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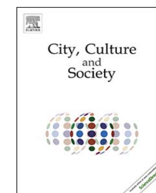

“It's about half and half”: Austerity, possibility and daily life inside a depopulated Detroit neighborhood

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1. Introduction

It is hard to spend much time in Detroit and not notice an alternation of apocalyptic and utopian perspectives, of picturesque and grotesque portrayals. Detroit has been depicted as a “dead end” (Eisinger, 2013), an opportunity for creative reimagining of urban space (American Institute of Architects, 2008; Gallagher, 2010, 2013) a playground for “disaster capitalism” (Klein, 2007) and neoliberal governance (Schindler, 2016), and as an Arcadian crucible of post-industrial social reimagining (Solnit 2007, pp. 65–73). Some see Detroit as a leading indicator in the downgrading of working class fortunes more generally, a warning sign or a worst-case scenario, while others view it as an inspiring incubator for future social formations. The vistas of waving fields of grass engulfing the remnants of burnt-out houses and trees sprouting from crumbling factories have become postindustrial clichés thanks to social media, but for residents of some neighborhoods these are not tantalizing images but facts of daily life. In the end, a city is not a symbol but a place where lives unfold and intersect, both with each other and the surrounding environment.

Our research is situated in the midst of this ongoing dialectic between different visions and plans for the city of Detroit, played out against a backdrop of physical decline that is impossible to ignore. In this article, we first consider contemporary perspectives that present Detroit as representative of larger trends affecting low-income or working class urban populations. We then leave aside these ruminations on the city's significance and consider the accounts of Detroiters themselves, focusing on the daily routines of local residents and employers in one largely depopulated neighborhood on the city's East Side. We examine their subsistence practices, their perspectives on the changes taking place around them, and their first-hand accounts of the city's complex and evolving economic reality. We conclude by situating this discussion in the context of previously mentioned debates about the city's fate and its future, and we contend that the complex reality of life on the ground should inform efforts to craft policy for postindustrial cities.

2. Background: debating Detroit

According to a recent report by the Economic Innovation Group (2016), Detroit is the second most distressed city in the United States (following nearby Cleveland), with a poverty rate of 40% and a housing vacancy rate of 29%. In addition, Detroit is one of the cities hardest hit by mortgage foreclosure, with about 28% of homes “underwater” at the height of the post-2008 housing crisis (Dreier, Bhatti, Call, Schwartz, & Squires, 2014). Even for those still employed in manufacturing industries, traditionally the most highly unionized and best compensated among the American working class, standards and expectations have fallen, as have the number of people on the payrolls. Furthermore, many of these jobs have relocated outside the urban core. Those people remaining within the city's boundaries, mostly African Americans, are more spatially isolated from opportunity than ever before (Eisinger, 2013).

Because the problems of Detroit are so closely connected to larger changes in the labor market, many scholars have looked at the city as an emblem or harbinger of these broad trends. For example, scholars such as Peck (2012, 2013, 2014) have emphasized the degree to which the working-class populations of cities are forced into marginalized forms of labor as the result of “austerity urbanism”, holding up Detroit as a case in point. However, others see in this fluidity the potential for a more liberating definition of work. As with the austerity argument, Detroit is often mobilized as a representative case of this emergent transformation. Long-time Detroit resident and social philosopher Grace Lee Boggs eloquently articulated this position:

> Once hailed as the place that gave birth to the American Dream, Detroit has since been lambasted, ridiculed and left to rot as the site of its demise. But as we wrestle with the unresolved contradictions of the industrial age and confront the new contradictions of post-industrial society, the current economic and environmental crises help us to appreciate how Detroit's fate is not exceptional but paradigmatic (2011, p. 10).

In this scenario, Detroiters are ahead of the curve—building the post-industrial, post-wage-labor model before the larger society realizes

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that this shift is even coming.

This idea of economic breakdown as a point of departure for new, creative conceptions of work offers the possibility that those currently on the margins may move to the center when that paradigm shifts (Holloway, 2010). Doomsday portrayals of Detroit are often implicitly targeted for refutation in these accounts, as when Rebecca Solnit (2007, p. 73) writes, “It is a harsh place of poverty, deprivation, and a fair amount of crime, but it is also a stronghold of possibility.” Kurashige draws a clear line between these “two alternative futures, one characterized by the shift toward authoritarian plutocracy and the other by participatory democracy” (p.12). The forces of darkness in this case have a name: neoliberalism.

> Through the implementation of “business-friendly” domestic laws and international “free trade” agreements, multinational capitalists have achieved a dramatic rise in their power and flexibility over the past five decades at the expense of the public commons and the rights and remuneration of workers. The political and economic tsunami that struck Detroit in the era of deindustrialization was built on the neoliberal structures of intensified exclusion and dispossession.

In contrast to this corporate takeover, Kurashige offers the examples of grassroots organizing efforts such as the creation of a Peoples' Water Board to contest water shutoffs, as well as the establishment of community gardens, “peace zones” and “freedom schools” as contributing to Detroit's alternative future as a “City of Hope.”

Kinder's (2016) book-length examination of ‘urban self-provisioning’ likewise presents the activities of Detroiters maintaining their property in the face of municipal neglect as a form of creative response to neoliberal urbanism. In this case, however, there is no grand thesis about the showdown between one paradigm and another. Instead, there is just the day-to-day grind and the satisfactions of simple persistence. Like Kinder, we are interested in how “overlapping and entangled dynamics” of economic decline, social marginality, ground level perspectives, and subsistence practices effectively “coproduce the city” (p. 6) on an everyday basis. Against the sweeping arguments of structural determinists or the aspirational ideas of post-capitalist visionaries, Hillbrandt and Richter (2015), maintain that “low budget practices” employed by people responding to austere conditions need to be examined in their own terms:

> By critically interrogating the limitations and applications of these existing framings we argue that an a priori understanding of low budget practices as either an indication of the roll-out of neoliberal rule and/or as a contingent assemblage replete with emerging possibilities hampers the study of these practices.

Similarly, Fairbanks and Lloyd (2011) state that much of the discussion of the neoliberal city is “pitched at high levels of abstraction, ill-suited to bringing their observations down to the street level, where the practical contradictions of navigating neoliberal terrain in everyday life are made manifest” (p. 5).

In a related critique, Small (2015), quoting Fischer, observes that many urban ethnographies focus too much on sensationalized portrayals of social problems, rather than the “ho-hum of daily life” (Small, p. 356). Ethnographers, he claims, sometimes heighten the drama of their accounts in order to drive home their theoretical points, and in doing so they sometimes neglect the heterogeneity of actual experience. In a response to multiple reviews of his book *Great American City (2012)*, Sampson (2013) asserts that specific interactions between ”cognition and context“ are neglected in much of urban sociology, and that “The way forward … is to study how cultural and structural forces are intertwined causally over time” (p. 28). Auyero and Jensen (2015) likewise call for a close examination of the “*lived experience* of inequalities, including that of the urban environment itself, and the political in the urban milieu, both *state practice* in its manifold forms, including its informal and clandestine aspects, and *collective action* (p. 359, emphasis in original).” Finally, Blokland (2012) argues for a *relational* approach to urban marginalization, focused on processes and mechanisms that contribute to durable inequality within specific settings.

Implicit in these critiques of both urban theory and urban ethnography is an interest in the city *as it is*, as opposed to the city as verification or repudiation of a thesis. In their own way, each expresses an interest in what Yaneva (2012) has called the “traceable city,” in exploring “the diversity of the urban, instead of reducing it to a simple set of homogenous abstractions; to types, or closed categories” (p. 88). At the same time, the results of these studies are not merely descriptive case studies, but retain an analytical focus on the interplay of elements—psychological, political, economic, cultural, physical–in the urban environment. However, to borrow the words of Blokland (2012), “Saying that structure and agency both matter is one thing. Implementing this commitment in actual research is quite another.”

As noted above, our own research focuses on the quotidian routines of individuals residing within what might be reasonably called a distressed urban area. We began with the intent of gauging granular changes as well as durable day-to-day reality in a neighborhood on Detroit's East Side targeted for a high-profile redevelopment project led by a nonprofit organization with a focus on using urban agriculture as a means of utilizing land and providing jobs, especially for people experiencing significant barriers to employment. Within this area or ‘footprint’ we focused on two main groups: individual residents and local businesses who might be affected by this development. In the sections that follow, we describe our setting and our methods, and we share some of the research findings, especially related to ‘low budget urbanity’ (Hillbrandt & Richter, 2015, p. 164), and ‘shared understandings’ (Sampson, 2013, p. 28) of residents. In our discussion, we seek to connect these findings to ‘state practices and political milieu’ (Auyero & Jensen, 2015, p. 359) that are embedded within this urban environment, and offer some ideas concerning the future direction of Detroit's marginalized communities. Finally, we argue that a nuanced understanding of these interrelationships is a necessary prerequisite to either mobilizing grassroots movements or crafting policy for post-industrial settings.

3. Methods

3.1. Economic ethnography on DETROIT'S east side

This paper draws on ethnographic (n = 37) and economic (n = 11) interviews gathered from one Detroit neighborhood over a period of approximately five years. This project was initiated due to a proposed urban farming project led by a nonprofit organization that promised to impact this neighborhood in a dramatic and visible way by populating vacant land with hoop houses, green houses and agricultural fields. We wished to determine what the social and economic impact on neighborhood residents would be over the course of this development. In order to do this, we needed to build a multidimensional portrait of life in the neighborhood, as seen and experienced by residents. We developed a mixed-methods approach integrating ethnographic and economic methods in order to: 1) examine the daily routines and work patterns of local residents; and 2) understand the perspectives of residents on processes of change. Our research questions were deliberately open-ended; we were seeking to understand life in the neighborhood in advance of its proposed redevelopment, as residents themselves experienced and understood it.

Our ethnographic sample includes both those who are self-employed and those who engage in off-the-books work or illicit activities within the East Side neighborhood that we call Pheasant Park. Once a predominantly Polish-American enclave, the neighborhood today is over 80% African-American. It is a heavily depopulated area, roughly comprising two Census tracts, which now has fewer than 1000 residents and more vacant than occupied buildings (see Table 1, Fig. 1). Many of

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