CONFLICT AND COMMUNITY SURVIVAL

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Abstract. Many urban communities are riven by intercommunal strife raising doubts as to whether the separate ethnic communities or the urban society can survive. This paper discusses recent urban riots in Britain both in relation to their internal urban causes and in relation to larger international issues.

INTRODUCTION
The international context in which this paper is given calls for the problem suggested in the title to be treated in a more than localized way. The suggestion seems to be that across the world, or at least across the urbanized industrial communities of the world, there is the possibility that civilized communities as we know them will not survive because of intergroup conflict. Maybe there is something in this, and I shall begin by covering some of the situations in which international issues are projected into an urban context, so that the very urban fabric is torn apart, let alone its community structure. I suspect, however, that the posing of this question arises from a concern about a narrower range of situations such as those which were represented by the American Long Hot Summer of 1967 and the British riots of 1981. Since I have some experience derived from research about these situations, I shall concentrate upon them. But, finally, I shall bring the two themes together by suggesting that the special Anglo-American problem is far from being unrelated to major world issues.
Diagnosis, of course, could be thought of as leading to proposals for remedy. But the very notion of remedy leads to the question, "Remedy from whose point of view?" It is possible, of course, to evade this question by positing peace or cessation of violence as an end in itself, but such an approach usually ends up on the basis of law and order solutions or of the manipulation of consent so that, in effect, peace is achieved through oppressed groups abandoning their legitimate goals. The other possibilities lie in the creation of a structure within which conflicting interests can be peacefully pursued or in the carrying through of the struggle of oppressed groups by all possible means until they achieve equality of bargaining power and consequent just treatment.

There are very few parts of the capitalist world today which do not face some kind of problem of terrorism. We are all accustomed today to the notion that air-travellers have to be protected from hijackers. There are also many cities in the world in which innocent citizens may be killed in explosions as they go about their peaceful business. Sometimes the "terrorists" represent a minority cause which gains no legitimate representation in the state, however just it may appear from outside. Sometimes they see themselves as peacemakers standing for causes and transformation more radical than those envisaged in the normal political spectrum. In either case, terrorism is the weapon of the weak against the strong. Unable to win or have any chance of winning according to the going rules of the game, the terrorists abandons those rules to shift the struggle to a terrain where, even if he or she (terrorism being unisex) may not win, the oppressors will suffer.

In many parts of the world, however, conflict has gone beyond the terrorist phase. What we are discussing, then, amounts to civil war. Such civil war may lead to the partition of whole countries, or it may be projected into great cities which themselves become divided into armed camps. The parties to such conflicts are quite frequently ethnic groups in an unstable plural society, but they may also be class groups or political groups in a developing situation of revolutionary class struggle. What is at stake in these cases is the unity of the state itself. Urban communities become divided because the state itself is divided, or, to put the matter in Weberian terms, because the state has ceased to exist, having lost its monopoly of the use of legitimate force.

The most terrible examples of community conflict of this kind in recent times are provided by Beirut and Belfast. In the first case, one has an already complex plural society into which have been inserted the problems of a neighboring state. What was a divided capital city has now become a battleground. In