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Detroit

An Overview

This book explores some of the major factors in the post–World War II evolution of one of the mightiest industrial metropolises of twentieth-century North America. It argues that the current state of the city of Detroit and its region—spatial inequality of industry and commerce, chronic racial and class segregation, regional political fragmentation—is a logical result of trends that have gradually escalated throughout the post–World War II era. It explains major trends by focusing specifically upon factors that have led to economic decentralization and racial segregation. In doing so, the book does not offer a global description of the city or its region, nor does it present background or explanatory material on all of its conditions or problems. Rather it looks at some of the basic aspects of recent city development that one must understand in order to begin to comprehend where Detroit has been and where it is going.

Although the city of Detroit first developed and grew as a center of trade and commerce, the automobile assembly line and a burgeoning automobile industry turned Detroit into a modern metropolis. Detroit and its jobs attracted immigrants from all over the United States as well as the world. The manufacturing sector was the irresistible lighthouse that drew the Irish, Poles, Italians, Finns, Hungarians, and blacks.

These ethnic groups set up their own enclaves in areas close to the central business district, enclaves in which the language and culture of the old country flourished intact. As foreign immigration declined, especially after World War I, domestic immigration increased, bringing thousands of rural southern black and white farmers and agricultural workers to serve Detroit's assembly lines. Gradually many of the European ethnic enclaves dispersed and assimilated, and their members bought newer and better housing farther from the central business district. But for many years the dispersion maintained ethnic and class lines. As late as 1940 distinctive white ethnic settlements remained fairly stable, including a large Polish

enclave centered in Hamtramck and west Detroit; several German neighborhoods in northeast Detroit; a Hungarian settlement in the Delray area of southwest Detroit; and English, Scottish, and Jewish enclaves in the northwest area to the west of Woodward Avenue.[1]

After World War II the city population transformed in at least two fundamental ways. First, decentralization accelerated as more and more manufacturing firms, commercial establishments, and middle-class residents (especially white families of northern European ancestry) moved to the suburbs. Second, immigration of blacks from the South increased, transmuting the percentage of blacks in the city population from 9.2 percent in 1940 to 28.9 percent in 1960 and 63.1 percent in 1980.[2] One trend reinforced the other, as increasing black in-migration generated even more white out-migration. Although some whites of eastern and southern European ancestry remained in city ethnic enclaves—and in recent decades Middle Eastern immigrants to the city rekindled its familiar lighthouse function—many upwardly mobile residents left the city for working-class, middle-class, or upper-class suburbs in the larger metropolitan area, and fewer and fewer nonblacks moved into the city. Neighborhood shops and downtown department stores shut down as emigrants outnumbered immigrants and the population of the city plummeted. Sections of the larger metropolis boomed economically, but Detroit city, once a paragon of industrial prowess and a polyglot of ethnic diversity, lost firms yearly. Both city and region developed ever more blatant racial and class segregation daily. The core city became heavily black and poor. The largely white suburbs divided along class lines. Those blacks who moved out of the city, spurred by the search for a better life and repelled by mounting decay, became resegregated in suburban enclaves.

These trends continued during the decade of the 1970s. Between 1970 and 1980 the Standard Metropolitan Statistical Area (SMSA) expanded from three counties to six, but the population of the three core counties that made up the 1970 SMSA declined by 160,000 people. This three-county loss of 3.8 percent was caused almost entirely by population decline in the central city, which had lost 311,000 people. While some areas of the city remained intact and stable, in other areas blocks disappeared as people abandoned homes, which the city then had to demolish. This led to further decline in neighboring property values and the inability to sell housing units, which led to additional decline. All of these trends depressed remaining residential and commercial property values.

Those who remained were the poorest of the poor. The percentage of persons in the city of Detroit who fell below the official U.S. poverty line

rose from 14.9 percent in 1969 to 21.9 percent in 1979. In 1979, of those 436,891 poor persons in the SMSA, 258,575—or three out of every five poor people—lived in the city.[3] As in many industrial cities in the Northeast and Midwest, it was left to the city administration to provide services to an increasingly poor population. At the same time industries and more well-to-do residents left the municipal boundaries. State government assistance became necessary to rescue the city's public school system, which virtually collapsed for want of revenue. The old story of not enough money to deal with extensive decay played full stage in Detroit, with wearisome familiarity.

Yet Detroit remained isolated within its metropolitan area. Although thoughts of metropolitan governance or financial sharing publicly surfaced occasionally, no serious attempt gained anything close to success. Wealthy suburbanites seemed content to continue to play status musical chairs, with upwardly mobile residents moving from suburb to suburb, depending on job status and current fashion. Working-class suburbanites seemed preoccupied with their concept of maintaining property values, through subtle exclusion of blacks, and with keeping their own enclaves from falling into the expanding pit of declining manufacturing employment and advancing residential decay. Black city politicians seemed content with black political power and unwilling to sacrifice that power for the unknown territory of regional governance.

Meanwhile cosmetic attempts to "revitalize" sections of the city, such as the refurbishment of portions of the central business district, brought small successes but on the whole failed to counter significantly the ongoing trends of decentralization and disinvestment.

John H. Mollenkopf suggests that three broad kinds of cities exist.[4] One kind includes those new cities of the South that had little or no industrial legacy but grew up based on administrative and service activities or on new high-technology industries. A second group includes cities that were industrial centers before 1930 but in recent years developed strong corporate, banking, and service sectors, such as New York, Boston, Chicago, and San Francisco. According to Mollenkopf's typology, Detroit would fall within the third group: cities that have never managed to become administrative and service nodes to the extent necessary to offset the loss of manufacturing functions. These are the cities most hurt by the transformation of the postindustrial economy.

The problem with placing Detroit within this third category—and, in a broader sense, the problem with the typology—is that it applies only to the central city and only if one views that central city as divorced from the rest

of the region. The administrative and service functions Mollenkopf refers to also take place in the Detroit region, but they are centered in the suburban municipalities of Southfield, Troy, and Dearborn, among others. To focus only on the central city is to fail to fully understand the nature of the region's economy. Detroit's older economic and political pattern was based on strong central-city manufacturing and retail sectors, but the current metropolitan pattern is dispersed and multicentric, much like that of Los Angeles. The problem in the Detroit metropolis is one of uneven regional development, rather than unmitigated regional decline. The political economy of the city of Detroit is dependent upon the political economy of the Detroit metropolis.

This book offers modest insights into why uneven regional development characterizes that metropolis. It suggests that disinvestment, suburbanization, and racial segregation strongly influence the status of the central city and its suburbs. Two major perspectives underlie the approach taken in this book. First the post-war evolution of the city of Detroit must be understood within the particular framework of its region and the uneven variations within that region. Second one must thoroughly understand the role of race in order to comprehend the spatial and political development of the city and its region.

As explained in Chapter 2, for the first portion of the post–World War II era, the regional framework was one of duality, with the central city marked by sustained economic and population decline and suburban areas characterized almost completely by growth. To a large extent this dual model is still relevant: Total property valuation and population have risen in suburban counties and fallen in the central city. Chapter 2 begins by describing the steep downhill slide of the economy of the city of Detroit. A massive freeway system became the conduit for the flight of the worker and the work place, and Detroit's share of the region's population, jobs, and wealth plummeted. Eventually, all major shopping areas were located in the suburbs, symbols of the emasculated power of the central business district.

In spite of such obvious duality, by the late 1970s a multicentric mode of growth was evident. Some industrial suburbs lost factories, while various nodes of commerce arose and flourished in other suburbs in the metropolis. In some contexts it became less and less relevant to talk about the central city versus the suburbs, for much depended on which portions of the central city one was addressing as well as which particular suburbs. For example, Livingston County has not experienced nearly as much growth as Oakland County, and significant disinvestment has occurred in the down-

river suburbs. On the other hand, investment dollars are beginning to pour into the riverfront of the city of Detroit, although development within the city is uneven.

Chapter 2 is the primary locus for explaining this regional political economy, but it is also an important ingredient in other chapters. For example, in Chapter 3, which covers patterns of race and class disparity, a conscious attempt has been made to avoid treating all suburbs as monolithic. Although it was important to look at variations between the central city and the suburbs as a whole, patterns of racial and income dispersion differed by suburbs. On the whole, suburbanization in the Detroit region has been a white phenomenon. A measure of racial segregation between municipalities shows that municipal segregation has actually increased, because when black suburbanization has taken place, it has centered in a few suburbs. Southfield, Warren, and Dearborn, all contiguous to Detroit, have experienced different rates and levels of suburbanization, and different suburbs vary widely in socioeconomic status. Even though most metropolitan poverty has become concentrated in the central city, poverty clusters exist in two of the least-developed counties of the six-county SMSA and in several key municipalities in the backwaters of metropolitan economic growth.

It is in the context of politics and policy that we suggest that one logical approach to uneven economic development in the region would be greater regional political cooperation. As the last portion of Chapter 6 explains, efforts to implement meaningful regional governance schemes have not been especially successful. The regional municipalities and counties have formed a council of governments and a regional transportation authority, as well as other single-purpose agencies, and groups of governments have cooperated in various endeavors throughout the years. But attempts to implement strong fiscal reform or to establish a true regional government have simply failed.

One explanation for the failure of many such attempts is that racial estrangement has characterized the region for many years. Thus the first perspective of the book, that problems of and solutions for the metropolis must be viewed within the context of the regional political economy, connects with the second perspective, that issues of race, racial conflict, and racial cooperation are critical.

Just as several chapters reflect the regionalist perspective, so too do several chapters reflect the racial perspective. Racial issues have played a crucial role in defining the parameters of change in the Detroit metropolis. All of the influential decisions that have shaped the metropolis and all of

the proposals for future development touch in some sense upon the issues of race and racial interaction. The fragmentation that the city and metropolis suffer is racial as well as economic and political, and solutions to Detroit's problems must overcome the racial divisiveness that has characterized much of its history.

Chapter 3 begins the analysis of the role of race by examining the spatial evidence of racial and income segregation, with a strong emphasis on race. The high levels of racial segregation in the region cannot be explained by variables such as housing value or rental costs. For example, in 1980 the location of low-rent and low-value housing explained only 36 percent of the variation in black residence in the six-county SMSA. Quite often rents and housing prices paid by blacks were disproportionately higher than those paid by whites, but blacks remained segregated because of other factors. It is not sufficient to view residential patterns of the Detroit metropolis solely as reflections of homeowners' ability to pay.

What such patterns do reflect is explained largely in Chapter 4's discussion of the history of interracial conflict and cooperation in the region. The chapter describes the historical context of white opposition to black influx. Embodied in such classic confrontations as the 1940s battle over Detroit's Sojourner Truth housing project, this opposition caused many whites to move to suburbs such as Dearborn, which erected virtually airtight walls against blacks. A leapfrog pattern of black residence developed largely because of varying levels of acceptance among white neighborhoods and municipalities. White suburban enclave building, assisted by laws of incorporation, became so strong that some municipalities lost federal housing and community funds rather than open the enclave.

Yet a parallel phenomenon existed: Many white citizens sincerely attempted to support the concept and reality of fair housing. In some suburbs, notably Oak Park, interracial harmony and cooperation developed to such a high level that many began to believe that Detroit might one day become a metropolis of truly multiracial communities.

Chapter 5's discussion of city redevelopment policies does not focus as heavily on race but does suggest that early redevelopment projects aggravated problems of racial estrangement within the city of Detroit. The first half of that chapter describes the urban renewal era, during which the city administration destroyed a number of black and white ethnic communities in various attempts to wipe out slums or allow resident institutions to expand. Black residents of the Gratiot, Medical Center, and University City projects paid an especially high price. Urban renewal seriously crippled