

MIKE DAVIS

THE L.A. INFERNO

april 30



Twenty minutes to curfew, Thursday evening. I am hurrying down Broadway past the boarded windows and derelict theaters, while the sky coagulates into a rusty fog like an enormous blood stain. A firestorm of rage and desperation is consuming Los Angeles' inner city, but Downtown itself is an eerily quiet ghost town. At noon the white professionals and clericals fled for their suburban homes with the apprehension of people who believed that an atomic bomb would shortly be dropped on the city. Now there are only the LAPD, bunkered in Parker Center awaiting the arrival of the National Guard, the homeless huddled in doorways, wondering what their fate will be under curfew, and an old Latino man stranded at a bus stop, who keeps muttering "*fin del mundo, fin del mundo.*"

Thanks to riot television coverage, hundreds of thousands of white Southern Californians are visiting Southcentral L.A. for the first time in their lives. But they will see little of the ordinary heroism or daily life of the community. Nor will they experience any of the economic violence of unemployment, welfare, and collapsing school systems. Because of television's monomaniacal insistence on "black rage," most will also miss the significance of the participation of thousands of poor Latinos in what may be modern America's first multi-ethnic riot. And without any of these contexts, the complexity of motive and range of passion, and the multiple articulations of race and class in the present tragedy will be ironed out into self-serving clichés about desperado youth and the criminal underclass.

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L.A.-based writer, and the author of *City of Quartz*.

The body of this article was written before the Rodney King verdict. It is prefaced by Davis' reactions the day after the police officers' acquittal.

Academics, using sophisticated survey techniques, have discovered that no less than 50,000 people—most of them ordinary working-class adults—took some part in the first burning of Los Angeles during the so-called Watts Riot of August, 1965. Yet the media and the establishment “experts” of the McCone Commission—ignoring testimony from the community—portrayed the upheaval as the product of a “criminal riffraff.” Chief Parker (the real arsonist in 1965) was triumphantly vindicated and the cancer of racism in the LAPD was allowed to fester for a full generation more.

Unhappily there is little reason to believe that the dominant interpretation of the current tragedy will be any more profound than the McCone Commission’s report 27 years ago. Consider the verdict that ignited a thousand fires across Los Angeles: If not outright racism, the good burghers of Simi Valley at the very least have signalled that racial injustice has become strictly secondary to white security and police morale. Perhaps people even crave reassuring demons to justify their flight to gated suburbs and monochromatic valleys.

On this Walpurgis Night (dictionary definition: “an eve of diabolic revelry”), nothing ahead is clear except that the riot in the inner city will probably be followed by a second, even more devastating “riot” in the suburbs. The suburbanites won’t burn Korean-owned liquor stores or stone Parker Center. They will simply tighten the fiscal vise around the central city (into which they will never again venture) and let it bleed. They will organize death penalty parties and victory parades for the LAPD and the National Guard (Operation Urban Storm?). And Daryl Gates’ book will top bestseller lists in West Hills and South Pasadena.

A preposterous scenario? Then recall that in November, 1964, two-thirds of California’s white electorate virtually voted for a race riot when they repealed the state’s fair housing law. After the Watts Riot ten months later (which one black leader called “the hate that hate produced”), Los Angeles endured eight years of increasingly virulent racial innuendo from Mayor Yorty and his bedrock supporters in the Valley and Harbor areas.

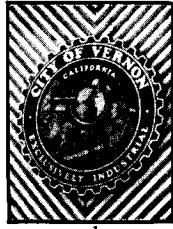
This time around, however, the politics of backlash will undoubtedly target Latino new immigrants as well as young African-Ameri-

cans. An ugly “seal the border” nativism has been growing like a noxious weed in this state for the last year. In the flames of Hollywood and McArthur Park—the epicenters of the Latino riot—supporters of this strategy will find new pretexts to talk about deportation and eliminating citizenship for U.S.-born children of undocumented workers. Everyone who lives in the neighborhoods of the new riot zone risks being characterized as “criminal riffraff” in the eyes of the other, suburban city. If one wants to find a truly large-scale generalization into which to insert all the diverse realities of this ordeal, it is simply that, even as we dance on the cliffs of nihilism, this remains, profoundly, a “citizenship thing.”

It is becoming clearer that Rodney King is as much a watershed in U.S. history as Dred Scott. African-Americans are being forced to struggle against a catastrophic devaluation of a citizenship for which fifteen generations of their ancestors have fought. Likewise, the new Latino immigrants, whose sweated labor makes Southern California’s luxury lifestyles possible, are resisting a future already looted of hope, where their children can only look forward to blow-drying rich peoples’ lawns or joining street gangs.

Certainly the smug, moralizing lens of “eyewitness” news gives us no inkling of these deeper issues. Their cameras capture only the armies of the night—looters, thugs, and arsonists—acting with inexplicable power and unfathomable malice. There is no intimation that the grim street warfare being waged against the police—prelude to our own urban *intifada*?—might be fueled by a generation’s collapsing hopes in the future. Or that the simple demand for “justice” might now be assuming a revolutionary, indeed almost apocalyptic, resonance.

the new industrial peonage



The descending sun is temporarily eclipsed by a huge water tower emblazoned "The City of Vernon." Shadows play off the concrete embankments of the Los Angeles River and dance across the shallow trickle of sewage in its channel. A locomotive shunts a dozen hazardous chemical cars onto a siding. A trucker somewhere pulls hard at an air horn. A forklift darts across a busy road. We are only a few miles from downtown Los Angeles, but have entered a world invisible to its culture pundits, the "empty quarter" of its tourist guides. This is L.A.'s old blue-collar heartland—the Southeast industrial district.

It's 4:30 p.m. Two workers are standing behind an immense metal table, partially shaded by a ragged beach umbrella. A portable radio is blasting rock and roll en español, hot from Mexico City. Each man is armed with a Phillips screwdriver, a pliers, and a ballpeen hammer. Eduardo, the taller, is from Guanajuato in Northcentral Mexico and he is wearing the fatigue green "Border Patrol" baseball cap favored by so many of Los Angeles' illegal immigrants. Miguel, more slightly built and pensive, is from Honduras. They are unconsciously syncopating the beat as they alternate between hammering, prying, and unscrewing.

Towering in front of them is a twenty-foot-high mound of dead and discarded computer technology: obsolete word processors, damaged printers, virus-infected micros, last decade's state of the art. The Sisyphean task of Eduardo and Miguel is to smash everything in order to salvage a few components that will be sent to England for the recovery of their gold content. Being a computer breaker is a monotonous \$4.50 an hour job in the black economy. There are no benefits, or taxes, just cash in a plain envelope every Friday.

Miguel is about to deliver a massive blow to the VDT of a Macintosh, when I ask him why he came to Los Angeles. His hammer hesitates for a second, then he smiles and answers: "Because I wanted to work in your high technology economy." I wince as the hammer falls. The Macintosh implodes.

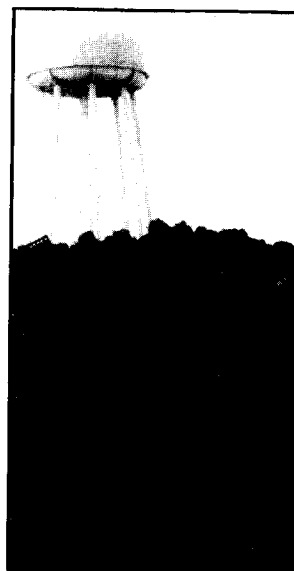
L.A.'S RUSTBELT

The computer breakers have been in Los Angeles three years. Eduardo had a local network of contacts from his village; Miguel, who had none, lived on the streets for nearly two years. Now they share a tiny two-bedroom house in the nearby city of Maywood with four other immigrant workers (two of whom are also "illegal") for \$1100 per month. All are married, but no one has yet managed to save enough money to bring his wife or kids *al otro lado*. Like so many of the 400,000 new immigrants who work and live in Southeast Los Angeles County, they feel trapped between low wages and high rents. "Just like peons," Miguel broods, "like slaves."

It wasn't always this way in the Southeast. Twenty-five years ago the archipelago of improbably incorporated bungalow communities that surround the factories and warehouses along the axis of the Los Angeles River was predominately Anglo. These gritty suburbs contained most of Southern California's non-defense factories and, with seven large tire and auto plants, ranked second only to Detroit and Akron in the assembly of cars and tires. Three major steel and aluminum mills evoked fiery images of Pittsburgh, while Southeast L.A. surpassed Houston in the production of oil drilling machinery. More than a sixth of Fortune 500 corporations had their West Coast branch plants or warehouses in the great Central Manufacturing District that overlapped the "special purpose" industrial cities of Vernon and Commerce.

The incarnation of postwar "Fordism," the plants were unionized, and they paid the mortgages on bungalows and financed college educations. On weekends well-dressed couples swung to Jimmy Wright's band at the South Gate Women's Club or rocked with Eddie Cochran at Huntington Park's Lyric Theater. For children of the Dustbowl like Cochran (from the nearby "Okie suburb" of Bell Gardens), the smokestacks of Bethlehem Steel and GM South Gate represented the happy ending to the *Grapes of Wrath*.

But this blue-collar version of the Southern California dream was reserved strictly for whites. Alameda Street, running from Downtown to the Harbor, and forming the western edge of the Southeast industrial district, was L.A.'s "cotton curtain" segregating immigrant



black neighborhoods from the white-controlled job base. Small Mexican *colonias* had long existed in Bandini (City of Commerce) and Compton, but restrictive covenants kept most tracts monochromatic long after the Supreme Court had supposedly outlawed such discrimination. Blacks who crossed Alameda to shop in the “hub cities” of Huntington Park or South Gate risked beatings from redneck gangs with names like the “Spookhunters.” Moreover, the region which the CIO once had hoped would be the bedrock of progressive politics in Los Angeles County became instead the crucible of the statewide anti-school-integration and anti-fair-housing campaigns led by reactionary Assemblyman Floyd Wakefield of South Gate.

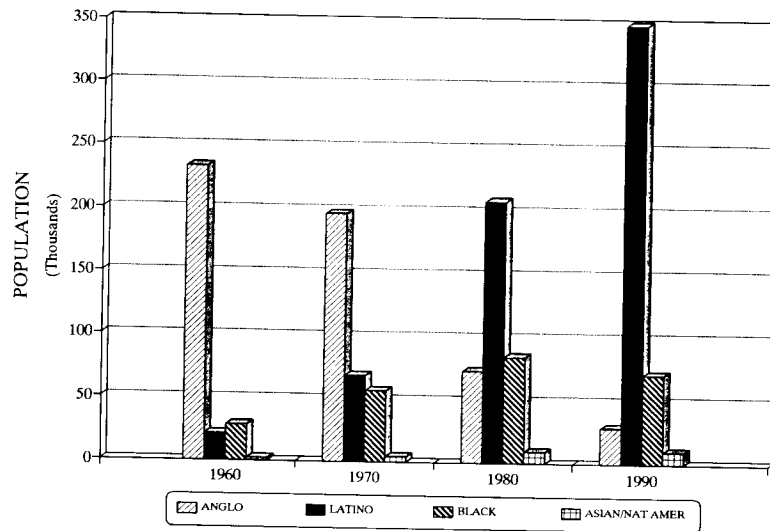
In the early 1960s, as ghetto joblessness soared in an otherwise full-employment economy, the situation became explosive. During the Watts Rebellion in August 1965, unemployed black teenagers stoned the cars of white commuters, while Lynwood and South Gate police reciprocated with the arrest of innocent black motorists, and a local Democratic assemblyman demanded that the National Guard encircle the ghetto with tanks.

Faced with inevitable, if only token, integration, the Southeast white working class voted with its feet. Some entrenched themselves in the “white redoubt” of nearby Downey, but most moved to the rapidly industrializing northern tier of Orange County. Employers—also responding to the inflation of land costs in local industrial zones—began to follow their labor force in a first wave of plant shutdowns in the early 1970s.

This outward seepage of the Anglo population in the 1960s (-36,510) became an exodus in the 1970s (-123,812) and the 1980s (-43,734).¹ Continuing racial hysteria, abetted by “block-busting” in the city of Lynwood in the early 1970s, was followed by a second, catastrophic wave of plant closings in the late 1970s. Much of the trucking industry, escaping gridlock and land inflation, migrated to new industrial zones in the “Inland Empire” (western San Bernardino and Riverside counties), 50 miles east of L.A. And disastrously, within the short space of the “Volker recession,” local heavy industry—including the entirety of the auto-tire-steel complex—collapsed in the

face of relentless Japanese and Korean competition, as Southern California integrated itself into an emergent Pacific Rim economic order. In most cases, closure followed within a few years of watershed black and Chicano breakthroughs in shopfloor seniority and local union leadership. While white workers for the most part were able to retire or follow their jobs to the suburban periphery, non-whites were stranded in an economy that was suddenly stripped of 40,000 high-wage manufacturing and trucking jobs.

THE ETHNIC TRANSFORMATION OF L.A.'S INDUSTRIAL HEARTLAND



Unlike Detroit or Youngstown, however, L.A.'s derelict industrial core was not simply abandoned. Almost as fast as Fortune 500 corporations shut down their L.A. branch plants, local capitalists rushed in to take advantage of the Southeast's cheap leases, tax incentives, and burgeoning supply of immigrant Mexican labor. Minimum-wage apparel and furniture makers, fleeing land inflation in downtown L.A., were the vanguard of the movement, followed by food distributors and importers of all kinds. Within the dead shell

of heavy manufacturing, a new sweatshop economy rapidly emerged.

MAJOR PLANT CLOSURES IN THE SOUTHEAST L.A. AREA		
DATE	PLANT CLOSED	EMPLOYMENT (PEAK)
1971	Chrysler (Commerce)	3000
1975	Goodrich (Commerce)	2100
1977	Fluor (Commerce)	4000
1978	Uniroyal (Commerce)	1450
1979	American Bridge (Commerce)	700
	Weiser Lock (South Gate)	2100
1980	Firestone (South Gate)	5000
	Goodyear (L.A.)	1580
	Ford (Pico Rivera)	2500
1982	General Motors (South Gate)	5500
	Bethlehem Steel (Vernon)	1500
TOTAL:		29430

The physical metamorphosis of the Southeast industrial landscape testifies to the generally low-tech character of post-Fordism in Los Angeles. The old Firestone Rubber and American Can plants, for instance, have been converted into non-union furniture factories, while the great Bethlehem Steel works on Slauson Avenue has been replaced by a hot dog distributor, a Chinese food-products company, and a maker of rattan patio furniture. Chrysler Maywood is now a bank "back office," while U.S. Steel has metamorphosed into a warehouse complex, and the "Assyrian" wall of Uniroyal Tire has become a facade for a designer-label outlet center. (Only Ford Pico Rivera perversely bucks this trend toward techno-regression: The plant which once assembled gas-guzzling LTDs now designs Northrup's Stealth Bomber.)

A FAMILY DICTATORSHIP

Although on a site-by-site average, two high-wage heavy manufacturing jobs have been replaced by only one low-wage sweatshop or warehouse job, the aggregate employment level in the Southeast has been sustained at 70 to 75 percent of its 1970s peak by the influx of hundreds of small employers.² The secret formula of this new, low-wage “reindustrialization” has been the combination of a seemingly infinite supply of immigrant labor from Mexico and Central America with the entrepreneurial energy of East Asia. Chinese diaspora capital (whose second language in Los Angeles is as likely to be Spanish as English) has been particularly vigorous in such sectors as food processing, apparel, novelties, and furniture, which employ large minimum-wage work forces of Latino immigrants. As a result much of Southeast L.A. County resembles a manufacturing platform of ambiguous nationality. Along Telegraph Road in the aptly-named City of Commerce, for instance, the blazing sun of the Republic of China (Taiwan) flies side by side with the stars and stripes, while billboards advertise beer and cigarettes in Spanish, and the local casino translates card rules into Korean, Vietnamese, and Cambodian.

The nation-state, moreover, yields real sovereignty to the city-states which contain most of L.A. County’s industrial assets. Exploiting the prerogatives of California’s promiscuous home rule law, a half dozen industrial areas have incorporated themselves as independent cities, enabling them to selfishly monopolize land use and tax resources. The two industrial enclaves in the Southeast—Commerce and Vernon—have historically divided up most of the area of the American West’s premier industrial district, the Santa Fe Railroad’s former Central Manufacturing District, which at its height in 1970 employed over 100,000 workers. These “phantom cities” (as critics have called them), however, differ sharply in their approaches to political management and industrial redevelopment.

The City of Commerce, for its part, pacifies its 12,000 residents with unusual welfare benefits, including a free bus service and a municipal summer camp for kids in the mountains, while real power remains invested in an Industrial Council of employers. As heavy



industry has closed down in Commerce, moreover, the city has evolved into the virtual company town of Trammell Crowe—the giant Dallas-based developer who has been given a monopoly to create business parks and outlet centers on the sites of defunct steel mills and tire plants. Relics of the old industrial age—enormous gears, forge hammers, palm planters in the shape of tires—have become “dead tech” statuary in the landscaping of Trammell Crowe’s brave new world of windowless pastel-colored warehouses and information factories.

The City of Vernon—the oldest and most singular of special-use incorporations—has adopted different strategies. Two facts are especially important about this industrial *hacienda*, to which Eduardo, Miguel, and thousands of their *compañeros* commute each morning. First, that it has a permanent residential population of only 151 citizens (90 percent of them municipal employees and their families living in city-owned housing), but a work force of more than 48,000—that is to say, a commuter-to-resident ratio of 600:1. Second, the city has been controlled by a single family, the Basque-origin Leonis dynasty, since its formation in 1905.

Originally established to provide a safe haven for “sporting” activities (for example, boxing, gambling, drinking) under attack by Los Angeles’ early municipal reformers, Vernon evolved during the 1920s into an “exclusively industrial” (official city motto) base for Eastern corporate branch plants. Under the iron heel of John Leonis, city founder, existing housing was condemned or bought out in order to reduce the residential population (predominantly Mexican) to a handful of loyal retainers living in the literal shadow of the bunker-like city hall. Elections in Vernon thereby became a biennial farce in which the Leonis slate (now headed by grandson Leonis Malburg) is unanimously reelected by a micro-citizenry of Leonis employees. (Although civic officials are required to live in the city of their election, Mayor Malburg has for decades brazenly flouted state law by residing in a family mansion in Los Angeles’ exclusive Hancock Park district.)

This family dictatorship has been routinely accepted by Vernon industrialists in exchange for exceedingly low tax rates and high

standards of municipal police and fire service. Conversely, Vernon cityhood has been a disaster for the city of Los Angeles, which has lost perhaps 20 percent of its potential industrial property tax base. Now Vernon—tantalized by Trammell Crowe's successes in Commerce—is trying to divert \$873 million in potential tax revenues from the county general fund (that is, schools, welfare, and hospitals) to its own redevelopment agency. The primary beneficiaries of this raid on the county treasury—to be used to “modernize” the city's older plant and warehouse sites—will be Vernon's major landowners: a list headed by the Santa Fe Railroad Land Company (now Catellus Development) and hizzoner Leonis Malburg.³

The thousand-odd pages of documents used to argue Vernon's case for redevelopment inadvertently unmask an economy capitalized on poverty and pollution. A detailed survey of local wages, for example, reveals that 96 percent of Vernon's 48,000 workers earn incomes so low that they would qualify for public housing assistance. At least 58 percent of this largely unorganized work force fall into the official “very low income” category, making less than half the county median—a dramatic downturn from the area's unionized high-wage norms twenty years before.⁴

This low-wage army, moreover, is working under conditions of increasing toxicity. Vernon has long been the worst air polluter in the county; but public health officials in nearby communities are most worried by the 370 hazardous material use or storage sites within the city. A study conducted by the California Public Interest Research Group showed that Vernon was the toxic capital of Southern California, emitting or transporting 27 million pounds of toxics in 1987 (more than three times as much as the entire City of Los Angeles). At the same time, 1,100 historical underground storage tanks have leaked lethal contaminants into the soil and water table, with incalculable long-range consequences.⁵

As many of its early 1980s “replacement” industries, especially apparel and furniture, have begun to relocate to Mexico or Southeast Asia, Vernon is becoming dependent on an “odd couple” of growth industries: food processing and toxic waste disposal. In Vernon there is nothing unusual about a Chinese frozen shrimp processor being

located on the same block with a company recycling battery acids or treating industrial solvents. The city's open-door policy towards hazardous waste, however, is beginning to provoke militant opposition from grassroots groups in neighboring towns. Last year a broad coalition that included Mothers of East L.A., the United Neighborhood Organization, Greenpeace, and local school teachers won a crucial double-header against Vernon, defeating a plan for a huge incinerator as well as a nightmare proposal for a toxic liquid disposal plant across the street from the overcrowded Huntington Park High School.

This emergent Latino-led movement is haunted by a recent succession of toxic disasters or near-disasters. In 1986 a ruptured pipeline at the Purex Corporation's bleach plant in South Gate sent a green cloud of deadly chlorine over nearby Tweedy Elementary School. Seventy-one students and faculty were hospitalized and the school site was eventually abandoned. The next year, teachers in Bell Gardens discovered a possible "miscarriage cluster" associated with toxic chromium emissions from adjacent plating plants, and eighteen months later Park Elementary in Cudahy was closed after analysis revealed that the "gook" oozing from the playground for the previous quarter-century was highly carcinogenic residue from an old toxic landfill.

In 1988, another poisonous shroud of chlorine gas in the City of Commerce injured 68 people and forced the chaotic evacuation of nearly 30,000 residents from adjoining communities. As the most recent incident—a fatal chemical spill in Vernon in July 1990—reminded activists, to the extent that toxics are becoming even more integral to local industrial restructuring, an eventual Bhopal-like apocalypse in the Southeast area cannot simply be dismissed as a paranoid fear.

RENT PLANTATIONS

Like ancient Gaul, the Southeast is divided into three parts: (1) the industrial incorporations, Vernon and City of Commerce, containing nearly 100,000 jobs; (2) four "normal" suburbs, Compton, Huntington Park, Lynwood, and South Gate, which retain some semblance of downtowns as well as significant industrial land use; and (3) the

more or less “exclusively residential” and very poor cities of Bell Gardens, Cudahy, Maywood, and Bell, which have almost no industry and lack recognizable business centers.

Jim McIntyre is city planner for Bell Gardens, the third poorest suburb in the United States (nearby Cudahy is the second). He is denouncing the slumlords “who turn up at meetings in torn t-shirts pleading poverty but actually own scores of units.” He is particularly incensed that the worst offenders include such sanctimonious types as the head of a local realty board, the pastor of a prominent church, and the president of the Korean-American Chamber of Commerce. Once the “workingman’s paradise,” where a dustbowl immigrant could buy a home and garden for \$20 down and \$10 per month, Bell Gardens (owner-occupancy in 1990 only 22 percent) has become a “rent plantation” controlled by absentee landlords, where Mexican immigrants (88 percent of the population) are forced to squeeze sometimes 15 people per unit to afford housing. McIntyre explains that local landlords can charge much higher rents than their counterparts in nearby white middle-class Downey, because Bell Gardens is a “totally cash economy,” catering to Mexican blue-collar workers, many of them “illegal,” without bank balances or credit lines. In exchange for not requiring credit checks or deposits, landlords routinely demand extortionate rents for units that they fail to maintain or repair. Tenants adapt to the high cost of housing by overcrowding.

Thus, rack renting in Bell Gardens and throughout the Southeast has battered off falling per capita and family incomes, and correspondingly reduced owner occupancy (from an area-wide average of 60 percent in 1960 to less than 40 percent today). The housing crisis also has been exacerbated by a dramatically widening population/housing “scissors” as the housing supply has contracted by 2,228 units while population has increased by at least 132,619.*

*All local officials maintain that the Southeast area suffered one of the worst 1990 Census undercounts in the country. The real population increase is estimated from 15 to 40 percent greater than was reported. In the most overcrowded cities—Bell Gardens, Huntington Park, Cudahy, and Maywood—the low-rise residential landscape

In effect this has been accomplished by a variety of desperate strategies. In Bell Gardens, at least five people occupy the typical rental unit—nearly twice the county average. In tiny Maywood, where the computer breakers live, “hotbedding” (rotating occupancy of the same bed) is common. In South Gate, once the richest of Southeast communities, every other garage has been illegally converted into a rental unit. In Cudahy, the poorest and densest of all, “victory garden” lots, 60 feet wide and as much as 390 feet deep, which were designed for a bungalow, a chicken house, and an orchard, now accommodate “six-pack” stucco tenements three or four deep—in effect, continuous barracks that house as many as 125 people on a former single-family site.

Perversely, Southeast local governments have reacted to this overcrowding crisis by trying to *restrict* the supply of illegal or tenement housing. Rather than seeking assistance to meet the demand, they have torn down cheap housing in order to build strip malls or upscale town houses. The explicit aim has been to reduce (or “stabilize”) the number of poor renters, while importing new tax resources in the form of retail businesses and middle-class residents. Thus Bell Gardens destroyed a poor neighborhood on its west side in order to build a shopping center and poker casino, while Huntington Park, the area’s most ardent gentrifier, has reduced its housing stock by 3 percent. Even the apparently laudable local effort to enforce building codes against slumlords and the owners of illegal garage conversions is primarily a stratagem to limit the growth of the renter population, rather than a serious crusade to improve housing conditions.

Meanwhile a sea of children has simply overwhelmed the aging physical plant of the Southeast schools. Over the last quarter century, as 200,000 aging Anglos have been replaced by 330,000 young Latinos, the median age in most Southeast cities has fallen from the 33-48 range to 22-25. There are 166,000 children in the area, double the number in 1960. Although local secondary schools are among

has had to absorb population densities that now approach the threshold of New York City (26,000 people per square mile).

the largest in the country and have long operated on staggered year-round schedules, they have failed to absorb the burgeoning teenage population. New students in the Southeast are now immediately bussed across Los Angeles, as far as the San Fernando Valley.

Nor has the School District been able to adequately address the needs of students who, in nine out of ten cases, now come from Spanish-speaking households. There have been numerous battles between majority-Anglo teaching staffs and Latino parents incensed over low test scores and 50 percent high school drop-out rates.*

“Law and order” in the Southeast long meant keeping blacks out of the area. Now, more than anything, it has become *carte blanche* to terrorize Latino youngsters, especially suspected gang members. A few sensational cases hint at widespread practices. Several years ago two Huntington Park policemen were prosecuted for torturing a gang member with an electric cattle prod. In 1990, 22 sheriffs based at the Lynwood station were accused of illegal beatings and shootings, as well as membership in a “white supremacist gang,” in a federal class-action lawsuit filed by 81 local victims, most of them Latino or black. In Spring 1991, while the world was watching the LAPD club Rodney King on video, a Superior Court jury convicted several officers for a savage beating of a Latino suspect in the Maywood jail the previous year.

*In Compton, however, Spanish-speakers had to deal with an often unsympathetic black educational establishment. Despite the Southeast’s population, there is no local community college except in Compton, and per capita recreational space is a tiny fraction of the county average. It is not surprising, therefore, that many local kids—betrayed by bad schools and predestined for sweatshop jobs—choose, instead, to join the flourishing gang subcultures. Although the Southeast, with the exception of the “Gangsta Rap capital” of Compton (in gang culture, an integral part of black Southcentral L.A.), is not yet a full-fledged war zone, it offers a broad array of *vidas locas*, from traditional local gangs like Florentia and Clara Street to newer affiliations like the 18th Street supergang that has scattered its spores throughout the county.

ROTTEN BOROUGHS

Unfortunately, police brutality, like sweatshop wages and overcrowded housing, has become routine fare in the communities of the Southeast. The Latino majority (mainly immigrants from west-central Mexico, especially Jalisco) is as effectively disenfranchised as were blacks in Mississippi a generation ago. Although the population of the Southeast (excluding Compton) has increased by 150,000 since the 1960s, the active electorate has *shrunk* by 40,000 voters (from one-half of the population to less than one-sixth). A geriatric Anglo residue, ranging from 13 percent in South Gate to 5 percent in Maywood, has remained an electoral majority, hegemonizing politics in a region that is now nearly 90 percent Latino (again excepting the black majority Compton). In Bell Gardens (whose population of 42,355 is 90 percent Latino), for example, 600 aged Anglos outpolled 300 Latinos in April, 1990, to reelect an all-white city council. Only the “phantom city” of Commerce—whose small population is largely composed of second and third-generation Chicanos—had a Latino electoral majority before 1990.

Latino powerlessness in the Southeast stems from a collusion of demography, citizen status, and benign neglect by the Democratic Party. First, deducting the large number of children on the Latino side of the ledger reduces the population ratio of Latino to whites from 9-to-1 to 5-to-1 (adults). Secondly, a large percentage of adult Latino residents, except in Commerce, are non-citizens. Accepting the high-range figure of 60 percent ventured by Jim McIntyre for Bell Gardens, the overwhelming Latino majority is further whittled down to a ratio of 2.5-to-1 or even 2-to-1 (potential electorates). At this point, the actual balance of power is a function of electoral mobilization, which in turn depends upon issue salience and political resources.

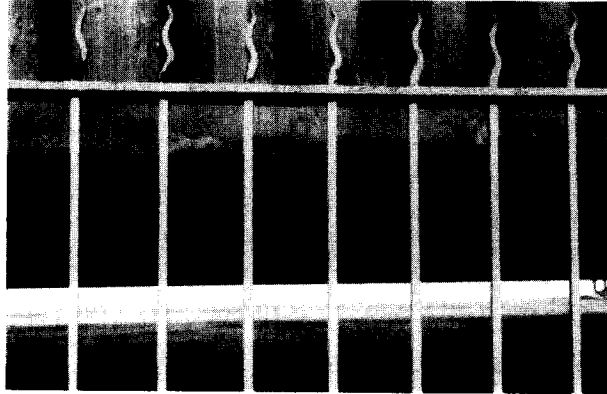
Since the early 1970s the Southeast area has been a political backwater. The old 23rd Congressional District that gave the area electoral coherence in the 1950s and 1960s was broken up by a Democratic state legislature and liberal Supreme Court during the reapportionment of 1972, and its fragments were distributed among new legislative districts anchored by black majority votes in

Southcentral L.A. The Democrats were motivated, at least in part, by the desire to destroy the political base that had supported the anti-integration white backlash led by Assemblyman Floyd Wakefield of South Gate. As Latinos rapidly became the majority in the area, they found themselves anomalously "represented" by Anglos in local government, and blacks in Sacramento and Washington.

Since 1991, however, the communities along the Los Angeles River (except black-led Compton and Lynwood) have been reapportioned to new Latino-dominated legislative districts, as well as to the supervisorial district represented by Gloria Molina. This resurrection of the Southeast as a consequential political entity, in turn, has focused the attention of Latino elected officials and voter-registration groups upon the disenfranchisement of Latinos in local government. Although a Latino council majority quietly assumed power in Huntington Park toward the end of 1991, the real political earthquake occurred in Bell Gardens.

The city's political boss, Claude Booker, badly misjudged the simmering mood of Bell Gardens' Latino homeowners when, at the end of 1990, he suddenly accelerated the pace of gentrification. At his urging, the city council adopted a new zoning map that drastically reduced density in residential neighborhoods and mandated the eventual demolition of more than 900 homes and apartment units—nearly one-fifth of the entire housing stock. Angry Latinos immediately denounced the rezoning plan as a de facto "Mexican removal."

Supporters of the No Rezoning Committee, led by Josephina Macias and Marie Chacon, clashed with Booker and were thrown out of stormy council meetings, but began to receive reinforcements from across the Chicano political spectrum. In a now famous incident, liberal state senator Art Torres eloquently rebuked the city council for its arrogant disregard of its Latino majority. The League



of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC), meanwhile, helped the No Rezoning Committee register record numbers of new Latino voters. And in a slightly more sinister vein, "NEWS of America"—an elite group of right-leaning Chicano entrepreneurs headed by Xavier Hermosillo (former consultant for Coors, Marriott Hotels, and Chemclear)—pretentiously proclaimed its sponsorship of the movement.

In response, Bell Gardens' bungling *ancien régime* generated a political whirlwind by distributing incendiary propaganda from the right-wing American Immigration Control Foundation's *Border Watch* newsletter, alleging "Latino Extremists Terrorize City Council." On December 10, 1990, newly registered and very angry Latino voters recalled the entire city council except for a Latina appointed at the last minute by Booker. Three months later (March 10, 1992), a second electoral landslide swept No Rezoning candidates into office through one door of City Hall, while the Booker machine was flushed out of power through another. As Marie Chacon put it: "The sleeping dragon woke up!"

The stunning success of Bell Gardens' insurgents, which captured attention even in *The New York Times*, may well herald a dramatic acceleration of ethnic succession in other Southeast cities where Anglo power defies demographics. Indeed, some activists—referring to the archipelago of communities along the L.A. River—have begun to talk romantically about the "reconquest of the Seven Cities of Aztlán." Yet it is also necessary to acknowledge the relatively constricted, even conservative, social base of the movement in Bell Gardens.

Interviews with participants, as well as careful analysis of financial disclosure statements and the local tax roll, reveal the core role of small landlords—the 500 to 600 Chicano families who send kids to college or finance retirements with the income from a few rental units in the backyard. The original recall campaign, moreover, was largely financed (approximately \$50,000) by Bell Gardens' twelve major absentee Anglo landlords, and the No Rezoning Committee's treasurer is Alan Gross, a Los Angeles lawyer who also represents Highland Federal Savings, the most notorious financier of slum

housing in the region. (In the second election, contributions from Latino political groups more nearly balanced the funds supplied by slumlords.)

The true silent majority in Bell Gardens—the 80 percent of the population who are low-income immigrant renters—played at best a minor role in the drama. (The last, tragi-comedic act of the dying Booker regime was to unveil a rent control ordinance.) Since the victory of the recall campaign, the big question in Los Angeles’ “rotten boroughs” is no longer whether Latino succession will take place, but what will be its political and social character. Will “Latino power” assume the narrow form of ascendant small-business and landlord groups, or will it mobilize and politically incorporate the immigrant majority?

Encouragingly, there is a growing interest in radical reform of the local political systems. Progressives council members such as Ric Loya in Huntington Park and George Cole in Bell are already exploring the legal options of extending local suffrage to adult residents regardless of citizenship. Some Bell Gardens insurgents have revived “participatory democracy” as a slogan while others are discussing strategies for combining government functions—like police and sanitation—in economies of scale across city lines and, perhaps, even a movement for consolidation of the balkanized suburbs.

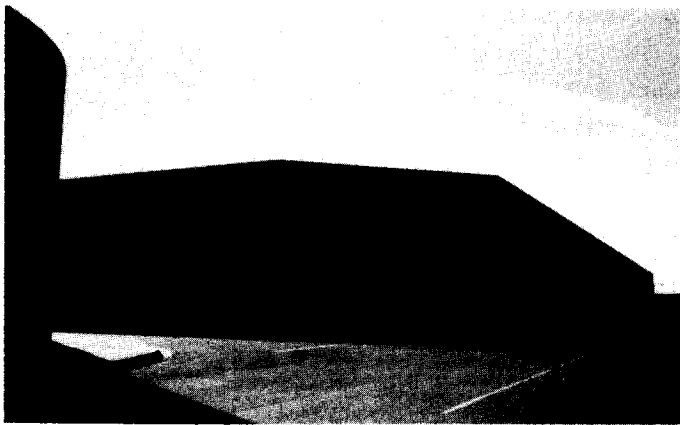
POKER FACES

The first item on the agenda of the new politics, however, must be to wrest back control over community redevelopment programs. Nothing has so poisoned local politics over the last generation, or brought so many Southeast cities to the edge of bankruptcy, as the flagrant use of redevelopment law to feather the nests of municipal bureaucrats and their business allies, especially the gambling industry.

An extraordinary level of venality has been made possible by the atrophy of political participation. The shrinkage of the electorate in the early 1970s and the disappearance of the big union locals as political actors, combined with Anglo solidarity and paranoia, con-

solidated the power of local Chamber-of-Commerce types, ruling from smoke-filled rooms in relaxed unaccountability. In Huntington Park, for example, the same five Anglo businessmen (with one substitution) comprised the city council from 1970 to 1990 (two still remain). In Maywood, City Manager Leonard Locher has been the dominant force since the late 1960s, as was Claude Booker in Bell Gardens until March 1992.

The chief interest of these “good ole boys” has been to exploit the lucrative pork barrel of redevelopment. California law allows municipalities to fight “blight” with urban renewal financed by tax increments withheld from the general fund. In smaller cities the city council acts as the executive of the redevelopment agency, which usually means that the same local realtors and businessmen who will benefit directly from renewal are also its administrators. “Blight,” moreover, has become a conveniently elastic category, encompassing everything from too many railroad spurs in Vernon to too many poor renters in Bell Gardens or Huntington Park.



In the balkanized landscape of the Southeast, redevelopment has devolved into a crazy zero-sum competition between impoverished municipalities. While the Lilliputian towns of Maywood, Bell, and Cudahy wager scarce tax resources in a “war of supermarkets” along Atlantic Boulevard,

the larger cities—Huntington Park, South Gate, and Lynwood—struggle to resurrect central shopping districts wiped out by the competition of regional malls in Downey and Carson. The result is excessive strip development, a redundancy of franchises, and profligate sales-tax abatement. Never having recovered from the twin blows of plant closures and Proposition 13 in the late 1970s, most Southeast communities have only exacerbated their fiscal distress with overly ambitious and poorly targeted redevelopment projects. Huntington Park, for example, has literally ruined itself in the course

of revitalizing its Pacific Avenue shopping corridor, while South Gate lost a quarter of its sales income when one heavily subsidized car dealership suddenly went bankrupt.

In the face of the unforeseen costs of retail modernization, gambling on redevelopment has literally become redevelopment by gambling. For decades Southeast citizens groups, led by the Methodist Church, had successfully resisted attempts by outside gambling interests to establish poker parlors (a constitutional local option in California). But with the attrition of the electorate in the late 1970s, pro-gambling forces managed to legalize card casinos in Bell, Commerce, Bell Gardens, Huntington Park, and Cudahy. Using their redevelopment powers to discount land to casino developers, these five cities have attempted to utilize gambling as a tax generator to keep housing and retail redevelopment alive.

The record is mixed. Bell Gardens' Bicycle Club, the largest card casino in the country (and perhaps the world), turns over \$100 million of gross profits each year, \$10 to \$15 million of which becomes local tax revenue—most of it immediately loaned to the city's aggressive redevelopment program. (The new insurgent city council, however, is proposing to divert this money into desperately needed youth services and recreation.) The giant 120-table Commerce Casino generates almost as much cash flow as the Bicycle Club, and has long been the city's chief source of revenue. In Bell, Cudahy, and Huntington Park, on the other hand, smaller-scale casinos have collapsed in bankruptcy (although a new Bell casino has emerged). Whether solvent or not, however, each card club has offered seductive opportunities to council members and their cronies.

In the case of Bell, Mayor Pete Werrlein, a council member for sixteen years and an archetypical "good ole boy," convinced anxious Anglo voters in 1978 that without the additional revenue from poker, the police would be unable to protect them from an influx of "dangerous Mexican gangs." Shortly after the opening of the California Bell Club, however, the county grand jury revealed that Werrlein, together with his city administrator and the former police chief of Huntington Park, had been engaged in "sex orgies" in a Cudahy

warehouse with fifteen-year-old prostitutes supplied by Kenneth Bianchi—aka the Hillside Strangler, L.A.'s most notorious serial murderer. Two years later, in 1984, Werrlein and the city administrator were indicted for bribery, fraud, and racketeering when their secret ownership of the Bell Club was exposed.

Hard on the heels of the Bell scandal, the ex-mayor of Commerce and two councilmen were arrested in a similar hidden share-holding conspiracy, this time in partnership with known Vegas mobsters. Perennial rumors that the casinos are laundries for drug money were partially confirmed in 1990 when the Feds seized the almighty Bicycle Club after evidence emerged that the casino had been financed with coke-tainted dollars. Finally, in Huntington Park, the remnants of the Anglo old guard nervously await the results of an investigation that purportedly links them to a profit-skimming operation at the city's now bankrupt card club.

SUPER-PAN NINE

As the sun plunges into the ocean off Venice Beach, the yellow-brown smog over Southeast L.A. suddenly turns pastel in a cheap imitation of an Ed Ruscha painting. The two square-block parking lots of the Bicycle Club are already full, and several hundred Friday paychecks have been converted into poker chips. Around the seven-card stud and Texas hold-em tables, the professional card cheats are sizing up an excited mob of bikers, housewives, truckdrivers, hippies, and senior citizens—all of them wearing their best poker faces. They are sweet-meat to the cheats who are usually tolerated by the management as long they keep the tables busy.

But the real action is happening in the other half of the casino, devoted to Asian card games. On the super-pan nine tables there is no bluff or bluster, just silence and intense concentration as the dealers fire cards from 432-card stacks, and players respond with volleys of hundred-dollar bills. Over half of the club's income now comes from the high-speed, high-stake play of the Asian games. For the intrigued but uninitiated player, there are convenient instruction sheets in English, Chinese, Korean, Spanish, Vietnamese, and Cambodian. In the exclusive inner sanctum of the Jade Room, off-limits

to ordinary punters, wealthy Chinese and Korean businesspeople, some of whom own nearby factories and warehouses, venture a year's sweatshop wages in a single hand. They accept their losses with icy composure.

Meanwhile, a few miles away, a man is standing in the twilight on the curb of Alameda Street, selling oranges. Behind him is a vast empty lot, overgrown with jimsonweed and salt grass, that used to be General Motor's South Gate assembly plant. He has been standing on Alameda, gagging on smog and carbon monoxide, since seven in the morning. A bag of plump but second-rate navel oranges costs one dollar. He has sold 25 bags and will be allowed to keep half his earnings by the boss who drops him off in the morning and picks him up in the evening. He is anxious because he still has three bags left to sell.

There are at least a thousand other men—most of them destitute recent arrivals from Central America—selling oranges on freeway ramps and busy street corners in L.A. I ask him in broken Spanish if he is Salvadoran or Guatemalan. He replies in abrupt English that he was born in San Antonio and until 1982 was a machinist making \$12 per hour in nearby Lynwood. When his shop went out of business he was certain that he could easily find another job. He hasn't, and at age 52 he is selling oranges for \$12 a day. So that's his story, and if my curiosity is satisfied, how about buying three bags of oranges? I pay him, he shuffles off, and when I get home I discover that the oranges have a strangely bitter taste.

NOTES

Unless otherwise noted, all data in this article is derived from tract-level U.S. Census Bureau returns (1940-1980) and preliminary community-level estimates from 1990.

- 1 L.A. County Regional Planning Department, L.A. County Plant Closures, revised edition, July 30, 1982.
- 2 According to consultants retained by the City of Vernon, "based on an inventory of reused industrial sites, the site employment density dropped from an average of 36.10 employees per acre to 17.96, or a decline of 50.26%." See Agajanian and Associates, Memorandum to Victor Vaits, Director of Community Development, Vernon, September 1990.
- 3 Figures derived by comparing redevelopment site addresses from the City of Vernon with the County Tax Assessor's data base.

- 4 See "Description of Existing Social Conditions," Section III.C in Redevelopment Agency of the City of Vernon, Report to Vernon City Council for the Proposed Industrial Redevelopment Project, 1989. For the entire Southeast area under consideration, per capita incomes fell between 1960 and 1988 from over 100 percent of the L.A. County median to under 50 percent. (Cf. data from Los Angeles County Department of Regional Planning and California Cities Data Base, Sacramento 1990).
- 5 See Redevelopment Agency of the City of Vernon, Final Environmental Impact Report—Vernon Industrial Redevelopment Project, September 1990.