made by the

other 90 per cent of Americans—to adopt Willie Sutton's law and "Go where the money is."

But once gone, and once in the pattern of seeking success through that route, his powers must then be developed, refined and utilized by such as will hire and use them for illegal activity.

So we had better start our route to repair by clearly distinguishing in our own mind between the not-poor-by-income poor criminal and illegal operators from the real poor. For it is evident that their chief victim is the poor. We also must separate in our own minds those who are clearly bent upon the destruction of our society from legitimate civil rights activists. For it is evident that the former's goals are completely incompatible with the existence of a community in which civil rights has any meaning.

In this connection, we had better begin to be much more discriminating and sensible—in the national interest—about who is characterized as a "Negro leader." A destroyer is not a leader, except to destruction. It is imperative that—Negro or white—we distinguish between Negro leaders and both Negro and white destroyers.

We also must not be too quick to label a product which we have mass-produced in our own community's educational, social and economic system a "criminal" as though that ends the problem. That is where the problem begins. We produced them. Their values are

our values. Their wants are our wants. But our "good life" is not their "good life," and our "belonging" is not their "belonging."

Since they do not have open and constructive routes to the achievement of these, our avenues are *not* their avenues to the enjoyment of the things we take for granted. And they demand either to have these things or to see us pay a terrible toll for their being so denied. This is their plain economic pragmatism. Moreover, the wider the gap between the affluent and the alienated the narrower the perimeters for choice either way become; and, by the fact, the more closely does any community approach the prospect of recurring violence. This we can never afford and survive.



So now we have a different kind of confrontation than has appeared before in recent history. For this was a revolt. A revolt differs from demonstrations as we know them, from riots as we know them, and even from insurrections. For all of these latter are overt in both leadership and design. Revolts are covert, devastating, and sudden. Not since the Gabriel Prosser and Nat Turner revolts of the nineteenth century have we seen this phenomena. Several commentators made the mistaken comment that this was the biggest riot in American his-

tory. They were far from right—on two scores. This was not a riot, and it is not the most costly even in Detroit history in human lives. The Faulkner riot perpetrated by white persons in March 1863 cost more lives and proportionately more property.

Finally, we have become so accustomed to our social concerns about those who are segregated from the *mainstream of society* that we just have not developed the social instruments and programs to really enfold those who are alienated from the *total society*. *Now—even in this most progressive city of Detroit—they have got around to us*. And when they got to us, we had no ready-made racial answers, because they are both Negro and white; we had no economic palliatives, because they are not among the organized and visible poor; we had no moral response because the morality of nonviolence has not brought to them the rewards it brought to us; we had no community response, because when we have seen them they were *in* but *not* of the community. Moreover, it must give a peculiar satisfaction to a person who has been denied induction into the military service to see himself pinning down soldiers for 40 minutes with sniper fire in his own private war—and then escape.

Never forget, no matter how strong we are in our bonds of community and no matter how concerned we are for the continued health and growth of our city, the

alienated are not the same as the segregated. The segregated are part of the society itself. Nothing in the recent history of demonstrations, and even riots, is comparable to the revolts of the alienated, so such attempts at analogues will be futile.

We must go all the way back, then, and study the dynamics of early revolts to learn what the present events in Detroit and elsewhere have been about. And when we study them, we should find that the rebellious slaves and indentured servants shared these three things in common—a concealed but deep resentment in their consciousness of complete alienation; an unswerving desire for the better things they saw around them; and a devastating capability for sudden, destructive and seemingly unorganized revolts against authority.

For those who have continually demeaned these people and argued that the community and the nation should not make the extra effort to reach them; should not make the extra investment in their more realistic education, training and self-image building; should not make a larger investment in their adjustment to the constructive and legiti-

mate job market; should not be concerned about the investment in, and reorientation of, services for their health, family and environmental improvement; should not expand upon the programmed efforts at finding with them a place of belonging and respect and personal dignity in our community and in our society; whatever this cost in lives, property, community pride, and fear of swift destruction from sources unknown, is only part of the price that we must continue to pay for *not* doing so.

With the recent super-imposition of the theory of violence upon the formerly nonviolent moral thesis of the civil rights movement, even Detroit has not been good enough or strong enough to be spared. If it can happen in Detroit, it will happen anywhere else in this nation! However, if we bring to bear upon this community, after this shock, the same constructive and creative resolutions which have carried us through 24 years before, we shall find a way to open up alternatives to them that will both spare us and embrace them. And that better voice of Detroit will be heard again in our land.



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