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Book Reviews

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BOOK REVIEWS

Ronald M. Jacobs, *Race, Media and the Crisis of Civil Society: From Watts to Rodney King* (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2002), 189 pp., \$60.00 (cloth).

"It's nice to think that the convulsions in Boston will be to the Catholic Church what the Tailhook scandal was to the Navy, what Watergate and the intern scandal were to the White House, what Enron is to corporate America—a hard summons to institutional accountability." This is what Bill Keller (2002) observed of the sex scandal in the Roman Catholic Church, which is much like what one could write about another similarly impermeable institution: urban police departments from New York to Los Angeles. One would hope that in 10 years, riots, mass civil disobedience, congressional hearings over racial profiling, and millions of dollars in settlements would have produced a shift in the culture of urban police forces. Yet today, big-city police, like other institutions without competitors, remain largely untouchable. At least that is the way it seemed in early March 2002, when the charges against NYPD officers Charles Schwartz, Thomas Bruder, and Thomas Wiese were thrown out. Each had been indicted for involvement in the police torture of Abner Louima; their cases were dismissed within a month of the 10-year anniversary of the L.A. riots—perhaps the bloodiest in U.S. history. Their acquittals forced many to wonder if accountability for police brutality will ever become a reality in American democracy.

When the L.A. riots broke out 10 years ago, I was about to graduate from college in Pomona, California, just miles from the riots. After students were ripped out of their cars, the campus was quarantined. When the police officers accused of beating Rodney King were tried in a suburban court by 10 white people, 1 Hispanic, and 1 Filipino—and no black jurors—the ensuing acquittals invoked a stinging sense of betrayal. Only 13 years before, in 1979, the San Francisco White Night riots occurred, when a jury that lacked a single gay juror gave former police officer Dan White a slap on the wrist for the murders of Mayor George Moscone and Councilman Harvey Milk. Citizens in 1979 and 1992, in San Francisco and L.A., had maintained faith that criminal justice would do the right thing.

Looking back at the headlines from the 30 April 1992, page 1 headline of the *Los Angeles Times*—"All 4 in King Beating Acquitted, Violence Follows Verdicts; Guards Called Out"—a sense of disgust remains. The headline was accompanied by photos of relieved baby-faced police officers hugging one another to the left and rioters against a backdrop of flames to the right. The night before, we had watched 5

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o'clock news commentators attempting to grasp the significance of the unrest erupting across the city. Our experience of these riots and the other uprisings of the era—the fall of the Berlin Wall, and so forth—was filtered through cloudy media lenses.

So today, a decade later, Ronald M. Jacobs's study of the competing media narratives of the riots could not be more welcome. *Race, Media and the Crisis of Civil Society* compares both the way in which the black and mainstream corporate media read the Watts and L.A. riots, as well as their representations of their various constituencies. Jacobs builds on Jürgen Habermas's theoretical framework, first outlined in his work, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, of the public sphere as a space between government and the market in which conversations take place, opinions are shaped, and the underpinnings of democratic action thrive. More than just a study of the riots themselves, *Race, Media and the Crisis of Civil Society* is also an investigation of the relations between a subaltern counterpublic—black media—and a dominant public sphere (and culture) represented by the *Los Angeles Times*, *New York Times*, and *Chicago Tribune*.

As in most studies of Habermas's conception of the public sphere, Jacobs must contend with the question of who is included or excluded from participation within dominant public spheres and on what terms. As a result, Jacobs's study becomes a meditation on questions about democracy within a diverse society. Given exclusions to participation within the dominant public sphere usually take place along the lines of race, class, or gender, Jacobs focuses on the racial dynamics of these inequalities and disparities in readings of the riots. Where were the black voices during the Watts riots? What did the black press see that the mainstream press missed when they covered Watts or Rodney King? How did story lines differ? Were the riots seen as the result of tragic, irrational expressions signifying nothing or as expressions of grief about one more lost scrap of faith in a democratic process? Which meanings or bits of coherence did the black media find that the *Chicago Tribune* missed? To what degree was the black press able to convey the humanity in rioters that the mainstream press failed to represent? These are the questions that unfold in Jacobs's wonderfully organized study, which is as masterful a piece of historical sociology as anything I have encountered in a long time.

The work benefits from a skilled deployment of narrative analysis that Jacobs uses to offer a wistful glimpse of histories of the black metropolises of Chicago, L.A., and Harlem and the community newspapers that covered their pulses. It is a conversation about race, class, and assimilation versus accommodation of autonomous voices into dominant cultural discourses. As small alternative presses are subsumed by media conglomerates, the viability of the counterpublics they represent comes into question as well. The questions that Jacobs is addressing about the daily black press could also be posed about the gay press and countless alternatives across the United States. Concurrently, independent media sources (such as <http://nyc.indymedia.org>) are popping up across the United States. Yet, as Jacobs acknowledges, the digital divide is only getting larger as the black press fails to establish itself in cyberspace.

Unfortunately, there are instances when Jacobs's focus on black and mainstream presses excludes other voices, thus conflating issues of race and representation into a

black and white dialogue. A multifaceted conversation is better suited to the cultural makeup of a city such as L.A., where the most popular radio station plays salsa, not hip-hop or alternative rock. Comparisons or even references to other presses whose constituents were affected by the riots, whether alternative, Spanish speaking, gay, or anarchist (all of whom covered the riots), might have been instructive.

Ultimately, *Race, Media, and the Crisis of Civil Society* is a study of the social meanings and cultural interpretations of riots. Regarding that interpretation, Jacobs has difficulty finding his footing. Jacobs quotes Edward Soja's insight: "Whereas Watts marked the first major rebellion against the late modernism of postwar America, the civil disturbances of 1992 may represent the first explosion of resistance to neoconservative American postmodernism and post-Fordism." It is a point on which Roger Keil (2002) and a number of other critics agree. Keil suggests that the L.A. riots were an early indicator of an urban-based movement that challenges the local dimensions of globalization, initially spotlighted by the 1999 anti-corporate-globalization protests in Seattle, the first full-scale explosions of a multinational metropolis; the riots offered a glimpse of an emerging neighborhood-based, local/global grassroots politics that gained momentum throughout the decade. Jacobs, on the other hand, vacillates on his reading of the meaning of the riots, reiterating the cynical post-O. J. Simpson verdict lament that "talk about matters of racial concern was a hopeless waste of time" (p. 146) after the first King verdict. He goes on to outline a number of possible polarized responses while bemoaning an "unbridgeable gap between the races" (p. 146) divided along bifurcated black/white racial lines, without a coherent overarching conclusion.

Nonetheless, the problem presented by L.A. continues today, and accountability appears more elusive than ever. Just this year, a Bronx woman observing a case of police brutality was beaten and arrested for asking for a badge number. As the past decade of multicultural responses, such as the mass civil disobedience around the murder of Amadou Diallo, indicate, the lack of accountability within police departments across the United States continues to present a challenge to democratic institutions and notions of civil society, as well as an opportunity for multicultural coalitions to respond and rebuild.

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