

MARK JAY + PHILIP CONKLIN

a People's History of Detroit

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Cover art: Workers on strike at the General Motors factory, around 1945–46.

Photo by Keystone-France/Gamma-Keystone, courtesy Getty Images.

To our loving partners, **MINNE + KATRINA**

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We see that this whole society exists and rests upon workers, and that this whole society controlled by this ruling clique is parasitic, vulturistic, cannibalistic, and it's sucking and destroying the life of workers, and we have to stop it because it's evil.

KENNETH COCKREL, LEAGUE OF REVOLUTIONARY BLACK WORKERS, 1970

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—Mark

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—Philip

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Introduction

Marx in Detroit

Here, man, oh man, it's a dream. Anything can be created in Detroit. —**DAN GILBERT**, chairman of Quicken Loans, Inc., quoted in Ben Austen, "The Post-Post-Apocalyptic Detroit," 2014

The state does not want us to have water. —**EMMA FOGLE**, seventy-four-year-old retired Ford worker and current Highland Park resident, quoted in Ryan Felton, "Not just Detroit," 2015

The story of Detroit has passed even beyond the realm of cliché. Epitome of the American Dream, Arsenal of Democracy, Poster Child of the Urban Crisis, Most Violent City in America, and now the Comeback City—Detroit has long been a canvas for our collective fantasies.¹ Detroit, it's been said, is the soul of America; as its fortunes rise and fall, so do those of the country. In the popular imagination, Detroit is a sort of "funhouse mirror" of twentieth-century America, which at once reflects and magnifies the ups and downs of a tumultuous history.² Motown, some have said, is "the starting line of the world's imagination."³ The cradle of modern manufacturing, the hub of global industry, and "the birthplace of the American middle class"—the Motor City was in the first half of the twentieth century the ostensible apex of Western capitalism, a city that could seemingly provide for the needs of all.⁴ But deindustrialization and the hollowing out of urban cores that plagued the nation in the postwar years

was particularly devastating to Detroit. According to the popular narrative, the riot of 1967—the most violent in a season of urban riots across the nation—was the final straw, as the explosion of racial tension inaugurated forty years of decline. In the late twentieth century, Detroit’s “hyper-crisis” became a shorthand for the collapse of urban America, culminating in 2013 in the largest municipal bankruptcy in U.S. history.⁵ By that time the city’s population had declined from its 1950 peak of 1.8 million to less than 700,000, and its white population had dropped from more than 1.5 million to less than 100,000. Once the industrial center of the world, Detroit now leads the United States in rates of unemployment and poverty. “Ruin porn” photographers have found in the fallen Motor City a panorama of industrial decay unmatched almost anywhere.

But hope remains. Detroit, they say, has shown time and time again that it can bounce back from anything.

“We hit rock bottom,” former mayor Dave Bing admitted.⁶ But rest assured: “Detroit was down . . . but not out.”⁷ Thanks to the city’s “infectious, survivalist spirit” and “entrepreneurial, roll-up-your-sleeves energy,” Motown has become “America’s great comeback story.”⁸ Since the completion of its bankruptcy, Detroit’s motto—“We hope for better things; it will rise from the ashes”—rings throughout the city, as resilient long-timers and eager newcomers “turn emptiness into opportunity.”⁹ “Artists, entrepreneurs and young people” are “converting vacant lots into urban farms and abandoned buildings into cafes and museums.”¹⁰ The flurry of reinvestment has turned the “new Detroit” into “America’s most ambitious renovation project.”¹¹ National media outlets laud the fallen city’s revival: the *New York Times* declares that there is a “new spirit and promise” in “post-post-apocalyptic Detroit.”¹² An *Economist* article about Detroit’s bankruptcy titled “A Phoenix Emerges” opens with the line, “There is an exciting feeling of a new beginning.”¹³ The *Washington Post* speculates that Detroit will be the greatest turnaround story in American history.¹⁴ *The Atlantic* proclaims, “The signs are everywhere: ‘Opportunity Detroit.’”¹⁵ *Detroit: Comeback City*, a History Channel documentary produced by the Detroit-born hip-hop star Big Sean, tells the story of “a city of ruins that is now on the cusp of an exciting rebirth.”¹⁶

As the city’s mayor Mike Duggan put it in 2016, “The goal is to create a city where we’re a center of invention and entrepreneurialism, like we were in the early nineteen-hundreds.”¹⁷ And indeed it seems Detroit has finally passed through the gauntlet of deindustrialization and successfully remade itself in the image of twenty-first-century urbanism—as a hub for tourism, white-collar industry, and high-end consumption. Recently ranked second on *Lonely Planet*’s list of best cities in the world to visit, and called “the most exciting

city in America right now” by the *New York Times*, Detroit is “transform[ing] itself from a punchline to a cool-cat destination.”¹⁸ “The food scene is making it a must-visit,” declares *Food Network*.¹⁹ “Something remarkable is happening here,” reports the *Toronto Star*. Detroit is “coming back better, stronger, artier.”²⁰ One giddy *New York Times* travel writer visiting Detroit imagined himself “on a Disney ride. *See the future American City being built before your eyes!*”²¹

But despite the very real changes transforming the city, the euphoria is far from universal. Flouting the media’s triumphalism surrounding Detroit’s “revival,” one publication, citing high rates of crime and poverty and a poor job market, rated Motown the worst U.S. city to live in in 2018.²² Even the *New York Times*, one of the main champions of Detroit’s revival, asserts that “The real story is a tale of two cities.”²³ While billions are invested in the roughly seven-square-mile area of Greater Downtown, many neighborhoods throughout the rest of the city’s 130 square miles languish, prompting local activists speaking in front of the United Nations to take up the 1951 declaration of the Civil Rights Congress: “We charge genocide!”²⁴

Even *Forbes* wonders, “How could you keep Detroit’s boom from replicating America’s economic divide?”²⁵ Many see Detroit re-creating the problems faced by other cities that have experienced gentrification. While the largely poor, black residents on the city’s outskirts continue to suffer from underemployment, crime, and austerity, the more affluent, disproportionately white newcomers have created a Downtown playground of consumption and luxury cut off from the reality of the rest of the city: “Today, the sidewalks of [Dan] Gilbertville are packed with millennials taking a break from beach volleyball to sip craft beer and nibble on artisanal pickles.”²⁶ It’s no wonder that the city’s poorer residents, having endured forty years of immiseration and dispossession, feel alienated by Detroit’s glittering “recovery.” As Coleman A. Young Jr., son of Detroit’s first black mayor, put it during his 2017 mayoral campaign, “If you can’t afford to participate in any of the things that are going on downtown, what does it mean to you? If you can’t afford your house? Can’t afford your water bill? Can’t afford car insurance?”²⁷

In April 2018 the University of Michigan’s Population Studies Center released a survey about Detroiters’ attitudes toward the city’s changes. The findings are revealing: “Asked about who benefits most from downtown and Midtown investments, more believed it was non-residents (38 percent) than city residents (20 percent); white people (47 percent) as opposed to black people (2 percent); and wealthier people (70 percent) over poorer people (2 percent).” “The negativism is a little starker than we thought,” concluded Jeffrey Morenoff, the director of the Center.²⁸

Despite its highly contested nature, Detroit's recovery is nonetheless happening and is considered by most outside commentators to be, on the whole, broadly beneficial. Even Alan Mallach, author of *The Divided City*, which details the inequality of Detroit's revitalization, concludes that "the basic revival trajectory is positive."²⁹ The prevailing sentiment holds that it's not a question of *if* but *when* the Downtown boom will reverberate through the neighborhoods. And many participants and outsiders alike hope that the changes transforming Detroit will have an impact not only on the city itself but on the country and the world at large. "Detroit is a city that hit rock bottom that is bringing you back," said former CIA director and U.S. Army General David Petraeus on a recent visit to the city. "The question is: how to do that for the entire country?"³⁰ Similarly *Forbes* sees in the Motor City's revival "a blueprint that could work across the country."³¹ JPMorgan Chase sees in Detroit a "model . . . that can be replicated in other places."³²

In the current political moment, when the currency of nostalgia helped propel right-wing billionaire Donald Trump to the presidency, the prevailing logic seems to be that if we can make Detroit great again, perhaps we can do the same for the whole country.

But what's at stake is more than just questions of economics; Detroit is also the soul of the country. "Americans love a good comeback story," *Lonely Planet* explains, "and Detroit is writing a mighty one. How the city navigates the tricky path to recovery remains to be seen, but we're pulling for the underdog."³³ The *Detroit Free Press* asserts, "Not just the nation—but the world—is rooting for the city."³⁴

It becomes clear that what's at stake in the city's fortunes is not just whether its recovery happens but how its recovery will be *made to mean*. Acknowledging the importance of positively framing Detroit's revival, the city government recently became the first in the United States to hire a "chief storyteller."³⁵ While ideological struggles take place everywhere, they seem somehow more intense in Detroit. What does it mean to live in Detroit? How should new residents comport themselves? What is the best way to think about the city's political-economic transformation?

Kenneth Cockrel, a longtime Detroit lawyer, activist, and socialist politician, has laid out some of the stakes of Detroit's redevelopment:

We've come a long way in our city, from a few years back being regarded as the murder capital of the world, to a city that is now seen as the model to which you go if you're interested in urban revitalization. Urban revitalization that is essentially keyed to an elaborate combination of schemes that marry the public sector and its powers of licensing, taxation, regulation,

zoning and so on—marries those powers and subordinates those powers to the interests of enhancing the profit-making potential of various private entrepreneurs. We do it with tax abatements, we do it with tax increment financing, we do it with bond schemes . . . or [by appealing to] the upscale, educated, affluent young types who “really can make a contribution” to the tax base, being brought back to *eat quiche* while the poor are taxed out of their homes.³⁶

Lest we are tempted to take seriously claims of newness surrounding the most recent round of redevelopment to hit Detroit, we should note that *these words were spoken in 1979*. Cockrel, who died young in 1989, did not live to see Detroit’s current renaissance. He was responding to the efforts since the Great Rebellion of 1967 to remake Detroit along principles of “economic growth,” an effort spearheaded by a cadre of public and private elites known as New Detroit, Inc. This group attempted to revitalize the city and quell future unrest through economic development, the most visible legacy of which is the Renaissance Center in Downtown.

As the following pages will show, nothing much about the New Detroit is in fact very new. The incredible inflow of capital and the physical transformation of certain areas of the city to which the national media has responded so jubilantly represents, rather, the success of specific strategies that have been ongoing for at least half a century and the continuation of a deeper capitalist logic that has shaped the Motor City since the birth of the automobile industry that made its name. It is worth dwelling on the fact that the revitalization efforts that appeared so successful in 1979 are today remembered as utter failures: this should serve as a warning of the ephemerality of the newest New Detroit, and indeed of every capitalist success story.

Theoretical Framework

Capital never solves its crisis tendencies, it merely moves them around. —DAVID HARVEY, “The Enigma of Capital and the Crisis This Time,” 2010

I would rather return to the dioramas, whose brutal and enormous magic has the power to impose on me a useful illusion. I would rather go to the theater and feast my eyes on the scenery, in which I find my dearest dreams artistically expressed and tragically concentrated. These things, because they are false, are infinitely closer to the truth. —CHARLES BAUDELAIRE, 1859, quoted in Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*

This project began as a two-person reading group at Colombo’s Coney Island in Southwest Detroit, itself an outgrowth of our work on *The Periphery*, a

literary and political journal we and our partners, Mallika Roy and Katrina Santos, founded in 2014. With this reading group we were attempting to understand what we were living amid—most of all, the twin spectacles of Downtown boosterism and the high-profile SWAT raids that mostly targeted petty criminals, weed dealers, and unemployed people in poor neighborhoods suffering from intensive austerity (we were immediately confronted by the injustice and hypocrisy of these raids when a friend of ours, a pregnant mother, was arrested and touted by the local media as a criminal, when her only charge was a late payment on a ticket for possessing a gram of marijuana a year prior). At first we examined the city's bankruptcy, but this was clearly an event—a coup—laden with history. Nor did the concept of *racism* or *neoliberalism* seem to fully get to the root of things. So we went back to the Great Rebellion of 1967. But how can one understand an uprising if one fails to understand the material conditions and the political consciousness of the people who took to the streets? So we went further back, to the post-World War II era, only to discover that, for most Detroiters, this supposed golden age was far from golden: it was instead a time of intense economic instability, harsh work conditions, and racial violence. Finally, we decided to start with the era of Ford and the International Workers of the World, and to begin unraveling the contradictions from there.

A few years later this book resulted: it is an attempt to understand the contemporary situation in Detroit by offering a particular kind of history. This is not a comprehensive history.³⁷ Rather, what we are attempting to do here is excavate the city's past in a way that brings to light the underlying logic of processes that continue to this day. To be sure, this book aims to correct many of the myths that pervade scholarly and popular understandings of Detroit's past. But a deeper motivation is to contextualize the present situation: we insist that in order to make sense of the dramatic shifts occurring in contemporary Detroit, one needs to have a broad understanding of the central tensions and contradictions that have driven the city's development over the past century. This requires an analysis of the broader system of capitalism, in which Detroit is embedded. In short, to understand what is happening in Detroit, one needs to understand how capitalism works.³⁸

Capitalism, as defined by Black Studies Professor Christopher McAuley, is a system of “managed commodity production for profit by workers who do not own the means of production.”³⁹ It is the first type of society in which people acquire the overwhelming bulk of their goods on the market and in which, in order to survive, most people have to seek out a capitalist who can profitably dispose of their labor. Without a serious analysis of how this capitalist economy

works—how jobs and resources are allocated, how exploitation and inequality are contested, justified, and institutionalized—one cannot fully understand the conditions of day-to-day life in Detroit, or most anywhere else.

As the title of this book suggests, we have a deep appreciation of the radical historian Howard Zinn's classic work, *A People's History of the United States*, which highlights the oppression and political struggles that have shaped this country since its genocidal birth. However, we feel that in order to give a true "people's history" one must do more than condemn the malevolence of those in power and celebrate the activists who have struggled for justice; one must also come to terms with the social system in which these people lived. In our case, this means confronting the logic of capital.

Unfortunately, however, even the most critical accounts of Detroit generally take the logic of capital for granted. To a certain extent, this is understandable. "Capital," Hardt and Negri write, "functions as an impersonal form of domination that imposes laws of its own, economic laws that structure social life and make hierarchies and subordinations seem natural and necessary." It is easy to take for granted "the basic elements of capitalist society—the power of property concentrated in the hands of the few, the need for the majority to sell their labor-power to maintain themselves, the exclusion of large portions of the global population even from these circuits of exploitation, and so forth."⁴⁰

In the scholarly literature on Detroit, one reads often about inequality, exploitation, unemployment, dispossession, and the like. But very rarely do authors analyze how these sorts of injustices are integral to the functioning of capitalism. Emblematic is the highly acclaimed *Origins of the Urban Crisis* by the historian Thomas Sugrue, probably the most widely read book on the history of Detroit. The work is an excellent piece of scholarship that documents how racial discrimination in housing and employment in the post-World War II era led to the outbreak of the Great Rebellion in 1967. The larger point is that the so-called Urban Crisis of the mid-1960s (involving deindustrialization, ghettoization of black communities, rising crime, and urban uprisings) did not just spring from the moral deficiencies of urban communities, and Sugrue's book, published in 1996, is a corrective to conservative ideologies, which claim that urban rebellions were a result of black criminality and entitlement fostered by liberal social programs. But by restricting his scope to a fifteen-year period (1945–1960) and focusing mainly on two issues (housing and employment), Sugrue's work remains basically at the level of the *symptom*. It is our contention that the origin of the urban crisis is not housing and employment discrimination in the years after World War II, though these were certainly a proximate cause; the origin of the urban crisis is the system of capitalism,

which dispossesses and alienates the majority of the people to enrich a small class of owners. Despite myriad studies of specific time periods or aspects of Detroit's past and present, there has not yet been a book which attempts to coalesce the city's modern history into a structural critique of the political economic system that we all live under. To correct this gap in the scholarly literature and popular understanding, we have turned to Marx—who remains the premier theorist of capitalism—as well as the myriad Detroit activists who were influenced by, and attempted to practice a politics based on, Marxism.

In an essay titled “Marx in Detroit,” which appeared as a postscript to his 1966 work, *Operai e capitale*, the Italian Marxist philosopher Mario Tronti argued that, though the ideological influence of Marxism had been greater in Europe, Asia, and Latin America, it was in the United States, and in Detroit in particular, that social relations were “objectively Marxian”: “For at least half a century, up to the post-Second World War period, Marx could be read [in the United States] in the reality of the struggles and of the responses provoked by the demands of the struggles. This does not mean that Marx's books provide us with an interpretation of American labor struggles. Rather, it means that these struggles provide us with a key for an accurate interpretation of Marx's most advanced texts . . . *Capital* and the *Grundrisse*.”⁴¹

Following Tronti, we claim that not only does Marx help us to understand Detroit but that Detroit helps us to understand Marx. In *Capital*, Marx suggests that the “secret of profit-making” is not to be looked for in the “noisy” marketplace but in the “hidden abodes” of the workplaces where capitalists exploit laborers and extract profits from their sweat and blood. When we look inside Detroit's gargantuan factories, we find vivid, devastating examples of the processes Marx theorized: workers treated as raw commodities by huge monopoly firms, systems of production that turn each worker into an “appendage of the machine,” militant worker struggles against degrading and dangerous workplace conditions, the constant reproduction of an unemployed “reserve army of labor,” and on and on. In short, as the backbone of U.S. industry and the center of industrial unionism, Detroit presents a distilled version of the process of class struggle Marx theorized. Marx and Engels also suggested that the perpetual need for higher profits “chases the bourgeoisie over the entire surface of the globe”; in Detroit we see a vivid portrait of what society looks like when the factory owners leave but the system of capitalism remains.⁴²

It comes as little surprise, then, that Marxism has had a significant ideological influence on thinkers, politicians, and workers throughout Detroit's history, as the following pages will show. To take just one example, consider these words spoken by Jerome Scott, a member of the League of Revolutionary Black Workers

(LRBW), a radical group that led struggles against economic exploitation and racial oppression in Detroit's plants in the late 1960s and early 1970s (soon after the publication of Tronti's essay): "Marxism—Marxism-Leninism—[w]as the theory that related most closely to our lives. Mind you, we were production workers. Marxism was written for workers."⁴³ The League and other militant groups launched a series of strikes in the 1960s and 1970s that drew the attention of leftist workers in Italy's auto industry: in the words of the renowned scholar-activist Paolo Virno, "Fighting at FIAT of Turin, we were thinking of Detroit, not Cuba or Algiers."⁴⁴

But while Detroit's past is full of attempts to build organized worker movements to combat exploitation and inequality, the city's history also demonstrates the difficulty of realizing Marx and Engels's famous vision: "Working men of all countries, unite!" In their actions, Detroit workers frequently demonstrated that they disagreed with the notion that in joining such a unified anticapitalist movement, they had "nothing to lose but their chains."⁴⁵ The divisive politics of the Motor City shows the validity of the Marxist philosopher Alberto Toscano's claim that "any kind of 'class unity' or 'solidarity' is a very precarious product of political work and not some underlying and secure ground which is merely obfuscated by capitalist brainwashing, liberal ideology, or indeed, 'identity politics.'"⁴⁶ Racism, sexism, ethnic divisions, political factionalism, generational differences, tensions related to place and geography (urban vs. suburban workers; workers of one nation against another), occupational differences (skilled vs. unskilled workers; workers of one industry vs. another)—these are just some of the tensions and contradictions that influenced and, to varying degrees, undermined, attempts at working-class solidarity, and they play a central part in the story of Detroit's political, economic, and cultural development.

This highlights the distinction Marx made between a class *in itself* and a class *for itself*. Capitalism separates people into different classes, regardless of each individual's understanding of their position in society. The primary distinction between people is a structural one: there is the ownership class, which controls the means of production, and the working class, composed of those who are separated from the means of production and forced to sell their labor power in order to earn their livelihoods. Regardless of this objective relation, class consciousness is never spontaneous or self-evident but is always forged and continually re-created in the face of the various divisions among workers. But however implacable the subjective differences among workers may appear, this structural relation joins workers together. Furthermore, capitalism is necessarily organized such that the vast majority of people are workers. This

is a *people's* history of Detroit because it is oriented toward the majority, the workers, and our aim is to explicate the class relation which dispossessed these workers of the wealth that they produced in the city of Detroit.

Throughout this book we will see divisions among the working class, and we will see attempts to bridge these divisions and pursue a politics based on the common interests of workers *as workers*. In recomposing the history of Detroit from the perspective of its workers, we hope to contribute to such a political project, to the transformation of the working class from a class *in itself* to a class *for itself*.

Before proceeding with our historical analysis, let us further elaborate on our theoretical framework. Our history of Detroit is guided by the dialectical relationship between two concepts: creative destruction and mythology.

Creative Destruction

Marx and Engels famously wrote in the *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, “Constant revolutionising of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all earlier ones.”⁴⁷ Building off of Marx and Engels’s work, Joseph Schumpeter wrote in his classic work from 1942, *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*, “The essential fact about capitalism is the perennial gale of Creative Destruction.” With this phrase Schumpeter meant to emphasize the destruction that is *inherent* to capitalism, a system that “incessantly revolutionizes the economic structure from within, incessantly destroying the old one, incessantly creating a new one.”⁴⁸

“Obsolescence is the very hallmark of progress,” declared Henry Ford II in the early 1950s. “The faster we obsolete products, machines, and antiquated ways of working, the faster we raise our living standards and our national wealth.”⁴⁹ In capitalism, one of the only things that doesn’t seem to become obsolete is the process of obsolescence itself.

This process of creative destruction has particular importance when it comes to the built environment. In the words of the Marxist geographer David Harvey, “Capitalism perpetually seeks to create a geographical landscape to facilitate its activities at one point in time only to have to destroy it and build a wholly different landscape at a later point in time to accommodate its perpetual thirst for endless capital accumulation.”⁵⁰

In contemporary Detroit, the destruction of the old to make way for the new is particularly acute. The problematic phrase *New Detroit*, which has become a shorthand among those in the know for everything that’s wrong with

Detroit's comeback, is nonetheless plastered on billboards and buildings, recited by CEOs, and used unironically by suburbanites flooding Greater Downtown. Detroit is being re-everything: revitalized, rebuilt, reborn, renewed, refurbished, revamped, restored, redeveloped. It is a "blank slate," an "investor's playground."⁵¹ Detroit's derelict landscape, an "American Acropolis," is marketed as its greatest asset.⁵² Here, where the obliteration of social forms and built environments has been more exaggerated than perhaps anywhere else in the country, capitalism's destructive capacity is cause for national celebration at the same time as it has ravaged the lives of hundreds of thousands of Detroiters.

In *All That Is Solid Melts into Air*, the Marxist theorist Marshall Berman captures the full implications of creative destruction:

"All that is solid"—from the clothes on our backs to the looms and mills that weave them, to the men and women who work the machines, to the houses and neighborhoods the workers live in, to the firms and corporations that exploit the workers, to the towns and cities and whole regions and even nations that embrace them all—all these are made to be broken tomorrow, smashed or shredded or pulverized or dissolved, so they can be recycled or replaced next week, and the whole process can go on again and again, hopefully forever, in ever more profitable forms. The pathos of all bourgeois monuments is that their material strength and solidity actually count for nothing and carry no weight at all, that they are blown away like frail reeds by the very forces of capitalist development that they celebrate. Even the most beautiful and impressive bourgeois buildings and public works are disposable, capitalized for fast depreciation and planned to be obsolete, closer in their social functions to tents and encampments than to "Egyptian pyramids, Roman aqueducts, Gothic cathedrals." If we look behind the sober scenes that the members of our bourgeoisie create, and see the way they really work and act, we see that these solid citizens would tear down the world if it paid.⁵³

Mythologies

It is clear, however, that capitalism is not always experienced as an antagonistic and exploitative system that runs on destruction. If it were, then the only way to achieve social order would be naked coercion. And while there has always been a heavy dose of coercion—from the police, the military, and private forces, as well as from "the silent compulsion of economic relations" that force

people to sell their labor in order to survive—much of the acquiescence to capitalism can be explained another way.⁵⁴ According to John Watson, a Detroit radical, “It is through the control of knowledge that the ruling class maintains its power. The struggle over the control of knowledge is a political struggle.”⁵⁵ And as Roland Barthes puts it in his seminal work, *Mythologies*:

Myth does not deny things, on the contrary, its function is to talk about them; simply, it purifies them, it makes them innocent, it gives them a natural and eternal justification. . . . In passing from history to nature, myth acts economically: it abolishes the complexity of human acts, it gives them the simplicity of essences, it does away with all dialectics, with any going back beyond what is immediately visible, it organizes a world which is without contradictions because it is without depth, a world wide open and wallowing in the evident, it establishes a blissful clarity: things appear to mean something by themselves.⁵⁶

As well as the destruction of the built environment and the social conditions it creates, the reproduction of capitalism entails the reproduction of mythologies, the obfuscation of its social relations. In capitalism the sphere of production is separated in space and time from the spheres of distribution and consumption. This makes it impossible to immediately see the social processes that determine the coordinates of our day-to-day existence—especially in today’s era of globalization. Our social relations are shrouded in darkness. As Marx pointed out in his discussion of commodity fetishism, a basic condition of capitalism is that people are constantly forced to mistake surface appearances for underlying social relations.⁵⁷

Myth—“ideology in narrative form”—is the necessary complement to capitalism’s inherent opaqueness and innate tendency for creative destruction. Myths allow the exploitation and social dislocations inherent in this political-economic system to be signified and smoothed over.⁵⁸ Paraphrasing Baudelaire, we can say that although the myths that sustain capitalism are in a sense false, they also reveal a deeper truth about the brutality and lack of transparency of capitalist social relations: *capitalism needs myths in order to survive*.⁵⁹

As novelist Leonard Michaels has written, in contemporary capitalism there is an “unprecedented dedication to illusions far more powerful than any religious myth. . . . Thousands dedicate their lives to sustaining mass fantasies in politics, news, advertising, public relation, movies, the stock market, etc.”⁶⁰ While this elite-driven dedication to illusion is certainly a huge aspect of contemporary society, it is also true that myths are not to be understood simply as top-down propagandizing. Nor are they pure fiction. Rather, myths

can take hold only if, in some real way, they resonate with people's everyday lives: a myth provides "a veiled, unclear representation of the truth. . . . Unless it awoke some echo in [people], they would never accept it."⁶¹ Myths are so powerful because they appear valid; they do not materialize out of thin air but instead manipulate surface-level appearances into narratives that allow people to locate the apparent causes of social disruptions without implicating their true origins: capitalism's structural dynamics.

Throughout this book we tend to deploy the term *mythology* in a specific and explicitly political way: we seek to shed light on the ideologies that have masked capitalism's destructive tendencies and shifted the blame for social dislocations onto discrete, identifiable groups: black people, criminals, immigrants, greedy unions, communists, "outside agitators," and the like. The point, however, is not simply to condemn myths and mythmakers. We must also explain why, at different historical conjunctures, different mythologies prevailed in and about Detroit, and in this way to break the hold that myths have on history.⁶²

Much of the power of myths comes from the sense of security they provide. Unmoored by the whirlwind of creative destruction, people can grab hold of myths—stories that provide easy answers to complex and disturbing political-economic dynamics. Myths tell stories that map on to our desires about how the world ought to be rather than how it actually is. A critical look at Detroit's past also reveals that political programs that present a positive, emancipatory vision for society can similarly capture people's imaginations and catalyze collective action to reshape society. The prevalence of myths, therefore, can be understood only alongside the formation and repression of political movements that advocate radical social alternatives. Repression, however, is rarely presented as such in the popular discourse, and so analyzing the myths that justify state violence is another important aspect of our history.

We are aware that some might view our narrative as yet another myth; this is inevitable. But following Bruce Lincoln, we insist that an essential difference between our narrative and many of those that we criticize is that ours will be *footnoted*.⁶³ The myths that legitimate and naturalize capitalism tend to depend for their persuasive power on what they obscure; our narrative, on the other hand, will be as transparent as possible to the reader.

The Organization of the Book

In the chapters to come, we structure our history around the interplay between creative destruction and mythologization. In deploying these concepts, our aim is not to give a complete or exhaustive analysis of social relations during the past

hundred-plus years; rather, the concepts are a sort of guide we use to orient the reader through the city's turbulent past.

Chapter 1 is in many ways the heart of the book. Here we provide an in-depth analysis of the political and economic dynamics at work in contemporary Detroit. We aim to cut through the hype and clearly spell out the investments, policies, and political struggles that are shaping the city's revitalization. We argue that the disparity between investment Downtown and dispossession in the neighborhoods that has produced the "Two Detroits" consensus in fact represents two components of a dialectical unity: redevelopment and austerity are not distinct processes but *two elements of the same process of uneven development*. New Detroit is not a tale of two cities but a tale of one city that is being massively and unequally adjusted to accommodate the pursuit of wealth, an adjustment that took place partially through the consolidation of Detroit's debt during its bankruptcy proceedings. An extended analysis of this situation leads us to a consideration of contemporary policing strategies: "broken windows" and paramilitary raids. These tactics, we argue, are part of a broader political project to coercively manage and contain poor and underemployed workers—the very Detroiters who have been excluded from the city's revitalization. This is a discussion that will be taken up in later chapters.

Chapter 2 dissects the birth of Detroit as the world's industrial center, from Ford's famous "Five Dollar Day" through the post-World War II era. These were the supposed glory days of Detroit, a popular assumption on which Detroit's later decline is predicated. For most workers, however, these years were characterized by brutal work conditions, immiseration, and intensive class struggle. Workers increasingly suffered during the Great Depression as unemployment skyrocketed, working conditions worsened, and prison populations ballooned. Only World War II would bring Detroit out of depression. The war created millions of jobs, but the military economy had pernicious effects. First, the growing power of workers resulting from the increased demand for labor was curbed by a "no-strike pledge" between unions and auto companies forged behind the backs of rank-and-file workers, which paved the way for further union capitulation after the war and alienated many workers from the labor movement. Second, high demand for labor during the war brought large numbers of black workers into production for the first time, and, as competition over scarce resources intensified throughout the 1940s and 1950s, so too did racial violence. After the war, companies increasingly moved their operations outside the city limits, and the social dislocations caused by automation, deindustrialization, and suburbanization

came to be legitimated by mythologies of greedy unions, communist agitation, and black criminality. Economic instability, violent crime, punishing working conditions, and racist police brutality became the order of the day in Detroit's so-called golden age.

Chapter 3 explores the radical movements that grew out of this nexus and their eventual combustion in the Great Rebellion of 1967. The strategies of liberal reformists and the mainstream of the civil rights movement, we argue, excluded and alienated many working-class Detroiters, fomenting a more militant approach to struggles over exploitation and oppression. Although the uprising in 1967 is commonly referred to as a race riot, when we situate it in the context of the efflorescence of radical political activity in the 1960s it becomes clear that it was a political uprising. And though national troops were able to reestablish order after five days of fighting, the contradictions and conflicts that had caused the uprising would continue to animate Detroit's political landscape in the years to come.

Chapter 4 is a detailed examination of two radical organizations active after the Rebellion: the League of Revolutionary Black Workers and the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense (BPP). While these groups tried to channel the energy of the uprising into a political movement against injustice and inequality, elites on the New Detroit Committee advocated a different response to the Rebellion: they hoped to quell urban unrest with an economic redevelopment program eerily similar to what is happening in Downtown Detroit today. The militancy of the LRBW and the BPP put them in conflict with these elites, and both groups were subjected to violent repression. We consider the effects of this repression: the straightforward elimination of political threats through imprisonment and assassination, the attendant hollowing-out of working-class communities and a weakening of their capacity to resist the state, and the consolidation of a punitive approach to the problems of underemployment and dissent, eventually leading to the phenomenon of mass incarceration. Crucially, the repression of the most radical elements of the black working class was accompanied by the recognition of formal racial equality and the progressive incorporation of many African Americans into the political machinery—a process we call the dialectic of repression and integration.

In chapter 5 we explore how this dialectic played out against the backdrop of economic crisis and the rise of the now hegemonic regime known as neoliberalism. In short, if the period after the Great Rebellion was characterized by the conflict between revolutionary forces calling for a refashioning of Detroit's political economy on the one hand, and repressive state forces allied with

corporate interests vying for a continuation of capitalist accumulation on the other, the period from 1974 to the present marks the victory of the latter camp. From the long tenure of Coleman Young through to Detroit's bankruptcy in 2013, the dialectic that characterized Detroit politics involved criminalization of the poor, draconian austerity, and attempts to redirect global capital flows back toward the Motor City. The current moment in Detroit represents a continuation of the first two of these terms and the success of the third.

A Tale of One City

c. 1913–2019

Ultimately, the market is going to determine what happens to Detroit. Look at the history of capital: it destroys an area, reduces the prices of the property, and then flows back in because a lot of money can be made. And that's what's gonna happen. —**RON GLOTTA**, Detroit-based lawyer and activist, early 1990s, quoted in Robert H. Mast, *Detroit Lives*

Wish you bought gold in '06? You'll wish you bought Detroit in '12. . . . Detroit has bottomed out, so now, there's nothing but upside. —**JOHN LINKNER**, Dan Gilbert's business partner, 2012, "Wish You Bought Gold in '06? You'll Wish You Bought Detroit in '12," *Forbes*

Investor's Playground

Money is pouring into Detroit, transforming the city's topography before one's eyes. More than \$9 billion was invested in Downtown real estate developments from 2006 to 2014.¹ During that time, but especially since the city's bankruptcy, this seven-square-mile area has operated essentially as one massive construction site. The signs of redevelopment are inescapable—Motown is getting a wholesale façade renovation. Skyscrapers that for years stood vacant are studied with scaffolds. At every turn construction blocks roads and sidewalks. The hum and shriek of machinery cloud the air, and gargantuan implements carve out mounds of earth. Cranes swing like puppeteers over the skyline as husks

of new buildings rise from steel beams. Laying track for the QLine, a recently completed streetcar that crawls for three miles along Woodward Avenue, reduced Detroit's main thoroughfare to two lanes for the better part of three years. Art Deco high-rises are converted into office buildings, which serve as the headquarters for a growing number of white-collar firms from around the globe (including Quicken Loans, MSX International, and Blue Cross Blue Shield). Abandoned industrial buildings are restored as luxury lofts. New parking lots are paved by the dozen. Restaurants and shops open at a breakneck pace. National chains flock to the Motor City (Nike, Shake Shack, Under Armour, Whole Foods, Warby Parker, Bonobos, and many others), plastering Downtown streets with logos and slogans.

Much of Detroit's redevelopment bears the hallmark of two local billionaires: Mike Ilitch and Dan Gilbert.

Ilitch, who passed away in 2017 with a personal net worth of more than \$6 billion, was, with his wife, Marian, the founder of Little Caesars Pizza and the owner of the Detroit Tigers, the Detroit Red Wings, and Motor City Casino Hotel. Ilitch had acquired one hundred acres of real estate in the Greater Downtown area over the past few decades, and for many years his immense personal wealth allowed him to hoard these properties in anticipation of lucrative development opportunities. In 2013, as the Ilitch organization was set to begin a massive development project in the heart of Greater Downtown, the city sold him thirty-nine parcels of land surrounding those he already owned, all for the price of one dollar.² Ilitch Holdings, Inc., the umbrella company of the Ilitch business empire, is now headed by Mike's son Chris Ilitch, and through their company Olympia Development the Ilitch family continues to have an outsized influence on Detroit's "renaissance."

Gilbert, whose personal net worth was \$6.6 billion in 2018, is the owner of the Cleveland Cavaliers as well as the chairman and founder of Quicken Loans, the largest retail mortgage lender in the United States, and Rock Ventures, a holding company for more than one hundred of Gilbert's businesses which employs seventeen thousand people, making it Detroit's leading employer.³ Since 2006 Gilbert has invested over \$5 billion in the city, buying up around a hundred buildings in the Downtown area. As with Ilitch, many of these properties were sold to him by the city government, several for just one dollar. Gilbert now effectively owns more than half of Downtown Detroit, an area of more than 13 million square feet. The scale of his investment has led many to depict Gilbert as the city's savior. ABC Detroit named him "Newsmaker of the Year" in 2013; the *Atlantic* wondered if he was "Detroit's New Superhero"; and the *New York Times* called him a "missionary" on a "quest to remake the Motor

City.”⁴ In 2014 a United Way billboard near Downtown showed a picture of a young white boy and had the following caption: “The next Dan Gilbert. The Detroit of tomorrow starts with a donation today.”⁵

With Gilbert and the Ilitch family in the lead, new developments in Detroit break ground at a frantic pace. Among ongoing and recently completed projects, perhaps the most dramatic is the District Detroit, a project led by Ilitch-owned Olympia Development, in partnership with the city, which aims to create a contiguous fifty-block sports and entertainment district connecting Downtown and Midtown. The centerpiece is Little Caesars Arena, completed in fall 2017 at a cost of \$863 million, a sprawling state-of-the-art facility that serves as the home of the Detroit Red Wings and the Detroit Pistons, hosts concerts and events year-round, and houses myriad restaurants, shops, and a Google office. In addition to bringing the Pistons back into the city (they had played in the suburb Auburn Hills since 1989), making Detroit the only city in the country with four professional sports teams in its Downtown, the Ilitches will also build a new practice facility and corporate headquarters for the team in the New Center area just north of Midtown. While the five residential neighborhoods around Little Caesars Arena promised by Olympia have yet to materialize, the company has built the Mike Ilitch School of Business for Wayne State University next door to the arena and undertaken a \$150 million expansion of Little Caesars world headquarters a few blocks away.⁶ According to Olympia, the District is responsible for \$4.2 billion in new investment—\$1.4 billion invested by the company itself and another \$2.4 billion in outside investments “catalyzed” by the company—430,000 square feet of new office space, \$18 million in infrastructure improvements, and 120,000 square feet of shopping and dining in the area.⁷

Gilbert’s real estate company Bedrock has invested in an array of projects spanning Greater Downtown. At the time of writing, four projects in the works Downtown have been the subject of much media attention: redevelopment of the Hudson’s department store site into a 1.4-million-square-foot “city within a city” which, at 912 feet, will be the tallest building in Michigan and will include retail, residential, offices, and seven hundred underground parking spaces; renovation of the thirty-eight-story Book Tower and thirteen-story Book Building into another mixed-use development; the Monroe Blocks development, a multisite project including a thirty-five-story office tower and 482 residential units; and a massive addition to One Campus Martius, a large office complex in the heart of Downtown. Totaling \$2.1 billion, these four projects are expected to add 3.2 million square feet of office, residential, and retail space to Downtown, along with two thousand parking spaces.⁸ Bedrock also collaborated with the

luxury Detroit-based leather company Shinola on a 130-room hotel Downtown that opened in late 2018. Just northeast of Downtown, Bedrock has undertaken a redevelopment of the historic Brush Park neighborhood between Midtown and Eastern Market, a twenty-four-block area which until recently consisted mainly of vacant lots speckled with dilapidated Victorian mansions. Bedrock has two huge developments underway in this area: City Modern, an eight-acre development that aims to renovate existing properties in the area in addition to constructing a range of new mixed-use and residential properties, adding four hundred residential units along with retail, offices, and public spaces to the area; and the Brewster-Douglass redevelopment, a \$300 million project that will bring nine hundred residential units, 3.2 acres of public space, and sixty thousand feet of retail to the former site of a public housing project whose four towers were demolished by the city in 2014.⁹

One Gilbert-led development is perhaps more emblematic of the situation in contemporary Detroit than others. In March 2018 Gilbert came to a tentative agreement with Wayne County to redevelop a site not far from Brush Park, where the construction of a criminal justice center had stalled in 2013 due to cost overruns. The so-called fail jail, a potent and visible allegory for the city's economic woes and alleged municipal mismanagement, was transferred to Gilbert's company, which plans to build a \$1 billion mixed-use commercial development on the site. In exchange, Rock Ventures, in a private-public partnership with the county, agreed to build a \$533 million criminal justice complex at a site further from Downtown, to include a new courthouse, administrative offices, juvenile detention facility, and 2,280-bed jail.¹⁰ As we'll see in the rest of this chapter, the simultaneous construction of a commercial complex and a criminal justice center represents two sides of the same process of Detroit's redevelopment.

While they may be the biggest players in Detroit's redevelopment, Gilbert and the Ilitch family are far from the only major investors. On the near northeast side, the former Packard Automotive Plant is being restored by the Spanish-born developer Fernando Palazuelo, whose past redevelopment projects span from Lima to Barcelona and Nepal. Palazuelo's company Arte Express bought portions of the industrial campus in the 2013 tax foreclosure auction, and ground broke on the project in 2017. Once considered the most modern automobile manufacturing facility in the world, the Packard Plant slowly deteriorated after Packard went out of business in the late 1950s, and the sprawling facility has long served as one of the most notorious symbols of the city's decline, as well as a popular site for Hollywood movie crews shooting apocalyptic action sequences. The forty-five-acre plant is now being billed as "the largest

renovation project in North America,” a four-phase project expected to take fifteen years to complete, bringing offices, retail, artists’ lofts, gallery and event space, a recreation center, and much more to the former factory.¹¹

Three miles north of the Detroit River, up Woodward Avenue, redevelopment of the New Center neighborhood is dominated by a company called the Platform, a partnership between Peter Cummings, a real estate mogul whose company Ram Realty Services has developed and managed properties in the southeastern United States for thirty-eight years, and Dietrich Knoer, a German-born businessman who moved to Detroit in 2013 to “explore a new opportunity in real estate.” The pair formed the Platform in 2015, after Cummings came together with the New York-based real estate firm HFZ and the metro Detroit real estate firm Redico—where Knoer was chief investment officer—to purchase the historic Fisher and Albert Kahn buildings on West Grand Boulevard at the Wayne County tax foreclosure auction for \$12.2 million. Since then, along with a proposed \$100 million renovation of those historic landmarks, the Platform has taken on numerous high-profile developments in the area. These include new construction of 234 residential units and a 28,300-square-foot grocery store on a parking lot adjacent to the Fisher building; the Boulevard at Third and Grand, a 231-unit mixed-use residential and retail building just down the street from the Fisher and Kahn buildings; a \$30 million high-end condo development called Cass and York featuring “a rooftop deck with a swimming pool and a club house, a common garden, a bike storage room, big windows with skyline views, two-story penthouses, and a 24-hour concierge in the lobby”; Baltimore Station, a block south of Grand Boulevard on Woodward, where a two-phase project of renovation and new construction will bring 161 new residential units as well as retail space; renovation of an abandoned Wayne State University building into office, gallery, and retail space; and, a few blocks east of Woodward on Grand Boulevard, the conversion of the nine-story Chroma building into a “creative center” featuring retail, event, and gallery space, part of an effort to “catalyze historic Milwaukee Junction as Detroit’s preeminent neighborhood for the creative class.”¹² The Platform is also involved in the Pistons’ corporate headquarters and practice facility being built in the neighborhood, a partnership between the Pistons and Henry Ford Health Systems, which is also in the midst of a three-hundred-acre, \$155 million expansion of Henry Ford Hospital on Grand Boulevard near the Fisher building, a development that will include a six-story glass pavilion and a skyway across the six-lane boulevard.¹³ Nearby, the German developers Optima Aegidius Group have purchased four former industrial buildings, which they plan to convert into lofts and retail space.¹⁴

Activity abounds also along Detroit's riverfront. Led by the nonprofit Detroit Riverfront Conservancy, expansion to the east and west will extend the current riverwalk over four miles along Detroit's southern edge. On the West Riverfront, a park designed by New York-based Michael Van Valkenburgh Associates—an internationally renowned firm that designed Brooklyn Bridge Park in New York City and Maggie Daley Park in Chicago—will transform a twenty-two-acre space into a public park featuring “a tree-lined promenade, a cove with a beach for swimming, a large performance shell, a stone isle for wildlife, and areas for play, nature, and relaxation.”¹⁵ On the East Riverfront ground broke in 2018 on a 3.2-acre “urban beach” with parks, playscapes, retail space, and a floating barge serving food and drinks. Other developments in this area will add parks, greenways connecting the riverwalk to other parts of the city, streetscape improvements, and rehabilitation of old warehouses into mixed-use buildings, restaurants, and residential.¹⁶

Suffice it to say that the scale of development occurring in Detroit's main commercial corridor is dramatic. Less tangible but perhaps even more powerful is the *feeling* of resurgence that has captured the city and captivated the world. No one describes the mood of redevelopment better than its official boosters. The Detroit Metro Convention and Visitors Bureau released a video in early 2018 that typifies the energy and ideology of the engineers of Detroit's renaissance. The centerpiece of a larger marketing campaign with the catchphrase “It's GO Time,” the video's narration is worth quoting in full: “They say history repeats itself. Motown. The Motor City. Detroit's had its time on top. And now, with hard work, and people who believe that never gave up, our time has come again. Because right now, in Detroit, it's Revival time. Envision time. Dinner time. Game time. Show time. Move-in time. And now's the time to experience all the things you've heard about Detroit for yourself. It's time to see it. Taste it. Hear it. Feel it. Witness it. And believe it. This is Detroit. And we're here to tell you: it's GO time.”¹⁷

This video contains many of the themes of Detroit's economic resurgence. First is the projection into the past of an idyllic period of prosperity, followed by a period of decline, and now the resurrection of prosperity (and, presumably, the end of history repeating itself). Second is the mythic depiction of Detroiters as hard-working, blue-collar, gritty, and perpetually optimistic. And finally, the focus on Detroit as a destination for tourism and entertainment. After years of deterioration, this video tells us, Detroit is finally getting its restitution, as economic revival is carried out on behalf of those plucky Detroiters who stood by their city through it all.

Nothing captures the confluence of the economic and ideological currents of Detroit's renaissance better than Ford Motor Company's recent purchase of Michigan Central Station. Built in the same year that we begin our history of Detroit, 1913, the eighteen-story train station was designed by the same architect who designed New York's Grand Central Station, and at the time of its construction was the tallest train station in the world and a visible symbol of Detroit's burgeoning industrial power. Closed in 1988, the abandoned train station has for decades served as the most iconic "ruin porn" landmark in a city full of them. Appearing in every cable-news video montage of Detroit's decay, a mecca for urban spelunkers, the subject of myriad investigative reports, the go-to backdrop for Hollywood action films looking to "paint a cinematic picture of post-apocalyptic urban decay," and a taunting eyesore looming over Detroit's hippest, most gentrified neighborhood (Corktown), the train station underwent a series of demolition false starts and failed rehabilitation attempts before Ford finally purchased the towering husk in June 2018.¹⁸ Now, in an almost too perfect metaphor for the current remaking of Detroit, Ford plans to turn the train station and its surrounding area into a 1.2-million-square-foot "innovation hub" geared toward "mobility solutions that will shape the future of transportation."¹⁹ So a city whose fortunes were built on the auto industry, and whose degeneration followed its abandonment by that industry, is now, in the throes of its rebirth, becoming a hub for the transportation industry of the future.

The symbolic significance of the Motor City's most iconic car company purchasing the international emblem of Rust Belt decay in the midst of the "greatest turnaround story" in the annals of urban revitalization was not lost on anyone. "The symbolism here is huge," reports *Curbed Detroit*. But much more than symbolism is at stake: "Let's keep dreaming big. Michigan Central Station is being revived—anything is possible."²⁰ Speaking at a press conference announcing Ford's vision for the area, Bill Ford, the company's executive chairman and great-grandson of founder Henry, invoked the company's long history in the Motor City and the significance of their purchase of the station today. "[One hundred] years after Henry Ford's assembly line revolutionized industry, we're reimagining mobility," he explained. As the center of this effort, the station will become "a beacon of development, possibility, and opportunity once again."²¹

Ford's purchase of the train station has for many also signaled a milestone in Detroit's recovery. As a *Detroit Free Press* columnist put it, quoting Winston Churchill, the deal marks "the end of the beginning" of the city's rebirth. "Ford's act of faith in Detroit's future with the enormous investment it will

bring signals a new era. Victory no longer seems so remote. The issue is no longer in doubt.” After some rough years, “progress in Detroit development will become the norm, not the exception. From now on, redevelopment will occur as the natural and expected outcome in a city once again on the move.” With comparisons to the first moon landing and World War II, the author claims that, having solved “the toughest of all Detroit’s redevelopment puzzles,” the city is on a conveyor belt to prosperity—all thanks to a company that has supported Detroit from the beginning: “The Fords have *been there* for Detroit.”²² Shortly after purchasing the train station, Ford projected in story-high letters the city’s official motto: “Speramus meliora; resurget cineribus”—We hope for better things; it will rise from the ashes.²³ (Less noted in the triumphalist media narrative was the fact that a primary focus of this “innovation hub” will be driverless cars, which is a particularly ominous development in Michigan, where, in 2018, upward of 100,000 people worked as drivers.²⁴)

It’s difficult to overstate the degree to which all this investment has transformed Greater Downtown Detroit. Depictions of Detroit as a ghost town are exaggerated and overplayed, but no one can deny that the level of activity currently animating the city core is an exponential increase from even five years ago. It is a qualitative as well as quantitative metamorphosis. The city’s white population has increased more than 25 percent since 2010, with the majority of the newcomers settling in the Greater Downtown area, where, between 2011 and 2016, white residency increased by 66 percent while black residency decreased by 5 percent.²⁵ A hum of energy shivers through streets where once foot traffic was scarce. Yuppies walk their labradoodles. Spandex-clad joggers run in place at street corners with earbuds in, waiting for the light to change. Suburbanites, tourists, and hipsters rub shoulders with office workers on lunch breaks. Visible signs of poverty make way for privately commissioned street art. Newcomers to the city lounge in the manufactured beach in the center of Downtown, surrounded by bars and food trucks. In the words of Olympia Development CEO Tom Wilson, “Just come down and enjoy a *new* Detroit.”²⁶

The Gentrification Blues

These transformations have not come without significant growing pains, and debate rages over who really benefits from Detroit’s renaissance. The problems associated with urban redevelopment in Detroit mirror those of other cities that have experienced similar processes, problems that usually go under the heading of “gentrification.” In her celebrated poem “Just Say Hi! (The Gentrification Blues),” Marsha Music bemoans how the city’s black residents have

become “urban background, just a haze,” and exhorts white newcomers to “say Hi!” to black Detroiters.²⁷ A local planning consultant and sociologist, Megan Elliott, has put forward a similar message, advocating that we use the term *cultural displacement* instead of *gentrification*: “When I ask [longtime residents] what can (new residents) do to soften [tensions], one person said, ‘Have them take a test, like immigrants do.’ . . . To come in without that context or understanding is one of the most damaging things that happens over and over again.”²⁸

This type of critique of gentrification has become widespread and is particularly pertinent in Detroit; it is an overwhelmingly black city, but if you walk around Downtown, you see a preponderance of white faces. In 2017 Dan Gilbert launched an advertising campaign for a new development with the slogan “See Detroit As We Do” overlaying a mostly white crowd. Predictably this led many to speak out against Gilbert and decry how gentrification made black people “invisible.”²⁹ The racial dynamics in high-profile gentrifying neighborhoods like Brooklyn are similar, leading the film director Spike Lee to complain that formerly black neighborhoods now look like the “Westminster Dog Show” and causing the *New York Amsterdam News* to equate gentrification with “ethnic cleansing.”³⁰

For a full understanding of gentrification these types of racial and cultural critiques must be accompanied by an understanding of the political-economic logic driving this phenomenon. Gentrification’s highly visible racialized impacts do not account for all of its causes or manifestations. As Alan Mallach has pointed out, in the United States “predominantly African American neighborhoods are less, not more, likely to experience gentrification than largely white, working-class neighborhoods.”³¹ Moreover gentrification is not simply an American phenomenon: poor people are being displaced and disempowered in gentrifying cities from Amsterdam to Lisbon, Cape Town, Buenos Aires, Mexico City, San Francisco, Beijing, Pittsburgh, and beyond.³² As Neil Smith presciently observed in 2002, gentrification has become a “global urban strategy.” Increasingly, urban areas feature

whole new complexes of recreation, consumption, production, and pleasure, as well as residence. Gentrification as urban strategy weaves global financial markets together with large- and medium-sized real-estate developers, local merchants, and property agents with brand-name retailers, all lubricated by city and local governments for whom beneficent social outcomes are now assumed to derive from the market rather than from its regulation. Most crucially, real-estate development

becomes a centerpiece of the city's *productive* economy, an end in itself, justified by appeals to jobs, taxes, and tourism. In ways that could hardly have been envisaged in the 1960s, the construction of new gentrification complexes in central cities across the world has become an increasingly unassailable capital accumulation strategy for competing urban economies.³³

This is all part of what David Harvey has identified as a shift from the “managerial” to the “entrepreneurial” city.³⁴ In the face of budgetary shortfalls caused by federal neglect and capital flight, city governments attempt to raise revenues by *marketing* themselves as attractive places for global capitalists to invest in and for middle- and upper-class residents to “live, work, and play” in.³⁵ Gilbert has openly praised the Detroit government for its attempt to “curate and package our region in a way that has never been done before.”³⁶

“Come discover the opportunity that is called ‘Detroit,’” Gilbert raved in a 2017 letter urging Amazon to establish its second headquarters in Detroit, where the corporate behemoth was promised cheap real estate, low taxes, a business-friendly government, and a vibrant atmosphere to lure potential employees.³⁷ That the \$4 billion Detroit pledged to Amazon was not enough to attract the company indicates that there are many other locales with similarly lavish incentives. And as cities compete against one another for increasingly mobile capital, branding becomes an integral strategy to lure business investment as well as consumer spending. Detroit’s destitution and poverty, as well as its history as a blue-collar industrial center, have become the main nodes of the city’s image: Detroit is “gritty,” “authentic,” “resilient.” We see this in the many poverty tours that have popped up around the city in recent years, in Chrysler’s “Imported from Detroit” marketing campaign, and in the success of the “Detroit Hustles Harder” clothing line.³⁸

Attracting physical redevelopment has thus become the preeminent urban strategy. As urban theorist Samuel Stein has written, whereas a century ago industrial capital was the “dominant force in urban politics,” today it is “real estate capital”: “Global real estate is now worth \$217 trillion, 36 times the value of all the gold ever mined. It makes up 60 percent of the world’s assets.” Growing investment in real estate is linked to the problem of industrial “overcapacity,” which according to *Business Insider* is “ruining our economy.” In short, as wages stagnate and wealth inequality rises, industrial firms have the capacity to produce far more commodities than the market can consume, and thus capitalists look elsewhere for profitable ways to invest their surplus cash. “Real estate,” Stein writes, “becomes the latest stop

on what geographer Cindi Katz calls ‘vagabond’ capitalism’s eternal search for profitability. . . . In 2016, a record 37 percent of home sales were made to absentee investors.”³⁹

All this investment puts upward pressure on property value and rents; wages, meanwhile, remain stagnant. As a result, “there is not a single county in the country where a full-time minimum wage worker can afford the average two-bedroom apartment.” In black and Latino neighborhoods, the percentage of income put toward housing is particularly high: 44 percent and 48 percent, respectively.⁴⁰

In Detroit, home values and rents in gentrifying areas have more than doubled since 2010. So too have Downtown rents. Throughout Greater Downtown, upscale condos, ranging from middle-income, two-bedroom units starting at \$275,000 to multimillion-dollar luxury units, have proliferated. Griswold Apartments, a rent-subsidized building housing mostly low-income seniors, has been transformed into the Albert, where one-bedroom apartments rent for \$1,400 to \$2,500 per month and where the owners aim to make the residents “feel like they’re living in a five star hotel.”⁴¹ At Gilbert’s David Scott Building one-bedroom apartments cost between \$1,920 and \$2,100 a month. Detroit’s revitalization means that, increasingly, the Detroit skyline is owned by companies like Triton, which, according to its website, has a “private equity portfolio with combined sales of around €11.5 billion.” Triton recently opened Water’s Edge apartments, “an upscale apartment community on the Detroit River with a private marina and two private lakes.”⁴²

As investors move in, thousands of working-class Detroiters have been displaced. Some of this displacement is attributable to the foreclosure crisis and to general cost-of-living increases, but many Detroiters have been coerced into leaving their homes and neighborhoods by more forceful means. In April 2013, for example, low-income residents in over two hundred apartment units in Cass Corridor (now referred to as Midtown) received a notice “saying that they had to move out within thirty days.” As these residents were being evicted, two other large Downtown apartments were taken over by international developers; the residents of these buildings, who were Section 8 (low-income, state-assisted) renters, were ordered to vacate the property.⁴³ This process is ongoing. In October 2018 low-income residents of Park Avenue were told to move out; one resident remarked, “As one of the last affordable places to live, this is displacing many poor and low-wage working people.”⁴⁴

Political elites purport to address problems of displacement by stipulating that a certain percentage of new housing projects must be “affordable.” But what’s affordable in affordable housing initiatives is based not just on the



FIGURE 1.1. A group of Detroiters sit on a Downtown sidewalk in front of a construction site for a new luxury hotel built by the Shinola leather company. A few minutes after this photo was taken, this area was cleared by private security and Detroit police. Photo © Philip Conklin, 2016.

median income of Detroit residents (\$25,764) but on the median income of the metro Detroit region (\$68,000), meaning, according to activists, “all of the newly developed affordable housing built in Detroit still isn’t actually affordable to most Detroiters.”⁴⁵

Gentrification, then, represents much more than cultural incompetence; it is a necessary element of urban political economy in contemporary capitalist society. The racialized components of real estate investment are a symptom of structural processes that do not always manifest in racial terms. As well as calling into question the utility of the term *gentrification*, this suggests that in order to curb the displacement attending to urban development, we must go well beyond acculturating newcomers and being friendly to our neighbors, and address the root of the problem: the creative destruction wreaked upon cities, and in particular their most vulnerable residents, by the whims of highly mobile real estate capital.

A Disaster Zone

We got a hell of a job out here to deal with. We're dealing with emergency managers; they never existed before in this country. We're dealing with the fact that people don't understand that these suckers don't care if they have water or not, because if you are not a part of their production, they don't need you no more. —**MARIAN KRAMER** of the League of Revolutionary Black Workers and the National Welfare Rights Union, "Marian Kramer," *League of Revolutionary Black Workers: A Media Project with the League of Revolutionary Black Workers*, 2015

Economists fret that Detroit, in the absence of the manufacturing economy that built it, no longer has any reason to be. —**BEN AUSTEN**, "The Post-Post-Apocalyptic Detroit," 2014

Even more illuminating of the logic underlying Detroit's recent transformations is another set of processes occurring in the peripheral regions on the city's East and West Sides, colloquially known as "the neighborhoods." Across the city, *only 53 percent of working-age Detroiters were formally employed at any point in 2013*.⁴⁶ But as the *Detroit News* reported in August 2015, the situation is even more dire on the East and West Sides: "Roughly half of the city's population lives west of Woodward Avenue—more than 335,000 people. But across that vast stretch of Detroit, there are only 30,500 jobs—less than one job for every 10 people. Similarly jobs-poor areas abound on the city's east side. That compares to the 64,000 jobs from Midtown to downtown, where just about 18,000 people live (Detroiters hold about 27 percent of the Midtown-downtown jobs). All told, the city has a little more than 200 jobs for every 1,000 people, well below St. Louis' 613, Cleveland's 481 . . . and Baltimore's 391."⁴⁷

Many people living in these "jobs-poor" areas struggle to make enough money to survive. Many depend entirely on their friends and family. Some panhandle. Others sell bottles of water, DVDs, cigarettes, or drugs or engage in other criminalized hustles. In 2013 a few of our friends from the East Side who had been recently released from incarceration supported themselves by taking two buses to get to the suburb of Southfield, where they then waited in line for hours at a plasma donation center. Including the rides there and back, it was a ten-hour day, and they typically earned around \$50 for their donation. When one of us went with them to CSL Plasma, the place was so overcrowded with Detroiters that the line stretched outside onto the sidewalk.

As investment in the metro area increases, some new jobs are created. But the question is: What kinds of jobs? Many people on the periphery take the bus to night jobs as dishwashers and line cooks at restaurants in the suburbs, and increasingly in Downtown and Midtown, jobs that are low-wage, monotonous, and physically taxing. Or they travel to the several warehouses that

Amazon has recently opened in the metro area. Employees inside these behemoths have become increasingly vocal in denouncing their work conditions. Mohamed Hassan, one of the workers who took part in a recent strike in an Amazon warehouse in Minnesota, said, “The pace of work is inhumane. Everyone feels continuously threatened by the system.” Many workers have decried the company’s union-busting tactics, as well as productivity standards that force people to stay on their feet all day long and leave no time for bathroom breaks, leaving many to urinate in bottles or trash cans. One recent undercover reporter described “employees collapsing at work, suffering panic attacks, pulling muscles and more.” As was the case in the early days of Ford, work conditions are so grueling and degrading that worker turnover has become a huge issue for Amazon.⁴⁸

Other Detroiters make their way to day labor companies such as PeopleReady, just east of Downtown. Companies like these have “spread like wildfire” in recent decades, becoming “a ubiquitous presence in poor, predominantly urban communities across the country.” As the sociologist Gretchen Purser has noted in her incredible ethnographic work, day labor companies heavily recruit formerly incarcerated workers and give them one-day labor contracts: “jobs without a tomorrow.” Often these companies partner directly with parole officers, as well as “re-entry” and social service organizations. Purser concludes that the 70 million or so U.S. workers who have a criminal record are not merely “excluded” from the economy; they are relegated to “its bottom-most segments in what has recently been referred to as the ‘gloves-off economy,’ where jobs are precarious, working conditions are perilous, violations of labor laws are pervasive, and wages are paltry.”⁴⁹

Workers’ ability to resist degrading and low-paying jobs decreased further in 2014, when Michigan became a right-to-work state, meaning that mandatory unionization is no longer legal. (This has not, however, stopped workers from taking action: a strike campaign by the Service Employees Local 1 won 1,700 local janitors a \$15 wage, and the UNITE HERE Local 24 workers’ month-long picket line at the Downtown Westin Book Cadillac hotel won improvements in work conditions and pay, then released this message: “[We] proved that even in a right-to-work state, when working people stand in solidarity, we win.”)⁵⁰

The fact that many Detroiters are still out of work, and that an outsized portion of the jobs that recent investment has created are low-wage, helps explain why in early 2019, after years of so-called revitalization, *WalletHub* concluded that due to its incredibly high rates of poverty for children (55 percent) and adults (32 percent), “Detroit is the neediest city in America.”⁵¹ Kurt Metzger,

director of *Data Driven Detroit*, comes to a similarly bleak conclusion: “the economy is not moving folks out of poverty.”⁵²

And while it is true that adult poverty rates have declined slightly in recent years, it remains unclear whether this decline is attributable to actual poverty alleviation or to the fact that many of the poorest Detroiters have been forced out of the city—both by police and by the sheer scale of the dispossessions that have occurred in recent years, mostly in the city’s East and West Sides. These dispossessions have been so sweeping that local activists have labeled them “genocidal.”⁵³ Three main processes are at work here: water shutoffs, home foreclosures, and school closings.

WATER SHUTOFFS

Between 2010 and 2018 the Detroit water department issued around 143,000 shutoff notices, directly affecting *more than 40 percent of the city’s residents*. To be subject to shutoff, water customers need be only sixty days behind on their payments or have \$150 of unpaid bills. Despite the outcry of neighborhood organizations and the intervention of the United Nations, the shutoffs have continued up to the time of writing (summer 2019). In March 2018 the city council approved a \$7.8 million contract for Homrich Wrecking to continue water shutoffs through 2021.⁵⁴

From 2006 to 2016 water rates in Detroit increased 120 percent, and the average monthly water bill in the city was nearly double the national average. Then, in 2017, the Board of Water Commissioners approved another rate increase. Meanwhile the Detroit city government has spent billions of dollars budgeted for the Water and Sewage Department to repay its creditors, mainly Wall Street banks; in 2011 “the agency spent \$537 million that had been earmarked for repairs paying off interest-rate swaps to major banks.”⁵⁵ The city has offered a payment plan for residents, but some see it as a scam, since it requires payments up to \$200 per month. Residents who have turned to “illegal water hook-ups” have been aggressively prosecuted for the felony of “malicious destruction of utility property.”⁵⁶

As we will see, water shutoffs are part of the city’s debt-restructuring program implemented by its emergency manager, Kevyn Orr, and the pattern of shutoffs demonstrates how Detroit is being remade in the interests of corporations over those of residents. Though city officials have presented them as a straightforward response to delinquent water bills, the shutoffs evidence a clear pro-business bias. In 2015 residential properties owed the city \$26 million in outstanding water bills, compared to \$41 million owed by commercial properties; however, residential accounts were four times more likely to be disconnected than commercial accounts.⁵⁷

In 2014 We the People of Detroit Community Research Collective interviewed hundreds of residents on the city's periphery, where the shutoffs were concentrated. They concluded, "Nearly 30 percent of our contacts had been shut-off, which seems incredibly high. We even talked to someone whose house had been shut-off for a 38 cent unpaid water bill. Fifty percent of the people were on some sort of payment plan. Only 30 percent of the households reported that every one there was healthy. So 70 percent had health issues. Forty-four percent of homes had multiple medical issues."⁵⁸ Dehydration and problems related to sanitation have become critical issues. Studies have also shown that water-borne diseases were more likely to occur on Detroit blocks that had experienced a water shutoff. Residents in the Detroit area are currently being ravaged by the worst Hepatitis A outbreak in the United States.⁵⁹

Activists have responded to the shutoffs in various ways. Marian Kramer, a longtime Detroit activist and a cofounder of Michigan Welfare Rights (the local section of the National Welfare Rights Union), was arrested along with eight other members of the Homrich 9 for blocking trucks that were being sent to conduct water shutoffs.⁶⁰ Other activists have set up emergency water stations and distributed water bottles throughout the areas hit hardest by the shutoffs. However, as Valerie Vande Panne of *In These Times* has reported, some residents don't want to admit that their water has been turned off, for fear that Child Protective Services will take their children away. Some parents without water even keep their children from attending school, worried that they'll tell their teacher that there is no water at home.⁶¹

The Detroit Water Brigade, an organization committed to "bringing an end to the water crisis," has aptly summed up the situation: "This is a disaster zone—and immediate relief and preparation is needed."⁶²

HOME FORECLOSURES

In 2017 the myriad organizations attempting to combat homeowners' violent dispossession—such as the Detroit People's Platform, the United Community Housing Coalition, the Moratorium Now! Coalition, Detroit Eviction Defense, the Coalition to Stop Unconstitutional Property Tax, and the Detroit Black Youth Project—organized a public forum. There, Wayne State University law professor Bernadette Atuahene reported that "between 2011 and 2015, one in four properties in Detroit was foreclosed on for unpaid property taxes by the Wayne County treasurer, a number not seen since the 1930's depression. When you combine the effect of tax foreclosures with the 65,000 mortgage bank foreclosures that also took place, Detroit has approximately one-third fewer occupied homes now than ten years ago."⁶³

According to a 2009 report by the city's Planning and Development Department, during the subprime mortgage crisis Detroit had the highest home foreclosure rate among the nation's one hundred largest metropolitan areas. Though Michigan law requires municipalities to reassess real estate values every five years, the city of Detroit did not do so once between 1995 and 2015, with the consequence that after the housing crash, as the market value of homes plummeted, Detroiters were still expected to make payments at inflated pre-crash rates. Some estimates hold that 85 percent of homes in Detroit were taxed at overassessed rates during this time, many at rates that violated the state constitution. In some neighborhoods the disparity is so stark that one year of property taxes can amount to more than the market value of the home. A recent University of Chicago study found that, between 2011 and 2015, 10 percent of Detroit's tax foreclosures were "caused by inflated property assessments." By 2014 fully 47 percent of Detroit homeowners were underwater on their mortgages.⁶⁴

The way the government deals with unpaid property taxes has further exacerbated the crisis. In fact, the procedures appear as nothing short of a coordinated effort to dispossess Detroit residents of their homes. According to a state law passed in 2000, when property taxes are not paid to the city of Detroit, the debt gets passed on to Wayne County. The county then charges 18 percent interest on these delinquent taxes—that is, interest charged, after the recession, on property tax assessments that in many cases were already unconstitutionally inflated. If these payments are delinquent for three years, the law mandates that Wayne County foreclose the home and put it up for auction. The Wayne County treasurer's home foreclosure auction, according to the *New York Times*, has become "one of the world's largest real estate auctions."⁶⁵ Since 2002 one in three Detroit properties has been put up for sale under this system.⁶⁶

Although many Detroiters would have legally qualified for "poverty tax exemptions," the city made it too difficult for residents to learn about, and qualify for, these exemptions. This was the subject of a lawsuit, filed against the city by the ACLU, which was settled in July 2018 mandating that Detroit create a more streamlined and user-friendly exemption application process.⁶⁷ Meanwhile federal money sent to Michigan to aid struggling homeowners was routinely redirected toward razing abandoned houses. In the summer of 2016, for example, the Michigan state government received \$188 million in federal funds as part of the Helping Hardest Hit Homeowners program; only one-quarter of the money went to support homeowners under threat of foreclosure, and the rest was reserved for "blight removal."⁶⁸ The city's demolition

program is the subject of an ongoing FBI investigation, after demolition costs spiked 60 percent in 2015 under the Duggan administration.⁶⁹

There is a brutal irony to the fact that Gilbert, the owner of a mortgage lending company, rose to prominence in Detroit in the aftermath of the subprime mortgage crisis. Quicken Loans closed an enormous \$353 million in the years preceding the crisis; during this time nearly 75 percent of new mortgage loans in Detroit were considered subprime. One report found that “Quicken corporate management pushed its employees to falsify borrowers’ incomes on loan applications and to push overpriced deals on desperate or unwary homeowners. Employees reported being bullied and pressured into illegal acts.” In 2017 homeowners won an \$11 million class action lawsuit against Quicken for its “unconscionable” and “truly egregious” predatory practices, which included artificially inflating home values without carrying out genuine appraisals. Nationwide 70 percent of homes that received subprime mortgages from Quicken between 2002 and 2008 were foreclosed on within three years. “Quicken directly carried out 1,058 foreclosures in Detroit, 52% of which were on subprime loans.”⁷⁰

Gilbert is not alone in profiting from the foreclosure crisis. Wayne County has required that homes purchased at the foreclosure auction be paid off in full within twenty-four hours, keeping most Detroiters, who don’t have thousands of dollars in disposable cash, from reacquiring their homes. Instead real estate speculators have pounced: in 2013 twelve investors bought more than a hundred homes *each*, many with plans to leave them vacant until their property value appreciates.⁷¹ Wayne County itself also benefits from this system. From 2010 to 2017 the county’s general fund received \$456 million from property tax foreclosures. This direct transfer of wealth from the most disadvantaged sections of Detroit’s population is integral to the county’s financial stability; investigative reports have concluded that “the county now relies on property owners’ misfortune to balance its budget.”⁷² The same process has been at work in Ferguson, Missouri, where in 2014 a series of uprisings occurred after the police killed an unarmed black man, Michael Brown. Fueling black residents’ anger was the fact that fines levied almost exclusively against the city’s poor population accounted for one-fifth of all revenues in 2013. Robin D. G. Kelley has called this process “revenue by primitive accumulation.”⁷³

The United Community Housing Coalition (UCHC) has responded to this vulturism by purchasing hundreds of foreclosed homes and attempting to hold them until the original owner can repay the purchase price. However, as the *Free Press* has reported, this remains the exception to the rule: “Many of the most prolific auction bidders are not homeowners looking to plant roots but

speculators who ‘rent’ houses back to owners who lost them, using predatory schemes that often lead to new evictions and cycles of instability. Or, as is more common, the speculators just sit on them.”⁷⁴ There’s some hope that the worst of the foreclosure crisis in Detroit is over. After peaking in 2015 at 24,793, the number of occupied homes for sale in the foreclosure auction decreased to 2,715 in 2018. Additionally the Make It a Home program, launched in 2018 as a partnership between UCHC and the city, which allows the city to divert some homes from entering the auction and then sell them back to the owners, may make it easier for some Detroiters to hold onto their homes. However, the reasons to be optimistic remain shaky at best. Tax foreclosures have decreased, but with one-third of all homes already affected by the foreclosure crisis, one wonders whether this is simply an indication that the transfer of homeownership out of the hands of poor Detroiters and into the hands of investors has been largely completed. Likewise there is no plan in place to offer restitution to the homeowners who have been preyed upon by lenders, overtaxed by the city, charged interest, and foreclosed on and evicted by the county—in short, the damage has already been done. In this context it is also important to note that the state-mandated tax foreclosure auction was itself intended as an urban renewal strategy to “reactivate abandoned spaces and spark new ownership.” In the Fitzgerald neighborhood, the dispossession caused by the foreclosure crisis has become the node of another round of urban renewal intended to “revitalize” “abandoned” lots and “leverage” new investments. That is, the very same properties that were wrested from poor Detroiters are being shifted into private hands, with the help of local government, to be redeveloped by investors and rented back to the community: so-called community investment. And so the cycle continues.⁷⁵

SCHOOL CLOSURES

In the past twenty years, more than two-thirds of Detroit Public Schools (DPS) have been closed. As has been the case with the water shutoffs and home foreclosures, the school closures have disproportionately affected residents of the city’s peripheral regions.

In 1999 the state of Michigan placed DPS under emergency management, which lasted more or less continuously up to 2016. At the time of the first state takeover, DPS had a \$100 million budget surplus and 168,000 enrolled students. After sixteen years of emergency management by the state, the district was \$3.4 billion in debt, enrollment had fallen to 47,000, and the state had closed a staggering 195 Detroit schools, leaving only 93 open. As a majority of the schools were closed, forcing students to seek other options, and the district

lost 70 percent of its students, the decline in enrollment was tautologically used as a reason to close more schools. The drop in DPS enrollment is tied to two developments in public education in Michigan in the 1990s. In 1993–94 the state eliminated all property taxes devoted to schools, tying funding instead to enrollment.⁷⁶ At the same time, new measures were adopted allowing districts to recruit students from outside their boundaries, which made Michigan one of the most permissive states for charter schools. Increasingly students no longer served by DPS are attending charter schools and schools in districts outside of Detroit. Charter schools, which as of 2014–15 had as many as or more students than DPS, have been the most harmful to Detroit students. Eighty percent of charter schools in Michigan are for-profit entities, and charter schools cost the state \$1 billion annually. Charters generally offer no bus transportation, no services for special education students, and spend \$2,000 less per student than public schools; they have not shown significant improvement in educational outcomes (which are measured largely by standardized test scores). Furthermore, as Julia Putnam, the principal of the James and Grace Lee Boggs School, has warned, the public debate as to whether charter schools increase or decrease test scores often obscures a critical fact: judging schools based on test performance is itself problematic, and it has the result of “incentivizing or tempting [charter] schools to push out kids who are poor because it really hurts their scores.”⁷⁷

Despite these facts, deregulation, privatization, and “school choice” remain the order of the day in Michigan, and in the country as a whole. Arne Duncan, President Obama’s secretary of education, has said, “I think the best thing that happened to the education system in New Orleans was Hurricane Katrina,” referring to the transition to charter schools in the city following the natural disaster. Duncan has now deemed Detroit to be “Ground Zero for education in this country.” Even more alarming are the policies of President Trump’s secretary of education, Betsy DeVos, a billionaire Michigan native who comes from one of the most powerful families in the state; her husband, Dick DeVos, is heir to the \$6 billion Amway fortune and ran for governor in 2006. One of the key funders of the 1993–94 pro-charter legislation, DeVos has essentially worked to end public schools, promoting for-profit education, vouchers for parochial schools, and limitations on the power of teachers’ unions. As one teacher-activist, Julie McIntyre, has written, “Supporters of charter schools often argue that when the administration is freed from the restrictions of union contracts, it can retain high-quality teachers. However, in many cases the model focuses on hiring the cheapest (least experienced) teachers to work many more hours than public school teachers are contracted to work.”⁷⁸

There has been some pushback to this kind of draconian educational reform. In 2013, for instance, teachers at Cesar Chavez Academy, a charter that serves two thousand students in Detroit, formed a union. (Ironically, the Academy, named after a legendary union leader, attempted to intimidate the union members and has consistently negotiated with them in bad faith.)⁷⁹ Another group, MIStudentsDream, has organized around issues of social justice. But by and large DeVos's vision for public schooling is being realized in Detroit. In March 2016 new state legislation split DPS into two districts: Detroit Public Schools became a shell district tasked solely with managing the district's debt, and in that capacity its funds will be directed mostly to Wall Street banks; a new district, Detroit Public Schools Community District (DPSCD), was created to actually run the schools. The legislation includes strict financial oversight of the new district by the state; a loosening of academic qualifications (Detroit is now the only city in Michigan that allows the regular hiring of uncertified teachers); antistrike measures to curb the power of teachers, who closed DPS for two days in May 2016 in a massive "sick-out" after the legislation was passed; a new law requiring the state to shut down all schools that land in the bottom 5 percent of state rankings for three years and, crucially, no measures for the city to regulate charter schools. With the public education system in Detroit hollowed out to almost nothing, and the city's residents on the hook to pay back billions of dollars of debt racked up while DPS was under state control, Attorney General Bill Schuette announced in September 2016 that twenty-seven more DPS schools were slated to be closed by the state in the next year. Thanks to political and community pressure, an agreement between DPSCD and the state has saved these schools from closure for now; they will instead be entered into a partnership program with the state to improve their performance. But this is only a temporary, remedial measure, similar to other "improvement plans" that most schools on this list already had to adopt in recent years. With the state law requiring the lowest-performing schools to close still in place, the future of Detroit's schools remains tenuous. Indeed, this same state law requires that the city's already scrutinized schools be given a letter grade based on student performance, with schools who get multiple F's in danger of being shuttered by the state.⁸⁰

As across the country, student scores on standardized tests are the basis of a school's performance rating. One result of this obsession with standardized testing is that "critical thinking" goes by the wayside, which according to Marian Kramer is no accident: "we know that capitalists don't want us to think."⁸¹ Another effect, as Alex Vitale points out, is that the emphasis on high-stakes exams creates a "pressure-cooker atmosphere" that facilitates the

school-to-prison-pipeline: “States that rely heavily on high-stakes tests tend to shift teaching toward . . . rote learning; this drives out creativity and individualized learning, which contributes to discipline problems as students grow uninterested or resentful. Schools too often respond to this dynamic by adopting ever more restrictive and punitive disciplinary systems. As a result, suspension, arrests, and expulsions increase, driving students out of school and into the criminal justice system. In this environment, teacher morale declines and dropout rates increase.”⁸² In Detroit, an ex-police chief runs the city’s “public schools’ force”—“the only full-service police agency in the state offering constant service to schools.”⁸³

Even though Detroit may be an extreme case, by and large, what is happening to the city’s most impoverished students has happened across Michigan: low-income students account for more than half of Michigan’s students, but per-pupil funding for these students fell 60 percent from 1995 to 2015.⁸⁴ The same thing is occurring throughout the United States. For Julie McIntyre, market-based education “reform” is “a meticulously designed machine built to dismantle public education over the next several decades.” “Public schools,” she writes,

are being intentionally underfunded and dismantled. Over the past ten years, teachers have been forced to follow scripts and rigid pacing guidelines, practices that contradict research about culturally relevant, responsive and inquiry-based teaching as methods to improve student achievement. . . . As public school teachers and students are pushed to failure, private interests will swoop in to provide alternative solutions and reap significant profits. Districts have shifted from elected school boards to mayoral or gubernatorial control, business leaders have orchestrated the shuttering of public schools and their replacement by charter schools, and seasoned, unionized teachers have been pitted against the bright-eyed Teach for America corps members and “superman” charter school leaders.⁸⁵

Charter schools are disproportionately staffed by young teachers, who, in the absence of union protections, are pressured to “sign flexible, risky contracts,” and then are expected to use their own creativity, enthusiasm, and desire for social justice to make up for budget cutbacks. In Detroit, educational nonprofits like City Year (where we both worked in 2012–13) and Teach for America (which came to Detroit in 2010) have permeated the school system. Despite the lofty rhetoric of these organizations, they are a constituent element of market-based educational reform. Underpaid “corps members” are

instructed not to worry about the politics of the education system: labor conditions, the focus on high-stakes tests, the profit model, the slashing of employee pay and benefits, the motivations of corporate sponsors, the heavy police presence inside schools, and so on. Focusing on these political factors, nonprofit leaders insist, is a “distraction” from the real work of helping underserved students. To be sure, nonprofit workers are generally well intentioned. But all too often they function as a cover for processes of dispossession, exploitation, and union-busting.⁸⁶

One Detroit

We’re hired by the citizens and the people of the state of Michigan and our responsibility is to give them great customer service. —**FORMER GOVERNOR RICK SNYDER OF MICHIGAN**, “State of the State Speech,” 2013

I can cut somebody’s throat and leave them to bleed out in the gutter with the best of them. —**DETROIT’S EMERGENCY MANAGER KEVYN ORR**, quoted in Shea Howell, “Asking Questions,” 2013

It’s hard to imagine a starker juxtaposition. While local and national media praise a “new spirit and promise,” community activists cry “genocide.”

The disparity between what’s happening in the Greater Downtown area and what’s happening in the peripheral neighborhoods is widely acknowledged. The idea that there are “two Detroits” has permeated public discourse, becoming an inescapable aspect of everyday life and of politics. Coleman A. Young Jr., who ran against Mike Duggan in the 2017 mayoral race, based his campaign on the Two Detroits thesis, to which Duggan’s subsequent slogan, “One Detroit. For all of us,” is a direct response. Residents old and new push back against the violence inherent in the term *New Detroit*, which erases the already existing residents and institutions. The disparity that characterizes the city is recognized as well by the city government and certain private developers in their efforts to bring redevelopment to some of these peripheral neighborhoods. Many of those moving to the city are active in social justice issues and aware of the dislocation and cultural displacement that gentrification entails. This stance is even embedded to a degree in the ethos of the business community; it’s common for businesses to donate a percentage of profits to charitable organizations, promote workforce development, and the like. And donations from corporate philanthropies have a big hand in the Motor City’s revival. Complicating the issue is the fact that gentrification is not always experienced negatively by those it affects, particularly home and business owners, leading

many residents to welcome the changes coming to the city. Those attending the festivals and events that have accompanied Detroit's revival are an economically and racially diverse group, spanning the city's population. And to those who can afford to remain in the city, the cosmetic and infrastructure improvements that accompany gentrification can be preferable to what they experienced before. As one Detroiter put it, "I hear talk about gentrification, but many times that's just redevelopment. If redevelopment means I can drive down 6 Mile in the winter without worrying about it being an ice rink, then give me redevelopment."⁸⁷

What's missing from all of this is a recognition of the necessity of both of these poles—investment and dispossession—to the process as a whole. The problem is continually framed along these lines: How can the development going on in Detroit be more equitably spread across the entire city, and not just Downtown? But Downtown development and dispossession on the periphery are not two separate processes; they are *two elements of the same process of uneven development*. The corporate revival can't be divorced from immiseration. These are mutually constitutive processes, wherein the city is remade into a center of investment and profit-making—at the direct expense of the poor and working class. *In short, the problem is not that there are two Detroits but that there is one Detroit, and it is part of a class society*. Detroit has become a standing testament to Marx's "absolute general law of capitalist accumulation," according to which wealth accumulates at one pole of society in direct proportion to the accumulation of poverty and misery at the other.⁸⁸

If one considers Downtown and the neighborhoods as a *unity*, the extent to which the city's poorest residents have subsidized Detroit's "renaissance" becomes clear. First of all, redevelopment has been able to flourish because of the vast amount of vacant land and buildings and rock-bottom real estate prices in the city. Investors and new high-income residents scoop up this real estate, giving further impetus to the city's redevelopment; the more businesses and high-income residents that move to the city, the more Detroit becomes a good investment for other potential investors. Detroit is often considered a blank slate, and developers are congratulated for building something where there was nothing. But for a proper analysis we must think historically. As will be explained in later chapters, manufacturers and the white middle class fled Detroit precipitously after World War II, leaving huge portions of the city vacant. The businesses that left bore none of the cost of this abandonment—in fact, thanks to state-subsidized suburbanization, they profited from it—but those Detroiters who couldn't afford to leave had to endure the social and economic costs of this devastation. Now this devalORIZED

real estate is scooped up by investors at bargain-basement prices, and the fact of its abandonment by the previous generation of investors is erased from historical memory.⁸⁹

We have elaborated the extent to which development is uneven spatially, in the disparity between the torrent of investment Downtown and the disposessions in peripheral neighborhoods. A few more examples drive this point home. First, consider Detroit Future City (DFC), which published its “Strategic Framework” in 2013. The DFC was the product of a private-public partnership managed by the Detroit Economic Growth Corporation and became an independent nonprofit in 2015. It presents the “Strategic Framework” as a fifty-year “blueprint for Detroit’s future.” Mayor Duggan’s chief economic advisor has called it his “bible.”⁹⁰

In order to arrive at a future that is “aspirational” as well as “just and equitable,” the DFC explicitly advocates a program of service cuts and blight removal in the city’s impoverished neighborhoods. This, it argues, will free up needed resources which can then be diverted toward more “viable” gentrifying areas. In short, the DFC plainly articulates the plan to revitalize the city by shifting the costs of its fiscal crisis onto Detroit’s poorest residents. According to Dave Bing, the mayor at the time, relocating people is “absolutely” part of the city’s plan: “There is just too much land and too many expenses for us to continue to manage the city as we have in the past. . . . There are tough decisions that are going to have to be made.” Despite Bing’s comments, there is no general plan for relocating residents. The DFC stresses that no residents will be forced to move; however, it is apparent that without key services—street lighting, trash collection, public transportation, and so on—the residents will not be able to stay.⁹¹

Meanwhile, elites complain that the city has too much empty land, and also that there are not enough parking spaces near Downtown. As many activists have pointed out, since the completion of the Little Caesars Arena, the Ilitches’ investments have been confined mainly to catalyzing new parking lots—over twenty acres of them.⁹² Gilbert himself owns more than seventeen thousand parking spaces. But according to the managing CEO of Gilbert’s Bedrock Detroit, a major obstacle to the city’s revitalization is the “strong need for additional parking options.”⁹³ The geographical unevenness is stark: on the one hand, political elites have depicted Detroit as “abandoned,” “thinly populated,” and in need of “downsizing” so as to justify vast service cuts in peripheral neighborhoods; on the other hand, with the help of public subsidies, billionaires continue to build parking lots to increase their concentration of wealth in a few gentrifying neighborhoods.

Another example of uneven development is provided by the QLine street-car system, which Gilbert spearheaded. Initially conceived as part of a larger

regional transit network, in its final form the QLine ended up covering only a three-mile stretch of Woodward Avenue spanning Downtown and Midtown. Largely a symbolic gesture to investors, the QLine serves more to encourage investment and facilitate tourism than to effectively transport residents; it is sleeker, but also slower and less frequent than the Woodward bus which covers the same area. Although it was mostly privately funded, the state and federal government spent \$47 million on the QLine. Meanwhile at least 25 percent of Detroiters live without a car and rely on the city's underfunded bus system to get around.⁹⁴

Inequality and unevenness can also be witnessed in the major subsidies given to Detroit's capitalist class. This happens indirectly, as when public services are shut off in the periphery while public funds are redirected toward schemes to lure investment downtown. It also happens more explicitly: for instance, when, in the midst of contributing to the city's blight and its residents' foreclosures, Gilbert received \$200 million in subsidies to keep his companies in Detroit, after threatening to move them to Cleveland, essentially compelling Detroiters to subsidize their own foreclosure crisis.⁹⁵ A week after Detroit declared bankruptcy, city officials announced that the public would cover more than half the cost of the \$450 million Little Caesars Arena. And, as mentioned, thirty-nine parcels of land for the arena and the surrounding District Detroit were sold to the team's billionaire owner, Mike Ilitch, for just one dollar—without the parcels ever being appraised.⁹⁶ These charitable dealings with moneyed interests stand in stark contrast to the aggressive enforcement of unpaid residential water bills and delinquent property taxes, pursued in the name of austerity by the same city government.

Proponents of these deals bristle at the contention that billionaires are gifted money from public funds, pointing out that Detroit doesn't simply write developers a check; rather, developments are subsidized through complex tax-capture arrangements, in which the developer collects tax revenues which would otherwise go into public coffers. Their argument is that developers are receiving only money that would not exist without them. But this is erroneous. In 2017 a new set of "transformational brownfield" bills passed in the Michigan legislature, greatly increasing the amount of public money available to developers. Named after their biggest sponsor, the so-called Gilbert bills are explicitly designed to facilitate real estate developments in Detroit. After the passage of these bills, four of Gilbert's developments Downtown—the Hudson site project, Monroe Blocks, Book Tower, and One Campus Martius—were approved for \$681 million in tax incentives. Typically, the brownfield concept is a relatively straightforward redevelopment strategy, opposed by few politicians on either

side of the aisle, wherein private developers can capture property taxes from developments they build on polluted land. But the situation in Detroit is different. Under these new regulations, the brownfield designation has been expanded to include blighted, foreclosed, and dangerous property. In other words, the types of investments that qualify for public subsidization have increased dramatically. Further, developers are allowed to capture not only property taxes but income taxes for employees who end up working at the redeveloped sites, income taxes for construction workers who build the sites, state sales taxes for construction materials needed to build the sites, and income taxes of residents who live in the buildings.⁹⁷

Where is the benefit for the city if all the newly generated tax revenues go back into the pockets of developers? Claims about “catalyzing” investments and creating “investor confidence” are nebulous at best; it seems the main thing investors have to be confident about is that *a closed circuit has been created wherein all potential public benefit from new developments remains in private hands*. The alleged number of jobs created in these developments is almost always inflated, and municipalities remain opaque about reporting the actual number of jobs created by subsidized developments. A report by the Mackinac Center for Public Policy concludes that of the 434 projects of the Michigan Economic Growth Authority (MEGA), which received subsidies on the basis of projected job creation, only 10 met or exceeded their expected job counts. That’s a paltry 2.3 percent. The Michigan Economic Development Corporation, which oversees MEGA, predicted that the projects would produce 122,785 jobs; only 13,941 actually materialized.⁹⁸

This points to the fact that capital profits from Detroit’s impoverishment not only directly, by purchasing cheap and abundant land and putting to work cheap and abundant labor, but also indirectly, through an ideological manipulation of Detroit’s poverty into a branding strategy that depicts investment as socially conscious. That is, the decrepit state of the neighborhoods, its abandonment by industry, and the poverty of its residents allow developers to portray their business activities as a form of philanthropy. Instead of being revealed as sheer profiteering, investment is painted as charity; recall, for instance, the *New York Times* labeling Gilbert the city’s “savior.”

“Bringing jobs to the neighborhood,” “reactivating public spaces,” “investing in communities” are just so many euphemisms for the pursuit of profit. Whether the developers themselves believe these maxims is beside the point; the fact is they are investing in Detroit because cheap real estate can be purchased and turned into lucrative investments. That these activities can be portrayed as charitable is one more way that capital has benefited from Detroit’s impoverishment.

When ground broke on the Hudson's development downtown, protesters showed up to decry the fact that the billionaire's project was subsidized by residents of a city with a 40 percent poverty rate. Gilbert responded that they were not being "rational": without such subsidies, he said, investors will move their capital elsewhere.⁹⁹ The same thing has been going on for decades. In the early 1980s, Kenneth Cockrel, then a socialist city council member, criticized Mayor Coleman Young for gifting hundreds of millions of dollars to General Motors in a bid to have the company relocate a factory to Detroit. Young's response is telling: GM, he reminded Cockrel, "ain't running no . . . welfare program."¹⁰⁰ Nearly forty years later, political elites and corporate media outlets continue to argue that if the city is to truly come back, it must lower taxes, further deregulate business, and increase corporate subsidies.¹⁰¹ Most ironically, as Representative Rashida Tlaib of Detroit points out, the supporters of public subsidies for private development "use economic recession and recovery as an excuse to not collect 100 percent of property, sales, and income tax produced by these for-profit, large-scale developments. Depleted public coffers will not be filled by giving away more public funds. . . . In a city where residents cannot easily access land and are losing their property at alarming rates . . . our resources and public lands are being turned into commodities to be brokered."¹⁰²

In Detroit, as in the rest of the world, the working class has in recent years had to endure austerity measures as a means to pay for public debt. After the global financial crisis of 2007–9, bailouts from local U.S. governments to financial institutions amounted to a staggering \$20 trillion, turning private debt into public debt. To pay for these bailouts, governments shifted to austerity programs. The working class paid for the profit recovery through layoffs, wage cuts, reduced work hours, and slashed social services. In the political scientist and activist David McNally's words, "When one U.S. economist observes that we have today 'a statistical recovery and a human recession' . . . we need to add, as one California teacher put it to me, that there is a statistical recovery *because* there is a human recession."¹⁰³

A final example of the inequality and unevenness that underpins Detroit's revitalization is the city's recent bankruptcy, which was completed in 2014. The previous year Governor Rick Snyder appointed a corporate lawyer named Kevyn Orr as Detroit's emergency manager, and in mid-2013 Orr declared bankruptcy on the city's behalf, its estimated \$18 billion debt making it the largest municipal bankruptcy in U.S. history. A law that greatly expanded the powers of emergency managers had been passed in Michigan in 2011, was struck down by voters in a referendum in 2012, and was finally pushed through the legislature later that year in a revised form which rendered it immune to

referendum. Under this law, Orr—a nonelected official in a position voters had rejected—was given autocratic power to restructure nearly all aspects of city government. The end result was a reduced payout for Detroit’s creditors at the cost of an austerity plan for city residents and increased influence and power for corporations in the city. Historian and Detroit scholar Scott Kurashige explains, “Detroit’s bankruptcy functioned as a hostile municipal takeover by financiers commissioned by the governor and emergency manager to reinvent Detroit on the basis of corporate restructuring principles.”¹⁰⁴

The result of Detroit’s bankruptcy came to be known as the “Grand Bargain.” In reality, it is the same breed of austerity plan that has gutted fiscally strapped governments across the globe. Social services, pensions, and public utilities are eliminated or privatized, while business-friendly policies are implemented to make Detroit more attractive to investors. The plan includes a reduction in payments to current pensioners to between 74 and 96 percent of the original; an end to cost-of-living increases, meaning that these deflated pensions will also decrease in value as inflation increases; and a 90 percent reduction in retirees’ health care benefits (which Orr estimated were actually more valuable than the pensions themselves). Banks took a significantly reduced payout on their loans—due largely to sustained efforts by the Moratorium Now! Coalition and other activists who protested throughout the bankruptcy and resisted Orr’s most draconian recommendations (which included an 86 percent cut to retirees’ pensions). But corporate interests were compensated by other means. Several banks who were “the biggest losers on paper . . . received access to Downtown Detroit land and property rights that could prove to be far more valuable in the future.” Detroit taxpayers were billed more than \$164 million for the services of the consultants and lawyers who negotiated the deal, including a bill for \$1 million to guard against excessive spending, and a bill for tens of thousands of dollars from the lead firm Jones Day for reviewing their fees with the examiner.¹⁰⁵

The post-bankruptcy restructuring of Detroit also involves a push to increase revenues and reduce expenses in order to make the city viable in the future. This involves selling off public assets, deregulating industry, and further pushing costs onto poor Detroiters. From his penthouse suite, Orr—whom the *Washington Post* deemed “the man who is trying to save Detroit”—privatized the city’s trash collection services and threatened to sell its entire water system to a private company before mandating the creation of a regional authority to take control of the water system, which already serves the entire metropolitan region.¹⁰⁶ The initiation of water shutoffs by the Detroit Water and Sewerage Department (DWSD) was a response to suburban communities’ concerns that

city residents do not pay their water bills; convinced that DWSD was coming under fiscal control, the Great Lakes Water Authority was created in 2014, transferring control of Detroit's water system outside the city. Residents will feel the push for revenue in other ways as well, with fines and fees expected to be raised for services like buses and parking. The bankruptcy plan also included "reinvestment initiatives," which Orr was particularly "hopeful" would secure Detroit's future. The two largest sums were for "blight removal" (\$460 million) and "public safety" (\$230 million), of which two-thirds will be devoted to policing.¹⁰⁷

A consensus soon emerged among political elites and national news outlets that Detroiters got a fair deal. The austerity program that the bankruptcy prescribed was inevitable—nothing more than a commonsense response to the city's history of profligacy. Ex-mayor Bing claimed that the roots of the city's fiscal crisis lay in its residents' "entitlement problem." Emergency Manager Orr lectured, "For a long time the city was dumb, lazy, happy, and rich." These claims were echoed in the national press. The *New York Times* wrote that the city's fiscal crisis followed "a trail of missteps, of trimming too little, too late. . . . Now the chickens have come home to roost." The *Economist* likened Detroit's government to an alcoholic and hoped the bankruptcy would sober the city up. The Cato Institute depicted the bankruptcy as a long overdue solution to self-inflicted wounds: "Detroit is a model of tax-and-spend liberalism. The city's per-capita tax burden is the highest in Michigan. . . . The city's own choices, not free markets and limited government, are really responsible for Detroit's failure."¹⁰⁸ Georgia's Republican senator Newt Gingrich fantasized about turning the city into a tax-free zone.¹⁰⁹ It was widely agreed by corporate and political elites that the sweeping cuts already made by the city were not large enough to address the fiscal crisis.

The idea that fiscal crises in the public sector are caused by overindulgent welfare policies, greedy unions, and bloated state bureaucracies is not novel; in fact, it has become something of a commonplace in recent decades as austerity programs have been implemented around the world. This has particularly been the case in the wake of the 2007–8 financial crisis: "As unemployment and home foreclosures continued to rise, social state restructuring and public service cutbacks were (re)presented as overriding imperatives for fiscal restoration and debt recovery. . . . In this curiously familiar 'new normal,' the costs of restructuring and insecurity are being revisited, once again, upon the poor, along with cutbacks in entitlement programs and public spending."¹¹⁰

It is particularly foreboding that this narrative of overentitlement can gain traction in Detroit, where rates of poverty, child poverty, and unemployment

are the highest of any large U.S. city. Moreover, as we will detail further in chapter 5, by the time the city was declared bankrupt, residents had already suffered decades of crushing austerity. Between 1990 and 2013, for instance, the city's municipal workforce was *halved*. And from 2008–13 half the city's parks were closed. Meanwhile the welfare state has been gutted. In 1991 Governor John Engler, citing the need for austerity, ended general assistance, eliminating welfare for eighty thousand people. Then, in 2011, as people in Michigan were reeling from the effects of the economic crisis, state lawmakers passed a law to limit people to only four years of cash assistance. Between 2007 and 2013 the number of people in Michigan receiving cash assistance was cut in half, and in 2014 Governor Rick Snyder responded to outlandish claims that welfare recipients were lavishly spending their assistance on drugs and in casinos and strip clubs by introducing mandatory drug tests for some welfare recipients; the program failed to detect any drug users.¹¹¹

Despite, or rather because of these cuts, elites see in Detroit a model case of urban governance, one that is replicable in deindustrialized cities across the nation. This too is part of a broader trend. As elites attempt to make cities around the world more propitious to investment, they rely on cosmopolitan technocrats to create “portable policy paradigms” that can be adopted from one place to the next. As Orr was appointed, Moody's Investors Services announced that Detroit's bankruptcy could “change how other distressed cities approach their pension and debt obligations” and that “bankruptcy may become more appealing to other stressed local governments if Detroit succeeds in lowering pension benefits and discharges most of its general obligation debt.”¹¹² Indeed there are striking similarities between Detroit's corporate restructuring and the recently imposed economic “recoveries” in impoverished and debt-ridden places like New Orleans, Greece, and Puerto Rico (where debt restructuring was carried out by some of the *same people* who administered Detroit's bankruptcy).¹¹³ In all of these places, economic issues are presented as too important to be discussed democratically by local residents, who are depicted as ignorant or self-serving, thus opening space for elite technocrats to administer sweeping austerity.¹¹⁴

Throughout Michigan, corporate tyranny is ascendant. Startlingly, around half of black Michiganders have been subject to emergency management this last decade.¹¹⁵ The situation in Flint is particular dire. There, a series of emergency managers worked with corporate elites to shift the city to a poisoned water source and subsequently to cover up the fact that the water had lead in it, resulting in a devastating health crisis. The official death toll from Flint's criminally poisoned water is twelve, though health officials indicate that the actual number of fatalities is more likely in the hundreds.¹¹⁶

In Detroit, and throughout Michigan, activists have attempted to combat this sort of heinous corporate rule. The 2017 town hall meeting “Real Detroiters Speak Out” featured 150 activists who “spoke on and heard about the role of the banks, global corporations and political comprador elites in perpetuating the superexploitation of the majority African-American, working-class and poor residents who have been totally left out of the so-called rebirth of Detroit.”¹¹⁷ This meeting helped build momentum for the 2018 Conference to Defeat Austerity in Detroit. In advance of the 2018 Demonstration to Defend Detroit’s Neighborhoods, the Moratorium Now! Coalition—which has spearheaded efforts to resist processes of dispossession—issued a statement summing up the criticisms of many local activists:

The Detroit “comeback” has bypassed Detroit neighborhoods. While billionaires receive massive tax breaks and taxpayer funds to finance their private projects in 7.2 square miles of central Detroit, the rest of the city, about 133 square miles, continues to face the largest wave of home foreclosures since the 1930s, while thousands of families face water shutoffs. Meanwhile, toxic waste is dumped into the Detroit Sewer System in one of the city’s poorest neighborhoods, where sewer backups spread the toxic materials into residents’ basements and streets. Air quality in some neighborhoods is so bad that Detroit experiences the highest asthma rates in Michigan! . . . Meanwhile, the city’s rulers have diverted the federal Hardest Hit Funds to tear down homes instead of keeping families in their homes.¹¹⁸

Neighborhood Revitalization

In the past few years there have been increasing attempts on the part of the city, nonprofit agencies, and private developers to address the oft-cited problem that the city’s “comeback” has bypassed Detroit neighborhoods.” The Fitzgerald Neighborhood Revitalization project is the clearest example of how local leaders are attempting to bypass the radical critiques of local activists and come up with a solution to problems of inequality and geographic unevenness that *leaves unchallenged the basic tenets of capital accumulation*.

The Fitzgerald neighborhood lies about ten miles to the northwest of Downtown, far from the burgeoning entertainment district and the plethora of new mixed-use developments. The project’s focus is the roughly quarter-square-mile area bordered by McNichols Road to the north, Puritan Avenue to the south, Marygrove College to the west, and University of Detroit–Mercy

to the east. Situated within the larger Livernois-McNichols area, which Mayor Mike Duggan proclaimed his “number one neighborhood revitalization priority,” the Fitzgerald revitalization zone is a residential area which, like similar areas on the city’s East and West Sides, has been hollowed out by disinvestment and depopulation.¹¹⁹

As Alan Mallach asserts, “gentrifying areas are rarely the most distressed areas of a city,” and the existing assets of the Fitzgerald neighborhood are at least as important as its vacancy and potential for improvement in the city’s decision to focus its efforts here.¹²⁰ The area is close to two higher education institutions and the Livernois commercial corridor, one of the few areas of the city experiencing the kind of retail renaissance confined mainly to Greater Downtown. Nearby are several historically high-income neighborhoods, the University District, Sherwood Forest, and Palmer Park—where stately rehabbed mansions are selling for anywhere from \$200,000 to more than \$800,000. (The city’s median home price was \$37,000 in 2018.)¹²¹ These surrounding resources all make the Fitzgerald neighborhood a prime site for revitalization.

The array of actors and the types of approaches to the neighborhood’s revitalization are perhaps even more indicative of the structure of contemporary urban development than the larger-scale, billionaire-funded projects concentrated near Downtown. A dizzying ensemble of public, private, nonprofit, and quasi-public institutions and individuals, in interlocking and overlapping relationships (referred to in development-speak as “braided investments” and “multisector teams”), have come together to effect the neighborhood’s revival. We have done our best to try to make the Fitzgerald project as transparent as possible, but as the reader will surely notice, wading through all the acronyms, jargon, and cobbled-together entities isn’t easy, which raises serious questions about the democratic accountability of these sort of opaque investment schemes.

The Fitzgerald project is led by the City of Detroit, in partnership with the Fitz Forward development team, composed of the Platform and Century Partners, a real estate development group formed in 2015 by two young entrepreneurs who relocated to the city from New York to try to “fill the gaps” in Detroit’s resurgence by investing in “neighborhood revitalization” and “wealth-building” among the city’s black population. Together the city and Fitz Forward hope to “instigate catalytic local neighborhood development and launch a new paradigm for how inclusive development can be successfully implemented within urban ecosystems.”¹²² The project involves rehabilitating 115 vacant homes into a mix of for-sale and rental properties, landscaping 192 vacant lots, creating a two-acre park to serve as a community hub, and linking

different parts of the neighborhood together through greenways. This effort is situated explicitly as an alternative to the kinds of developments happening in Downtown and Midtown, with references to “residential stabilization,” “community engagement,” and the needs of “existing residents” recurring throughout the official literature. Demolition will be as limited as possible, and no new structures will be built; instead the neighborhood’s existing houses and vacant lots will be transformed into “productive” community assets, “preserving the character” of the neighborhood while “increasing density” and walkability. Fitz Forward is also partnering with local workforce development nonprofits and urban agriculture nonprofits like Greening of Detroit, which will turn some of the vacant lots into community gardens.

In order to carry out the reactivation of vacant lots and “abandoned” homes, the city has requested the transfer of 373 parcels of land owned by the Detroit Land Bank Authority (DLBA), a public institution “dedicated to returning Detroit’s vacant, abandoned, and foreclosed property to productive use.” DLBA is currently Detroit’s largest landowner, controlling about 100,000 parcels in the city, which also makes it the largest land bank in the country (seven times the size of the second largest).¹²³ The land bank was formed out of the rubble of the subprime mortgage crisis as a centralized repository for the increasing amount of publicly controlled land in the city. Its mission to turn Detroit’s vast amount of vacant and blighted land to “productive use” involves selling vacant lots (homeowners can buy empty lots adjacent to their property for \$100); auctioning houses online; selling a select few “rehabbed and ready” homes, with renovations subsidized by Quicken Loans; assembling parcels for development projects; and demolishing blighted structures, which between 2010 and 2017 was funded with about \$380 million in federal funding through the Hardest Hit Fund.¹²⁴ The activities of the DLBA have ramped up significantly since the beginning of Mayor Duggan’s first term in 2014, when it controlled a mere seven hundred parcels, and because of the institution’s massive land holdings—it currently owns 68 percent of the city’s 43,576 vacant homes—it plays an enormous role in redevelopment projects across the city.¹²⁵ Of the 373 parcels the DLBA owns in the Fitzgerald neighborhood, 323 will be transferred to the developers behind Fitz Forward, to be either rehabilitated and put on the market or demolished and turned into “productive landscapes.” The city will receive the remaining 50 parcels, which it will convert into new greenways and public spaces.

In projects like this one commentators see implications far beyond the city itself: “If Detroit can make a land bank work on this scale, it would provide a replicable model for other large cities.”¹²⁶ Indeed local institutions are

not the only ones involved in the Fitzgerald project. The larger Livernois-McNichols area surrounding the Fitzgerald neighborhood is one of the sites selected for Reimagining the Civic Commons, a program in which four national philanthropies—the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, the JPB Foundation, the Kresge Foundation, and the Rockefeller Foundation—pooled \$20 million to distribute among five cities: Akron, Chicago, Detroit, Memphis, and Philadelphia. Socioeconomic mixing, civic engagement, environmental sustainability, and value creation are the four pillars of this program, and the Fitzgerald neighborhood revitalization is the centerpiece of these efforts in Detroit. The expected impact of these efforts is far-reaching. Reimagining the Civic Commons declares, “Detroit is creating a new model of community development with civic assets at its heart, and has learned lessons with implications for cities far outside its borders.”¹²⁷ According to Detroit’s design director, “The lessons we’ve learned in Fitzgerald over the past year and a half . . . will create more engaged, equitable and thriving neighborhoods across Detroit—and even across the country.”¹²⁸

The Fitzgerald revitalization is only one aspect of a much larger effort undertaken by Mayor Duggan since he took office in 2014 promising to spread the benefits of redevelopment across the city’s population. His office crusades under the slogan “One city. For all of us.” In his first year in office he launched the Strategic Neighborhood Fund (SNF), an effort to coordinate investments in neighborhoods where market conditions make traditional investments impossible. The SNF is a partnership between the city and Invest Detroit, a federally certified Community Development Financial Institution that uses a mix of public and private funding to finance development in low-income and underserved communities and brings “partnerships and philanthropic resources together to catalyze growth in Detroit by supporting real estate and business projects that struggle to find traditional financing.”¹²⁹ Livernois-McNichols was one of the first three neighborhoods selected for the SNF, which expanded to ten neighborhoods in 2018 under SNF 2.0. This initiative is funded through a mix of city money (\$59 million), philanthropic donations (\$56 million), and state financing (\$15 million). It’s centered on four principles: “park improvements, streetscape improvements, commercial corridor development, and affordable single-family home stabilization.”¹³⁰ That last effort is also supported by the Affordable Housing Leverage Fund, a partnership between the City of Detroit Housing and Revitalization Department, the Michigan State Housing and Development Authority, and the Detroit office of the Local Initiatives Support Corporation, a national Community Development Financial Institution formed by the Ford Foundation in 1979 that “connects communities with

resources” by pooling funds from government agencies, banks, philanthropies, and private companies and using them to finance community development projects. The \$250 million Affordable Housing Leverage Fund in Detroit is directed toward the preservation of the quality and affordability of existing housing stock and the construction of new housing affordable to people “across a range of incomes,” all in the same neighborhoods targeted by the Strategic Neighborhood Fund, as well as Greater Downtown. However, it’s important to reiterate that “affordable” housing “isn’t actually affordable to most Detroiters.”¹³¹

Various local nonprofits, philanthropies, and community-minded developers are entwined in these braided redevelopment initiatives. Revitalization of the Livernois-McNichols area is to a large extent coordinated by the Live6 Alliance. (McNichols Avenue is the official name for 6 Mile Road, the name residents generally use.) Live6, a nonprofit organization that coordinates development efforts in the area, acting as a “conduit” between the community and various other local and national institutions. These include Motor City Re-Store, a façade improvement program launched in 2017 as a partnership between the City of Detroit, the Detroit Economic Growth Corporation, the Economic Development Corporation of the City of Detroit, and the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, in which local businesses receive matching grants for improving their storefronts. Live6 also works with Motor City Match, another partnership created by these four entities. Motor City Match is a \$500,000 quarterly grant program that seeks to develop small businesses in Detroit by pairing local and national businesses with the “best available real estate” in the city, as well as providing loans and business planning and counseling to new businesses and businesses relocating to Detroit.¹³²

This is only a partial snapshot of efforts to redevelop Detroit without the unevenness and displacement that usually attend the process of gentrification. What we can see from this sketch is the extent to which—in contrast to the relatively straightforward, federally funded urban programs of the New Deal and Great Society eras—urban development is today effected by an incredibly complex web of public, quasi-public, philanthropic, and private institutions at local and national levels. This approach, which has its roots in the “progrowth coalitions” that sought to quell urban unrest with economic development starting in the late 1960s, has arguably reached its apogee in contemporary Detroit, where a line can be traced from a new coffee shop in a “turnaround” neighborhood all the way to the federal government by way of local and national nonprofits, city and state governments, the largest philanthropies in the country, and a menagerie of financial institutions.¹³³ The architects

of these braided, multisector redevelopment processes refer to their work as “filling the gaps,” and, indeed, in a situation where private investment is not economically rational or feasible on its own, and where government funds are insufficient to provide for the needs of city residents, this concatenation of actors and funding sources is necessary if redevelopment is going to occur at all.

In fact, the same is true of the developments in Greater Downtown that opened this chapter. Dan Gilbert and the Ilitch family would not be reconstructing the center city into a mecca for tourism, entertainment, and white-collar industry without the intervention of the city government. The logic of contemporary urban development necessitates that nearly all the real estate investment activities in Downtown Detroit are publicly subsidized. While tax breaks for billionaires in the poorest city in the country appear heinous, those who argue that without these subsidies redevelopment would not be occurring at all are, within the framework of the “entrepreneurial city,” correct. Fierce competition for highly mobile capital creates a situation where cities are forced to fall over one another to offer the highest subsidies to increasingly fickle transnational corporations. This is vividly demonstrated by the inter-city contest for Amazon’s HQ2 in 2018, in which urban governments across the country competed to provide the company with the most generous package of tax breaks and business friendly conditions, a competition which threw Downtown Detroit’s boosters into a marketing frenzy for several months. Amazon’s subsequent abandonment of one of their selected sites in New York City (which Governor Andrew Cuomo called “the greatest tragedy that [he has] seen since [he has] been in government”) demonstrates the volatility of this profit-driven logic, and the precarious position faced by cities forced to conform to such logic.¹³⁴

The *New York Times* has recently written, “There are no real assurances that gains will be spread democratically across the city, or that city planning and public resources will serve the needs of everyday Detroiters. But the hope is that private individuals will keep the greater good in mind.” Local elites have heralded the spread of “mini Gilberts” and “black Dan Gilberts” who will invest in more socially conscious ways.¹³⁵ However, despite the city’s efforts to employ strategies consonant with the necessities of capitalist development and with principles of inclusion, equality, and community engagement, there is every reason to believe that the negative aspects of revitalization are not aberrations that can be solved with smarter and more inclusive investments. Rather, as the previous sections demonstrated, inequality is hard-wired into the functioning of the capitalist city. Well intentioned as these efforts may be, as long as they leave unquestioned the logic of capital accumulation they can

at best only ameliorate the deprivations caused by this system. More often, such efforts work hand in hand with these deprivations. The form of neighborhood revitalization being practiced in Detroit is, for example, perfectly consonant with the city's austerity plan. The neighborhoods targeted for investment are in every case those with already existing assets like colleges, hospitals, active commercial corridors, relatively high rates of occupancy, and cultural institutions. As such, their reinvigoration leaves unquestioned the concomitant disavowal of the most impoverished and derelict neighborhoods advocated by Mayor Bing and the DFC, which considers such neighborhoods, and thus the residents who occupy them, not "viable" in the process of Detroit's recovery.

But the inability of the neighborhood revitalization framework to overcome capitalism's destructive tendencies becomes even more obvious when we consider that capitalist development is uneven not only spatially, but also temporally. Simply put, Detroit could not be redeveloped if it had not already been disemboweled. The only reason the Fitzgerald neighborhood can be "revitalized" is that it was leveled through another public-private partnership in the recent past; mortgage lenders, Wall Street financiers, the City of Detroit, and Wayne County worked together to dispossess vulnerable populations from their homes, a process which has now come under the misnomer of "abandonment." Without this underdevelopment, there could be no redevelopment.

And while the former glory of Detroit is omnipresent in the zeitgeist of the city's renaissance, historical memory stops short of a recognition that the lows of Detroit's past could also be replicated in the future. But where mythology obfuscates this possibility, real-time events prove an irrefutable reminder.

In February 2019 Fiat Chrysler Automobiles (FCA) announced plans to invest \$1.6 billion to convert old factories on the East Side of Detroit into new production facilities, which would constitute "the first new auto assembly plant in Detroit in a generation." Michigan's governor Gretchen Whitmer proclaimed, "It's been a long time since we've seen an investment this big and transformative," with Mayor Duggan adding that the deal is a "once-in-a-generational chance to change the economic fortunes of thousands of Detroiters."¹³⁶ The constituencies of these politicians will, as a result, heavily subsidize the new plants built by FCA, a company that was created as part of Chrysler's \$12.5 billion federal bailout after the 2007–9 financial crisis.¹³⁷ Detroit residents' forced contribution will be a full 200 acres of land, assembled by the Duggan administration's aggressive land bank authority, gifted to FCA for nothing other than the promise of future jobs and so-called economic development. On top of this,

FCA will receive up to \$270 million in various incentives and tax abatements, of which at least \$34 million would otherwise have gone toward school funding.¹³⁸

The deal is reminiscent of GM's controversial Poletown Plant, built through a similar process of land acquisition and tax incentives in the early 1980s, which destroyed a thriving neighborhood in the process. Mayor Duggan himself compared the current deal to Coleman Young's infamous one.

In late 2018 GM announced that it would be closing the Poletown Plant, along with several others of its factories, in order to downsize the company's workforce and maintain profitability. The nearby city of Hamtramck (which is completely within the city of Detroit), will be left in a "major financial crisis" without the revenue from the factory.¹³⁹

The new plants being built by FCA in Detroit face, then, an unfortunate but predictable future. Whether, as in the Amazon HQ2 fiasco in Long Island, the deal falls through, leaving the city and its taxpayers in the lurch, or whether, as in the Poletown Plant's slow demise, the years simply render it obsolete, this momentous deal will eventually go down as another failure piled on the trash heap of capitalism's history.

But where it cannot rely on the passage of time, capitalism turns to more coercive mechanisms to push through its vision for society. We now turn to the police's role in facilitating capital accumulation in contemporary Detroit.

Policing the New Detroit

The officers had real, real long rifles. It was like the army or something on Jefferson [Avenue]. Like an invasion. —MARCO FREEMAN, resident of Detroit's East Side, quoted in Mark Jay, "Policing the Poor in Detroit," 2017

Over the past few years there has been much emphasis on the need to address Detroit's crime problem. In his report to the state government, Emergency Manager Orr claimed that the crime problem in Detroit is "endemic" and is a primary obstacle to the city's revitalization. A Michigan Radio story titled "How Is Crime Hindering the Comeback of Detroit?" is indicative of the liberal media's coverage of crime in contemporary Detroit.¹⁴⁰

The appointment of James Craig as chief of the Detroit Police Department (DPD) in 2013, and the department's subsequent implementation of broken-windows tactics, have been viewed by the local and national media as a long overdue response to this crime problem. The broken-windows theory holds that punishing even the smallest crimes—such as loitering, panhandling, and graffiti—is necessary to create the atmosphere of lawfulness that will prevent

more serious crimes from being committed. This strategy, which includes zero-tolerance policies and stop-and-frisk tactics, was famously implemented in New York City in the 1990s by Mayor Rudolph Giuliani and Police Commissioner William Bratton (although, as we will see, stop-and-frisk first emerged in the 1960s to combat black political militancy). Chief Craig served under Bratton when he brought the broken-windows policy to Los Angeles in 2002. In 2013 the city of Detroit paid \$600,000 to the Manhattan Institute and undisclosed fees to the Bratton Group for their help facilitating DPD's adoption of broken-windows tactics.¹⁴¹

It is true that, for the past several decades, Detroit's reported crime rates, including violent crime rates, have consistently been among the highest for large U.S. cities; this is understandable when we consider the high rates of poverty and unemployment, as well as the city's dramatic demographic shifts. But it is also clear that broken-windows tactics, and anticrime measures more generally, have served a broader purpose: they have simultaneously helped to *administer and legitimate* the social order required for the city's revitalization to take place. To get a sense of what we mean by this, let us take a closer look at the social effects of these anticrime measures, again contrasting Greater Downtown and the neighborhoods on the city's deeply impoverished East and West Sides.

POLICING GREATER DOWNTOWN

As displacement increases in the Downtown area, the dislocated residents are generally depicted as the unfortunate, though inevitable, casualties of Detroit's comeback. At other times, however, the displaced are presented as criminals impeding the progress of gentrification. A 2016 *Detroit News* article headlined "Revival of Detroit's Cass Corridor Crowds Out Criminals" begins, "In the rebranded Cass Corridor, police say hipsters are crowding out the criminals. But the drug dealers who have permeated the neighborhood for years aren't going down without a fight." The article goes on to quote DPD Captain Darin Szilagyi: "The revitalization of the Cass Corridor has left very little territory for drug dealers. . . . The little that's left has become valuable territory, and that's led to some violence. You have your OGs (original gangsters) who go back to the 1980s, and they're fighting with the younger guys who are trying to move in. . . . This is where these dealers have operated for years, and they want to hold on to it." In the same article, Lyke Thompson, director of Wayne State University's Center for Urban Studies, offers a similar version of the story: "Gentrification . . . affects criminals, too. . . . It's been happening all over the country. . . . You see development, and when you have a strong foundation of

investment, that brings more law enforcement and people who are more likely to report crimes. *And the criminals are forced to go elsewhere.*"¹⁴²

We can see here how the subtle narrative gloss is performed wherein those Detroiters pushed aside by revitalization are rebranded as undeserving criminals. There is no room in analyses like this one for contradictions, complexity, or history; it paints a simple conflict between police—stewards of Detroit's economic recovery and, thus, representatives of the common good—and bad guys: "drug dealers," "OGs," "criminals." This sort of mythologization has hardened into a kind of political common sense: in 2016 the city spent \$547 per capita on police; that same year, per capita spending on food stamps in Michigan was less than \$21.¹⁴³

The city's homeless population has been similarly criminalized. According to Mark Jacobs, director of Heart 2 Hart, a Detroit homeless outreach organization, there were around 20,000 homeless people in the city in recent years but only 1,900 shelter beds—enough for less than 10 percent of the homeless population. Mayor Duggan recently promised to reduce the number of people "wandering" and "begging" near Downtown. A 2013 ACLU report details that, Downtown, homeless people are "being approached and harassed by police, not necessarily for anything they're doing, but just because of the way that they look. . . . Often they're being dropped off late at night in neighborhoods that they don't know. Police often take any money they have out of their pockets and force them to walk back to Detroit, with no guarantee of any safety."¹⁴⁴ This process is ongoing. In February 2019, for example, Detroit police "wiped out" two makeshift camps Downtown that had been used by homeless people for decades. According to *Metro Times* and WXYZ Detroit, the city cleared the areas as part of a larger effort to "keep the city clean" and place the city's homeless population in shelters. In the middle of a winter that saw temperatures drop to -30 degrees Fahrenheit, and on the brink of an ice storm that closed schools and froze infrastructure across the metropolitan region, police seized all the belongings of the camps' residents and forced them to move elsewhere. One sixty-six-year-old homeless man had his wallet and ID taken as part of a "clean sweep" in which officers confiscated the accumulated belongings of Detroit's most vulnerable population as they tried to survive the winter: coats, hats, gloves, blankets, sleeping bags, tents, and sleeping mats.¹⁴⁵

Making matters worse, the United Community Housing Coalition, one of the main local organizations that works with displaced Detroiters, lost 40 percent of its government funding in the summer of 2019.¹⁴⁶ In the absence of any plans for employment, public works, or large-scale affordable housing programs, homelessness is generally treated as a security problem. Nationally



FIGURE 1.2. Two private security guards patrolling Downtown stop to talk to a couple of residents. Photo © Philip Conklin, 2016.

the trend is the same: more than 15 percent of new arrestees report being homeless during the year of their arrest. In a recent Los Angeles city budget, \$87 million of the \$100 million devoted to the problem of homelessness was allocated to the police.¹⁴⁷ In Detroit, according to Police Chief Anthony Holt, the message from police to panhandlers is clear: “We don’t want you to move from Woodward and Warren to Woodward and Selden. We want you to stop the behavior.” But in the city with one of the highest unemployment rates in the nation, it is unclear what alternatives could allow them to “stop the behavior.”¹⁴⁸

As the political scientist Cedric Johnson reminds us, “Aggressive policing is central to urban real-estate development and the tourism-entertainment sector growth, both of which serve as central economic drivers in the contemporary landscape.”¹⁴⁹ In Detroit this policing is bolstered by a variety of private security firms. Dan Gilbert employs private guards from a wide range of companies who are “trained to spot potential trouble and to deter thieves, drug dealers, muggers and even aggressive panhandlers.” These guards are typically paid just above minimum wage: “Security contractors have been reluctant to



FIGURE 1.3. Police officers question a man sitting on a sidewalk in Hamtramck.
Photo © Philip Conklin, 2016.

significantly raise wages because they are under competitive pressure to keep costs low.” Detroit police officers are in radio communication with guards from the multiple security firms that Gilbert employs, and they work in concert to remove these human “broken windows” from the Greater Downtown area.¹⁵⁰

Gilbert has also installed a multimillion-dollar surveillance system of over three hundred cameras that captures most of what happens in Downtown. And all of it is seen by Gilbert’s security staff, who monitor the live feeds twenty-four hours a day from a Downtown “command center.” In 2015 *Motor City Muckraker* reported that Gilbert’s surveillance team was illegally installing cameras throughout Downtown on buildings Gilbert did not even own. Gilbert denied the accusations, calling his critics “lying venom filled wannabes” and “dirty scum,” but the story was corroborated by local business owners.¹⁵¹

Detroit is not the only city whose downtown area is patrolled by a panoply of private and public security forces. The number of private security guards in the United States is rising rapidly, and it is estimated that by 2020, there will be 1.2 million private guards employed, roughly the same number of full-time

police officers in the country. These private security forces, however, have not replaced police so much as collaborated with them, amplifying their power and helping them to implement strategies such as broken windows.¹⁵²

Downtown security has also been bolstered by Wayne State University's Urban Safety Project, a partnership with AmeriCorps, a national nonprofit organization. The project's motto is "Come together in a community effort to secure and beautify!" The program is "designed to build a culture of neighborly communication . . . in order to reduce crime." AmeriCorps members are given such tasks as "taking surveys, talking to residents, boarding up houses, organizing community meetings." They become the eyes and the ears of the police, passing along information about criminal threats to promote neighborhood beautification. This program is consistent with the broader logic of community policing, a logic characterized not by a reduction of police authority but a *diffusion* of police authority throughout society.

POLICING THE PERIPHERY

From 2013 to 2015 the DPD carried out a series of seventeen paramilitary police raids under the moniker Operation Restore Order. Presented by the department and local media as a way to combat the city's "most problematic" and "crime-riddled" areas, the raids invariably targeted the same impoverished neighborhoods on the city's periphery most impacted by water shutoffs, home foreclosures, and school closings.¹⁵³

The DPD has allocated resources to these expensive paramilitary raids—which killed seven-year-old Aiyana Stanley-Jones in 2010—even as more immediate community needs go unmet. In 2013 Emergency Manager Orr estimated that the police's average response time to emergency calls was fifty-eight minutes.¹⁵⁴ Five years later the *Motor City Muckraker* reported that the response time was still among the slowest in the country: "In 2018, police averaged nearly 40 minutes to respond to priority one and two calls, the most urgent crimes, from burglaries and armed robberies to homicides and kidnappings." Nevertheless, as part of the city's recent austerity, DPD's ranks have been cut around 25 percent.¹⁵⁵

Police Chief Craig has defended the deployment of SWAT teams, claiming they were used only in extreme situations: "[In] fortified locations . . . where there are heavy armaments, who better to send inside that location to execute a search warrant other than special response teams of SWAT units? . . . When we have to address an active shooter situation or barricaded suspect, I think the community would applaud us coming in with an armored vehicle, not only to keep our officers safe, but to keep our community safe."¹⁵⁶ However,



FIGURE 1.4. A police SWAT team on a raid detain several Detroiters. © 2014 Karpov.

as Ryan Felton has reported, the evidence from the seventeen raids that composed Operation Restore Order tells a different story. Over the course of the operation, police made over a thousand arrests, but these yielded little in the way of prosecutions. Wayne County's prosecutor Kym Worthy admitted, "Our office simply has not received an influx of cases from these raids."¹⁵⁷ Despite Chief Craig's claim that paramilitary units are deployed only in "active shooter situations," these SWAT raids were little more than routine, low-level drug busts: police seized three hundred kilograms of narcotics throughout the raids, 99 percent of which was marijuana, a drug that Detroiters voted to decriminalize in 2012 and that was legalized for recreational use in Michigan in 2018.

Across the country the pattern is the same. In recent years, there have been around fifty thousand SWAT raids annually in the United States, up from three thousand in the early 1980s. Almost all are in poor neighborhoods. Although



FIGURE 1.5. Militarized officers prepare to enter a Detroit home. © 2014 Karpov.

SWAT teams emerged in the late 1960s to combat the Black Panther Party, nowadays they are mostly deployed for drug searches in the country's poorest neighborhoods, predominantly communities of color—and in at least one-third of cases these searches yield no drugs. During the past few decades, spending on police across the United States has increased by 445 percent. Much of this has gone toward militarization, with more than \$400 million spent each year on military-grade equipment, compared to \$1 million in 1990. Between 2006 and 2014 the military donated 128,000 items of equipment to Michigan police departments alone. These include “17 Mine Resistant Ambush Protected Vehicles . . . built to counter roadside bombs; 1,795 M16 rifles, the U.S. military's combat weapon of choice; 696 M14 rifles; 530 bayonet and scabbards; 165 utility trucks; 32 12-gauge, riot-type shotguns; nine grenade launchers; and three observation helicopters.”¹⁵⁸

The militarism of Detroit's police extends beyond its equipment and tactics; it permeates the mind-set of many of its officers, who often treat








KEY	
	Borders of the City of Detroit (excluding the separate municipalities of Highland Park and Hamtramck, indicated by the white space in the center of the map).
	Outline of Greater Downtown Detroit.
	Borders of the three zip codes in which the most foreclosures took place between 2005-2014. Within these three zip codes, at least 26,107 foreclosures occurred during this 10-year span.
	Locations of paramilitary police raids launched between 2013 and 2015 as part of Operation Restore Order (including the raids that killed Aiyana Stanley-Jones [2010] and Terrance Kellom [2015]).
	Census block groups that endured the most water shutoffs between January 2015 and February 2016. Within each of these block groups, at least 15 properties and at most hundreds of properties lost access to water.

FIGURE 1.6. Map of water shutoffs, home foreclosures, and paramilitary police raids in Detroit. Sources: We the People Community Research Collective; *Detroit News*; City-data.com; 7.2 SQ MI. Image © Mallika Roy.

“disorderly” Detroit citizens as enemy combatants. In August 2017, for instance, Damon Grimes, a fifteen-year-old black youth, was riding his ATV through Detroit’s East Side and “popped a wheelie.” When police attempted to apprehend Grimes for his reckless driving, he fled and police followed, shouting, “Don’t run from the state police, you’ll get fucked up!” When Grimes slowed down, State Trooper Mark Bessner tased him, causing Grimes to crash his vehicle. Although Grimes died soon after the crash, Bessner insisted that he had “no sympathy at all for [that kind of] bullshit.”¹⁵⁹ In another incident in October of that year, two DPD officers, Ronald Cadez and Stephen Heid, were involved in a high-speed chase that led to the death of another black youth, nineteen-year-old Jerry Bradford Jr. The officers reached speeds of 75 miles per hour during the chase, which they initiated in violation of police protocol, failing to turn on their lights and sirens or notify Dispatch that they were involved in the chase. The officers eventually “disengaged” and later learned that the teen had hit another car and smashed into a tree, causing his fatal injuries. Detroit police are allowed to chase a suspect only if they believe the suspect has committed a felony, but no reason was given for this chase. Chief Craig explained that police officers “operate on hunches.”¹⁶⁰

This type of violent policing is justified by a mentality that views marginalized Detroit residents as, first and foremost, security threats. This ideology is so deep-rooted that, throughout Operation Restore Order, whenever no criminal activity was found at the site of a raid, the media reported that the suspects “got away” or that they managed to hide their criminal activity or even that they were “tipped off” by others in their criminal network. Therefore, the reasoning went, more raids would be required. The paranoid logic at work here is eerily reminiscent of the argument Stalin used to justify his purges of seemingly innocent members from the communist bureaucracy: “The best proof of people’s guilt is the lack of all proof. For if there is no proof, it must be because they have hidden it; and if they have hidden it, then they must be guilty.”¹⁶¹ To take just one example, here is the transcript of ABC Detroit’s report on the operation’s final raid:

REPORTER JONATHAN CARLSON: The Detroit Police Department is getting good at these organized crackdowns. . . . On this snowy March morning they were at it again, this time hitting this home, which *the chief says was a drug den*.

JAMES CRAIG: It was an active narcotics location based on what we’re finding.

REPORTER CARLSON: But in this case *the suspects got away*. Could be the *bad guys* know this is becoming more common. . . . When the accused drug dealers get home, they'll find a rude awakening, and a casualty.

JAMES CRAIG: There was a large-sized pitbull inside that the [Special Response Team] officers had to put down. He became aggressive during the entry. They fired two shots.

REPORTER CARLSON: This was the seventeenth Operation Restore Order. Every now and then the SWAT vehicle rolls into trouble spots in *a show of force*. It's to *put wrongdoers on notice*, and to let residents know the department means business. . . .

JAMES CRAIG: This is about making this city safe, and we have to sustain it.

REPORTER CARLSON: And the chief says when he rolls into one of these busts now, the people say, "We know you were coming, but we didn't know you were coming today." A sign that the message is getting across.¹⁶²

Though Operation Restore Order ended in 2015, paramilitary raids in the city have continued. In the summer of 2016 officers raided an alleged drug house on the East Side. According to the residents—a pregnant woman and her fiancé—the police did not announce their presence until they shot their way through the front door, killing the couple's dog and lodging a bullet at head height in the living room wall. Immediately after searching the home, the police issued a statement that drugs had been found. The residents, however, insisted that the police discovered nothing illegal. Their claim is corroborated by the fact that no arrests were made, and no tickets related to drugs were issued. A few months later, on September 27, 2016, a team of DPD officers, Michigan State security personnel, and U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) agents raided a West Side home as part of a collaborative "undercover narcotics operation." According to the *Detroit News*, "What police believed was a barricaded gunman situation . . . turned up nothing after they searched a home." The alleged criminal was not in the house; in fact, a DEA agent involved in the operation admitted that it was unknown whether the suspect had ever been there. A forty-one-year-old disabled woman was, however, present during the raid and "was safely removed."¹⁶³

Despite the often arbitrary violence associated with paramilitary raids, these police tactics do enjoy some support among poor Detroiters. Throughout Operation Restore Order, black residents in the city's periphery were consistently

shown on the news cheering on the officers as they pursued mostly black low-level drug offenders.¹⁶⁴ While this depiction is partially a product of the media's pro-police predilection, it also reflects the reality that many Detroiters do in fact support police tactics that target the city's poorest residents. ABC's coverage of a SWAT raid in 2014 provides a vivid example of this attitude:

REPORTER JULIE BANOVIC: Many of the homes being raided are tips from neighbors, who fear they are living next to drugs like this home on the West Side. One of the adults being questioned buried her head in her hands.

CHIEF CRAIG: We have three adults out front that are detained and we'll continue with our investigation.

REPORTER BANOVIC: Someone in the home tried to get rid of the marijuana by throwing the bag out a second-story window. But police find it. Relieved, neighbors show their gratitude to Chief Craig. Sadly there are three small children in this home, so Child Protective Services will be coming by. When we go to the next home, police check tennis shoes for hidden drugs. . . . The three young adults who lived here were detained on the front lawn. Again, neighbors show their appreciation.

RESIDENT: Thank y'all.

REPORTER BANOVIC: But police could not find the marijuana everyone could smell and had to let the adults go.¹⁶⁵

When an older black resident thanked Craig for launching the SWAT operation, another reporter asked him what he wanted to tell his younger neighbors: "Get a job," he yelled. "To all them, get a damn job!" That the rate of unemployment in this particular West Side neighborhood is among the highest anywhere in the United States went unmentioned in the news report.¹⁶⁶

Anyone who spends time in Detroit's peripheral neighborhoods is likely to notice a number of signs for community crime patrols. As Jackson Bartlett has demonstrated in his compelling ethnographic work, these patrols are generally led by black residents who are caught between understanding crime as a "symptom" of poverty and as a straightforward problem of "personal responsibility." Members of these patrols tend to be middle-class, and though they are often uneasy about the nature of police violence and its racial overtones, in the absence of substantive social programs, a "moral" interpretation of crime generally prevails, one that treats crime as a behavioral issue. The result is that deep-rooted socioeconomic problems are treated as crime problems and are dealt with by the police, courts, and prisons.¹⁶⁷

This dynamic is not unique to Detroit: according to one study covering the first decade of the twenty-first century, 73 percent of white Americans, as well as 64 percent of black Americans, felt that the criminal justice system dealt with criminals “not harshly enough.”¹⁶⁸ This was after a half-century of mass incarceration, in which the number of people in prison, in jail, or on probation or parole increased from less than 800,000 in 1965 to more than 7 million.¹⁶⁹ The number of Michigan state prisoners increased from 8,000 in the early 1970s to around 41,000 in 2016; by the latter year, 25,000 Detroiters were under some form of punitive state control, including several thousand who must wear electronic collars. (This form of control, increasingly marketed throughout the United States as a cheap and humane alternative to imprisonment, has increased 70 percent in the past two decades and is now a \$6 billion industry.)¹⁷⁰

As we will see in the chapters to come, mass incarceration has been used to manage the poorest and most recalcitrant members of the working class.¹⁷¹ A 2018 report from the People’s Policy Project comes to significant conclusions about who, exactly, mass incarceration has targeted. The report’s author, Nathaniel Lewis, divides the U.S. population into five quintiles, based on people’s “household income during adolescence, their current household income, their education, their current assets, and whether they own a home or not.” Lewis also breaks down the “probability of ever being jailed”; the “probability of being jailed after arrest”; “the probability of being jailed more than a month”; and the “probability of being jailed more than a year.” The conclusion is that, “for all four incarceration outcomes, being lower class rather than middle or upper class makes a massive difference. Being black rather than white makes a modest difference that is statistically insignificant for all outcomes except one: the probability of being in jail or prison for more than a year. And even in that case, whites in the lowest class group are more likely to be incarcerated than blacks in the second-to-lowest class group.”¹⁷² This maps onto the Yale law professor James Forman Jr.’s finding that, “while the lifetime risk of incarceration skyrocketed for African American male high school dropouts with the advent of mass incarceration, it actually decreased slightly for black men with some college education.”¹⁷³

The black political elites who governed Detroit from 1974 to 2013 all advocated aggressive anticrime measures against the poorest Detroiters. (Coleman Young, the city’s first black mayor, said in his famous 1974 inaugural address, “I issue forward a warning now to all dope pushers, to all ripoff artists, to all muggers: It’s time to leave Detroit.”) And Detroit was no outlier: “an absolute majority of African-American [congressional] representatives voted in favor of

each of the major federal crime bills” of the past half-century.¹⁷⁴ These politicians, the historian Touré Reed writes, were “pressured not just by the federal government, but by *black* constituencies in high-crime neighborhoods in cities rocked by deindustrialization.”¹⁷⁵ Thus when Mike Duggan, the city’s first white mayor in forty years, supports aggressive anticrime measures, he is part of a long lineage, and, on this issue, he generally has the support of a good segment of the black population.

A Very Real Terror Squad

The security industry downtown is growing because there’s more people downtown. People were not downtown. Businesses were leaving. But now businesses are coming back. —JAMES HARRIS, manager at Securitas, a private security firm, quoted in JC Reindl, “Detroit’s rebound brings surge in downtown security jobs,” 2018

In *The Fabrication of Social Order*, Mark Neocleous traces the historical origins of the institution and concept of police, arguing that as capitalism developed, “the police mandate was to fabricate an order of wage labor and administer the class of poverty.”¹⁷⁶ Crime prevention as such has never been the purpose of police; rather the role of police in capitalist society is the maintenance of *good order*, and disciplining the working classes to the regime of wage labor is integral to this process. It is telling that the series of raids carried out by DPD from 2013 to 2015 was called *Operation Restore Order*. The massive amount of investment occurring in Detroit has created many new low-wage service-sector jobs. Retail, restaurant, janitorial, construction, and other poorly paid positions will necessarily have to be filled by Detroit’s laboring poor. Certainly, high levels of crime are a pressing social and political issue in the city, and one that disproportionately affects the city’s poorest residents, hence the support for paramilitary police raids among the city’s poor; but this should not lead us to believe that the raids are a straightforward response to crime. Though Detroit’s crime problem has plagued the city for decades, a spectacle on the order of paramilitary police raids becomes especially important now that reinvestment is occurring.¹⁷⁷ These raids thus have a dual effect. First, they coerce those on the receiving end to accept the capitalist order: *either find a job or leave the city*. Second, to all employed residents, potential gentrifiers, and investors, the raids offer a message of reassurance: *Don’t worry! The crime problem is being dealt with head-on. Detroit is a safe place to live, work, and play!*

In *Capital*, Marx suggested that, absent a unified working-class resistance, the “silent compulsion of economic relations” would force people to work

on capital's terms. And indeed, in the contemporary United States, where 46 percent of Americans don't have enough money to cover a \$400 emergency expense, sheer poverty certainly does a lot to motivate people to work low-paying, degrading jobs.¹⁷⁸ But there are also significant forms of *extra-economic force* compelling workers to take whatever jobs they can find, even if the pay is bad and the work is dangerous and alienating. As we have seen, impoverished people face an aggressive criminal justice system that punishes them harshly for any missteps. Additionally, as we write, the Trump administration is implementing plans to introduce mandatory work requirements for a broader array of social programs, including food stamps, housing, and Medicaid. As Tracie McMillan has reported, "The combined budgets of the public programs currently targeted for work requirements—food assistance, health care, and housing—total \$704 billion."¹⁷⁹ Thus the *threat* that Operation Restore Order conveys to poor people is expanding throughout society: either accept whatever jobs are on offer, or you will be locked in a cage or shackled with an electronic collar or suffer sheer destitution and homelessness.¹⁸⁰

As we mentioned in the introduction, and as we will detail in the chapters to come, attempts to revitalize Downtown and lure big businesses and high-income workers to Detroit go back at least a half-century, to the efforts of New Detroit, Inc. in the wake of the Great Rebellion. So it is unsurprising that our critique of DPD has precedents throughout these decades. To take just one example: a 1973 pamphlet released by the Detroit activist group From the Ground Up has eerie parallels to the contemporary situation. The pamphlet criticized Stop the Robberies, Enjoy Safe Streets, more commonly known as STRESS, a DPD "decoy" unit operating mostly in Cass Corridor (today's Midtown), which, on the thin pretext of targeting robbers, killed twenty Detroiters between 1971 and 1973.¹⁸¹ From the Ground Up insisted that Downtown developments such as the Renaissance Center would "be life-giving only for those entrepreneurs whose investments of substantial sums of wealth will reap even greater profits" and that, against the background of mass poverty and uneven development, "the function of STRESS as a tool of those in power becomes clear. The intimidation of the black community, the fostering of racial tension and division, the ostensible effort to 'make the streets safe' in the center, all represent an attempt to perpetuate the existing structure of society. . . . 'Street crime' will continue as long as society is organized for the profit of the few at the expense of the many." The pamphlet goes on to paraphrase Kenneth Cockrel's critique of STRESS, a critique that in many ways echoes contemporary critiques of DPD's paramilitary raids: "STRESS must be viewed not only as a very real terror squad operating outside the law, but also as an integral part, a

conscious program, of the city's power structure. As such, STRESS is a concrete example of the brutality, criminality, and racism which maintains the present structure and its priorities."¹⁸²

DPD's prominent role in maintaining and legitimating a deeply unequal and unjust Detroit is nothing new. What is new is that more money than ever is pouring into Downtown Detroit, and the police force tasked with securing the city's revitalization is now headed by a black police chief and is composed of mostly black officers.

The relationship between the criminal justice system and the city's power structure becomes clearer when we consider two current examples. First, the Detroit Police Department has access to Gilbert's private panopticon and works with his private security staff to monitor the Downtown area during events like professional sports games and protests.¹⁸³

Second, in 2014 two Detroit activists, Dale Lucka and Antonio Cosme, painted the words "Free the Water" on the Highland Park water tower. Next to these words they painted a large black-power fist. The artists were part of a collective that joined thousands of Detroiters in resisting mass water shutoffs. Soon after they painted the tower, the two men were arrested by Highland Park police and faced felony charges. The protesters were accused of "malicious destruction of property" as well as trespassing at a "key facility," a post-9/11 law that is punishable by three to four years in prison. Cosme said in an interview with *Democracy Now!*, "The criminalization of artists is part of a larger war on public space. It's coinciding with a war on public good. And privatization is being implemented on our public schools, on our water, our health care."¹⁸⁴

Perhaps the most ominous sign of this "war on public space" is DPD's use of facial recognition technology. As Steve Neavling has reported in the *Metro Times*, "In July 2017, the city signed a three-year, \$1 million contract with DataWorks, a facial-recognition vendor that offers 'real-time video surveillance' and a system that 'provides screening and monitoring of live video streams.'" Since then, DPD has "been using the face-scanning system for nearly two years without public input or a policy approved by the Detroit Board of Police Commissioners." As part of Project Green Light, a government initiative to expand surveillance throughout the city, the face-scanning system "enables police to identify and track residents captured on hundreds of private and public high-definition cameras installed at parks, schools, immigration centers, gas stations, churches, abortion clinics, hotels, apartments, fast-food restaurants, and addiction treatment centers. Police can identify people at any time using databases containing hundreds

of thousands of photos, including mug shots, driver's licenses, and images scraped from social media." Combined with Gilbert's private panopticon, Detroit's surveillance system has become one of the most pervasive and invasive in all the country; and if the city's elites get their way, Detroit may well follow in the footsteps of China, where the Communist Party watches over everyone with the help of all-pervasive security cameras that are attached with microphones.¹⁸⁵

When, in the summer of 2019, the public was finally made aware of this clandestine, dystopic police program, there was significant backlash. A coalition of 12 civil rights groups, for instance, have called on the city to end the "flawed and dangerous" program. But, as of our writing, DPD has not budged. At a public Police Commissioner's meeting on July 11, the publicly elected police commissioner Willie Burton repeatedly criticized the program's secrecy and called for a public ballot initiative so that Detroiters could vote on facial-recognition technology; as a result, *Burton was arrested on the spot*. Congresswoman Rashida Tlaib has also been a vocal critic of the program. "With little to no input," she said at a May 22 hearing, "the city of Detroit created one of the nation's most pervasive and sophisticated surveillance networks with real-time facial-recognition technology. Policing our communities has become more militarized and flawed. Now we have for-profit companies pushing so-called technology that has never been tested in communities of color, let alone been studied enough to conclude that it makes our communities safer." When Tlaib called on Police Chief Craig to terminate the "bullshit" facial-surveillance program, Craig responded that "nobody ever talks about the victims in these cases. I would offer a word of caution to the congresswoman about using that kind of language in referring to technology that gives these grieving families closure." Craig went on to say that, at a meeting with relatives of crime-victims, "when I mentioned facial recognition technology, they cheered."¹⁸⁶

The implementation of this draconian police program points to a larger dynamic in the city's so-called revitalization. Detroit's "comeback" leaves hundreds of thousands of Detroiters mired in poverty and unemployment. While the city government has not proposed any serious policies to address this problem, it continues to find new ways to criminalize the most vulnerable Detroiters, and to mythologize them as an immoral group of people that represent a dangerous threat to working Detroiters. In the end, this is simply a cheap way of managing poverty, and the ultimate goal here is to use the police to ensure that investors, consumers, and homeowners feel safe in the New Detroit.

The Myth and Reality of Detroit's Renaissance

What we can see from all this is the contradictory unity of dispossession and investment, privation and luxury, austerity and revitalization in contemporary Detroit. As Samuel Stein has written, "A planner's mission is to imagine a better world, but their day-to-day work involves producing a more profitable one."¹⁸⁷ While efforts to equalize the benefits of redevelopment may be well intentioned, what should be clear by now is that, so long as the profit motive reigns supreme, inequality and unevenness will be integral to Detroit's revitalization.

The situation becomes more understandable when viewed through the framework of creative destruction and mythologies. Capitalism continually destroys the landscape it creates in order to make way for a new regime of accumulation. What's happening now in Detroit is not new or unique; it is the contemporary iteration of the transition that most manufacturing cities have undergone as they transform from an industrial to a postindustrial economy. What is unique about Detroit is the amount of time this transition has taken and the immensity of the disinvestment and poverty it has incurred in the meantime. After a series of false starts beginning in the late 1960s, Detroit has finally succeeded in becoming what various scholars have called the "corporate," "progrowth," or "entrepreneurial" city, one whose political economy is centered around corporate headquarters, "meds and eds," tourism, consumption, and entertainment. Despite the confidence of investors, city planners, and new residents, we can't be sure how long this success will last. The only thing we can be sure of is that at some point the postindustrial landscape, like the industrial one that preceded it, will eventually become obsolete and will have to be destroyed to make way for a new landscape that fits whatever follows in its wake. As long as capital perpetuates itself, it will perpetuate this process of creative destruction.

We contend that this inherently destructive process continues to engender itself and retain legitimacy through the concomitant process of mythologization, which redirects and obfuscates capitalism's destructive tendencies, allowing people to make sense of the contradictions swirling around them without pointing to their structural causes. The primary mythology sustaining the creative destruction of contemporary Detroit is the one we've disputed throughout this chapter—that redevelopment can be equalized across the city, if only two conditions are met: if poor people behave in a more moral and less criminal fashion, and if business owners invest in more socially responsible ways.

Mythologies, in our sense of the term, are not simply tales of propaganda constructed in the boardrooms of the elite or decreed by fiat from on high;

rather they are often the spontaneous result of political and ideological struggle and are utilized both by those in power, who need mythologies to legitimate their rule, as well as by those without power, who need them to make sense of their situation. This is perfectly evident in Detroit today. The engineers of Detroit's renaissance need to portray their efforts in a way that makes them appear benevolent, for if they appeared to the public as supporters of an avaricious scheme to siphon profits from the city's impoverished residents, they would have a much harder time achieving their goals. And so the pursuit of profit is cloaked in a language of "job creation," "community investment," and variations on the theme of "walkable, mixed-income urban neighborhoods." New residents, at least those aware of the negative impacts and connotations of gentrification, likewise wish to absolve themselves of directly or indirectly displacing current residents. And so a portion of profits are donated to charity, small businesses are patronized, and inclusive development is supported in spirit, if not in practice. Long-time residents, meanwhile, who seek to make sense of their neighborhood's deterioration, often take refuge in mythologies that blame their lazy and criminal neighbors. This way, relatively well-off Detroiters can believe that they succeeded because of their hard work and ingenuity, while those who languish do so because of individual failings. In this way, the system of capitalism, which necessarily produces a class of poor, unemployed workers, is absolved.

This is not to say that any of these claims or actions are disingenuous—just the opposite. In order for mythologies to be effective, they must resonate with real conflicts and anxieties and satisfy actual needs and desires. For this reason, mythologies go hand in hand with political struggles. The attempts by contemporary activist groups in Detroit—We the People of Detroit, the Moratorium Now! Coalition, Detroit Eviction Defense, the Michigan Welfare Rights Organization, and many others—to demonstrate the connection between the "two Detroit's" necessarily confront the mythologies that legitimate Detroit's revitalization. The question is, which vision of the city's present and future will resonate most deeply with Detroiters: one that justifies the profiteering of capitalist elites, or one that advocates for a more equitable distribution of the city's resources?

We situate our work as a complement to these struggles, as an ideological challenge to the prevailing mythologies of Detroit's renaissance. To borrow from Marxist philosopher Massimiliano Tomba, whereas mythologies distort the past and present capitalist social relations "as something that cannot be transcended," Marxist history "reopens, in the moment of a current struggle, the possibility of beginning another history, alternative to the course of capitalist modernisation."¹⁸⁸ Reconceptualizing how we think of Detroit's past is part and parcel of this struggle toward building a more humane future.

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Fordism and the So-Called Golden Years

c. 1913–1960

The wretchedness of the worker is in inverse proportion to the power and magnitude of his production. —**KARL MARX**, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*

The intellectual—be he scientist, engineer or writer—may think Automation means the elimination of heavy labor. The production worker sees it as the elimination of the laborer. Not being in a factory, the intellectual may think that the Worker in Automation is being turned into a technician. The production worker, however, knows this simple truth: when he is not thrown into unemployment, he is subjected to the inhuman speed of the machine. —Detroit autoworker and labor organizer **SIMON OWENS** (aka Charles Denby), *Workers Battle Automation*, 1960

Donald Trump was elected president in 2016 promising to “make America great again,” continuing the far right’s legacy of the strategic deployment of nostalgia to manipulate people’s discontent with the present and uncertainty about the future. Before its recent decline, so the story goes, America was a land of wealth and opportunity, and with the right set of policies this prosperity can be resurrected. The same sort of nostalgia for a mythic past animates the discourse around contemporary Detroit. The best-selling author David Maraniss’s *Once in a Great City: A Detroit Story* capitalizes on this nostalgia in its tale of Detroit’s “glory days,” when the city was, as the *New York Times* explains,

“a symbol not of urban decline and Rust Belt blight, but of high hopes and youthful dreams.”¹

This near-ubiquitous nostalgia for Detroit’s “glory days,” which underlies the contemporary spirit of “comeback,” remains operative because of its tangential relationship to the truth. As the center of the auto industry, the city once flourished; as the “arsenal of democracy,” it boomed with war production; and as the nation’s foremost “union town,” Detroit boasted high wages and benefits for its autoworkers during the postwar period. Barthes writes that “myth is speech *stolen and restored*. Only, speech which is restored is no longer quite that which was stolen: when it was brought back, it was not put exactly in its place.”² Mythology, in this sense, is often a historical action; it relies on a certain temporal distance from the events it describes, a gap within which its distortions evaporate, leaving a sedimented gloss over the reality of the past.

Nowhere is this more evident than in the legend that surrounds Henry Ford, the most impactful individual in the making of the Motor City. The changes that the Ford Motor Company wrought on the auto industry in the early 1900s transformed not only the city itself but the entire modern industrial process and our conception of work. His influence was so great that the era of mass industrial production bears his name: Fordism. Ford himself has become an emblem of the American ideals of hard work, individualism, and pick-yourself-up-by-your-bootstraps resourcefulness, and his mark is a constant presence in Detroit today, so ubiquitous and naturalized that it becomes almost invisible. The most potent memorialization of Ford is the museum complex based in nearby Dearborn called The Henry Ford, encompassing three campuses. The first is Greenfield Village, a sort of living museum of early American life where “300 years of American perseverance serve as a living reminder that anything is possible,” which includes working farms, a replica of a traditional Main Street, and demonstrations of traditional crafts.³ Second is the Rouge Factory Tour, touted as “America’s greatest manufacturing experience,” where guests can view the workings of a real automotive factory and have “awe-inspiring encounters with America’s celebrated manufacturing past, present, and future.”⁴ And finally, at the Henry Ford Museum of American Innovation visitors step “into a world where past innovations fuel the imagination of generations to come. A vibrant exploration of genius in all its forms,” the museum “allows you to experience the strides of America’s greatest minds.”⁵

The Henry Ford presents a mythological image of Ford: the name itself, with the simple introduction of “The,” turns the man into a concept, a monolith representing the tenets of “innovation, resourcefulness, and ingenuity,” the three “key words” of the museum’s mission statement.⁶ The museum is

explicitly historical; Ford was a collector of antiques and Americana, and the museum was founded on his personal collection. Of his original project Ford stated, “When we are through, we shall have reproduced American life as lived; and that, I think, is the best way of preserving at least a part of our history and tradition.”⁷ At The Henry Ford, visitors are presented with an image of America’s history and ideals *frozen* in time. You are invited to “try your hand at working on an assembly line. . . . See how Henry Ford revolutionized modern manufacturing. . . . In this hands-on activity, you’ll work with other guests to assemble a miniature wooden Model T using the station and moving assembly line methods.”⁸ But these historical exhibits serve, paradoxically, to evacuate history, replacing it instead with rigid, nostalgic *images* that, separated from their original context, only veil the complex and contradictory processes which they envelop.

What’s missing from the mythological nostalgia for Detroit’s glory days is the intensity of the class struggle during these years, a constant and violent conflict that pitted the *builders* of Detroit’s prosperity, its workers, against the *owners* of that prosperity, the auto companies. A Marxist theoretical framework makes the situation perfectly legible. Capitalism reproduces a dialectical relationship between labor and capital; where capital thrives, labor is immiserated. The prosperity that allowed business to flourish and some members of the working class to achieve a structurally superior position to others is the same mechanism by which the majority of the working class was intensely exploited and eventually made entirely redundant to the production process. As Marx suggests, “Accumulation of wealth at one pole is . . . at the same time accumulation of misery, agony of toil, slavery, ignorance, brutality, mental degradation, at the opposite pole.”⁹

From the Fordist regime, which made Detroit the center of global manufacturing through the creation of a “new human product,” to the “boom years” of the postwar period, when the prosperity of the auto industry was built on the coordinated debilitation of the labor movement, the mythological story of Detroit’s former glory can be told only by eliminating the violence and contestation that was always embedded within it. In short, the wealth of Detroit was built on the blood, sweat, and exploitation of its workers.

Ford’s House of Terror (1913–1940)

You can tell Herr Ford that I am a great admirer of his. I shall do my best to put his theories into practice. . . . I regard Henry Ford as my inspiration. —ADOLF HITLER, quoted in A. James Rudin, “The Dark Legacy of Henry Ford’s Anti-Semitism,” 2014.

The modern industrial age can be said to have begun in 1913, when Henry Ford opened a new production facility on 160 acres in Highland Park, then a small farming community just north of Detroit proper. The Crystal Palace, so called for its façade of windows, contained the world's first moving assembly line and was designed as a model of a new form of labor organization known as "scientific management." Under this system, work was broken down into highly specialized, minutely timed individual tasks which a worker would perform ceaselessly and without variation. Such methods had been undertaken by industrial employers in the United States since the turn of the century, including by Ford at his Piquette Avenue plant in Detroit, but the Highland Park factory represented a wholesale implementation of this philosophy. Taylorization—named after the father of scientific management, Frederick Taylor—led to an unprecedented shift in the scale of production and the nature of work in the U.S. auto industry, and Ford's enthusiastic adoption of its principles led to his company's meteoric rise: beginning as one of hundreds of small automobile manufacturers in 1903, by 1914 Ford's share of the automobile market was nearly 50 percent.¹⁰

Ford's legacy as the founder of modern manufacturing is the result not of his genius as an innovator or engineer but of his reorganization of the industrial labor process. The earliest cars, Ford's included, were produced slowly, at immobile workstations, with a minimum of standardization, and by the cooperation of various skilled craftsmen: metal finishers, upholsterers, machinists, woodworkers, and others.¹¹ As David Montgomery has documented, in the mid- to late 1800s, craft workers in the United States generally managed themselves and the "helpers" that worked under them. These workers were well-organized and self-sufficient, and they typically set the pace for their own productive labor. Workers' monopoly on the know-how required for their particular task gave them a significant degree of power and autonomy; there was thus relatively little need or capacity for surveillance within the workplace.¹² This is not to say that this was an idyllic time for most working people, or that market pressures played no role in orienting work relations. But it was drastically different from the production regime that succeeded it.

In order to understand the radical shift in working conditions that took place at the turn of the twentieth century, it is helpful to turn to Marx's crucial distinction between the *formal* and the *real* subsumption of labor under capital. Under *formal* subsumption, which is characteristic of earlier stages of capitalist development, workers collaborate to produce commodities for market exchange, and the profit from this exchange accrues to a small group of capitalist owners; the capitalist, however, "does not intervene in the process of production

itself, which proceeds in its traditional fashion, as it always had done.”¹³ In contrast, under *real* subsumption, in addition to claiming the profits, capitalists take over the labor process itself, and workers generally lose control over their laboring activity.¹⁴

Control over production was a point of struggle between workers and capitalists from the beginning of the auto industry, expressed in the distinction between a closed shop, one controlled by workers and “closed” to management’s influence, where only union members could be hired, and an open shop, one where employers intervened directly in the work process by hiring nonunion (and thus cheaper) labor, introducing new machinery, and speeding up production.¹⁵ While workers formed unions to attempt to limit capital to the *formal* subsumption of labor, capitalists formed organizations like the Employers’ Association of Detroit to further the *real* subsumption of their employees’ labor. Taylor’s theory addressed the needs of these capitalist organizations, based as it was on the complaint that in most workplaces “the shop is really run by the workmen and not by the bosses.” His solution was to take control of the work process from the laborers and put it in the hands of management, “classifying, tabulating and reducing this knowledge to rules, laws and formula” according to “the laws of science.”¹⁶ In short, “All possible brainwork should be removed from the shop and centered in the planning or laying-out department.”¹⁷

In other words, deskilling workers was one of the primary goals of the Fordist-Taylorist labor revolution. Removing “brainwork” from daily operations and putting control of knowledge in the hands of the bosses removed the workers’ main source of bargaining power. Complex tasks performed by craftsmen with accumulated years of experience were replaced by a simple series of movements performed by an unskilled worker requiring little to no training. By the early 1920s, nearly 50 percent of Ford’s jobs required only one day’s training, and a full 85 percent required under two weeks to learn.¹⁸ With control of production thus firmly situated in the minds of management, the Taylorist factory owner was free to implement new machinery, speed up production, and otherwise command the bodies and motions of his workers, each one identical to the other, now at the mercy of an increasingly mechanized and automated pace of work.¹⁹

Marx wrote that the real subsumption of labor “transforms the situations of the various agents of production . . . [so that] a complete (and constantly repeated) revolution takes place in the mode of production.” This revolution can be seen not only in the increased efficiency and output of the auto companies but also in the scaling up of their workforce: in the mid-1800s Detroit’s largest employer, Michigan Central Railroad, had around 200 paid workers;

by the early 1930s the River Rouge complex, Ford's successor to the Crystal Palace, employed more than 100,000. In Michigan's auto industry, this scaling up was possible only because companies like Ford, Packard, Buick, Olds, and Cadillac were financed by elites who had made incredible profits in the timber, copper, and railroad industries.²⁰ Smaller, family-owned operations struggled to compete, and more and more people had to work as wage laborers for large capitalists in order to survive: from 1880 to 1930 the percentage of U.S. workers who were wage or salary employees increased from 62 to 77, and the percentage of workers who were self-employed decreased from 37 to 20.²¹

The Fordist-Taylorist reorganization facilitated a dramatic rise in productivity and efficiency. Between 1910 and 1914 Ford reduced the time for assembling the Model T from seven hours to ninety minutes. While 10,600 Model Ts were sold in all of 1909, 16,000 were sold *per month* by 1913, and in 1924 Ford's factories produced 7,000 autos *per day*. From 1908 to the early 1920s the price of the Model T dropped from \$850 to \$290. The success of this vehicle was due to its design as a mass-market product, suitable for every potential customer, standardized to be exactly alike and easily replicable. (Ford famously commented that customers could choose any color they liked, so long as it was black.)²² The quantitative shifts engendered by the manufacturing of the Model T also corresponded to a shift in the quality of work: while one in three workers at Ford were skilled craftsmen in 1910, that ratio was only one in five by 1917, significantly weakening the strength of craft unions and thus further eroding the laborers' control of their work.²³

Deskilling workers was part of a broader strategy for increasing productivity at Ford. Coercion and surveillance inside the plants, facilitated by management's increasing control of the shop floor, was also integral to this boom. Foremen "had a raised desk in the centre of their work area from which to monitor the shop floor and also to remind their supervisees that they were being watched. . . . Supervisors had the power to enforce a range of petty rules, all designed to embody corporate control over the worker's body: bans on talking, singing, whistling or smoking."²⁴ Writing at the time, Lenin saw Fordism as little more than a tactic to "suck" more surplus value from the worker: "And if he dies young? Well, there are many others waiting at the gate!"²⁵

These workers waiting at the gate were in fact an integral part of this system, for soon after Ford opened the Crystal Palace a major problem emerged: no one wanted to work at the new Taylorized factory for very long. In 1913 so many workers left Ford—either ill, wounded, or full of hatred for their bosses—that Ford had to hire four workers for every waged position.²⁶ The cost of this

turnover forced the realization upon Ford that he had to pay more attention to the “human element of production.” His solution, in 1914, was to introduce the Five Dollar Day, widely considered as the moment the manufacturing middle class was born.²⁷ This momentous event, however, was not as straightforward as it is remembered today. As Ford himself stressed, the Five Dollar Day did not represent a simple increase in wages. Only half of the \$5 was guaranteed as wages; the other half was a contingent profit-sharing plan, dependent on worker behavior and actions both inside and outside the plant. As Stephen Meyer III has written:

The essence of the Ford Five Dollar Day and Profit-Sharing Plan was the use of profits to alter and to control the lives and the behavior of the Ford workers. . . . Money alone was not enough to induce workers to speed up machinery. It was simply a key to open the door to the source of the labor problems. It allowed Ford sociological investigators to enter the homes of Ford workers and to gather information on their values and styles of life. And, with this information, the investigators used the monetary incentive to change what they considered inefficient aspects of working-class life and culture.²⁸

For the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci, Fordism represented “the biggest collective effort to date to create . . . a new type of man.”²⁹ Just as the Model T was designed to be exactly like every other Model T, Ford’s workers were disciplined into being like every other Ford worker. The company’s Sociological Department implemented this employee standardization, conducting “character investigations” on nearly every employee in order to determine whether they would qualify for their profit shares. Investigators evaluated workers’ sexuality, financial responsibility, and religious attitudes, deeming at least 40 percent of the workers ineligible for the Five Dollar Day. The Department also institutionalized Ford’s patriarchal ideals: a worker whose wife worked outside the home was also disqualified from receiving the full \$5.³⁰

Part of Ford’s attempt to create an undifferentiated mass of workers was a special program to socialize foreign-born and nonwhite workers. By the early 1910s three out of four Detroiters were either immigrants or children of immigrants; they came mostly from Southern and Eastern Europe, fleeing poverty, dispossession, and political and religious persecution. For these workers, Ford—a notorious bigot and eventual Nazi supporter—created the Americanization program, with the stated goal of creating a new “human product.” According to the program’s *Ford Guide*, “yellow races” were “half civilized,” and black people “came from Africa where they lived like other

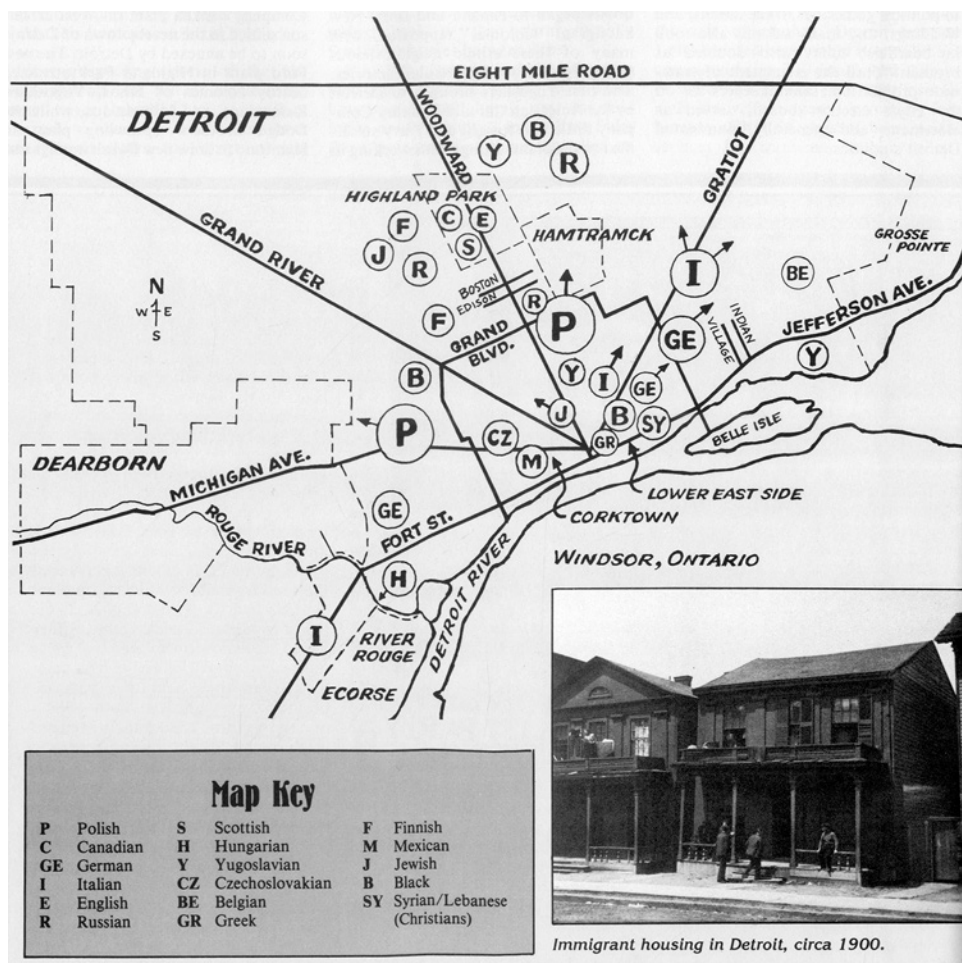


FIGURE 2.1. Map of Detroit, circa 1900. Source: Babson et al., *Working Detroit*, 26; Burton Collection, Detroit Public Library.

animals in the jungle. White men brought them to America and made them civilized.”³¹

Paternalistic, brutal, and racist though they were, Ford’s policies had the immediate effect that he desired. Worker turnover, as high as 370 percent in 1913, decreased to 16 percent in 1915.³² But Ford’s dream of creating a Procrustean bed on which his workers could be made to fit the demands of industrial production would soon prove to be unrealizable. The contradictions of capitalism were too pronounced to be remedied by any of Ford’s technical fixes.

Wobblies, Reds, and Goon Squads

Another major reason for Ford's introduction of the Five Dollar Day was the specter of class struggle. Workers did more than quit in frustration with the new industrial regime: many of them were organizing to resist the dehumanizing and humiliating conditions at auto factories across the city, posing a significant problem for Detroit's industrial elite.

Although less than 10 percent of Detroit's workforce was unionized in 1911, there is a rich history of worker struggles in Detroit before the days of Ford. Strikes, such as the General Strike on Labor Day in 1886, won such concessions as shorter workdays and more control over the shop floor. Detroit's business elites, however, fought tirelessly to keep Detroit an open-shop town, depicting unions as "criminal conspiracies" against the rights of private ownership. Owners hired spies to infiltrate workers' organizations, and the police were routinely called upon to escort foreign-born strikebreakers past picket lines.³³

Worker militancy began to intensify in the early 1910s. In 1912 the International Workers of the World (IWW), colloquially known as the Wobblies, entered the fray. Some three thousand Ford workers would gather around during their lunch breaks to listen to the IWW organizer Matilda Rabinowitz, who advocated direct action to "burst the shell of capitalist government." In response, Ford outlawed outdoor lunches and had Rabinowitz and other Wobblies arrested. In 1913 thousands of Studebaker workers walked off the job in the first major autoworkers' strike in Detroit's history; led by the IWW, they marched across the city, attempting to initiate an industrywide strike. The police attacked and dispersed the crowd and arrested the strike's organizers.³⁴

The IWW and its short-lived efforts at insurgency—the organization's Detroit chapter dissolved shortly after the mass strike of 1913—was one of many attempts to organize the Motor City's industrial workforce.³⁵ In the late 1910s the socialist-led Auto Workers Union had forty thousand members in Detroit alone. At the time, more than half of Detroit's workers were employed in the auto industry, making the autoworkers' movement Detroit's central political problem. As Zaragosa Vargas has noted, "Because of the peculiar nature of mass production, 'a minutely divided, closely timed, mechanized process,' the auto industry was analogous to a huge synchronized machine—a disruption of any sort would shut it down completely."³⁶

In the context of growing militancy the nation experienced its first "Red Scare," a campaign by the federal government to repress workers' resistance. As millions of American industrial workers displayed their solidarity with the Russian Revolution of 1917, and many more identified with the countries that

the United States was fighting in World War I, the Espionage Act of 1917 and the Sedition Act of 1918 were passed, mandating severe punishment for any person who “shall willfully utter, print, write, or publish disloyal, profane, scurrilous, or abusive language about the government of the United States.” During these years the entire IWW leadership was arrested, as was Eugene Debs, the presidential candidate of the Socialist Party. In the 1919–20 Palmer Raids (in which the future FBI head J. Edgar Hoover took part), the government rounded up six thousand “radicals” and exiled one thousand foreign-born socialists.³⁷ During the First World War, the American Protective League, a private organization that was officially sanctioned by the U.S. government, conducted thirty thousand investigations in Detroit alone, aimed at rooting out radical workers. Publications like the *Michigan Socialist* were outlawed; socialist meetings were banned; and carrying a red flag became illegal in the state.³⁸ Nativist ideologies were rampant, and immigrant workers found themselves in a vulnerable position; many of them left the city, including most of the 100,000 Mexicans in the metro area.³⁹

This coincided with the first great migration of African Americans to the northern United States. More than one million left the Jim Crow South in the 1910s and 1920s, and Detroit’s black population increased from less than 6,000 in 1910 to more than 120,000 in 1930. The causes for this migration include mechanization of agriculture, which left many black farmhands out of work; crop and bank failures; and the everyday terrors of the Jim Crow South.⁴⁰ Additionally, in the midst of the Red Scare, the federal government limited immigration from southern and eastern Europe, causing northern industries to become more reliant on black migrants. Indeed “much of the mobilization of the migration was orchestrated in the boardrooms of northern industrial enterprises.”⁴¹ Black workers were often deployed as strikebreakers and private guards and functioned as a cheap labor pool used to keep wages down.⁴² These workers were forced to work what Abdul Alkalimat and others have referred to as “shit work”—the worst paid, most degrading, and most dangerous work. In the auto industry, blacks were largely confined to jobs as production assistants, janitors, and foundry workers.⁴³

African Americans were also forced to live in the segregated Black Bottom neighborhood, which contained the city’s worst housing stock, often owned by predatory absentee landlords.⁴⁴ The relegation of black Americans to inner-city ghettos was a nationwide process, facilitated by an alliance between business interests and the police. The Code of Ethics of Detroit’s realtors’ association told salesmen not to sell to “members of any race or nationality . . . whose presence will be detrimental to property values,” restricting the growing

black population to the ghetto, “with police playing the role of both containment and pacification.”⁴⁵ Chances for integration were hampered in 1923, when the Michigan State Supreme Court ruled that racially restrictive provisions in the sale of homes were legal.⁴⁶ When Ossian Sweet, a black doctor, moved his family into a white neighborhood, white supremacist groups attacked the house, and the police failed to protect Sweet and his family. In the ensuing confrontation, a white person was killed; subsequently all eleven black people in Sweet’s household were arrested and held without bail on the charge of murder; all were eventually acquitted.⁴⁷

Blacks organized themselves against this terror and oppression by joining the union movement, as well as forming “church groups, women’s clubs, Black veterans’ groups, community organizations . . . and political clubs.”⁴⁸ Numerous black newspapers were formed during this time, including the pro-labor *Michigan Chronicle*. The Garveyite movement, which stressed black self-determination and advocated for black business development, also grew rapidly in Detroit as it offered a refuge for many black workers who were stripped of dignity inside and outside of the factory. (Garvey, however, was frequently criticized by black socialists such as A. Philip Randolph for his uncritical stance toward capitalism and class divisions within black America.)⁴⁹

The Detroit Police Department expanded its operations significantly in the 1920s, largely to repress workplace strikes and contain the influx of black migrants. At the time, Detroit was also home to many white-supremacist groups. In the 1920s Michigan had the largest Ku Klux Klan membership of any state, and at least thirty-two thousand members lived in Detroit. (Nationally, KKK membership exceeded two million in the early 1920s.) In 1924 the KKK’s candidate for mayor won Detroit’s popular vote; he was disqualified only on the technicality that, as a write-in candidate, his name was frequently misspelled on the ballot. The police, whose membership often overlapped with the KKK’s, deployed violent containment strategies to keep black workers in their designated place: in the first eight months of 1925, Detroit cops shot fifty-five black Detroiters. As the *Detroit Independent*, one of the city’s black newspapers, wrote at the time, more black men were “shot down in the streets [of Detroit] without a reasonable excuse than [had] been lynched in the entire South, during the same period.”⁵⁰ The Black Legion, a splinter group of the KKK, had a chapter in Highland Park with as many as thirty thousand members in the mid-1930s, including a former mayor. Blacks were not the only target of the Legion: Jews, Catholics, and communists were also condemned by the Legion for violating the sanctity of a pure Detroit. Police estimated that Black Legion members committed as many as fifty murders, including the bombing of

union headquarters and the slaying of prominent communist organizers. At the time, to be a radical activist, particularly a black activist, was a very dangerous proposition.⁵¹

Police worked hand in hand with the auto companies to contain worker dissent. By the mid-1920s, when Ford shifted operations from Highland Park to the River Rouge complex in Dearborn, creating the world's largest factory, the company had taken a more direct and violent approach to the problem of worker behavior. The Five Dollar Day was dropped in 1921, and with wages soon falling below the industry average, direct repression became the preferred form of labor management. The Sociological Department was replaced by the Service Department, headed by Harry Bennett, who soon "assembled the world's largest private army, and established the most extensive and efficient espionage system in American industry."⁵² Bennett recruited mainly former boxers, gangsters, and ex-convicts to staff this security force, which "body-searched workers, patrolled washrooms and interrogated anyone suspected of union activity."⁵³ At the same time the number of foremen in Ford's factories doubled, creating a "penitentiary atmosphere" for workers.⁵⁴ Along with major auto companies such as General Motors, Dodge Motors, Studebaker, and Packard, Ford worked with the Employers' Association of Detroit, which hired labor spies and black-listed workers suspected of union activity. In the case of any union mobilization, the Association had a roster of forty-four thousand strikebreakers.⁵⁵

The Great Depression

The production boom that this type of coercion facilitated was historically unprecedented. Worker productivity in Detroit's auto industry had increased 1,000 percent in just two decades. The heavy capital outlays required to keep up with Ford's production techniques—sprawling factories, moving assembly lines, cutting-edge machinery, and a massive workforce—drove most of the country's small manufacturers out of business, resulting in a remarkable *centralization* of capital. In 1908 there were 253 auto producers in the United States; by 1929 that number was 44, with just three companies—Ford, General Motors, and Chrysler—accounting for 80 percent of industry output. This centralization of capital led to a drastic increase in wealth inequality.⁵⁶

The oligarchic auto industry was the motor of both the local and the national economy. Car production consumed more than 50 percent of the steel produced in the United States, 75 percent of the glass and rubber, and 20 percent of the nickel and tin.⁵⁷ Particularly in Detroit, few jobs were not in some way dependent on the auto industry.⁵⁸

Competing firms, in all types of industries linked to the auto boom, were being forced by the coercive laws of competition to make a choice: either invest in new machinery and rationalize production or lose market share. All this led to an unprecedented construction bonanza that included factories, railway tracks to move the product, and houses to shelter the swelling industrial labor force. In Detroit a dramatic building boom also transformed the Downtown skyline in the years before 1929, leading a contemporary publication to enthuse, "Detroit has crowded more than three-quarters of a century of achievement . . . into a short space of two decades."⁵⁹ But a problem was brewing, one that would eventually bring the system crashing down. The real incomes of 90 percent of U.S. workers *declined* in the Roaring '20s. Who, then, was buying all these new cars and other consumer goods?⁶⁰

In volume 3 of *Capital*, Marx illuminates a central contradiction of capitalism: "The more productivity develops, the more it comes into conflict with the narrow basis on which the relations of consumption rest."⁶¹ Eventually consumption *always* lags behind production for the simple reason that if the workers were paid enough money to buy all the products they produced, there would be no profit. This gap is widened by the downward pressure on wages that the "coercive laws of competition" exert; these laws dictate that firms with the cheapest costs of production can generally undersell and outcompete other firms. That the working class as a whole doesn't have the disposable income to purchase all the products it produces is a contradiction that can *never be resolved within capitalism*; it can only be displaced in time (through credit) and space (through the conquest of foreign markets).⁶²

In the 1920s Detroit factories were producing cars at a rate that far exceeded the capacity of consumers to purchase them; the same was true in industries across the country. But Wall Street remained optimistic: even as corporate profits declined, stock prices (shares of those profits) were increasing.⁶³ In late October 1929, however, the gap between productive capacity and consumption became too wide, and the house of cards came crashing down.⁶⁴ Investment stopped. People were laid off en masse. Within a few years auto production in Detroit fell 75 percent. Even as the crisis deepened, however, the Big Three firms "thrived": "Ford and Chrysler endured only two modestly unprofitable years while General Motors recorded no losses at all, with profits surpassing the 1928 record as early as 1936. This was accomplished by . . . massive permanent layoffs, 50 percent reductions in annual pay for those remaining, and unprecedented speed-ups, while at the same time maintaining the pace of product and process innovation."⁶⁵ The extent to which workers were asked to shoulder the load of the crisis is revealed in one Chaplinesque anecdote: as a result of Ford's

speed-up campaign, one worker's job entailed operating two drill presses, one in each hand.⁶⁶

The destitution and misery that workers faced is hard to overstate. By the end of 1930, 150,000 Detroiters were out of work. Across the United States, the unemployment rate reached 25 percent. A quarter of U.S. children were malnourished. Millions lost their homes. "Homeless armies wandered the country on freight trains; one railroad official testified that the number of train-hoppers caught by his company ballooned from 14,000 in 1929 to 186,000 in 1931." There were 568 suicides in Detroit in 1931, five times the number in 1927.⁶⁷

The Spirit of 1937

In 1930 Detroiters elected Frank Murphy, a liberal, pro-labor candidate for mayor who promised to combat the "financial dictators" who were responsible for the city's immiseration. Although Murphy enjoyed wide support across the city, his big ambitions were curtailed by harsh economic realities and a budgetary shortfall. Part of the problem was that Ford had deliberately set up his major factories outside of city limits (in Dearborn and Highland Park) to avoid paying taxes to the Detroit government, despite the fact that as many as 35 percent of relief recipients in the city were Ford employees. As Detroit's tax revenue sagged, Ford stuck to his policy of never donating to local relief groups, claiming that "self-help is the only means of combating the economic depression."⁶⁸ Reminiscent of the 2013 bankruptcy, the banks that loaned Detroit the money to maintain its social services in the face of these revenue shortfalls demanded an austerity program in exchange, including a reduction in the city's welfare expenditures and cutting the wages of thirty-five thousand municipal employees. And, as in contemporary Detroit, a huge percentage of the city's revenue was redirected toward repaying its creditors: in 1932, whereas 7 percent of the city's revenue went to relief efforts, 43 percent went to banks, half for interest payments.⁶⁹

In 1933 Franklin Delano Roosevelt, a close associate of Murphy, was elected president promising to create a "New Deal." Henry Ford and many other of Detroit's industrial tycoons were opposed to Roosevelt's (and Murphy's) support for increased government intervention into the market. When Roosevelt traveled to one of Ford's factories in Detroit, Ford refused to meet with him, claiming Roosevelt was advancing Soviet-style policies.⁷⁰ But many enlightened members of the capitalist class realized that more government intervention was needed to right the economy and restore a semblance of order. Furthermore, Roosevelt was no socialist. The president himself called relief



FIGURE 2.2. An Unemployed Council protests in Downtown Detroit in 1932.
Sources: Babson et al., *Working Detroit*, 57; *Detroit News*.

“repugnant to the American ideals of self-reliance.” His programs alleviated some sections of the working class’s worst suffering but brought the country nowhere close to recovery. The New Deal’s Civilian Works Administration, for example, provided enough jobs for only 40 percent of the 10 million unemployed workers who applied. The Social Security Act excluded all farm and domestic workers, with the result that, in 1933, 11.4 million white workers and 3.5 million black workers were left in the lurch.⁷¹ Piven and Cloward insist that resistance to a more robust welfare state was “not only a reflection of harshly individualistic American attitudes. They were also a reflection of American economic realities. Work and self-reliance meant grueling toil at low wages for many people. So long as that was so, the dole could not be dispensed permissively for fear some would choose it over work.”⁷²

As immiseration spread and jobless workers were forced to steal in order to survive, the state responded with mass arrests. Between 1925 and 1939 the U.S. incarceration rate increased 73 percent. As George Rusche, an affiliate of the Frankfurt School, wrote at the time, the imprisonment boom was part of a campaign to displace blame from the economic system onto “immigrants and Negroes.”⁷³ In 1936 black people accounted for 4 percent of Michigan’s total population but 20 percent of its prison population.⁷⁴

As prisons grew overcrowded (some stuffed to 300 percent of their capacity), a series of prison revolts broke out in the metro Detroit area and across the country. Rusche wrote, “There is a shortage of beds; the air, calculated carefully per head in the narrow cells, is consumed excessively. . . . The sanitary facilities are becoming pestilential. . . . Under these conditions a hell is created.”⁷⁵ The growing number of prison riots and escape attempts caused an international scandal, and prison officials were warned to be hypervigilant in preventing any further upheavals. So when a fire broke out in a prison in Columbus, Ohio, in April 1930, prison guards suspected it was a ploy of the prisoners and responded by securing the gates with “machine gun emplacements.” By the time the guards realized that the fire was no ruse and attempted to put it out, it was too late: 322 prisoners in the overcrowded prison had burned to death. This story was front-page news in Germany.⁷⁶

To combat widespread immiseration, the U.S. Communist Party (CPUSA) organized Unemployed Councils to block evictions, restore disconnected utilities, and protest social deterioration. A year after the National Hunger March, the head of the CPUSA in Detroit organized the Ford Hunger March. On March 7, 1932, three thousand workers marched on the city’s employment office. Their demands were relief payments, employment, the right to unionize, and an end to discrimination in Ford’s factories. The DPD, Dearborn police, and Michigan state troopers attacked the crowd and a fight broke out in which the police killed five people. Although no police officers were killed, the *Detroit Free Press* blamed the deaths on the “red mob” that was led by “chronic agitators.” The night of the march, officers used the violence as a pretext to raid the homes of many well-known communists and union organizers. Days later thirty thousand people marched in solidarity during the funeral procession of the murdered protesters.⁷⁷

As around the country, Depression-era protests were often multiracial, which deeply worried local elites. Ford, for example, had long understood the danger of black activism. In 1923 his newspaper characterized the civil rights movement as “the Jewish attempt to Bolshevize the Negro.” That same year, the Ford Service Department hired a black ex-cop, Donald J. Marshall, to run

the black Service Department. One Department operative wrote, “If a colored man would give any back talk in his employment office, Marshall would take him out in the back room somewhere and . . . beat the very last daylight out of him.”

Ford is often praised for being the first among the major auto companies to hire a representative number of black workers, but it is important to note that in the 1930s, more than 99 percent of black Ford workers were confined to the Rouge factory. According to University of Kansas professor Elizabeth Esch, Ford’s strategy was a contingency plan: in case white workers initiated a mass strike, he could rely on black workers to maintain production. Ford had long used divide-and-conquer strategies, pitting various ethnic and racial groups against one another inside the plant. He gave financial contributions to a select few churches that he knew to be politically conservative, and used these churches as employment agencies to find loyal black workers and strike-breakers. (Reverend Charles Hill was outstanding in his efforts to encourage blacks to resist this unholy alliance and join the union movement.) When A. Philip Randolph, the black socialist leader of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, came to speak at a black church in Detroit, Ford issued a threat to all his black workers that whoever attended Randolph’s speech would be fired—and many were.⁷⁸

It was not only capitalists who supported racial divisions within the working class. The American Federation of Labor (AFL) clung to its policy of racial segregation, even though that policy had undermined one of the union’s largest strikes, the steelworkers’ strike of 1919, when tens of thousands of black workers crossed a picket line rather than stand in solidarity with a racist organization. But thanks largely to the work of black leaders like Hubert Harrison, Cyril Briggs, and the African Blood Brotherhood, the Communist Party increasingly worked to organize black workers. The 1930 Comintern—an international organization that met to advance global communism—stressed the importance of the “Black Question.” By 1931 there were over one thousand black members in the CPUSA.⁷⁹

In 1935 the United Auto Workers (UAW) was formed as part of the Committee for Industrial Organization (CIO), a radical sector within the increasingly conservative AFL, and began consolidating all the radical workers’ groups in and around Detroit. The UAW had a distinct faction linked to the CPUSA, which organized the UAW’s campaign for a thirty-hour workweek and worked closely with the National Negro Congress, a left-wing organization formed in 1936, to unionize newly arrived black laborers. In 1935 the executive council of the AFL warned of the growing leftist influence in union movement: “If the

Communists succeed in their efforts it means no more or less than the dissolution or destruction of our movement.” The *Detroit Free Press* added, “The responsible leaders of American labor cannot be hoodwinked into believing that the seizure of their movement by Communists would bring in the new millennium.” The Black Legion murdered UAW secretary George Marchuk, and the militia is suspected of being behind the deaths of other UAW organizers who were murdered during the 1930s.⁸⁰

Despite such repression, in 1936–37 the UAW led a historic series of sit-down strikes. As opposed to the walkout, during which workers would leave the plant and picket outside the gates to try to keep strikebreakers out, in the sit-down strike workers occupied the factories and locked themselves in. This tactic was adapted from one used by capital *against* workers; in 1933, when fifteen thousand autoworkers struck in Detroit, plant owners set up barracks so that the strikebreakers could live in the factories to ensure uninterrupted production.⁸¹ Workers put this strategy to use with the help of small businesses and women-led groups that supplied striking workers with food and other necessities, and sit-down strikes soon spread throughout the city and across industries, as workers in Detroit’s department stores, lunch counters, and hotels all sat down. The labor historian Steve Babson writes, “The sitdowns welded workers of diverse skills, nationalities, races and religions into a powerfully unified movement.”⁸²

These sit-down strikes, which essentially codified the labor movement as a force in twentieth-century American politics, were successful thanks to concurrent developments in the country’s political life. In particular, as the labor historian Nelson Lichtenstein explains, the union movement seemed to offer a solution to two of the most pressing political problems of the 1930s, underconsumption and industrial democracy, both of which grew out of the contradictions which had culminated in the Great Depression. As we’ve seen, the Depression was caused by overproduction and a highly regressive distribution of wealth that put the new consumer products (especially automobiles) that were now driving the economy out of the reach of most workers. To solve this problem, “a broad upward shift in working-class purchasing power was essential,” and the union movement seemed the only institution capable of achieving this “American standard of living” for all workers.⁸³ On top of this, unions were the institution that seemed capable of bridging the gap between the rights discourse prevalent in American society with the culture of autocracy and obedience of the parochial industrial workplace. Many of the new unionists were African Americans, Mexican Americans, or from European immigrant families, and the union movement’s promise of “industrial democracy” offered them a sense of citizenship they were denied in civil society.⁸⁴

This popular upsurge, garnering legitimacy from the anti-business sentiment engendered by the Depression, was given institutional expression by the politicians of the New Deal. The 1935 Wagner Act, named for Senator Robert Wagner, was a “Magna Carta” for the labor movement, designed to put in place a permanent set of mechanisms by which the labor movement could organize itself and resolve its grievances with management. The Act gave workers the right to strike, boycott, picket, and, crucially, select their own union by majority vote, which the companies would now by law be forced to recognize as the sole collective bargaining agent of its workers. The next year the American public voiced its approval for the New Deal coalition and its policies by reelecting President Roosevelt in a historic landslide victory. It was this wave of popular support and institutional authority that the UAW rode on its path to official recognition during the sit-down crusade.

The longest and most influential of the sit-down strikes was the 1936–37 occupation of General Motors in Flint, Michigan. This strike, which was catalyzed largely by communist and socialist organizers, lasted forty-four days.⁸⁵ In a tactic that the League of Revolutionary Black Workers would emulate thirty years later, UAW organizers targeted specific “mother plants”—plants that produced *all* of an essential part needed for GM cars. By targeting these plants, striking workers were able to shut down production at all GM plants within three days. As in Detroit’s Great Rebellion thirty years later, the National Guard was called in to help the police repress the workers, who refused to capitulate even in the face of bullets, tear gas, and vomit gas.⁸⁶

After the strike, GM was forced to legally recognize the UAW as the sole bargaining agent for all of its workers, and Chrysler soon followed. But GM also moved much of its production from the Flint plant to upstate New York, an early example of what labor historian Beverly Silver describes as a “spatial fix,” one of industrial capital’s main strategies for escaping militant labor. And this fix set an important precedent: in the decades to come, the Big Three firms fled southeastern Michigan precipitously, in an effort to escape the strong workers’ movement.⁸⁷

But the sit-down movement was too strong for most capitalists to simply repress or evade. In March 1937 Detroit’s leading newspaper declared, “Revolution is here.” Babson explains:

The sitdown wave spread through virtually every industry in the city. Four hotels, including two of the downtown’s largest, were occupied. So were at least 15 major auto plants (including Chrysler), and 25 smaller parts plants; a dozen industrial laundries; three department stores and



FIGURE 2.3. Strike at Dodge Main in 1937. Sources: Babson, *Working Detroit*, 80; United Auto Workers.

over a dozen shoe and clothing stores; all the city's major cigar plants; five trucking and garage companies; nine lumber yards; at least three printing plants; ten meat-packing plants, bakeries and other food processors; warehouses, restaurants, coal yards, bottlers, and over a dozen miscellaneous manufacturers. . . . Even non-employees sat down. On March 11, 35 relief participants occupied the Fort Street welfare office.⁸⁸

Reactionary forces opposed the sit-down wave through mythologization and outright repression: city elites consistently blamed worker militancy on

“outsiders”; the House Un-American Activities Committee had hearings on the “communist conspiracy” behind the sit-downs; and the National Guard was routinely brought in to retake the occupied buildings. Nonetheless, radical unions were winning recognition across the city and across the country. More than 2 million U.S. workers participated in a strike between September 1936 and June 1937, and CIO membership increased to 3.7 million.⁸⁹

Ford was the last of the Big Three to hold out against unionization. His strategy was outright coercion. Almost 10 percent of Ford’s ninety thousand Rouge employees were secretly working for the Service Department. Harry Bennett, who by then had taken over the day-to-day management of Ford’s enterprise due to Henry’s health problems, ruled with an iron fist. The Service Department continued to recruit from gang members, bouncers, boxers, and convicts; while Bennett was on the board of the Michigan Prison Commission, from 1935 to 1937, “convicts were paroled to the Ford Motor Company at a rate of approximately five a week.”⁹⁰ Bennett used the three thousand members of the Service Department to brutalize any and all workers suspected of union activity. In 1937, at the Battle of the Overpass, the Department violently attacked UAW activists, including future UAW President Walter Reuther (then of the Socialist Party), who were leafleting during a shift change. In the next four years, Ford fired four thousand workers for suspected union activity. But workers withstood this repression, in no small part thanks to the National Negro Congress, which helped the UAW organize black workers. In the decisive walkout of 1941—which finally forced Ford to recognize the UAW—Bennett deployed black workers to attack the picket lines and to work as strikebreakers in a deliberate attempt to foment a race riot. But this divide-and-conquer strategy failed when the majority of the 16,000 black workers stood in solidarity with their white co-workers.⁹¹

In the context of pervasive racial violence, a deepening penal crisis, rampant unemployment, militant workers’ movements, and economic stagnation, many in power realized that the state needed to take a much more active role in managing the capitalist market. But attempts to manage the crisis, notably the New Deal, proved insufficient to remedy the country’s faltering economy. By the late 1930s, Detroit’s auto companies were still producing fewer cars than they had in 1929. In Detroit 135,000 people were still unemployed (including 80 percent of the UAW’s 250,000 members), and the national unemployment rate was 15 percent. Meanwhile factories across the country had more productive capacity than their owners knew what to do with; as factories and machines stood empty and unused, there was simply no way, within capitalist logic, to connect this surplus capacity with the mass of unemployed workers.

It would take a war to pull American capitalism out of this crisis: as historians Jefferson Cowie and Nick Salvatore write, “*The major reallocation of the American division of wealth was, in fact, not the New Deal, but the Second World War.*”⁹²

The War Years

In late 1940, with the Second World War raging in Europe, President Roosevelt gave a speech titled “The Great Arsenal of Democracy.” A year before the attack on Pearl Harbor, the speech was an announcement of the country’s material and ideological support of the Allies in their fight against the Axis powers. After warning of the direness of the situation in Europe and the Nazi project to conquer the world, Roosevelt decried the possibility of U.S. complacency, rousing the nation to the cause of Great Britain and “Democracy’s fight against world conquest.” Though not engaged militarily, American support would come in the form of “sending every ounce and every ton of munitions and supplies that we can” to our allies across the ocean. Every industry, Roosevelt proclaimed, no matter its peacetime function, “must yield, and will gladly yield, to our primary and compelling purpose.” Asking for sacrifice from workers, managers, and executives, Roosevelt urged, “The nation expects our defense industries to continue operation without interruption by strikes or lockouts. It expects and insists that management and workers will reconcile their differences by voluntary or legal means, to continue to produce the supplies that are so sorely needed.” The stakes were nothing less than “the defense of our civilization and . . . the building of a better civilization in the future.”⁹³

Before entering the war militarily, the United States was involved in the war economically. And the war was hugely productive for the economy, finally pulling the country out of the Depression. Nationally the war effort helped create 17 million jobs. The task of armament fell primarily to the industrial cities of the North, and Detroit in particular became the arsenal within the “Arsenal of Democracy.” Factories were converted wholesale to produce military equipment. (From 1942 to 1945 no autos were produced in the Motor City.) General Motors and Ford Motor Company were, respectively, the first and third highest-producing companies of military equipment for the war effort in the country. The number of unemployed workers in the city declined from 135,000 in 1940 to 4,000 in 1943. As thousands of Detroit’s workers joined the armed forces, demand for labor in the military economy was so high that women were recruited to work in the plants in record numbers: there were 260,000 women earning a wage in Detroit in 1943, up from 44,000 a few years

earlier. And for the first time, black women were drawn into the industrial workforce: the number of black women employed by Chrysler increased from zero to 5,000 between 1941 and 1945; as around the country, black women were relegated to the lowest-paying industrial jobs and were routinely subject to racist attacks and sexual assaults.⁹⁴

Even before the U.S. declared war on Japan, UAW leaders, and in particular Walter Reuther, had sought to use defense mobilization as a way to build goodwill for the union movement among the populace and consolidate labor's position in the political life of the country. While it enjoyed tremendous popular support, the 1936–37 union upsurge was the product of a temporary and tenuous coalition of forces. The incredible growth of union membership after the sit-downs belies what Lichtenstein calls the “surprising weakness of the union forces.”⁹⁵ A small group of radicals had been responsible for the GM sit-down, with the mass of workers supporting the union only after the strike had succeeded. Further, the strikers were victorious not because of pro-union sentiment among workers but because the corporation was temporarily denied recourse to the police power of the state thanks to the pro-union governor Frank Murphy's hesitancy to deploy the militia after the 1936 election demonstrated the population's support of workers' rights to bargain. However, this window of political opportunity was a brief one, and the future of the UAW was by no means assured. The nascent union was in shambles by 1938, faced with an economic slowdown and the power of the corporations they were up against. Divisions within the movement mirrored those in the broader polity, and reactionary forces hemmed in the union on all sides. Faced with this situation, Reuther latched on to the war production effort as the means to bolster the union's position and popularity, first by proposing a plan to pool the industry's unused industrial capacity to produce military equipment, and then, after the U.S. entered the conflict, by ensuring labor's complete cooperation with defense mobilization.⁹⁶

Immediately after the attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, union leaders rushed to show their support for the war effort by calling off strikes and pledging peaceful labor relations, fulfilling President Roosevelt's entreaty. On December 9 the president of the AFL issued a statement: “Labor knows its duty. It will do its duty, and more.” In the following days, meetings between the government, industry, and labor leaders produced an agreement that would ensure uninterrupted production during the war. President Roosevelt codified the agreement as follows:

- 1 There shall be no strikes or lockouts.
- 2 All disputes shall be settled by peaceful means.

3 The President shall set up a proper War Labor Board to handle these disputes.⁹⁷

This War Labor Board would be filled with union representatives who had nearly unanimously agreed to these conditions. As Martin Glaberman, a prominent Detroit Marxist and former autoworker, writes in his hallmark work, *Wartime Strikes*, “One of the interesting aspects of the adoption of the no-strike pledge was that no union bothered to consult its membership in advance, and very few bothered to consult afterward.”⁹⁸ Indeed, the no-strike pledge was anathema to workers’ interests. Though the pledge was predicated on the notion of “equality of sacrifice” on the part of labor and management, in reality workers bore the brunt, with union brass ignoring their members’ immediate interests in exchange for a more secure place at the bargaining table, sowing the seeds for the accommodationist posture of the UAW after the war.⁹⁹

In exchange for a no-strike pledge, federal military contracts were almost exclusively given to firms that employed unionized workers. (The government gave contracts mostly to big businesses, largely excluding small businesses from the wartime boom, and concentrating employment in large industrial enterprises.) As a result, unions were given carte blanche to register all laborers that worked in the war effort, increasing union membership and filling union coffers. These unionized workers were forbidden from quitting during the duration of their contract, a rule that benefited unions by securing their membership, and benefited capital and the state by mitigating work stoppages. This arrangement facilitated the largest growth in union membership in U.S. history: by 1946 more than two-thirds of manufacturing workers were represented by unions.¹⁰⁰

The booming war industry caused a high demand for labor, creating a contradictory situation for workers. On the one hand, work was plentiful and salaries were relatively high; on the other hand, the ability of workers to resist the demands of management was severely limited. This was due both to the no-strike pledge and to the popular call for patriotism and sacrifice, which fell primarily on workers. Many workers, despite the strike ban, initiated wildcat strikes—strikes not authorized by the union—but when they did, they faced resistance from all quarters of society. One worker at a plant in Hamtramck, a municipality inside Detroit, explained the media’s reaction to striking workers: “We were allies of Hirohito and next to Pearl Harbor, we were responsible for the rest of the troubles of the country.”¹⁰¹ Echoing this sentiment, General George Marshall, the army’s chief of staff, called wartime strikes “the damndest crime ever committed against America.”¹⁰²

Industry and the government fed into this mythology by claiming that the actions of striking workers were the result of a small group of “outside” radicals sowing dissent for its own sake. One future Michigan governor, George Romney, an auto industry representative during the war years, claimed, “The manpower problem exists principally because the desire of the majority of workers to do more work and get this war over with is being thwarted by an unrestrained militant minority group.”¹⁰³ In his “Arsenal of Democracy” speech, President Roosevelt provides a potent example of the way mythological language can create these types of divisions: “The evil forces which have crushed and undermined and corrupted so many others are already within our own gates. Your government knows much about them and every day is ferreting them out. . . . They seek to stir up suspicion and dissension, to cause internal strife. They try to turn capital against labor, and vice versa. . . . These trouble-breeders have but one purpose. It is to divide our people, to divide them into hostile groups and to destroy our unity.”¹⁰⁴

Declarations of patriotism and anticommunism obscured another reason for the crackdown on labor at this time. Not since before the Great Depression had there been a significant labor shortage. In other words, “this was the first time in anyone’s memory that workers had the means to exert considerable pressure for improved wages. That, in fact, is why the government rushed to freeze wages at a ridiculously low level.”¹⁰⁵ The relatively favorable conditions brought about by the war—nearly full employment and unrelenting demand for the goods of war—put labor in a better position to negotiate than it had had in a long time. It’s no coincidence that severe limitations on labor’s primary bargaining tool—the strike—were put in place at this time, precisely when wages were capped by federal decree and the president and industry leaders were demonizing struggling workers as the enemies of democracy and freedom. If patriotism were all that was at stake, then the companies themselves would have been forced to sacrifice for the war effort as well, but as one GM worker explained, “The corporations were showing no sense of patriotism or loyalty and were contributing nothing. All the sacrifices were on the part of the workers.”¹⁰⁶

The differential treatment of labor and capital during this period is stark. To control labor and ensure continuous production, the federal government took an increasingly direct role in the management of capital-labor relations. In addition to what we’ve already seen—the no-strike pledge, the regulation of wages by the government instead of through collective bargaining, and the intervention of the War Labor Board in labor disputes—Congress passed the Smith-Connally Act in 1943, which gave the federal government the power to

seize any “essential” factory or mine during a strike and force workers back on the job. Workers who promoted a strike were subject to imprisonment and a \$5,000 fine.¹⁰⁷ At the same time, the federal government was subsidizing private plant construction to an astonishing degree, with new factories disproportionately located in suburbs (such as Ford’s Willow Run bomber facility, between Detroit and Ann Arbor), further curbing the power of organized labor and accelerating unemployment in central cities in the postwar years.¹⁰⁸ Between 1940 and 1944 GM built \$900 million in new factory capacity, almost all of it paid for by the federal government. During the war corporate profits rose from \$9 billion in 1940 to \$24 billion in 1944. On top of this, the government promised to rebate most of the taxes on these profits after the war. As Secretary of War Henry Stimson wrote at the time in his wartime diary, “If you are going to try and go to war in a capitalist country, you have got to let business make money out of the process, or business won’t work.”¹⁰⁹

Despite widespread pressure from their employers, the government, the public, and union leadership, many workers continued the battle against capital. In addition to low wages, horrible work conditions were a major factor. *In Michigan, one workplace death, five amputations, and one hundred serious injuries occurred per day in 1944.* Between 1943 and 1944 four million American workers took part in 8,708 wildcats. In early 1944 Detroit workers averaged a dozen strikes per week, making the Motor City the leading center of workplace worker militancy. A local union president in Detroit, describing the rush to contain strikes during the war, said, “It was like a fireman with a water bucket running around trying to put fires out.” Wildcat strikes continued to increase in number throughout the war.¹¹⁰

In response, striking workers faced direct coercion. The military was often brought in to stabilize factory operations. “Military officers in uniform were present in all of the war production plants during the war and they regularly intervened in strikes and potential strikes. In other words, the reality of the war and the role of the government were concretely present to workers who went on strike or who threatened to go on strike.”¹¹¹

Mythologies smooth over contradictions to make the world legible, simple, and palatable. Wartime strikes in Detroit presented a series of contradictions. This is clearly seen at the UAW’s 1944 convention, when workers rejected all proposals on the no-strike pledge: to uphold it, to slightly modify its terms, or to rescind it entirely. During this time a majority of union members were violating the no-strike pledge through wildcats and other actions; despite this, in a referendum on the no-strike pledge union members voted 2 to 1 to uphold the strike ban, and two-thirds of the membership failed to even mail in their

ballots. This result shows that the connection between patriotism and the passivity of labor was not as simple as the government, the press, and corporate elites made it out to be. Workers, it turned out, could support the war, understand their sacrifices as a contribution to the war and an affirmation of patriotism, and *at the same time* oppose the blatant profiteering of their employers and the federal government's intervention in their relations with management.¹¹² The mythology that overlay these inconsistencies allowed the situation to *work*; that is, it facilitated the accumulation of capital (letting business "make money out of the process," as Stimson explained) during the war, while providing an accompanying ideology that cast those who would challenge the production of profit from the sweat and sacrifice of workers as "un-American," "unpatriotic," or "outside communist agitators." It allowed for profit-making, the exploitation of labor, and the containment of dissent.

Mythology also facilitates concrete repression when the mythology itself isn't enough to resolve ambiguities in public feeling. In other words, the mythology here casts labor organization and collective bargaining as unpatriotic and criminal. This mythology itself is not enough to convince the striking workers and any who support the actions of the workers, despite the slander of the press. But the mythology justifies the repression of the workers who fail to accept the mythology. With striking or otherwise disobedient workers equated with Hitler and the enemies of freedom, the government was free to administer the full force of its repressive apparatus, with the military intervening in situations where the indirect influence of government—through legislation, ideological pressure, and bureaucratic procedure—was insufficient.

The Postwar Regime

We shall solve the city problem by leaving the city. —HENRY FORD, quoted in Amy Kenyon, "Detroit's Road to Ruin," 2013

The postwar period is remembered as Detroit's Golden Years, a time of almost magical prosperity, when well-paying and dependable auto manufacturing jobs were available to everyone; when ascendance to the middle class—in the form of homeownership facilitated by steady work in the auto industry—was within reach for almost all Detroiters; when "Motown ruled the airwaves"; when liberal governance and the civil rights movement seemed to promise a slow but unwavering surge toward racial equality. "In the postwar years," a *New York Times* article stated in 2017, "Detroit became the epitome of the American dream."¹¹³

As we know, myths are not without their material foundations, and this period in Detroit was indeed one of comparative affluence. Detroit was the center of the globally dominant U.S. auto industry, and in the context of a booming postwar national economy, many in the working class enjoyed a rising standard of living: between 1939 and 1959 real median family incomes in the United States doubled.¹¹⁴ In Detroit these gains were largely thanks to the success of the UAW, which during the immediate postwar period earned significant wage and benefits gains for its members, while becoming institutionalized within the city's factories. This period in Detroit coincided with global economic trends: "The world economy had never seen anything like the Great Boom of 1948–73. For a full quarter-century the dominant economies surged ever forward, generating jobs, robust profits, and rising incomes year after year. These were the golden years of western capitalism."¹¹⁵ To understand Detroit in this period it is necessary to keep in mind this broader context. The United States emerged from World War II as the leader of the capitalist world, dominating global politics throughout the Golden Years. America's military was the strongest in the world: it had hundreds of bases across the world and carried in its arsenal the nuclear weapons that had just killed more than 100,000 people in Japan. In the economic arena, the United States also towered above the rest: at war's end, U.S.-based production accounted for more than half of global production. Using its influence to globalize trade and finance, the United States also supplied Europe and Japan with the physical capital, commodities, and cash to rebuild their economies. In addition, the combination of imperialist machinations and co-opted liberation movements opened space for capital expansion in the Global South, as previously undeveloped countries became repositories for Western capital.¹¹⁶

The myth of the Golden Years is twofold. First, this period mythologizes the Great Boom as the capitalist norm, with the attendant assumption that the conditions of this period could be permanently resurrected. In this framework, the period from 1973 to the present is viewed as a "long downturn" or "long crisis." Yet, as Thomas Piketty has famously documented, the reduction in inequality following World War II was an *exception* to the general rule of capitalism, a system that tends toward widening inequalities.¹¹⁷ Second is the myth that these years were golden at all. Despite increasing aggregate wages, this period in Detroit was marked by pervasive unemployment, intense class struggle, volatile racial strife, and the permanent relocation of auto manufacturing jobs outside of the city. Throughout the 1950s unemployment in the auto industry frequently exceeded 10 percent, and between 1947 and 1963 the city lost 134,000 manufacturing jobs.¹¹⁸ As the labor historian Daniel J. Clark

has provocatively written, “The very concept of ‘autoworkers’ is problematic. There was no consistent body of people who could be classified as autoworkers during these years. Instead, people periodically entered and left auto work, often with little control over the timing.”¹¹⁹

The actions of workers themselves at the time should disabuse us of the myth of the stable, prosperous autoworker. In the immediate postwar years, the labor movement reached a crescendo when over four million workers participated in a nationwide strike to demand higher wages. Between this labor militancy, widespread unemployment, and hostile race relations, the transition to a stable postwar regime of capital accumulation was far from guaranteed. While the United States was the dominant military, economic, and political power across the globe at war’s end, the transition to peacetime production was not a matter of resuming business as usual; it was just as impossible to continue producing military equipment as to return to pre-Depression standards.

The principle of creative destruction posits that capitalism must continually revolutionize itself in order to survive. Nowhere is this clearer than in the history of Detroit after World War II. The massive investments in factories and other infrastructure that had facilitated capital accumulation during Detroit’s industrial buildup became obstacles to the growth of capital in the postwar period. Auto companies were turning to automation and other new production processes to reduce costs and increase efficiency, and if capital was to expand in Detroit, it would either have to rebuild within the city—which was experiencing a shortage of land for new plants—or move elsewhere. Detroit was also home to one of the most organized and militant industrial labor forces in the world, a group that commanded high wages and could exert considerable control over the production process. These two problems together—the strength of the labor movement and the obsolescence of the city’s industrial base—formed the basis of Detroit’s deindustrialization after World War II.¹²⁰

What resulted was a dispersal of manufacturing and people and a concerted effort by capitalists and the state to limit the power of unions, coinciding with a coordinated Red Scare that limited the scope and appeal of leftist politics, both within the labor movement and in society at large. These two strategies fed into one another: as industry increasingly fled the city, rising unemployment meant unions had less power to control production; with unions unable to control the shop floor, companies were free to automate, speed up, and otherwise control work processes. Dispersal of people—suburbanization—also curbed union power by separating the working class and investing them in the

new values of middle-class consumption (two-car garages, TV sets, and all the rest of it), facilitated by rising union wages, rather than in worker solidarity and collective well-being.

The specific strategies involved were, crucially, a direct outgrowth of the war: the push for uninterrupted production; the construction of highways (originally conceived as a military strategy), which facilitated the flight of industry outside the city; the use of the military to mediate the class struggle; and the Cold War ideology that justified the purging of leftist union elements at the same time that it legitimated the new role of the United States as a global policeman ensuring security and encouraging free trade. The creative destruction that fashioned the new postwar regime was accompanied by a powerful set of mythologies that smoothed out its contradictions, involving an amalgamation of anticommunist hysteria, racism, and a patriotic belief in the American Dream.

Purging the Parlor Pinks and the Treaty of Detroit

Q: When did you become a member of the Communist Party?

A: I never became a member of the Communist Party.

Q: If you are, as you say, a loyal American, why do you persist in denying that you were a member of the Communist Party?

—Transcript of **QUESTIONING FROM THE U.S. LOYALTY PROGRAM** in the 1950s, quoted in Neocleous, *Critique of Security*, 2008

Soviet agents are coming into the U.S. disguised as Jewish rabbis. —Detroit Police **CHIEF HARRY TOY**, quoted in Babson, *Working Detroit*, 1984

This is the context in which the Cold War materialized. The United States and the Soviet Union had emerged from World War II as the two global superpowers. With the temporary alliance against Nazi Germany dissolved, the countries embarked on a long ideological and military struggle for global preeminence, producing a powerful mythology that shaped global politics throughout the second half of the twentieth century—the Cold War ideology of a division between the good guys and the bad guys, totalitarianism and liberty, communism and democracy, an ideology that proved extremely useful for repressing resistance movements. As we saw from the Red Scare during the First World War, demonizing anticapitalist political movements did not originate in the post-World War II era, but McCarthyism and the Cold War, which pitted the United States against communist forces at home and across

the globe, took these tactics to new heights and profoundly impacted American political policy and popular mentality for years to come.

The Cold War was synonymous with the postwar economic expansion, as the Us versus Them mythology became the justification for American economic and military imperialism. During this time the Marshall Plan sent billions of dollars to American allies around the world, much of it earmarked for the purchase of U.S. commodities. Though the Marshall Plan is usually characterized as a magnanimous attempt to rescue war-devastated European economies, Mark Neocleous makes the critical point that, “excluding Germany, no country was actually on the verge of collapse. There were no bank crashes, very few bankruptcies and the evidence of a slowdown in industrial production is unconvincing. . . . By late-1946 production had roughly equalled pre-war levels in all countries except Germany.”¹²¹ The primary goal of the Marshall Plan, and U.S. foreign policy in general during this time, was to support “economic security as a means of maintaining political order against the threat of communism.” As Neocleous has provocatively written, “*the Soviet Union was a side issue*.” American national security advisors at the time recognized that the military capacity of the USSR was “limited and weak” and that the country posed no military threat to the United States; rather, the global specter of communism posed a *political and economic threat* to the order of private property. According to NSC-68, an important National Security document from this time, “Even if there were no Soviet Union we would face the problem of the free society, accentuated many fold in this industrial age, of reconciling order, security, the need for participation, with the requirements of freedom.”¹²²

For all its ephemerality, the Cold War was profoundly violent. The American National Security doctrine adopted at this time, which has survived fully intact into the twenty-first century, established a sort of good cop/bad cop duality: the humanitarian good cop sends money to countries around the world in the name of freedom and democracy, while the authoritarian bad cop violently disrupts and reorders the affairs of countries that express a form of politics opposed to the capitalist notion of order. One CIA official estimated in 1991 that overt or covert operations carried out in the name of security had resulted in a *minimum of six million deaths* in Korea, Vietnam, Indonesia, Cambodia, Nicaragua, and Angola, among many other places.¹²³

The same anticommunist ideology that was justifying U.S. economic imperialism the world over was used domestically to destroy unions and repress dissidence. At home, the Cold War spawned McCarthyism, the Hollywood blacklist—which targeted entertainment industry workers with leftist politics—and many other repressive policies. As former FBI director William

Sullivan stated, Cold War tactics “were brought home against any organization against which we were targeted. We did not differentiate. This is a rough, tough business.”¹²⁴

The scope of the Red Scare was broad, reaching from the halls of the federal government into the banalities of daily life. Echoing the Sedition Act and Espionage Act of the World War I era, in 1949 fifteen states passed “anti-subversion laws,” and in Michigan the writing or uttering of “subversive words” became punishable by life in prison. Detroit’s city council banned the Communist Party’s newspaper, the *Daily Worker*, and some council members attempted to paint over Diego Rivera’s murals in the Detroit Institute of Arts because of Rivera’s communist politics. Even the NAACP was listed as a “Communist-Front” group. From 1947 to 1956 the U.S. government undertook “loyalty screenings” to root out left-leaning workers, leading to the firing or resignation of seven thousand federal employees. In 1952 the line between the police and the military, and between domestic and foreign operations, was further blurred when President Truman formed the National Security Agency (NSA), an integral component of the larger “containment” doctrine associated with the Cold War. The NSA was tasked with monitoring subversive activity both in the United States and abroad, helping the government to dismantle and discredit radical union activities throughout the 1950s.¹²⁵

The fate of unions, however, was far from decided in 1945. Indeed the post-war era is often remembered as the height of the labor movement. Building on membership gains and cooperation with management during the war, the UAW in the immediate postwar years became an institutionalized component of the auto industry. Some ten years after the Big Three first recognized the union, collective bargaining had won its membership significant wage and benefit increases. With the UAW leading the charge, between 1945 and 1955 the average weekly wage of Detroit’s industrial workers rose to \$98, compared to a national average of \$75, which was 40 percent higher in real wages than at war’s end. The UAW also led the way in winning such benefits as company-financed pensions, sick pay, health plans, life insurance, and paid vacations. The backdrop for this was a flourishing auto industry: in 1949 auto sales surged to 5 million, finally breaking the record set in 1929, and in 1955—after a partial conversion to military production during the Korean War—sales soared past 8 million.¹²⁶

But such numbers leave us with a distorted and impartial picture. These gains were won only after a period of intense struggle immediately following the war, when national prosperity was far from assured. The wage increases and benefits finally earned in the late 1940s and early 1950s came at the cost of increasing coordination between the union and the auto companies, the alienation

of the rank and file from union leaders, management control at the point of production, and the evisceration of leftist elements from unions.

The sunny picture of auto work, and of postwar prosperity in general, is belied by the massive wave of postwar strikes in the auto industry and beyond. Workers did not soon forget the sacrifices they had made during the war years, and with the return to civilian production many were defiant that these sacrifices should be compensated. The weekly wages of nonwar workers declined 10 percent in the first months after the war; war workers, meanwhile, saw their wages drop 31 percent. According to a government study, these wages were inadequate to maintain prewar living standards. Strikes began within days of the war's end. In September 1945, the month of Japan's surrender, the number of days lost to strikes doubled. In October it doubled again. Oil workers, miners, lumber workers, longshoremen, truck drivers, machinists, textile workers, and others struck before the end of 1945. By early 1946 more than 1.5 million U.S. workers were striking. The months that followed, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, constituted "the most concentrated period of labor-management strife in the country's history." Throughout 1946 over 4.5 million workers went on strike; the average duration was four times that of wartime strikes. This was as close to a sustained national labor strike as the United States ever came.¹²⁷

The UAW rank-and-file membership played a huge role in catalyzing these strikes. In November 1945, 225,000 GM workers walked off the job in a nationwide strike. Three days after the war's end the UAW had requested from the company a 30 percent pay increase without an increase in prices (to stave off inflation). GM countered with a 10 percent cost-of-living increase and said its prices were none of the union's business. When workers requested the company defend its claim that it couldn't afford to raise wages, the company refused to open its books, and workers responded by striking. They were soon joined by other industrial workers: "On January 15, 1946, 174,000 electrical workers struck. The next day, 93,000 meatpackers walked out. On January 21, 750,000 steel workers struck, the largest strike in United States history. . . . On April 1, 340,000 soft-coal miners struck, causing a nationwide brown-out. A nationwide railroad strike by engineers and train men over work-rule changes on May 23 brought 'an almost complete shutdown of the nation's commerce.'" Using wartime emergency powers, the federal government stepped in to settle these disputes. The U.S. Army and Navy were deployed to seize railroads, mines, oil refineries, and factories occupied by striking workers. President Truman later wrote, "We used the weapons that we had at hand in order to fight a rebellion against the government."¹²⁸

Even when the military wasn't called in, the government generally sided with management in these disputes. When GM workers refused the president's request to go back to work, Truman established a neutral fact-finding board: it concluded that GM could afford a 19.5-cent hourly wage increase (17.5 percent) without raising prices. The company rejected these findings, and workers remained on strike, despite the UAW's acceptance of the deal, which amounted to little more than half of their initial demand. Soon, however, workers in other industries accepted similar deals; wages were increased, but so were prices, essentially nullifying wage gains. And despite the findings of its fact-finding board in the GM strike, the federal government pushed workers to accept this compromise in industry after industry; where workers refused, the military was waiting in the wings. When striking railroad workers refused the government's order to go back to work, Truman threatened to draft them and call in the army; when coal miners refused to end their strike, Truman fined their union \$3.5 million.¹²⁹

Eventually, with workers across industries accepting similar deals, even GM's militant UAW membership was forced to capitulate, finally accepting an 18-cent-per-hour wage increase, with no mention of prices.¹³⁰ The high wages so often referenced as a benchmark of postwar worker prosperity were achieved only after the postwar strikes were quashed and this pattern had been established: wage increases were granted, but companies were allowed to raise prices, meaning that the cost of these wage increases were passed onto workers themselves in the form of inflation—in other words, their pay increased, but this increased pay bought the same amount of goods. At the same time, unions became more bureaucratic, and relations with management more regularized. Between 1949 and 1955 many UAW members voted to have union dues deducted directly from their paychecks (which Ford had done since 1941); under this system, instead of union stewards going from member to member to wrangle union dues, the companies delivered huge sums deducted from paychecks directly to the union treasury. In addition, the cooperation between corporate executives and union leaders—behind the backs of the rank and file—which had established the no-strike pledge during the war set the stage for further cooperation in the postwar period. The relationship had proven valuable for both parties: “the greatest growth of union membership in American history came in this period,” and the War Labor Board declared, “It is in the interests of management, these companies have found, to cooperate with the unions for the maintenance of a more stable, responsible leadership.”¹³¹

Because of these and other policies, the leadership of the UAW had by this time alienated many workers. During the strike wave of World War II and the

postwar period, workers had demonstrated that, through coordination and solidarity, they had the potential to paralyze not just one corporation or industry but the entire country. Nevertheless union leadership had continually worked to mitigate the militancy and the power of their members. When UAW leadership consented to the firing of twenty-six workers who led an unauthorized wildcat strike in a Ford factory during the war, it lost the trust and respect of much of the rank and file. Union leaders were also amenable to demands like GM's in 1946 for "responsibility for uninterrupted production." Ninety percent of the labor contracts signed by unions in 1945 and 1946 pledged *no strikes* by 1947. Such submission went straight to the top: the presidents of the AFL and CIO signed a "Charter of Industrial Peace" with the president of the Chamber of Commerce in 1945.¹³²

In general, workers went on strike during and after the war against the wishes of their unions. The historian Jeremy Brecher concludes, "The unions were unable to prevent the post-war strike wave, but by leading it they managed to keep it under control."¹³³ The anxiety of business and union leaders was to a large extent justified, as the projected postwar boom failed to immediately materialize: though industry experts forecast the production of 6 million passenger cars in the first year after the war, the total was less than 400,000 eight months after Japan's surrender. Widespread strikes had resulted in "shortages of crucial materials such as coal, iron, steel, copper, aluminum, and glass." In response, workers were generally laid off until corporations could profitably secure all the means of production they required. Employment during this time was "sporadic," and most Detroiters suffered: "Corner grocery stores extended credit when possible, medical bills went unpaid, and rent, mortgage payments, and utility bills piled up." Things were particularly dire for women, who were laid off en masse after the war: 259,000 women worked in Detroit's factories in 1943, as compared to only 67,000 in 1946, and 88,000 by the mid-1950s. These layoffs reinforced a system of patriarchy in which many women were made dependent on a male breadwinner. Meanwhile the Michigan Unemployment Compensation Commission exacerbated the situation for all workers by "ruling that no one on strike, or who was laid off because of it, was eligible for unemployment benefits." As late as the end of 1948, "no one in the industry thought that the postwar boom had arrived."¹³⁴

The problems of a sluggish economy and the militancy of workers fused with the nation's Red Scare in the Taft-Hartley Act of 1947. This aggressive antilabor legislation, passed by the newly elected Republican Congress, outlawed sympathy strikes, wildcat strikes, mass picketing, and "secondary" boycotts against stores selling nonunion goods. It allowed states to pass right-to-work laws,

which facilitated capital flight to nonunion areas and gave workers the option to opt out of the union, meaning they could refuse to pay dues even while enjoying the benefits of collective bargaining. The act also forced union officials to sign affidavits guaranteeing that they had no contact with the CPUSA, and those who refused lost the protection of federal labor law.¹³⁵

Taft-Hartley exploited the tension within the working class by blaming striking workers—depicted as unpatriotic agitators—for the hardships of the postwar economy. The act facilitated a sharp decline in the Communist Party’s membership, from 80,000 members in the early 1940s to 10,000 by 1957. (The decline was also due to the Party’s support for Stalin, which alienated many workers.) This is when Walter Reuther consolidated power in the UAW. He used the act to remove from the union all “parlor pinks,” a derogatory term for workers with communist sympathies. According to the legendary labor organizer and Marxist theorist James Boggs, Reuther “pushed aside all the militants and radicals who in sitdown strikes and during the war had built the UAW into a model for the CIO.” As well as weakening or eliminating the most radical elements of the union movement, Taft-Hartley also facilitated an absolute decline in the number of unionized workers in the United States, which decreased from 5.2 million in 1945 to 3.7 million in 1950.¹³⁶

As Nelson Lichtenstein has noted, despite widespread worker interest, Reuther abandoned plans for a separate labor party during this time, limiting union efforts instead to the pursuit of a “private welfare regime.” In sum, Reutherism

tied its fate more closely to that of the industry and increasingly subordinated the endemic shop-floor struggle over working conditions and production standards to the UAW’s national bargaining program. As a union political-economic strategy, Reutherism moved from a demand for structural changes in the management of the auto industry and by implication in the political economy as a whole, to negotiation of an increasingly privatized welfare program that left unchallenged essential power relationships in the industry. . . . The defeat or expulsion of the Communists from within its own ranks had the practical effect of robbing these new unions of their oppositional character and welding them even more closely to the Democratic Party¹³⁷

The history of the National Negro Labor Council (NNLC) exemplifies the postwar repression of leftist worker movements. The NNLC, whose executive secretary was a future Detroit mayor, Coleman Young, was formed in 1951 from unions that had been expelled from the CIO for retaining communists.

The Council led struggles demanding that “fair practices” clauses be inserted into union contracts that would protect the rights of women and nonwhite workers. In 1954 the House Un-American Activities Committee denounced the NNLC as “pro-communist.” The NNLC’s efforts also met stiff resistance from the conservative leadership of the UAW. When NNLC president William Hood circulated a petition urging Detroit workers to support “fair practices” clauses, the UAW International labeled Hood’s petition “Communist-inspired” and forbade UAW workers from signing. In 1956, due largely to pressure from the state, corporations, and unions, the NNLC folded.¹³⁸

Despite the restrictions imposed by Taft-Hartley, workers continued to fight for improved conditions. Refusing to lower car prices, auto companies competed with each other mainly by lowering their production costs. This led to a dramatic intensification of factory operations and numerous strikes over work conditions. In 1949 workers took part in a strike against production speedups at the Ford Rouge plant. The strike, which lasted twenty-four days, involved “including strikers’ families, at least a quarter million Detroiters.” A few months later a 104-day strike took place at Chrysler. Workers protested work conditions and demanded (and eventually won) a pension plan similar to what had been recently won at Ford. During this time the ranks of Detroit’s unemployed neared 200,000; profits, meanwhile, were high, and Detroit’s auto leaders declared the situation “tremendously successful.” On the brink of starvation, striking and laid-off workers sought alternative incomes: in February 1949 thousands of unemployed workers waited in the cold to be among the eight hundred workers chosen by the Department of Public Works to work as a snow shoveler. One official described it as “the biggest line since the depression.”¹³⁹

Desperate to avoid more work stoppages, GM in 1950 agreed with the UAW on a five-year contract. In exchange for a no-strike promise and handing over to capital control of the shop floor, UAW workers were granted pensions, unemployment benefits, and annual cost-of-living increases. *Fortune Magazine* coined the deal the “Treaty of Detroit,” noting that “GM may have paid a billion for the peace, but it got a bargain. General Motors has regained control over one of the crucial management functions . . . long range scheduling of production, model changes, and tool and plant investment.”¹⁴⁰ Similar deals were soon signed with Ford and Chrysler.

“In the early forties,” Lichtenstein writes, “Ford’s recognition of the UAW touched off a virtual revolution on the shop floor. Workers ignored petty shop rules that regulated smoking, eating, and talking, unpopular foremen were forced out of their departments, production standards were set only

after checking with the department committeemen.”¹⁴¹ However, with the Treaty of Detroit, higher-ups in the UAW gave back control of the shop floor to the owners in return for monetary gains. But even these proved illusory, as the gains assured on paper were undermined by job instability and generalized economic insecurity.¹⁴² Though there were booms and busts in Detroit’s auto industry throughout the 1950s, the booms (in 1953 and 1955) were short-lived, and the busts were devastating: in 1952, due mostly to automation and materials shortages in the auto industry, 10 percent of *all the unemployment in the United States* was in metro Detroit. Automation was a large factor in such widespread unemployment. In addition to the machinery that replaced unskilled labor, the constant pressure of automation drove smaller automakers out of business and put their workers out of a job. “The economics of automation,” Dodge’s president explained, “are harsh, but simple: automate or die.” In addition to driving their smaller competitors out of business through their investments in technology and advertising, Big Three firms also became more “vertically integrated,” meaning that they made more of their parts in-house, causing many local suppliers to lay off their workers and close up shop.¹⁴³

During this time the charged situation brought about by the Red Scare produced a mythical discourse that blamed the city’s socioeconomic problems on a range of scapegoats: unions, white southern migrants, old workers, women workers, and black workers. George Romney, the American Motors Corporation president and future governor of Michigan, said unions were the country’s “number one problem” and called union president Walter Reuther “the most dangerous man in Detroit.” The Detroit Board of Commerce questioned how many of the unemployed were “actual citizens” of the Motor City, and suggested migrant workers should leave. For their part, old workers were seen by many younger Detroiters as having an unfair monopoly on the city’s stable jobs, and there were insistent calls to overturn systems of workplace seniority and enforce a retirement age. Working women, meanwhile, were frequently reminded that their natural place was in the home, not competing in a crowded labor market with men. And impoverished black workers were consistently depicted as the source of the city’s social ills, particularly the increasing number of property crimes occurring throughout the city.¹⁴⁴

In 1955 the conservative AFL union merged with the CIO (a union federation that included the UAW), and Reuther’s UAW renewed the Treaty for another three years. The first day after the contract was signed, 134,000 GM workers struck in protest, and so did 114,000 out of 140,000 Ford workers. These workers were dismissed in the media as greedy and pessimistic; the Free Press called

the strike the “revolt of the victors.” However, the “disastrous” economic years of 1956 and 1957, and the mass layoffs and speed-ups that followed, undermine the idea that the workers were the true “victors.”¹⁴⁵

The government’s Red Scare, the purging of radicals from the union, the capitulation of union leadership, and the UAW’s ensuing loss of control at the point of production produced the results that the auto companies desired: during the first eight years of the Treaty of Detroit, work stoppages declined dramatically, and worker productivity on Ford’s assembly lines increased 25 percent. As similar contracts were signed between management and unions across the country, investment in plant and equipment drastically outpaced total wage expenditures. Between 1953 and 1957 plant and equipment expenditure increased 37 percent.¹⁴⁶ During these same years, three major Detroit plants closed down, total employment in Michigan’s auto industry decreased 27 percent, and total manufacturing employment in Michigan fell 15 percent.¹⁴⁷

In 1958 the UAW signed another deal with the Big Three that won retirement benefits for older workers but did little to address working conditions. James Boggs explains:

When the 1958 contract was finally signed, there were few workers in the plant who did not realize they had returned to fully company-controlled plants. Time-study men and work layout specialists roamed the plants like sniffing bloodhounds, spying, taking pictures, watching over the workers’ shoulders, while the shamed union representatives hid behind pillars or in toilets. . . . Today the workers are doing in eight hours the actual physical work they used to do in twelve. At 6:30, a half hour before the day shift begins, you see workers setting up their operations so that they will not fall behind during the hours for which they are paid. They are afraid to go to the toilet, to get a drink of water, to take time off to go to the funeral of a relative. If they refuse to work overtime, they are written up and sent home.¹⁴⁸

In addition to allowing for stricter management control inside the plants, the Treaty of Detroit also facilitated rising rates of unemployment.¹⁴⁹ In 1949 the father of cybernetics, Norbert Wiener of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, wrote to Reuther warning of the potentially disastrous social effects of automation, which he feared would lead to “the factory without employees.”¹⁵⁰ Despite such warnings, Reuther’s UAW never seriously combated the problem of automation. As late as the 1960s Reuther imagined that a collaboration between workers, unions, corporations, and technology could achieve full employment.¹⁵¹ Against Reuther’s mythological optimism, Boggs, in his classic

work, *The American Revolution: Pages from a Negro Worker's Notebook*, presciently wrote:

Automation replaces men. This of course is nothing new. What is new is that now, unlike most earlier periods, the displaced men have nowhere to go. . . . As automation spreads, it will intensify the crises of capitalism and sharpen the conflicts among the various sections of the population, particularly between those working and those not working, those paying taxes and those not paying taxes. Out of this conflict will grow a counter-revolutionary movement made up of those from all social layers who resent the continued cost to them of maintaining these expendables but who are determined to maintain the system that creates and multiplies the number of expendables.¹⁵²

As the number of these “expendables” grew, Ford decided that it was more cost-effective to pay some workers overtime than to pay for the training and benefits of new workers, and he instituted a compulsory fifty-four-hour work week in his Lincoln-Mercury plants. Compulsory overtime soon became standard practice at all Big Three factories.¹⁵³ Black workers were generally the last to be hired and the first to be fired and were made to work in the least-skilled, most dangerous positions. Therefore, as the percentage of unskilled laborers in the U.S. workforce *decreased from 36 percent in 1910 to 5 percent in 1962*, young black workers were disproportionately hurt (though tens of thousands of white workers were discarded by Detroit’s auto industry during these years as well).¹⁵⁴ Meanwhile, the city’s east side, where blacks were mostly concentrated, lost more than 70,000 jobs between 1954 and 1960.¹⁵⁵ Across the U.S., *nearly one in four young people of color were unemployed in 1960*.¹⁵⁶

Race, Class, and Suburbanization

The communist purges of the Cold War era weakened the militancy of unions, allowing industry to take greater control of the production process and subsequently automate jobs and flee outside the city to more business-friendly areas with less organized labor forces. In Detroit and beyond, reactionary forces also conflated the spectre of communism with another ideological challenge to the ruling order—that of racial integration. Progressive causes in general, and the civil rights movement in particular, became easy fodder for those seeking to uncover “subversive” activities threatening the “American way of life.” The Chairman of Washington state’s inquisition claimed, “If someone insists there is discrimination against Negroes in this country, there is every reason to

believe that person is a Communist.” Picketers outside a church in Detroit in the 1950s made the same connection between racial integration and left politics: “Race mixing is communism in action,” one sign declared.¹⁵⁷

It’s no coincidence that labor organization and civil rights for black Americans were often conflated during the Red Scare. Just as anti-communism in the union movement allowed capital to wrest control of the shop floor from unions and flee the city, so too did the racialization of the working class facilitate the economic reorganization of the postwar era.

The deindustrialization of U.S. cities, however, began much earlier, in the period between 1910 and 1920. The inauguration of modern manufacturing at Ford’s Crystal Palace in 1913 also marked the beginning of suburbanization in Detroit; at the time Ford moved there from his Piquette Avenue Plant in Detroit, Highland Park was a small farming community far from the bustle of the city center. Less than fifteen years later Ford moved even further away, to the western suburb of Dearborn. This pattern can be seen across the industrial cities of the Northeast and Midwest. John Mollenkopf locates the transition from the industrial to the postindustrial city around 1920. From this time, manufacturing relocated away from the cloistered, multi-level, labor-intensive facilities in urban cores to sprawling, horizontal, increasingly mechanized factories in the outlying, undeveloped regions of metropolitan areas. We’ve outlined already the two primary reasons for this shift: to escape organized labor, and to meet capitalism’s need to continually revolutionize the means of production (creative destruction). And, as we saw in the first chapter, the industrial city would eventually become the corporate city, with manufacturing replaced by corporate offices, administrative buildings, hospitals, and universities.¹⁵⁸

But this transition did not happen quickly or on its own. “Urban blight” was already a national political issue in the early 1930s. Broke city governments and bankrupt businesses couldn’t afford infrastructure improvements or new investments during the Depression, and with the dispersive tendencies of manufacturing already operative from the 1910s, city cores had significantly deteriorated by the beginning of World War II. The war accelerated these processes dramatically. The War Production Board (WPB), which directed the use of government funds in private plant construction, was largely separated from other federal agencies and dominated by business leaders. “Leaders of the largest industrial corporations could thus use government financing to reconstruct the private sector’s capital base along new and more desirable lines” by moving out of the city. Detroit received the largest absolute amount of plant investment from the WPB, whose efforts nationally amounted to a *doubling* of U.S. industrial capacity. “The war-created facilities,” according to the WPB’s

summary report, “represent the greatest increment to manufacturing capital recorded in modern industrial history.”¹⁵⁹

This was a continuation of the more direct role the federal government had taken in managing the economy since the Depression, when it had initiated massive public programs to address unemployment and blight. After the war the government likewise took an outsize role in the process of suburbanization, through federally backed mortgages, highway and school construction, and the urban renewal efforts that sought to replace slum housing and deteriorated manufacturing facilities with the institutions of the corporate city.

Each aspect of this process was thoroughly racialized. Black Americans were by and large excluded from suburban homeownership by government policy and everyday practice; subsequently barred from the benefits of suburban manufacturing employment and wealth building through homeownership; confined to substandard central city housing, which became the target of slum clearance during urban renewal; and then blamed for the social problems that resulted from these dislocations.

Racial enmity was prominent and widespread in World War II-era Detroit. The city’s black population increased by sixty thousand during the war. Expecting to find work in the booming war industry, blacks faced persistent patterns of discrimination in employment and housing. Many of Detroit’s workers blamed southern black migrants—as well as “hillbillies” and “white trash” from Appalachia—for overcrowding the city’s job markets, and workplace discrimination was constant. Even when stable work was available, there were nowhere near enough houses to shelter the growing population. Wartime restrictions on nonmilitary construction put a freeze on most housing construction in the 1940s—and as black Detroiters were barred from 85 percent of the city’s housing, their situation was particularly dire.¹⁶⁰

In 1941 the Sojourner Truth housing projects were built in Northeast Detroit, primarily to house poor black Detroiters. On February 28, 1942, the day the first black tenants were scheduled to move in, 1,200 white picketers greeted them. Many tenants, who had already paid their first month’s rent, were determined to move in nonetheless. According to the *Free Press*, police fired “three volleys of tear gas . . . when a truckload of Negroes crossed the ‘no man’s land’ that police were trying to preserve and were bombarded with bricks and white pickets who swarmed over the truck.” In the next few days of violence, 104 people were arrested, all but two of them black. It would take another month and a half of fighting and picketing before the first black residents could peaceably enter their legal address.¹⁶¹

In response to the economic exclusions and degradations faced by black workers, A. Philip Randolph organized a March on Washington movement in 1941. The specter of 100,000 black men and women marching on the U.S. capital forced FDR to sign Executive Order 8802, prohibiting racial discrimination in the war industries. Despite this legal intervention, however, “there were still limits in upgrading, in the separation of production jobs by departments, and in relative exclusion from certain corporations and certain plants.” Black workers were thus more limited in their ability to resist degrading work conditions. While white workers, in a situation of relative labor shortage, could be reasonably assured of gaining employment at another plant if they were fired for striking, black workers did not have the same easy access to new jobs. Many black workers therefore supported the militant stance of Randolph, who the CPUSA had labeled a proto-fascist for his unwillingness to support the strike ban. This was a point at which the Communist Party drew away many black workers.¹⁶²

Even where blacks were able to make gains on the job, they faced the racist attitudes of many white workers. A wave of hate strikes occurred in Detroit and across the United States in 1941 and 1942 as a result of the federal government’s mandate to integrate war plants. In 1943 twenty-five thousand white workers at Packard walked off the job in protest of the promotion of three black men. Unlike in the wildcat strikes mentioned earlier, the police were not on hand to break up these strikes.¹⁶³

A couple of weeks after the hate strike, a fight broke out between black and white Detroiters at Belle Isle, a huge island park in the Detroit River. The next day a series of violent confrontations erupted throughout the city. The white residents, with the help of the DPD, were the aggressors in what came to be called the Race Riot of 1943. Michigan’s Governor Harry Kelly declared martial law, and six thousand U.S. troops were summoned to Detroit to enforce a 10:00 p.m. curfew. Officers ordered black bystanders to “run and not look back” and shot several people in the back as they ran away, killing seventeen black people and not a single white person. All in all, thirty-four people were killed, twenty-five of them black; 85 percent of the 1,800 people arrested were black. The National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders called this “the bloodiest riot in the U.S. in a span of two decades.” This sort of state violence is a significant reason why many black leaders, from Ida B. Wells to Malcolm X and Robert F. Williams, have historically opposed attempts to disarm black Americans.¹⁶⁴

A picture taken from the riot, published in *Collier’s* magazine, with a readership of over 2.5 million, had given rise to an international scandal: the image showed two police officers holding down a black man as a white man approached

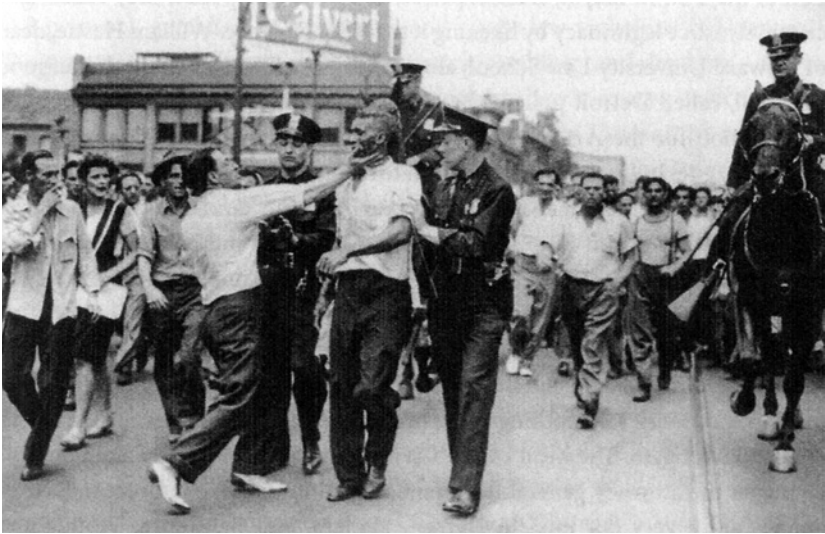


FIGURE 2.4. “A Colored Man Is Held by Unconcerned Detroit Cops While a White Man Slaps His Face,” 1943. Sources: Murakawa, *The First Civil Right*, 33; Associated Press; “Race Riots Coming,” *Collier’s*, September 18, 1943, 11.

and slapped him in the face. In the aftermath of the riot, Thurgood Marshall referred to the Detroit police as the U.S. version of the Gestapo. Police attacks on black people were nothing new in the U.S., but at the time, the country was engaged in a world war that was ostensibly against totalitarian governments, and the hypocrisy of the U.S. government’s attempts to portray itself as a just global policeman was there for all the world to see.¹⁶⁵

Local and national elites mythologized this contradiction by shifting the blame for the riots onto communists and blacks. Detroit’s Mayor Edward Jeffries—who had campaigned on a promise to stop the “Negro Flood”—claimed that “Negro hoodlums” were to blame. The head of FDR’s Civil Rights Section said that the “rioting and looting are outstanding examples of Negro hoodlumism and wanton murder.” The Michigan Governor’s Committee on the Causes of the Detroit Race Riot blamed Randolph, even though he was nowhere near Michigan at the time, for inspiring in black Detroiters a “disregard for law, order and judicial process in seeking the racial equality to which they are entitled.” The Committee also blamed the strife on the influx of southern black migrants who exhibited a propensity toward violence and lawless behavior that the city’s black leadership had encouraged by instilling in new Detroiters the unrealistic expectation of equal rights in the North.¹⁶⁶

Hate strikes, riots, public housing protests, mythological distortions—such was the situation of race relations in Detroit during the war. In the postwar period, racial violence and discrimination hardened into ideological commonplace and bureaucratic procedure.

Between 1947 and 1958 the Big Three auto companies built twenty-five new factories in southeast Michigan—none of them in Detroit. “From almost every angle,” the Marxist theorist Chris Wright concludes, “moving industry out of the cities benefited businesses.”¹⁶⁷ In the suburbs capitalists found cheap land, low taxes, business-friendly governments, and a relatively docile workforce. Managers of new suburban plants in California in 1946 testified that “their employees are more loyal, more cooperative, more productive workers than those they have had in the big cities.”¹⁶⁸ The relocation of manufacturing outside the city fed into the escalating housing crisis. When 100,000 migrants arrived in Detroit in the early 1950s at the onset of the Korean War—mostly with unrealized hopes that Detroit would again be a major center of wartime production—they found themselves in an incredibly precarious situation: “Housing experts had concluded that there was virtually nothing available in the city for persons of low or average income. Only one-tenth of 1 percent of rental units in metro Detroit were open, and those commanded rents . . . well beyond the range of autoworkers.” By 1952 the number of homeless far exceeded the capacity of the city’s three shelters. And for those who could find housing, 250,000 lived in substandard units, “defined as ‘dilapidated’ or without indoor toilets, bathtubs, or running water.”¹⁶⁹

Federal housing policy assured that black Detroiters would stay confined to blighted, rundown housing stock in the center city, while whites fled to newly constructed homes in the suburbs. In the late 1940s 90 percent of housing in Detroit was off-limits to blacks.¹⁷⁰ The two federal programs supporting homeownership—the Federal Housing Authority and the Home Owner Loan Corporation—both developed systems that strongly favored “racially homogeneous” neighborhoods. The federal home loan agency’s official guidelines for underwriting mortgages were set forth in the *Underwriters Manual*, which outlined color-coded areas where lending was most likely to succeed. Areas that were largely black or mixed were outlined in red—hence “redlining”—making them essentially ineligible for public or private loans. The result was that less than 1 percent of federally guaranteed and subsidized mortgages in the United States between 1935 and the early 1960s went to nonwhites. Less well known than redlining practices are the *specifically suburban biases of these federal housing policies*. The *Underwriters Manual* also “made it difficult to get an insured loan for already-built housing, and certain construction guidelines—such as

requiring a certain amount of distance between the house and the street—forced people to move to newly constructed housing in the suburbs instead of purchasing in the cities.” This essentially forced prospective homeowners “to purchase new buildings instead of existing housing stock.” Moreover an assortment of federal subsidies and tax credits made it so that “it was often cheaper to buy in the suburbs, including purchasing one or two cars, than to rent equivalent housing in the city.”¹⁷¹

As well as federal policy, the spontaneous organization of homeowners in Detroit limited the housing options available to working-class blacks. Homeowners throughout Detroit fiercely resisted public housing projects being built in their area. It was not only racial animosity that fueled such actions; an economic logic underlay them as well. “Better-off blacks,” writes Thomas Sugrue, “like their white counterparts, often sought to . . . ensure the exclusiveness of their neighborhoods.”¹⁷² Developers and real estate agencies frequently exploited the situation by engaging in blockbusting—moving one or two black families into the neighborhood, then working to rouse paranoia about a coming “Negro invasion.” The blockbusting realtors would then buy up the homes of fleeing whites at below-market value and sell them to blacks at inflated prices.

Touré Reed argues that “white homeowners resisted integration . . . not simply because they did not like African Americans, but because they wanted to protect their investment.”¹⁷³ Certainly blockbusting real estate agents and federal housing policy tied home values to race in a way that operated independently of individual homeowners’ prejudice. But while racist housing policies and the like are partially explained by the desire of homeowners to “protect their investment,” the prejudice and outright violence faced by black residents and workers go well beyond the logic of economic rationality. In 1948, for example, more than half of the city’s restaurants practiced racial segregation. And throughout the postwar era, blacks who attempted to move into “white” neighborhoods often faced violence from vigilante groups like the KKK, as well as from white homeowners’ organizations, which sometimes terrorized black families moving into their neighborhoods for months on end.¹⁷⁴

Suburban homeownership also gave rise to worker conservatism. As David Harvey points out, mortgage debt was crucial here: “Debt-encumbered homeowners do not go on strike.”¹⁷⁵ The housing issue was so inherently conservative-leaning that even union members who supported integration on the shop floor often believed in residential segregation. “They should have equal opportunities,” one white worker said of blacks, “and . . . as we become better educated we will have less prejudice. And we should have less. But I

don't want to live next to them."¹⁷⁶ The isolating and consumerist lifestyle in suburbia also proved to be anathema to collective politics: "Where before union members often lived in or near the same neighborhood as their factory and union hall, now a growing number were scattered throughout the metropolitan area, making the round trip to union meetings a matter of some inconvenience."¹⁷⁷ Long commutes meant that people's work lives and social lives were even more divorced. The home became "a self-sustaining microcosm in which the outside world only entered via electronic media such as radio, television and eventually the computer. . . . At the same time, the yard provided a fenced-off replacement for parks and playgrounds and other public facilities in which nature might be experienced collectively."¹⁷⁸

Suburbanization inscribed the racial division of the working class into the landscape of metro Detroit. Between 1950 and 1960 Detroit's white population decreased by more than 350,000 while its black population increased by more than 180,000. As late as 1970, in Detroit's three largest suburbs, out of nearly 400,000 total residents, *only 186 were black*. And metro Detroit continues to bear the marks of this bout of creative destruction: the region remains one of the most segregated in the United States.¹⁷⁹

The other side of suburbanization was urban renewal, which sought to address slum conditions in center cities across the industrial belt as part of a larger strategy to transform urban cores into centers of corporate and administrative activities. In city after city, controversy attended these efforts, as initiatives ostensibly intended to ameliorate the living conditions of a city's poorest residents—who were almost always black—instead became land grabs for big business, subsidized by local and federal governments, which eliminated slums in favor of high-end developments. In Detroit the center of this process was Black Bottom.

In the late 1940s, 140,000 black Detroiters lived in Black Bottom, a neighborhood on the city's lower East Side. Together with its commercial district, Paradise Valley, this area was in many ways the city's cultural hub. Known as the Harlem of the Midwest, Black Bottom was "the birthplace of the Nation of Islam, the former center of the largest concentration of Black-owned businesses in the country, the home of the religious and cultural institutions that nurtured the rise of the Motown sound."¹⁸⁰ By the postwar period it was also the city's worst slum district. Over half the structures had been built before 1900, and many lacked indoor plumbing, meaning residents had to rely on outdoor latrines. Migration during and after the war exacerbated the neighborhood's endemic overcrowding. As Black Bottom was adjacent to the Downtown commercial center, it became the focus of the Detroit version of urban renewal.¹⁸¹

In 1946 Downtown business interests proposed an urban renewal program called the Detroit Plan, under which the city government would buy and demolish slum property, and then, instead of building public housing, sell it to private real estate developers. These private developers would then, supposedly, build low- to moderate-income housing in the area. The plan was decried by CIO leaders and several city council members as a scheme to swindle taxpayers and subsidize private developers. Nevertheless the city began condemning slum property in 1947 and 1948. In 1952 the Michigan Supreme Court gave legal sanction to these efforts when it ruled that cities could sell land to private developers at subsidized rates. Mayor Albert Cobo—elected in 1949 over the CIO-backed liberal candidate George Edwards, thanks to overwhelming support among whites in the city's outlying wards, including many union members—proceeded to bulldoze seven hundred buildings in Black Bottom, displacing nearly two thousand black families. Soon the same fate befell other aging areas around the city core.¹⁸²

As the black studies professor David Goldberg has pointed out, many black Detroiters initially supported plans for slum clearance and hoped that urban renewal programs would lead to improved living conditions. This support was short-lived, however, as urban renewal displaced thousands of black families and eliminated far more affordable housing than it created. "Rather than improving neighborhoods and providing affordable, updated, and sound housing," Goldberg writes, "urban renewal displaced Black Bottom residents and the institutions they had built, making way for middle- and upper-income housing while also creating a buffer between the city's poorest residents and a newly expanded central business district, medical and cultural centers, and the university district."¹⁸³

This dispossession should be seen in a national context, as decaying urban cores became a central political problem across the country. A 1953 study by the Twentieth Century Fund concluded, "No matter in what city we may be, we see broad areas of deterioration. . . . Old buildings are rarely replaced and old districts rarely renewed to their former vitality."¹⁸⁴ The 1949 Federal Housing Act, which addressed this problem, was gutted by a conservative Congress. As a result, instead of constructing public housing, the 1949 Act provided the tools for local business and political elites to use federal funds and the rallying cry of "urban renewal" to clear low-income residential districts and replace them with private developments and public infrastructure.¹⁸⁵ Robert Moses in New York City was a pioneer in this regard, using federal largesse to, in his own words, take a "meat axe" to the Bronx in order to make way for a highway project that linked New York City to its surrounding suburbs.¹⁸⁶ Several years

earlier, by including a few rundown tenements that were home to fewer than three hundred residents, Moses had used federal urban development legislation to take control of two square blocks of thriving commercial land in Manhattan, and with \$26 million in federal assistance he built an exhibition center, a parking structure, and a luxury housing development at the site.¹⁸⁷ In 1947 Illinois passed the Blighted Areas Redevelopment Act and the Restoration Act, allowing the city of Chicago to use eminent domain to acquire slum areas and sell them to developers at subsidized rates. The city subsequently cleared hundreds of acres of slums to make room for middle-class housing complexes which inflated rents by as much as 600 percent. During his twenty-year tenure Mayor Richard J. Daley used this precedent to demolish low-income inner-city neighborhoods to make way for highways, administrative buildings, skyscrapers, and high-end housing.¹⁸⁸ The scale of destruction involved in this process led many contemporary commentators to make comparisons to the violence of war: one organization in San Francisco battling urban renewal declared that the city's efforts constituted "not a *war on poverty* but rather a *war on the poor*."¹⁸⁹ Summing up the situation across the country, the Urban Planning Professor Rachel Weber writes, "Urban renewal pulverized [the] inner city in the middle of the century, funneling billions of federal dollars into costly downtown commercial projects, highways, and sanitized streetscapes. Between 1949 and 1965, one million people, mostly low-income, were evicted in the name of eliminating and containing blight."¹⁹⁰

The same was true of Detroit, where large swaths of Black Bottom, including the famous Hastings Street, were eventually replaced by highways or high-end neighborhoods like Lafayette Park, which remains one of the wealthiest areas in Detroit. Highway construction under Cobo alone destroyed twenty thousand homes. In Detroit as elsewhere, slum removal generally equaled "negro removal." The majority of all housing aid granted to the city by the Federal Housing Act of 1949 was directed toward slum clearance and subsidizing high-end urban renewal projects, dislocating up to half of Detroit's black population. For Cobo, who promised voters that he would stop the "Negro invasion" of white neighborhoods, this was "the price of progress."¹⁹¹ Meanwhile, as Detroit's public housing program was destroyed, Cobo—who owned the Cobo Realty Company—"stacked the Detroit Housing Commission with people from real estate and construction industries, both of which helped to ensure that Detroit's urban renewal favored private developers at the expense of the city's poorest residents."¹⁹²

New "affordable" high-rise buildings were built, but thousands of the poorest and most marginalized Detroiters were pushed into dilapidated units owned

by slumlords, or simply rendered homeless as the city's housing market faced an "acute shortage." The Detroit Urban League decried "the staggering magnitude of the relocation program," and in the early 1960s Detroit's city council debated what to do about the growing homeless population. In 1962 city council member Mel Ravitz came up with an idea: "Why can't we control and designate a specific area for them, before we find the effects of a new Skid Row appearing throughout the city?" The "specific area" that the council settled on was Cass Corridor (today's Midtown), and police soon shifted homeless residents into this area.¹⁹³

Capital develops unevenly across space and time, and as we saw in chapter 1, a new process of urban renewal is now occurring in the same area that was designated to contain residents dislocated by a previous urban renewal project, causing this group to be dislocated again. We can see the relevance of Engels's insight: "The Bourgeoisie has only one method of settling the housing question. . . . The infamous holes and cellars in which the capitalist mode of production confines our workers night after night are not abolished; they are merely shifted elsewhere."¹⁹⁴ Here the power of mythological thinking is on full display. The *Detroit News* article that details the postwar history of dislocation of black workers and the creation of Cass Corridor as a ghetto to contain them is the same article referenced in chapter 1, titled, "Revival of Detroit's Cass Corridor Crowds Out Criminals." That is, even after noting the violent history of dispossession in *the past*, the article naturalizes those same processes in the present, by branding those who are being dispossessed today as criminals. Mythological thinking always creates a strong barrier between history and the present. While the systemic nature of past injustices may be acknowledged, the same implicit claim is always made: between then and now, *progress* has occurred.

"What about the Negro Crime Rate?"

Despite its brutal outcome, urban renewal was directed toward a very real and pressing problem: the deterioration of inner cities, particularly their low-income neighborhoods. But as we've seen, the poor quality of housing stock was only a pretense to clear the land for the institutions of the corporate city. In order to carry through the seizure of these slum neighborhoods and their replacement by commercial centers, middle-class housing, and highways, city governments needed a justification. What eventually coalesced was a mythology that equated the decayed inner-city neighborhoods with the people who lived in them. Planners depicted these areas as decrepit not only physically

but morally and culturally as well. Disinvestment was conflated with social deterioration to create a picture of a pathologized population: not only was the neighborhood “blighted,” but so were its people. The disposessions that had already affected these neighborhoods were then used to justify their flattening, as statistics on crime, disease, and vice were lined up to paint a picture of a population in ruins, ignoring the strong elements of community life in these neighborhoods (churches, social clubs, ethnic institutions, and cultural landmarks often animated the neighborhoods targeted for urban renewal). This is especially apparent in the case of Black Bottom, which, despite the dereliction of its infrastructure, was a thriving commercial and cultural hub for Detroit’s black community.¹⁹⁵

John Mollenkopf writes, “Renewal planners and administrators faced a difficult bind: on the one hand, all the political and economic incentives pointed toward supplanting a ‘blighting’ population and its ‘blighting’ land uses with a higher-status population. On the other hand, they could not acknowledge to those about to be displaced, or perhaps even to themselves, that they were engaging in highly regressive social engineering.”¹⁹⁶ In this context, one particular metric of social dislocation became more efficacious than others in the containment of “blighting” populations: crime.

While black workers were devastated by unemployment and state-sponsored dispossession, they were also increasingly criminalized. This was just the beginning of the “counterrevolution” Boggs had presaged, in which privileged sectors of the working class would rebel against having to pay taxes to support an immoral class of “expendables.” Hyperaggressive police kept poor blacks away from more “respectable” Detroiters, and they also disciplined black youth to the needs of the capitalist labor market, closing off any attempts to make money outside of the wage labor system. As John Hersey, author of *The Algiers Motel Incident*, writes, black youth in Detroit “for the most part . . . [had] no foreseeable future except among the hustlers and minor racketeers. For the most part, they are cynical, hostile, frustrated, and angry against a system they feel has included them out.”¹⁹⁷ It was the activity of these “hustlers and minor racketeers”—in Marx’s terms, the lumpenproletariat—that was most intensely targeted by police. In 1951 Truman signed into law the Boggs Act, which established a two-year mandatory minimum for first-time marijuana possession. Five years later the Narcotics Control Act increased these mandatory minimums and ratcheted up federal funding for police work that targeted narcotics-related crime. From 1950 to 1965 the number of drug offenders in federal prisons nearly doubled. In 1955 Detroit, though blacks made up only 20 percent of Detroit’s population, they constituted 89 percent of the drug arrests.¹⁹⁸

The criminalization of the surplus population was justified much as it is today: by condemning the behavior of a racialized “underclass.” A 1957 article published in the *Detroit Free Press*, titled “What about the Negro Crime Rate?,” notes that black Detroiters accounted for 49 percent of arrests in the previous year. The article asserts, however, that racial statistics belie the true nature of the situation. But the other factors contributing to the statistical disproportion the author mentions are perhaps even more telling. Citing sociologists, he claims that “it is environment, not race, that results in the disproportion of arrests.” This leads him to conclude:

Whatever the basis for the arrest record, it is disturbing to *law-abiding* Negroes. They make up the great majority of the race in the community. What about the large part of the aggressive crime involving Negroes? Most of it is directed against other Negroes and occurs in the city’s poorest quarters. *Blind passion often is at the basis of the act.* Dr. Lyle W. Shannon, University of Wisconsin criminologist teaching this year at Wayne State University, stresses *environmental factors*: “The middle-class Negro probably does a better job of being a citizen because he is so conscious of his responsibility to the community.”¹⁹⁹

Environmental factors, not race alone, have produced a stratum of the urban poor alienated from the norms of civilized society and from the “respectable” elements of the racial group: such notions of a pathologized and nihilistic community are the basis of “underclass” discourse that remains operative up to the present. The idea of the underclass skirts structural explanations in favor of tautological “descriptions of associations,” producing a narrative of a self-regenerating layer of society beyond the reach of political intervention.²⁰⁰ Crucially, the *Free Press* article produces a litany of factors—poverty, unemployment, substandard housing, educational deficiencies—that, in some amorphous way, produce “Negro crime.” But this assemblage produces not an explanation, but an *image* of crime; we know very well what crime looks like, and the factors which somehow produce it, but we remain in the dark about the procedural connection between *environment* and *criminal*. The article repeats the implicit claim, identified by the political scientist Adolph Reed Jr., that “dealing with the problem of an underclass depicted as almost ferally alien requires the black elite’s intermediary role as socializing agents and role models.”²⁰¹

In the years to come, as the city’s economic problems deepened, violent crime soared, and Detroit’s homicide rate was nearly triple the national average. This problem was treated above all as a problem of lawlessness in the city’s black ghettos. In 1957 a Republican named Louis Miriani, whose UAW-endorsed

mayoral campaign centered on his promise to wage a war on “Negro crime,” won in a landslide election.²⁰²

In December 1960, within a few weeks of each other, two young white women were murdered, and black men were the suspects in both cases. In response, Mayor Miriani declared, “The time has now been reached to realize this thing is not spasmodic. It is an outbreak that will continue and we’ve got to use strong measures to abate it and stop it.” The *Detroit News* went so far as to offer a \$5,000 reward for information leading to the arrest of the “vicious killer” of “pretty” Marilyn Donahue. The police responded with what the *Free Press* called “an all-out war on crime.” Within a week more than 1,500 black Detroiters were arrested and questioned. According to Buddy Battle, a black UAW organizer at the time, the police targeted “any Negro standing on the corner, coming out of the house to get in his car, going to the church, going into a store, coming out of a store, going into a nightclub or coming out of a nightclub.”²⁰³ A coalition of black pastors responded by partnering with the Michigan Corrections Commission to launch a “crusade on crime.” Reverend Dr. McNeil said, “We will want to give every assistance to the police to enforce the law and to encourage our own people to view their responsibilities with civic maturity.”²⁰⁴

At the same time, however, a radical movement led by black workers was emerging to contest the state’s attempts to “police the crisis.” These workers challenged more than aggressive police tactics, taking aim at the city’s power structure, eventually helping to catalyze the city’s Great Rebellion in 1967. It is to the efforts of these militant workers that we turn in the next chapter.

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The Conditions of the Great Rebellion

c. 1960–1967

We learned from Detroit to go to the cities. —GENERAL VÕ NGUYỄN GIÁP of the Vietnam People's Army, 1968, quoted in Jay and Leavell, "Material Conditions of Detroit's Great Rebellion"

The Great Rebellion of 1967 is considered by people across the political spectrum to be foundational to the ensuing decline of Detroit. Across five days of armed conflict, forty-three people were killed and over one thousand were injured in the bloodiest uprising of a summer of urban rebellions across the country. The city commemorated the fiftieth anniversary of the Rebellion in the summer of 2017, and commentary on the conflagration and the ensuing fifty years of history show that the meaning of this seminal event is still highly contentious. Whether to refer to it as a "riot" or a "rebellion," whether it was provoked by a small group of radicals or represented the will of the majority, whether it was a cause or a consequence of the city's downfall—these and other debates continue to animate the struggle over the signification of Detroit's largest civil uprising. In short, the Great Rebellion has become a prime site of analysis for mythmaking.

There are two aspects to the mythologization that surrounds the Rebellion. The first is that both liberals and conservatives tend to obscure the political-economic coordinates of the uprising. Conservatives tend to ignore material

conditions altogether and blame the “riot” on the irrational, irresponsible behavior of the rioters themselves. Emblematic is the attitude of the organizer of Mayor Jerome Cavanagh’s 1967 “secret riot-spy network.” Participants in riots tend to come from what he describes as the “no-winner” crowd: “A typical ‘no-winner’ . . . is hostile, angry and frustrated. ‘He believes that if he can’t have what he wants he will destroy. He’s childish and doesn’t know any better.’”¹ Liberals, on the other hand, tend to blame discriminatory policies and the racist attitudes of white citizens and police. This attitude does not stop them from viewing such outbreaks of violence as irresponsible and misguided. The *Washington Post*, for example, described Detroit’s uprising as “the greatest tragedy of all the long succession of Negro ghetto outbursts.”² To take a more recent example, during the uprisings in Baltimore that followed the killing of an unarmed black man, Freddie Gray, by the police, David Simon, creator of the celebrated HBO series *The Wire*, wrote, “This, now, in the streets, is an affront to that man’s memory and a diminution of the absolute moral lesson that underlies his unnecessary death. If you can’t seek redress and demand reform without a brick in your hand, you risk losing this moment for all of us in Baltimore. Turn around. Go home.”³ Both the liberal and the conservative positions obscure the material conditions of the uprisings, preferring to cast them in mythic terms, as winner/loser, moral/immoral, and so on. Whether one views those protesting as simply bitter and opportunistic or as righteous but misguided, casting the issue in individual, ethical terms directs attention away from the structural issues that caused the uprising in the first place. Such a framework also papers over the fact that our political-economic system makes it exceedingly difficult, if not structurally impossible, for the protesters to collectively seek legal, peaceful redress for their demands. Embedded in the call for responsibility on the part of protesters is an insistence that only demands made through the formal and regularized political process are legitimate, ignoring the fact that eruptions of this sort tend to arise out of the exclusion of certain elements of the populace from this process or its failure to address specific issues. The truth is, throughout U.S. history and up through the violent uprising in Ferguson, Missouri, where Mike Brown was killed by police in 2014, riots have in fact often been catalysts for social change: under the national and international spotlight that violent protests produce, politicians have been forced to implement reforms they might otherwise have forgone.⁴

The second way that the Great Rebellion, and similar uprisings, are mythologized is by obfuscating or erasing the importance of all of the organizing efforts that helped to catalyze the uprising. Throughout the 1960s political

organizers facilitated reading groups, distributed pamphlets, and gave speeches that helped to raise workers' political consciousness. Organizers also created networks for militants and hosted workshops in political education and military strategy. By ignoring the activism in the lead-up to the Rebellion, one easily falls into the trap of thinking that when things get bad enough, uprisings happen "all by themselves."⁵

In this chapter we give an account of the macro-level causes of the Rebellion and how they informed the praxis of radical leaders on the ground in Detroit. We highlight the processes of creative destruction that devastated workers in general, and black workers in particular, and how militant groups of workers attempted to resist these processes. We look at the myths that shifted the blame for social turmoil onto the militants themselves, as well as the police tactics used to repress political dissidence and restore bourgeois order. Finally, we give a detailed account of the Rebellion itself and how the state repressed and mythologized this event.

The Civil Rights Movement and Its Discontents

In order to understand the turbulent politics and radical imagination operative during this time period, let us first return to the contradiction between capitalism's capacity to produce and its capacity to consume, a contradiction that the intensive automation in the auto industry during the Treaty of Detroit brought into stark relief. This antagonism is well illustrated by a fabled conversation between Walter Reuther and Henry Ford II. "Walter, how are you going to get those robots to pay your union dues?" asked Ford. Reuther responded, "How are you going to get them to buy your cars?"⁶

This contradiction was further heightened by competition in the global market. In 1950 U.S.-based firms' share of global car production was more than 80 percent; by 1961 that figure was 48.5 percent, as firms in Western Europe and Japan (subsidized by U.S. dollars, courtesy of the Marshall Plan) made a dent in the global auto market with sleeker, more energy-efficient models. To defend their market share, U.S. firms continued to automate (worker productivity increased around 50 percent between the end of World War II and 1960), churning out more and more cars. Nearly 58 million cars were produced and sold by U.S.-based auto firms in the 1950s, one new vehicle for every three Americans, the elderly and infants included. In that decade GM spent more money on advertising than any other company in the world. But even as the booming advertising industry played up the novelty of each newer model, there was clearly a limit to consumers' willingness and capacity to purchase more cars.⁷

At the same time, in the U.S. South, automation was causing demand for black farm labor to plummet. Between 1940 and 1960 the percentage of black workers employed as farm hands decreased from 32 to 8. Detroit's black population more than tripled between 1940 and 1960 as many of these newly superfluous farm workers made their way to Detroit. This population was exploding just as the city's employment opportunities were shrinking: between 1947 and 1963 Detroit lost 134,000 manufacturing jobs. As these economic problems deepened, and police tactics to deal with underemployed black workers became more aggressive, the civil rights movement entered its most radical phase.⁸

The rise of civil rights protests in the South, after the Supreme Court's *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling ended legal segregation, catalyzed political activity in the urban centers of the North, and in the late 1950s and early 1960s there were sustained efforts to fight for civil rights within a legalistic, nonviolent framework in Detroit. In 1961 Jerome Cavanagh, a liberal candidate who ran on a platform of racial integration, was elected mayor of Detroit. The Trade Union Leadership Council (TULC), a liberal-black coalition formed by UAW workers in 1957, was influential in turning out the black vote for Cavanagh. This was the first time in the postwar era that the majority of black voters had been on the winning side of a mayoral election, and the result, according to legendary Detroit activist Grace Lee Boggs, was that blacks got "a taste of their political power."⁹

In the early 1960s the newly elected liberal administration in Washington would prove responsive to the wave of activism in the South and the urban North. During this period a wealth of new federal urban programs provided new funding resources for local activists and politicians. The Great Society, as it would come to be known, attempted to revitalize the urban program delivery system developed during the New Deal era, which had generated conflicts during the urban renewal projects of the conservative 1950s. In 1960 forty-four federal grant programs sent about \$4 billion annually to the big cities; by the end of the Great Society, there were over five hundred federal grant programs distributing \$14 billion to cities, which rose to \$26.8 billion in 1974.¹⁰ As well as providing novel funding to cities, the legislative initiatives of the Great Society increased the role of the federal government in local politics and tied the health of cities directly to federal funding—a relationship that would have drastic consequences in the decades to come, when this funding was drastically reduced.

TULC organized support for President Lyndon Johnson's War on Poverty and successfully lobbied him to select Detroit for his Model Cities program,

which provided Detroit with \$360 million in federal antipoverty aid in the mid-1960s. TULC also successfully fought for more black employment in the skilled trades, as well as more black representation in local government and in local universities: Mayor Cavanagh placed several prominent black figures in key positions, and Wayne State University's black enrollment increased to 2,500, more than in the Big Ten and Ivy League schools combined. TULC also helped organize the larger than expected 200,000-person turnout for the 1963 March for Freedom, in which Martin Luther King Jr. walked hand in hand with Mayor Cavanagh, Governor George Romney, and UAW president Walter Reuther along Woodward Avenue before delivering the day's keynote speech. The partnership between TULC and the liberal establishment led *Harper's* magazine to claim that Cavanagh's administration was helping to "build a bridge over the river of hate" between the government and the black community.¹¹

But this bridge was unable to address the city's endemic economic problems, problems that particularly devastated black members of the working class. According to Dan Georgakas and Marvin Surkin, Chrysler's Dodge Main plant represented typical demographics: "99 percent of all general foremen were white, 95 percent of all foremen were white, 100 percent of all superintendents were white, 90 percent of all skilled tradesmen were white, and 90 percent of all skilled apprentices were white." In fact, due largely to capital flight, automation, and the vulnerable position black workers occupied in the labor market, the disparity in incomes between black and white families *increased* between 1950 and 1965. Furthermore, black youth unemployment in the United States *increased* from 16 percent in 1954 to 26 percent between 1956 and 1965; this figure was nearly 33 percent in Detroit and grew to 50 percent for high school dropouts.¹²

Structural economic issues ensured that the War on Poverty in general, and policies of integration in particular, would do little to ameliorate the daily living conditions of working-class black Detroiters.¹³ Partly this was due to a lack of funding. Although Detroit was consistently lauded as one of the country's most exemplary and progressive "model cities," "had the city distributed its entire antipoverty budget . . . among the city's poor, each would have received only \$60."¹⁴ Even so, the funding managed to reach only a small portion of those in need: of the 360,000 Detroiters living below the poverty line in 1967, only 70,000 received aid through the War on Poverty.¹⁵ In addition to poor funding, there was the issue of how the social programs were designed. Cowie and Salvatore explain, "Unlike the New Deal's focus on creating jobs directly . . . the 'war on poverty' programs emphasized helping individuals to reform themselves so as to gain better access to the job market—mostly through job training

and educational assistance. The tacit assumption of Great Society policymakers was that in the midst of the greatest economic boom in American history, unemployment was not a structural problem but a personal one.”¹⁶ This individualistic approach went hand-in-hand with liberal attempts to divorce race and class as they emphasized the “distinctiveness of African American poverty.” As Touré Reed has stressed, the Johnson administration attributed “high rates of black poverty in the early 1960s to the unique challenges African Americans faced in the form of racial discrimination and blacks’ related soft and hard skills deficits.” As a result, War on Poverty programs “like Job Corps and Community Action Programs emphasized provision of job training and cultural tutelage to impoverished minority youth rather than public works.”¹⁷

It should be no surprise, then, that the War on Poverty failed to address Detroit’s deep-rooted structural problems. Programs like Head Start, for instance, helped many poor Detroiters but could do little to address the overarching problems in the city’s education system: the high school dropout rate at Detroit’s overcrowded, underfunded schools remained above 50 percent. Additionally, when the housing programs funded by President Johnson’s Model Cities were exhausted, only 758 low-income units had been built, doing little to alleviate the housing shortage that left the vast majority of Detroit’s black residents in substandard housing. The housing situation in Detroit shines a light on the growing class division within the city’s black population. On the one hand, by 1967 the percentage of African Americans who were homeowners grew from 39 to 48, giving Detroit the highest percentage of black homeownership in the country. On the other hand, many poorer blacks struggled to find adequate shelter: around 26,000 dwellings were demolished in 1960–67, replaced with only 15,500 housing units, most of which were for middle- and high-income residents. As the union activist Mike Kerwin notes, by the late 1960s, the Housing and Urban Development Committee, headed by George Romney, “just ran hog-wild. It was corrupt. Everybody was raking money out of it: real estate agents, insurance people, rehabilitation people, inspectors, appraisers.”¹⁸ David Goldberg writes, “Legal and political struggles for open housing in the city’s outskirts or suburbs did little to address the realities and problems faced daily by poor and working-class Blacks,” who confronted “living conditions that were often worse than those that residents had experienced prior to urban renewal.” Absentee slumlords collected rent while failing to make repairs, often in the hopes that allowing their properties to deteriorate would qualify them for lucrative urban renewal projects. The results were horrendous: “Residents’ complaints ran the gamut from falling plaster, rotted beams, exposed hot wires, septic cellars, lack of hot water, broken plumbing

and furnaces, leaky roofs, and broken windows to rat, roach and bedbug infestation and bites.”¹⁹ To combat such conditions local activists formed more than fifty tenants’ rights organizations in Detroit in the mid-1960s. These groups launched rent strikes and held demonstrations to combat these predations. Landlords initially responded by making some minor repairs, as well as evicting housing activists or driving up their rent.²⁰

Another problem was that the liberal gains of the civil rights era did little to curb processes of criminalization and police brutality: by 1967, 82 percent of black Detroiters felt DPD used excessive force; at the time, blacks amounted to 35 percent of Detroit’s population but less than 5 percent of its police force.²¹ Police Commissioner Ray Girardin admitted that the way many Detroit cops dealt with African Americans was “to hit them on the side of the head.”²² Widick writes of the city’s nonviolent civil rights movement, “Closer examination showed that most of the gains benefited the Negro middle class.”²³

The perceived and real limitations of liberal integrationism, or the failure of what Robin D. G. Kelley calls “Black Bourgeois reformism,” spawned a “generation of black radicals whose dissatisfaction with the civil rights movement’s strategy of nonviolent passive resistance drew them closer to Malcolm X and Third World liberation movements.”²⁴ World historical transformations occurring at the same time as the civil rights movement changed the way many viewed the black struggle in the United States. The same year of the Supreme Court’s *Brown* decision the Viet Minh defeated the French military, ending French colonial rule and bringing communists to power in North Vietnam. In Africa, the Kenyan Freedom Army—which became known as the Mau Mau in the Western press—waged war against the British colonial army. The following year a historic conference in Bandung, Indonesia, brought together representatives from twenty-nine African and Asian nations with the goal of combating colonialism and increasing cooperation among oppressed peoples.²⁵ Combined with the conservatism of trade unions following the regularization of capital-labor relations in the postwar period, these developments led to a growing consciousness that the agent of revolutionary change was no longer the mass industrial worker but rather the colonized, the unemployed, and the dispossessed. Activists increasingly viewed black Americans as a colony and related their struggles to those of the colonized peoples of developing countries.

Disaffection with Communist Party politics was another important node of this transition. “Every time a Negro would pick up a piece of Communist literature,” claimed Frank Marquart, a white autoworker and union organizer in the 1930s, “he would always find something that pertained to the problems of the Negro.”²⁶ But the Party’s policies and bureaucracy alienated

many black workers during World War II and in the postwar years, when traditional left orthodoxy failed, in the eyes of many, to account for the social and economic changes facing society. In 1944 the prominent black novelist and social critic Richard Wright published his scathing indictment of the Communist Party, "I Tried to Be a Communist," and Claudia Jones denounced the Party's paternalistic attitude toward black women workers. James Boggs argued that although the Communist Party was an important factor in raising workers' consciousness on the shop floor, it often had a condescending and racist attitude toward black workers.²⁷ Perhaps the most well known African American novel, Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, published in 1952, dramatizes the Party's inability to recognize the individual humanity of black members, treating them instead as part of an undifferentiated mass. As Harold Cruse, author of *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual*, wrote, "American Marxists cannot 'see' the Negro at all unless he is storming the barricades, either in the present or in history." Such a stance, Cruse explained, led communist organizers to wrongly view blacks as "a people without classes or differing class interests."²⁸ A former Communist Party member, Cruse defected over frustration with the Party's failure to account for the changing nature of class struggle. Critiquing the stale social theory of Party bureaucrats, he asked why it was assumed "that everything in society is subject to the processes of change except the historical role of the working class in advanced capitalist nations."²⁹

In the context of black workers' alienation from "old left" dogma and the rise of anticolonial movements abroad, the Johnson-Forest Tendency germinated in Detroit. Founded in 1941, the Tendency originally formed within the Trotskyist Workers Party, later joining the Socialist Workers Party in 1947, and finally forming an independent organization called Correspondence. The group took its name from its two founders, the Trinidadian Marxist C. L. R. James, author of *The Black Jacobins* (who used the pseudonym J. R. Johnson), and the Ukrainian Marxist Raya Dunayevskaya, a former secretary of Leon Trotsky (who published under the name Freddie Forest). The third principal member was the Chinese American activist Grace Lee, a Bryn Mawr-trained philosophy PhD who married the autoworker James Boggs after he joined the group. The Tendency also included notable scholars and activists such as Martin Glaberman, Simon Owens, and George Rawick. In the group's early years they made a major contribution to Marxist theorization when Grace Lee Boggs produced the first-ever English translation of Marx's now famous 1844 *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts*. The group also published a range of theoretical books and pamphlets on worker self-activity and Communist Party

politics, such as *The American Worker* (1947), *State Capitalism and World Revolution* (1950), and *Facing Reality* (1958).³⁰

The first issue of the *Correspondence* newspaper came out in 1953, and it soon claimed a regular readership of as many as four thousand people, one hundred of them contributing regular pieces to the paper. As Stephen M. Ward writes, *Correspondence* was committed to “affirming the role of the working class as the agent of revolutionary change; rejecting the concept of the vanguard party and instead celebrating the self-activity of spontaneous mobilization of the working class; and standing in full opposition to all forms of bureaucratic control.”³¹ Inside the plants, *Correspondence* activists attempted to lead a “revolt against Reuther.” Simon Owens distributed pamphlets like *Workers Battle Automation* hoping to catalyze worker resistance to speed-ups and unemployment.³² The initiatives of *Correspondence* were influential throughout European leftist circles, who looked to Detroit’s working class for tactical guidance and ideological inspiration.

In his 1948 essay “The Revolutionary Answer to the Negro Problem in the USA,” C.L.R. James described the “immense revolutionary potentiality” of black Americans, in whom the “readiness to destroy” bourgeois society existed “to a degree greater than in any other section of the population in the United States.”³³ Arguing that the struggle against capital was still fundamental, James cautioned against subordinating the civil rights movement to trade unionism or left politics. Though the group had split by 1962 over ideological differences, James Boggs expressed a similar sentiment in his seminal and widely read work of 1963, *The American Revolution: Pages from a Negro Worker’s Notebook*: “American Marxists have tended to fall into the trap of thinking of the Negroes as Negroes, i.e., in race terms, when in fact the Negroes have been and are today the most oppressed and submerged sections of the workers. . . . The Negro struggle in the United States is not just a race struggle. . . . The goal of the classless society is precisely what has been and is today at the heart of the Negro struggle.”³⁴ Boggs concluded that “the black masses were bypassing workers as the force most prepared or able to disrupt society.” In the years to come, the Boggses championed the Black Power movement, but also criticized Black Power leaders who “would rather keep the concept vague than grapple with the systematic analysis of American capitalism out of which the concept of Black Power has developed.”³⁵

In the mid-1960s the black nationalist Reverend Albert Cleage of the Shrine of the Black Madonna in Detroit laid out a Christian variant of revolutionary black nationalism: “With the emergence of the nationalist movements of the world’s colored majority, the historic truth is finally beginning to emerge—that Jesus

was the non-white leader of a non-white people struggling for national liberation against the rule of a white nation, Rome.”³⁶ Cleage consistently drew large audiences for his polemical sermons, railing against white supremacy and condemning TULC’s “Uncle Tomism.”³⁷ In a well-attended memorial meeting for Malcolm X at Detroit’s Socialist Forum, Cleage captured the changing tenor of the black struggle: “When you were just begging the white man to give you something, you didn’t need organization. All you needed was a kneeling pad so that you could kneel down and look humble. But if you want power, you have got to organize to get it—you have got to have political power, you have got to have economic power.”³⁸ Throughout the 1960s Cleage worked with a range of activists who shared a radical vision for the black movement in Detroit. Cleage organized a “Do Not Buy Where You Cannot Work” campaign and organized boycotts of racist businesses throughout Detroit. He also worked with Richard and Milton Henry, who were close friends of Malcolm X, and the Boggsses to organize the Group on Advanced Leadership, a socialist, black nationalist organization formed in 1962.

A few months after the civil rights leader Medgar Evers was assassinated by a white supremacist in Mississippi, the Group on Advanced Leadership organized the 1963 Northern Negro Grass Roots Leadership Conference at King Solomon Baptist Church in Detroit, a formative event in the history of the Black Power movement. There Malcolm X, whose nickname was “Detroit Red” and who had briefly worked in Detroit’s Lincoln-Mercury Plant, delivered his famous “Message to the Grass Roots” speech. Offering a scathing critique of mainstream civil rights leaders, he told his Detroit audience, “Whoever heard of a revolution where they lock arms, singing ‘We Shall Overcome’? You don’t do that in a revolution. You don’t do any singing, you’re too busy swinging.”³⁹ Exposing what he saw as the conservative dynamics underlying the civil rights movement, Malcolm X portrayed the 1963 March on Washington as “an effort to subdue the groundswell of dissent while consolidating support for Kennedy’s proposed civil rights reforms.”⁴⁰ Due to his relationship with Detroit’s radical activist network, Malcolm X returned to Detroit the following year to deliver another influential speech, “The Ballot or the Bullet.” “I am not anti-white,” he insisted. “I am antiexploitation, antioppression.”⁴¹

In addition to their own organizational work, Cleage and James and Grace Lee Boggs served as mentors to a new generation of black activists. In 1963 students at Wayne State University—including many future leaders of the Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement, such as John Watson, Luke Tripp, and General Baker—formed Uhuru, a black Marxist-Leninist organization. Uhuru—Swahili for “freedom”—helped found the Freedom Now Party, a black-leftist political party led by the Boggsses, Cleage, and Harold Cruse. Members of Uhuru also

attended the Socialist Workers Party's Friday Night Socialist Forum. The activists formed reading groups to discuss the works of Marx, Lenin, Mao, Malcolm X, Frantz Fanon, C. L. R. James, and Che Guevara. Uhuru members also studied the writings of Robert F. Williams, which had been published in *Correspondence*. Williams had served in the U.S. Marines and labored as a factory worker in Detroit before he went to Monroe, North Carolina, and became president of the local NAACP chapter. In the late 1950s he formed black armed self-defense groups, and when the KKK attacked the organizer of a local campaign to desegregate the public pools, Williams and others returned fire and succeeded in running the white supremacists off. Williams's tactics helped reduce the incidences of racial violence across Monroe, where he stayed until 1961, when he was threatened by a violent lynch mob. He found asylum in Cuba, where he soon met with Mao Zedong. Following their meeting, Mao wrote, "The evil system of colonialism and imperialism grew up along with the enslavement of Negroes, and it will surely come to its end with the thorough emancipation of the black people."⁴²

In 1964 Williams published an influential essay titled "The Potential of a Minority Revolution" in which he gave specific suggestions for building a "poor man's arsenal": "Gasoline fire bombs (Molotov cocktails), lye or acid bombs (made by injecting lye or acid in the metal end of light bulbs) can be used extensively. During the night hours such weapons, thrown from roof tops, will make the streets impossible for racist cops to patrol. Hand grenades, bazookas, light mortars, rocketlaunchers, machine guns and ammunition can be bought clandestinely from servicemen, anxious to make a fast dollar."⁴³

In 1964 the Progressive Labor Movement invited several Uhuru leaders on a trip to Cuba, where they met with Williams, Fidel Castro, and Che Guevara to discuss revolutionary tactics. General Baker, a future leader of the League of Revolutionary Black Workers, remembers, "It was a laboratory of revolutionary fervor."⁴⁴ Ernest Allen, a friend of Huey Newton and leader of the Revolutionary Action Movement (RAM) in Oakland, was also in Cuba at the time. As a result of the meetings, Allen and the cadre of Uhuru activists committed themselves to applying "'Marxism-Leninism Mao Tse-tung thought' to the conditions of black people." Once back in Oakland, Allen soon recruited Bobby Seale, the future cofounder of the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense, into RAM. In Detroit James Boggs was elected RAM's ideological chairman, and he and Grace Lee Boggs helped organize RAM's journal, *Black America*. According to a former Black Panther member, Ahmad Rahman, Detroit's RAM activists became "the underground, military wing of the black liberation struggle for which Malcolm X's Organization of Afro-American Unity was to be the above-ground vehicle."⁴⁵ RAM had links with the Afro-American Student Movement,

which published a journal, *Black Vanguard*, edited by John Watson, a future leader of the Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement, which was distributed throughout the city's factories.⁴⁶

Around the United States, the struggle was becoming increasingly violent. In 1964 the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee launched its Mississippi voter registration campaign, and white supremacist groups responded by bombing forty homes, burning thirty-five black churches, and murdering six people. That year also saw urban uprisings in Harlem, Chicago, Philadelphia, and several other cities. In February 1965 Malcolm X was assassinated. A few months later residents of the Watts neighborhood in Los Angeles took part in what *CBS Reports* called a "virtual civil insurrection probably unmatched since [the Civil War]." During the Watts rebellion, LAPD Chief William H. Parker said, "This situation is very much like fighting the Viet Cong. . . . We haven't the slightest idea when this can be brought under control." Days of armed struggle resulted in 3,952 arrests and more than \$40 million in property damage. Thirty-four people were killed, nearly all of them black, and most of them by the police.⁴⁷ To make sense of this insurrection, it is helpful to consider the political-economic context: between 1963 and 1965 the LAPD killed sixty black people, and twenty-eight factories had left the local area.⁴⁸ When Martin Luther King Jr. traveled to Watts to organize the rebels into a nonviolent movement, his speech was interrupted and ridiculed by an angry crowd. King's friend and fellow nonviolent activist Dick Gregory attempted to intervene, borrowing a bullhorn from the police and shouting at the rebels, "Go home!" A protester subsequently shot Gregory in the leg.⁴⁹

Following Watts, President Johnson addressed the nation with these words: "A rioter with a Molotov cocktail in his hands is not fighting for civil rights any more than a Klansman with a sheet on his back and a mask on his face. They are both more or less what the law declares them: lawbreakers, destroyers of constitutional rights and liberties, and ultimately destroyers of a free America. They must be exposed and they must be dealt with."⁵⁰ The president's statement bears an eerie resemblance to an earlier statement by King: "Lawlessness, looting and violence cannot be condoned whether used by the racist or the reckless of any color."⁵¹

Stop-and-Frisk Comes to Detroit

The state responded to this upsurge in militancy by bolstering its police forces. Following the Watts uprising, the LAPD introduced stop-and-frisk tactics in the black neighborhoods that launched the rebellion. That same year, President Johnson passed the Law Enforcement Assistance Act, launching his War

on Crime, which would run parallel to his War on Poverty.⁵² At the same time, Mayor Cavanagh proceeded to modernize and enlarge the DPD as part of his own “war on crime.” Cavanagh said that the government must “show to those who break the law that you are an enemy. Show to those who respect the law that you are a friend.”⁵³ As part of this effort, he expanded DPD’s Red Squad. Tasked with monitoring and infiltrating radical groups, the squad grew in size from six to seventy members from 1958 to 1970. The mayor also proposed a “stop and frisk law.” According to the *Free Press*, “The law would empower a policeman to stop any person he reasonably suspects is committing, has committed, or is about to commit a felony or high misdemeanor. . . . It would also allow the policeman to search the person for a dangerous weapon if the policeman ‘reasonably suspects’ he is in danger.”⁵⁴ In 1965 DPD also introduced tactical mobile units, “an elite corps trained to deal with civil disturbances.” The high-crime areas being targeted by an enlarged and modernized DPD were poor areas with high concentrations of black residents.⁵⁵

Antipolice sentiment had already been running high in Detroit’s black community after a police officer killed Cynthia Scott in 1963. Following Scott’s death—she was shot three times, twice in the back, having allegedly slashed an officer on the hand—the *Free Press* titled their ensuing article “Police Kill Woman in Vice Case” and labeled Scott a prostitute and a “188-pound former wrestler.” A mass protest ensued, with as many as five thousand Detroiters marching on police headquarters, chanting, “Stop killer cops!” The city prosecutor, however, declared the officers’ actions justified.⁵⁶

On the night of August 9, 1966, police officers attempted to arrest three black youth who were “loitering” on the sidewalk.⁵⁷ A crowd estimated at one hundred people responded to the arrests on Kercheval Street by attacking private property and throwing rocks at the tactical mobile units. For three nights Detroiters, armed with rocks and Molotov cocktails, clashed with police. Eventually the police arrested fifty-five people, most on charges of “inciting to riot” and “conspiracy to disturb the public peace.” Those arrested included General Baker and Glanton Dowdell, future organizers in the League of Revolutionary Black Workers.⁵⁸ In an article titled “Lessons Learned from City’s Racial Violence,” the *Free Press* concluded that at Kercheval Street “Detroit experienced a sharp, violent and potentially explosive disturbance. It didn’t explode, and that, too, is significant. Detroit learned that when an illegal outbreak occurred, police and other community agencies moved quickly to contain it and defuse it. The police have had the youth movement under almost constant surveillance.”⁵⁹ In short, rather than address the root causes of social unrest—poverty, unemployment, poor housing, violent and racist policing—members

of Detroit's power structure were confident that they could effectively contain the crisis by policing it.

In response, activists began patrolling the police officers and monitoring their activity. "Join the black guards" slogans could be found throughout Detroit. Two months after the Kercheval clash, on October 30, the *Free Press* published a brief article titled "Negro Check on Police Is Criticized": "A predominantly Negro political group said Saturday that plans to recruit Negroes to police Detroit policemen were considered 'ill-considered and ill-advised.' The community and Labor Political Action Coalition (CALPAC) issued the statement after a militant inner-city civil rights group told of plans to form 'black panther patrols.' The unarmed patrols will record all incidents of police brutality."⁶⁰

As black militancy grew, elites propagated a myth that blamed these militants for the city's increasing crime rates. In late 1966, for example, thirteen Black Panthers were arrested and interrogated after a sixty-one-year-old grocer was murdered. In their front-page story on the arrests, the *Free Press* called the Panthers "an alleged terrorist gang." Three men were charged with first-degree murder, and "police said a waiver would be sought on a 15-year-old, said to have served as the lookout during the holdup, so that he might be tried as an adult with the others."⁶¹

Compare this with the criminal justice system's treatment of white Detroiters. In the summer of 1967 a group of white men killed Danny Thomas, a black war veteran and former Ford employee, at River Rouge Park. Thomas was murdered after attempting to defend his pregnant wife, whom the men raped, causing her to have a miscarriage. Initially Detroit's major newspapers attempted to silence the story, and Thomas's murder was covered only by the *Michigan Chronicle*. As political pressure mounted, several days after the attack the *Free Press* published a muted story of the killing—burying it on the paper's third page, behind a cover story about a blind puppy that white homeowners took in.⁶² The police immediately released five of the men detained for killing Thomas. Only one person was charged with the murder, and he was eventually acquitted. At that time, in Detroit, no white person had ever been successfully prosecuted for the murder of a black person.⁶³

That same week, in a series of police raids, sixteen Revolutionary Action Movement members in New York were rounded up and arrested on trumped-up charges. The police action came on the heels of a *Life* magazine exposé on RAM, which claimed that the "Peking based group" was "impressively well read in revolutionary literature—from Marat and Lenin to Mao, Che Guevara and Frantz Fanon." All charges were subsequently dropped.⁶⁴

A week later, on July 1, Vivian Williams was murdered. The *Free Press* buried the story on the eleventh page. In the fifty-four-word report on the murder, the paper did not mention that Williams was black, nor that multiple witnesses claimed that Williams had been killed by a white police officer who had had repeated, hostile run-ins with her.

Both Danny Thomas and Vivian Williams lived in the deeply impoverished Twelfth Street neighborhood, where the Great Rebellion would begin. The demographics of this West Side neighborhood had changed dramatically in recent decades: 99 percent of the residents were white in 1940, and only 4 percent were white by 1960. Many of the incoming black residents had moved into the area after Black Bottom was razed.⁶⁵

On July 20, a week after a black-led insurgency in Newark, New Jersey, in which twenty-three people were killed, Mayor Cavanagh's Summer Task Force began a riot simulation in the Twelfth Street neighborhood. Public officials were tested on their ability to respond to a "mock riot." According to the designer of the Early Warning System, "things look good."⁶⁶

The Great Rebellion

In the city's factories, it was mostly blacks who worked the late shifts—shifts that often lasted until three in the morning. As bars were officially closed at this time, "blind pigs"—unlicensed, after-hours drinking and gambling establishments—were the only places where workers could congregate and unwind after their shifts ended. Police raids were common at blind pigs, a source of anger among black workers. On Saturday night, July 22, a group of black Detroiters went to a blind pig in the Twelfth Street neighborhood to celebrate the safe return of two GIs from their tours in Vietnam.⁶⁷ At around 3:30 a.m. police used a sledgehammer to break into the establishment. Officers poured in, arresting eighty people and throwing them into paddy wagons. When people protested the aggressive manner in which the arrests were being made, officers raised their batons and told them, "If you stay where you are, no one will get hurt." According to the sergeant who led the raid, "The real trouble didn't start until we started to leave with the last wagonload, and we couldn't get our cars out. By the time we pulled away, more bottles and bricks were coming. A lot of the windows were broken out in one of the cars."⁶⁸ One black youth, thought to be a Ford employee, incited people to fight back against the police with cries of "Black Power!" It wasn't long before people began "looting the stores that siphoned their money out of the community, burning the slums to which economic exploitation and housing

discrimination confined them, and fighting the police force which harassed and often brutalized them.”⁶⁹

Initially the police response was tentative, due to fears that a strong repressive response would escalate matters and provoke more violence. This hesitancy came under sharp criticism from business owners, middle-class residents, and political elites. Nor was it only whites who complained. The executive secretary of Detroit’s branch of the NAACP worried about the “restrained” police response, and the black president of the 12th St. Businessmen’s Association blamed the riot’s escalation on the police’s initial failure to use fire power to stop looters.⁷⁰

Just as Martin Luther King Jr. was brought in to try to defuse the violent uprising in Watts, John Conyers, a black U.S. representative from Michigan, came to Detroit. He drove around Detroit with Hubert Locke, a black assistant police commissioner, asking people to leave the streets. On Sunday afternoon he stood on a car on Twelfth Street with a police bullhorn, but the crowd shouted him down. A black man called out, “Why are you defending the cops and the establishment? You’re just as bad as they are!” The crowd even began throwing bottles at the congressman, who later offered this explanation for his inability to quell the crowd: “They’re alienated from us. We don’t speak their language. We throw \$100 dinners and some of these people don’t see \$100 in a month.”⁷¹

Rebels meanwhile grew in numbers, and “molotov cocktails, guns, stones, bricks, and bottles were used against police,” who were outnumbered and overwhelmed.⁷² Attacks on private property intensified on Sunday afternoon. The fires of arsonists spread rapidly amid the dilapidated slum housing, and the Detroit Fire Department, one of the lowest funded per capita in the country, was powerless to contain the conflagrations. A total of 531 fires were lit on Sunday.⁷³

At 4:20 p.m. Mayor Cavanagh called in the National Guard. A few hours later the mayor instated a 9:00 p.m. curfew, declaring a state of emergency. He then ordered all the city’s gas stations to close, following reports that they were selling gasoline in “buckets and bottles” to rebels. Governor Romney commented that there was so much combat, “it looked like the city had been bombed on the West Side.” By day’s end, police had arrested at least 1,030 people. DPD had suffered twenty-eight injuries, compared to two hundred injured residents. Several were shot, including two black men: Robert Boyd, who was in critical condition after a security guard shot him in an alley just west of Twelfth Street, and Clinton Pryor, who was killed by a National Guardsman. Two black men, Willie Hunter and Price Williams, had died from asphyxiation inside a burning building, and a white woman, Sheren George, was killed by a

crowd of black men. Overnight another eight thousand National Guardsmen were summoned; they were instructed to “shoot to kill if fired upon, and to shoot any person seen looting.” Romney announced, “Fleeing felons are subject to being shot at.”⁷⁴

Violence escalated on Monday, July 24. As Hubert Locke writes, “By midnight on the second day of the riot veteran police officers were convinced they were engaged in the worst encounter in urban guerilla warfare ever witnessed in the United States in the 20th century.”⁷⁵ The Fire Department was alerted to 617 alarms on Monday, triple the number of the previous day. Fire Chief Quinlan believed arsonists employed “a divide-and-conquer-strategy. They set a fire in one area, and when the firemen get there the guys who started them are several blocks away starting another.” Some calls were “merely traps to lure the Fire Fighters into ambush to be sniped at.” Firefighters were “pelted with rocks, bottles, and cement.”⁷⁶

Attacks on private property were largely targeted. Black-owned stores displaying “Soul Brother” signs were generally left alone. At other stores rebels burned credit records, freeing residents of crippling debt. Some also targeted pawn shops with guns, stealing 2,500 rifles for their war chest. “African Americans,” Ahmad Rahman writes, “had attacked few civilian white Detroiters. Instead, the black rebels directed their wrath almost exclusively against the most visible symbols of capitalism and racism: first, property, and second, the firefighters and policeman who protected it.”⁷⁷

By day’s end, seventeen uprising-related deaths had occurred, the highest of any day that week; this included seven black looters killed by state forces, one black man killed by a black private security guard, and another two looters—one black, one white—killed by the same white business owner. In all, 2,931 people, mostly black, were arrested for riot-related activities.⁷⁸ The *Free Press* blamed the violence on looters who erupted in an “orgy of pillage”: “As the looting spread, so did the conviction that this riot had less to do with race than with color TV sets, less with Black Power than with something for nothing.”⁷⁹ President Johnson added, “Pillage and looting and arson have nothing to do with civil rights. I know that with few exceptions the citizens of Detroit . . . deplore and condemn these criminal acts.” For his part, the editor of the *Michigan Chronicle*, a black-owned weekly, chastised DPD’s “permissiveness” in handling the looters: “This was the time firm action should have been taken, to nip this thing in the bud. . . . A firm hand would have chased these people away.”⁸⁰ Taking a similar line, TULC leaders blamed the “riot” on a “relatively small number of hoodlums and hatemongers” whose actions threatened to “destroy years of effort to build community,” a “proud” effort

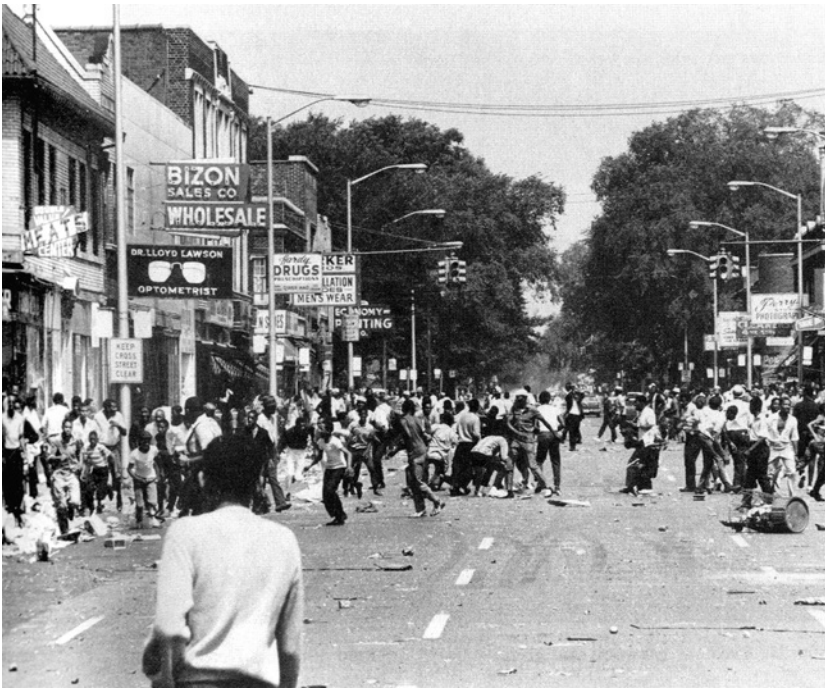


FIGURE 3.1. Twelfth Street during the first day of the Great Rebellion.

Sources: Fine, *Violence in the Model City*; *Detroit News*.

that yielded “substantial progress.” Martin Luther King Jr., Roy Wilkins of the NAACP, Whitney Young of the Urban League, and A. Philip Randolph soon issued a joint statement arguing that “riots had proved highly ineffective, disruptive, and highly damaging to the Negro population, the civil rights cause, and the entire nation.”⁸¹

Late on Monday night, President Johnson invoked the Insurrection Act of 1807 to order 4,700 army paratroopers into Detroit to deal with the looters committing crimes in Detroit. (Of these, 2,750 paratroopers were stationed throughout five East Side high schools—and as we saw in the first chapter, this police presence has continued in Detroit’s schools to this day.⁸²) It was only after consistent appeals from local leaders that the troopers were ordered in. Even UAW leader Walter Reuther and African American congressman Charles Diggs Jr. called the White House asking for military intervention.⁸³ The media also played a role in fostering local and national support for military intervention. In her PhD dissertation on the media framing of the 1967 uprising, Cassandra E. Ulbrich concludes, “Blacks were clearly described as the aggressors, and

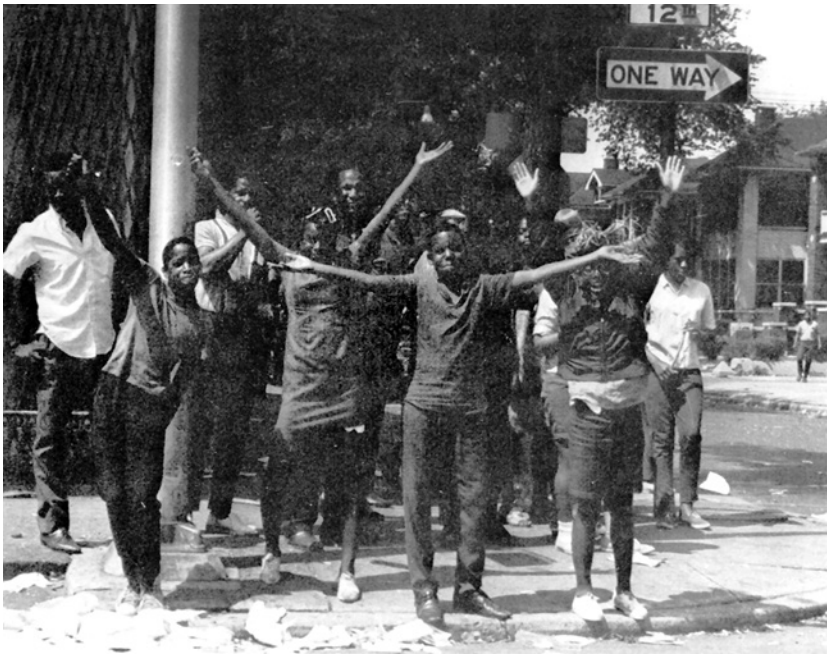


FIGURE 3.2. Detroit children celebrating during the Great Rebellion.

Source: Locke, *The Detroit Riot of 1967*.

white business owners were depicted as the targets or victims of the aggressors. Language pertaining to those who died as a result of the uprising also tended to follow the notion that blacks were the aggressors and that many who died did so as a result of their own actions.”⁸⁴

Tuesday morning, according to Hubert Locke, was “the most intense period of the riot,” “a total state of war.” At the Ford Hospital on the West Side, sniper fire hemmed in forty officers and Guardsmen. Tanks were brought in to clear the streets where the most violent resistance was taking place. The 82nd and 101st Airborne divisions engaged in firefighting with snipers whom the *Free Press* described as “terrorists.” Officers acknowledged that the resistance “look[ed] organized.” The *Free Press* reported, “Negro snipers turned 140 square blocks north of West Grand Blvd. into a bloody battlefield for three hours last night, temporarily routing police and national guardsmen. . . . Tanks thundered through the streets and heavy machine guns clattered. . . . The scene was incredible. It was as though the Viet Cong had infiltrated the riot blackened streets. . . . Since the Negroes know their battleground best, they were out to make it the kind of war they could fight.”⁸⁵



FIGURE 3.3. The National Guard patrols Linwood Avenue on July 23, 1967.
Sources: Fine, *Violence in the Model City*; *Detroit News*.

On Tuesday another thousand-plus people were arrested, and the official death toll rose to twenty-five, including one police officer and one firefighter. That day Richard and Milton Henry, representatives from the Malcolm X Society, which had worked closely with RAM in the buildup to the Rebellion, sent a telegram to Mayor Cavanagh, Governor Romney, and the White House claiming they would work toward “a cessation of all hostilities by insurrectionists” if the government would meet the following demands: the withdrawal of federal troops, “amnesty to all insurrectionists,” giving residents the right to veto urban renewal programs, funds for “community-owned businesses and cooperatives,” and community control over the school board.⁸⁶ It seems unlikely that the Henrys had the capacity to control the militants, but the telegram does speak to the fact that many local activists saw the insurrection as a



FIGURE 3.4. The U.S. Army patrols Detroit during the Great Rebellion in a tank with the words “Mission Impossible” written on it. Sources: Fine, *Violence in the Model City*; *Detroit News*.

fundamentally political event, not the “orgy of pillage” that the media described. As in Watts, rather than countenance any political demands, “a ‘dragnet’ process was evoked in which the ordinary canons of evidence necessary to arrest and the normal constraints of limited police manpower were largely ignored in an all-out effort to clear the streets.” Police targeted activists for arrest, and the courts refused bail to 98 percent of arrestees until the uprising ended. Judge George Crockett Jr., a progressive African American, stood out in his refusal to set high bail to keep arrestees locked up.⁸⁷

Prison conditions were brutal, and lack of facilities forced many prisoners to remain in police buses for upward of thirty hours. Prisoners were even kept in Belle Isle, earning the park the nickname “Bellekatraz.” “Hundreds of those arrested were forced to spend several days in an underground garage that lacked toilets. Police inflicted sexual abuse and brutality on prisoners, with

many requiring hospitalization following ‘interrogations.’”⁸⁸ One prisoner, while being interrogated, “had his skull cracked open, and was thrown back in the cell. He was taken to a hospital only when other arrestees complained that he was bleeding to death.” A female prisoner was forced to strip, photographed nude, and then raped by a police officer. In solidarity with the rapist, police officers took off their badges and taped over their license plates, making it “virtually impossible” to identify the officer who committed the rape.⁸⁹

Throughout Tuesday officers and Guardsmen frequently fired into apartment complexes in which militants were believed to be hiding. Among the casualties of such a tactic was Tonya Blanding, a four-year-old black girl who died when an army tank fired into her apartment building. The “flash” the tank was firing at was later confirmed to be from Tonya’s uncle, who was lighting a cigarette. According to a resident of the building, police “just started shooting and shooting. . . . We yelled to them that we had children in there, but it didn’t do no good. They said there was a sniper in our building. We told him there wasn’t nobody in there but families with children, but they shot in anyway.” Remarkably, though the *Free Press* acknowledged that the flash that police were responding to was nothing but the flame from a cigarette lighter, the newspaper still titled the article “A Sniper Was Under Fire, but a 4-Year-Old Girl Died.” A fifty-one-year-old white woman was similarly killed by indiscriminate tank fire. Also on Tuesday, State Representative Arthur Law of Pontiac killed a black “hoodlum” who was looting a grocery store. Law was quoted in the *Free Press* as saying, “The only answer is a double-barreled approach. The police and National Guard must shoot to kill and the courts must back them up by giving maximum sentences on all offenses.”⁹⁰

By Wednesday night the military had finally succeeded in quelling the Rebellion, and the *Free Press* reported that things were “nearly back to normal.” But even after the city’s streets were largely cleared of militants, the paratroopers remained. “Most Detroiters know why. [President] Johnson was using them as a buffer to prevent the revolt from spreading further east, to neighborhoods like Grosse Pointe where Henry Ford and others of the city’s ruling class lived.”⁹¹

By Thursday morning the reported death toll was thirty-six. This included one black youth whom police told to run away, after which they fatally shot him in the back—the same tactic police officers had used in 1943. The most heinous state violence occurred at the Algiers Motel, where officers converged in response to alleged gunfire—which turned out to be a toy gun. The police killed three unarmed black men; nine others, seven black men and two white women, were viciously beaten and forced to endure hours of what can only be described as kidnapping and torture.⁹²

On Thursday the state police began to leave, and by Friday there was only one gun battle between rebels and police. In the days that followed, the National Guard slowly pulled out of the city, curfews were lifted, and almost all businesses were open.

As the historian Sidney Fine writes, “It required a total of about seventeen thousand men drawn from the army, the Michigan National Guard, the State Police, and the Detroit Police Department to quell the Detroit riot.” State forces fired over 150,000 rounds of ammunition; there were so many empty shells lying throughout the streets that people used them for necklaces. In all, forty-three people were killed, thirty-three of them black, at least twenty-nine of them killed by state forces. About 7,200 people were arrested—more than double the amount in the Watts uprising—64 percent for looting and 14 percent for curfew violations. Twenty-six people were charged with sniping, and 552 buildings had been damaged or destroyed.⁹³

Though the uprising was black-led, thousands of poor white workers, many of them southern migrants, took part: 12 percent of those arrested were white, and whites committed 27 percent of the arsons. Many of these white workers were part of the National Committee for Democratic Action, an organization within the UAW that called on the union “to return to the militant and united action which was once the strength of the rank and file in the 1930s.”⁹⁴ General Baker insists that what makes Detroit’s Rebellion unique was not simply its scale—it was the largest uprising in the United States since the Civil War—but also its integrated character: “The first person that was killed in the Detroit Rebellion was a white worker that was looting a store down in Trumbull. When they carried me to Ionia, I had two white guys on my [prison] bus that was arrested for sniping.”⁹⁵ Recognition of white participation in the Great Rebellion would prove to impact the organizing strategies of groups, like the League of Revolutionary Black Workers, which formed in its wake.⁹⁶

The Consequences of State Repression

The state’s response to the uprising had important political consequences that would reverberate throughout the era of mass incarceration. Mass arrests were used to quell urban militancy, causing the rate at which new inmates entered the prison system in the late 1960s and early 1970s to increase faster than at any time since the Great Depression.⁹⁷ As the scholar-activist Dan Berger writes, “Although these arrests resulted only in brief incarcerations, they were dry runs in dedicating massive state resources

to widespread imprisonment. As the economy began its postindustrial turn, elites changed these urban uprisings into experiments in detaining large numbers of people.”⁹⁸

National and local media outlets justified the repression by describing it as a necessary response to combat lawlessness. Emblematic is *Time* magazine’s account: “If there is one point that has been proved repeatedly over four summers of ghetto riots it is that when the police abandon the street, the crowd takes it over, and the crowd can swiftly become a mob. It happened in Watts, in Boston’s Roxbury District, in Newark, and in blood and fire in Detroit.”⁹⁹

When considering the militarization of the police in the United States, it is important to remember that during the uprising in Detroit, as in insurgencies across the country, the police and National Guard proved incapable of restoring order on their own. One member of Mayor Cavanagh’s staff complained that the National Guard had “no more training for this kind of situation than a good group of Boy Scouts.”¹⁰⁰ One Guardsman described them as “lost boys in the big town carrying guns.”¹⁰¹ Fine suggests that the chaotic and often racially motivated violence of the police and National Guard should be characterized as “a riot of police against blacks.” It was not uncommon to hear Guardsmen—almost all of whom were white—saying things like “I’m gonna shoot anything that moves and that is black.” And on multiple occasions police themselves were reported to be looting, “filling a paddy wagon with goods taken from a store.”¹⁰² As Rodney Stark points out in *Police Riots*, the army’s discipline stood in stark contrast to the police and Guardsmen’s wanton violence and ineptitude: “These dramatic and critical differences seem to have stemmed from discipline. The paratroopers had it. The police and guardsmen did not. The army ordered the lights back on and troopers to show themselves as conspicuously as possible; the police and the guardsmen continued shooting out all lights and crouched fearfully in the darkness. The troopers were ordered to hold their fire, and did so. The police and guardsmen shot wildly and often at one another.”¹⁰³

It was the army’s superior ability to repress the uprising that justified and catalyzed the militarization of U.S. police forces in Detroit and across the country in the wake of the urban rebellions of the late 1960s and early 1970s. In the years to come, the U.S. military, which had over a thousand military bases around the world at the time of the Great Rebellion, would increasingly occupy U.S. cities like Detroit to pacify political militancy, giving credence to the Black Panthers’ equation of the police with a foreign army of occupation.¹⁰⁴

Post-Rebellion Consciousness

One poll taken soon after what it called the “July Insurrection” found that 56 percent of black respondents characterized the events in Detroit as a “rebellion or revolution,” compared to only 19 percent who called them “riots.” The role of unemployed people and of industrial workers in the uprising stands out: surveys reveal that 30 percent of those who took part in the Rebellion were jobless and that 40 percent of the arrestees at one Detroit prison were employed at Detroit’s Big Three auto companies. Worker absenteeism was so high for several days during the uprising that production had come to a near standstill.¹⁰⁵

The 120 social scientists who were originally hired by the U.S. government to investigate the causes of the country’s uprisings concluded, “A truly revolutionary spirit has begun to take hold . . . an unwillingness to compromise or wait any longer, to risk death rather than have their people continue in a subordinate status.” The team that composed the report was subsequently fired and their insights removed from the final version of the Kerner Report, an influential document that serves as the government’s official public account of the urban uprisings.¹⁰⁶

In the aftermath of the Great Rebellion, black activists who would soon organize the League of Revolutionary Black Workers launched the *Inner City Voice* newspaper. The first issue contained these words: “We are still working too hard, getting paid too little, living in bad housing, sending our kids to substandard schools, paying too much for groceries and treated like dogs by the police. We still don’t own anything and don’t control anything. . . . In other words, we are still being systematically exploited by the system, and still have the responsibility to break the back of that system. . . . Think about it brother, things ain’t hardly getting better. The Revolution must continue.”¹⁰⁷

On the other end of the political spectrum, Governor Romney declared, “Violation of law to secure needed social and economic improvement cannot be countenanced. . . . No American has the right to break the law.” Romney said that he would use any means necessary to “stop lawlessness and violence” and pledged to support “responsible” black leaders to help reestablish peace.¹⁰⁸

The opposition between the governor’s sentiment and that expressed by the *Inner City Voice* could not have been more stark. And it was the contradiction between them—efforts to restore bourgeois order on the one hand, and efforts to subvert the political-economic system on the other—that would define the years to come.

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Revolutionaries and Counterrevolutionaries

c. 1967–1973

The biggest lesson that we learned out of the rebellion was that when they established curfew, if you got sick you couldn't go to the hospital, if you got hungry you couldn't go to get no food, but if you had a badge from Chrysler, Ford or General Motors, you would get through the police line, the National Guard line, and the army line to take your butt to work. We learned a fundamental lesson out of that, that the only place that black people had any value in the society was at the point of production. And that's why we turned our efforts to organizing in the factories, and within a year's time after the Detroit Rebellion, DRUM was born. —GENERAL BAKER of the League of Revolutionary Black Workers, "General Baker Speaks!" 2010

The Negro youth and moderates must be made to understand that if they succumb to revolutionary teaching, they will be dead revolutionaries. —FBI director J. EDGAR HOOVER (year unknown), quoted in Bloom and Martin, *Black against Empire*

In July 2017 *Detroit* was released to widespread critical acclaim. Directed by the Academy Award–winning director Kathryn Bigelow, the film restages the city's 1967 uprising. *Detroit* is "harrowing, relentless, and intensely angry," declared the *New Statesman*. "As it should be." The filmmakers decided that the fiftieth anniversary of the Great Rebellion was the perfect occasion for *Detroit's*

release, and advertisements for the film papered Detroit while the city commemorated the uprising. In deciding whether to take on the project, Bigelow thought, “Am I the perfect person to tell this story? No. However, I’m able to tell this story, and it’s been 50 years since it’s been told. . . . I always feel that the purpose of art is to agitate for change, but you can’t change anything if you’re not aware of it. . . . With the events unfolding today, the story needed to see the light of day. My hope is that a dialogue comes out of this film that can begin to humanize a situation that often feels very abstract.”¹

Detroit opens with a stage-setting voice-over: after black workers’ Great Migration north, a second great migration occurred, when racist whites abandoned cities, “taking jobs and money with them.” As we have seen, deindustrialization, suburbanization, and ghettoization are impossible to understand without taking into consideration the broader political and economic landscape. But in Bigelow’s depiction, white racism is the transhistorical scourge. This simplification allows Bigelow to turn the deeply rooted urban rebellion into a race riot, a violent spectacle to be staged with a \$34 million budget.

Bigelow obscures not only the political causes of the uprising but also the political content of the uprising itself. The myriad radical political organizations and leaders that helped galvanize Detroit’s uprising are entirely absent from the film. Militant autoworkers, so central to the Rebellion, are likewise erased; insofar as they appear in the film, autoworkers appear only at work, often discovering that their sons, who they wish were “smarter than that,” have foolishly joined in the uprising. And white workers, who took part in the uprising in significant numbers, are nowhere to be found in Bigelow’s drama. Instead of a political uprising, we are left with a picture of enraged, despairing black men looting the city, a picture not dissimilar from that offered by the media at the time in their attempts to discredit the uprising as an “orgy of pillage.”

The word *rebellion* sometimes gets thrown around in progressive circles. It’s often used to describe and romanticize any event with political determinants that entails mass resistance. But, as Grace Lee Boggs has written, there is a qualitative difference between a rebellion that is simply a negative reaction, a tearing down, and a rebellion that creates space to reshape and overcome the thing one is rebelling against. Rebellions can pave the way to revolutionary politics only when people have assumed “the role of subject in the precarious adventure of transforming and re-creating the world. They are not just denouncing but also announcing a new positive.” Detroit’s rebellion encompasses the *positive* vision for a new type of society that animated the radical organizations that proliferated in Detroit, both before and after the rebellion.²

The radical imaginary that animated many in Detroit at the time is obscured in the debate about Bigelow's merits as a white woman. This is clear from the appraisal given the film by Dr. Michael Eric Dyson, a Detroit native and one of the country's most prominent black political commentators (whom Bigelow consulted while making *Detroit*): "This is a white woman telling the truth as much as she can on film about racial injustice in America. That will resonate very powerfully with white folks. What better way to use your white privilege than to undermine it, raise questions about it, leverage it on behalf of black and brown people who usually don't have a voice in the matter at all."³

Obscuring the political-economic coordinates of the Rebellion in favor of a straightforward story of racial enmity and oppression is nothing new. In 1968 the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, known as the Kerner Commission, issued a seminal report on the country's recent "racial uprisings." Adolph Reed Jr. comments:

The report concluded with more than seventy pages of specific, mainly social-democratic recommendations for national policy action to prevent future disturbances. Those were by and large ignored, even in popular discussion. Instead, the report's most meaningful and lasting impact on American politics resulted from its generic diagnosis that "white racism" was the ultimate source of the manifold inequalities and disparities the report catalogued and its prognosis that "the nation is rapidly moving toward two increasingly separate Americas . . . a white society principally located in suburbs, in smaller central cities, and in the peripheral parts of large central cities; and a Negro society largely concentrated within large central cities."⁴

In other words, the dominant interpretation of the Kerner Report was to divorce race from class and obscure the complex material causes of the urban uprisings. The conclusion that "white racism is essentially responsible for the explosive mixture which has been accumulating in our cities since the end of World War II" had far-ranging effects on politics in the post-civil rights era. If uprisings were caused primarily by racism, then they required a racial solution: more black politicians, police officers, college graduates, and so on. By pushing political-economic causes to the background, it became easy to ignore the recommendations of black leaders like Coretta Scott King, Bayard Rustin, and A. Philip Randolph, who were calling at the time for full employment.⁵

Meanwhile the Kerner Commission's call for more "training, planning, adequate intelligence systems, and knowledge of the ghetto community" was widely heeded, and the new multiracial political elite sought tighter control

over the exploited and alienated populations who were responsible for the uprisings.⁶ As the black political establishment became more and more entrenched and black membership in the middle class grew, conditions for black workers, and the working class more generally, worsened dramatically, with unemployment and incarceration rising in tandem.

In this chapter we analyze the post-Rebellion years in Detroit, focusing on the activity of two radical groups that tried to subvert the power structure from below, the Black Panthers and the League of Revolutionary Black Workers, and on the corporate and political elites who attempted to navigate their way out of the crisis through a combination of repression, co-optation, and mythologization.

The Scope of the Crisis

In the late 1960s the future of the American and, indeed, the global political-economic system was far from assured. The U.S. economy was stalling. Workers were taking to the streets. The Black Power movement was at its height, its most militant adherents calling for the black nation's secession from the white supremacist United States. Antiwar mobilizations were calling into question the imperialism that underpinned American domination. A counterculture movement was patently rejecting the value system that capitalists like Henry Ford had worked so hard to inculcate. During this time, elites and radicals both realized that things could not go on as they had. Their combative attempts to actualize their political visions helped to define this era of social turmoil and radical possibility. Before we examine how the capitalist class managed to gain the upper hand and escape this crisis, let us take a closer look at what, exactly, the crisis entailed.

Western capitalism's hegemony in the world system was under serious threat in the late 1960s from surging liberation movements in Cuba, Algeria, Poland, Vietnam, Mexico, Congo, South Africa, Palestine, Uruguay, Brazil, Jamaica, and Northern Ireland, among other places. In May 1968 "an assault on the culture and superstructure of late capitalism" was mounted across Europe, Japan, Mexico City, and Jamaica, as workers and students occupied universities, factories, and public squares.⁷ The anti-imperialist movement had also become a formidable force within the United States. Hundreds of thousands of protesters marched on Washington, denouncing the war in Vietnam. Martin Luther King Jr., increasingly influenced by the socialist leader Eugene Debs, criticized the war in his famous "Beyond Vietnam" speech, in which he made the link between "poverty, racism and militarism." A couple of years later the

North Vietnamese government made the same connection, offering to release American prisoners of war if the United States released arrested Black Panthers. By then there was also an open revolt of U.S. ground troops in Vietnam against the war effort.⁸

In response to King's assassination in April 1968, there were uprisings in over one hundred U.S. cities. In Detroit thousands took to the streets in protest, and the National Guard was again called in to restore order. In 1969 there were major anti-establishment protests at three hundred U.S. universities, one-quarter of them involving strikes and building takeovers.⁹

This wave of mass discontent was particularly worrying for U.S. elites given that it was occurring just as U.S. companies were losing their dominance in the world market. In 1953, 30 percent of global exports came from U.S. producers; by 1966 (the first year in decades that the profit rate fell) that figure was just 16 percent. The United States soon faced its first postwar trade deficit and would have to go further and further into debt to finance the disastrous Vietnam War, as well as the social programs that working-class radicals were struggling for.¹⁰

It was in this contradictory, tumultuous historical moment that the League of Revolutionary Black Workers was born.

The League of Revolutionary Black Workers

Exploitation and oppression are part of the same coin, part of that monster that is standing on our chest, and you can't eliminate one without the other. —JEROME SCOTT, "A Media Project with the League of Revolutionary Black Workers"

Labour cannot emancipate itself in the white skin where in the black it is branded. —KARL MARX, *Capital*

In the words of Manning Marable, "The League was in many respects the most significant expression of black radical thought and activism in the 1960s." While several book-length studies of the LRBW already exist, recent and ongoing efforts shed new light on this seminal organization. A recent oral history media project contains interviews with dozens of League members, and their stories force scholars and activists to reconsider the group's history.¹¹ Furthermore, Jerome Scott and Walda Katz-Fishman are in the process of publishing a book about the League, written in collaboration with many other former members.¹² All we aim to do here is situate some of this radical history within our broader narrative.

The *Inner City Voice* (ICV), "Detroit's Black Community Newspaper," printed an average of ten thousand copies per issue in its first year. The radical

paper was edited by John Watson, a former member of Uhuru and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). As Watson reported in an interview in 1968 with *Radical America*, “The people who created [ICV] were Marxist-Leninists, revolutionary socialists. . . . We have our office in a large building with our own coffee house and with our own school, teaching black history and now courses in Marxism-Leninism.” Influenced by Lenin’s pamphlet *Where to Begin?*, ICV attempted to build a newspaper that “organizes the division of labor among revolutionaries.”¹³

When Watson was asked about his reaction to Black Power leader Stokely Carmichael’s insistence that “socialism and communism was not for black people,” he called the claim “bullshit”: “To say socialism or communism is irrelevant is foolish and we oppose this. . . . When Stokely is attacking socialism he is attacking us. How can socialism be irrelevant? We don’t understand that.”¹⁴

Interest in a Marxist position grew as General Baker and other workers at the Dodge Main plant organized interest in ICV. Nine months after the army had evacuated Detroit, when Dodge attempted to speed up the production line, four thousand workers, led by a group of white women, shut down the plant in the first wildcat strike in over a decade. One major catalyst for the strike was the organizing of workers affiliated with ICV, who, after the strike, renamed themselves the Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement (DRUM). The strike, which cut Chrysler production by 1,900 automobiles, resulted in the firing of twenty-six workers.¹⁵ The *Detroit Free Press* condemned the strike and described DRUM as “seeking to force Chrysler to adopt an employment policy of reverse Jim Crow. One of the leaders of the DRUM movement, fired by the illegal strike activity was General Baker . . . a Negro racist.”¹⁶

Working-class support for the wildcat, however, forced Dodge to rehire the workers; almost immediately they led black workers in another three-day wildcat strike, again violating the union contract. The strikes mobilized support from black industrial workers across Detroit, whose numbers grew 21 percent between 1967 and 1969 as the Detroit Board of Commerce initiated a hiring campaign for minority workers as a concession to defuse the tensions that had exploded in the Great Rebellion. Inspired by DRUM, workers throughout the city and around the United States formed their own Revolutionary Union Movements—not only factory workers but also postal employees, newspaper workers, and other service workers.¹⁷

According to Luke Tripp, a DRUM organizer, while the consciousness of the young radicals had grown out of their involvement in civil rights protests, they spurned the integrationist character of the mainstream of the movement: “Most of us who were Black did not subscribe to the philosophy of nonviolence

nor to the belief that racism and social inequality could be abolished within a capitalist system.” Echoing the sentiments of C. L. R. James and James Boggs, Tripp writes, “We believed that organized Black workers, more than any other segment of our community, constituted the force with the greatest power to pressure the ruling capitalist class for social change.” DRUM consciously positioned itself in opposition not only to the company and the union but to the black middle class and black political elites. Six months after the formation of DRUM, the National Urban League held a banquet in Detroit where they presented awards to Ford, GM, and Chrysler for their “pioneer efforts in furthering the concept of equal opportunity.” Black workers showed up with picket signs to disrupt the gala, which they characterized as “the farce of the year.” Earlier that week DRUM had organized a public rally to further their organizing efforts. Tripp recalls, “Prior to the rally, raffle tickets were sold. The selling of raffle tickets, in addition to providing money, served to inform community people about the struggle of Black workers. The first prize offered was a new M-1 Rifle, the second prize was a new shotgun, and the third prize was a bag of groceries.”¹⁸

Within two years of the Great Rebellion, the city’s various RUMs had led dozens of wildcat strikes and coalesced into the League of Revolutionary Black Workers, with a central staff of eighty and over one thousand members. The *Michigan Chronicle* noted at the time, “No matter what the actual number of DRUM members, many other black auto workers knew this mess for what it was and while they may not be DRUM members, they sure as hell support some of the DRUM goals.”¹⁹

The disaffection of black workers from the union and from auto work in general was a direct result of the UAW’s tactic since the Treaty of Detroit: negotiate for wage increases and fringe benefits and cede full control of the shop floor to the corporation. Despite the production boom of the 1960s, when “jobs were more plentiful than at any time since World War II,” auto work was so dangerous and degrading that, as in the years before Ford’s Five Dollar Day, worker turnover was tremendous: throughout the 1960s the majority of unskilled new hires quit within one year. Between 1960 and 1965 the auto industry had to hire over 1.5 million workers to fill just 250,000 jobs. Worker absenteeism was at 5 percent during the decade, double the rate of the 1950s, and climbed as high as 20 percent in some factories on Mondays and Fridays. This coincided with a generation shift among workers, with the old guard who had participated in the historic sit-down strikes of the 1930s and lived through the Depression replaced by younger workers with little experience in unions. All this contributed to a state of affairs in which “factory workers in

general, and Detroit's in particular, were becoming increasingly unhappy with their jobs." In addition to absenteeism, disciplinary issues were rife in the auto plants, with young workers increasingly defiant toward factory discipline and the monotony of their jobs.²⁰

The racist policies of corporations, and of the UAW, also catalyzed support for the League. Despite its ostensibly progressive record on racial issues, the UAW had marginalized black workers to the extent that its acronym took on a new meaning for many: "You Ain't White."²¹ The League repeatedly took the UAW to task for its failure to protect the lives and livelihoods of black workers. These criticisms were often unsparing: in an *ICV* edition published days after Walter Reuther's death in a plane crash, the League characterized the former UAW president as a "reactionary conservative leader" and a "friend of the auto barons" who failed to raise "any struggle against the racism that existed in his own union or in the plants where Blacks constituted a majority."²² According to LRBW member Jerome Scott, the League's militant stance "humiliated" UAW higher-ups, who thought of themselves as progressives.²³

To contextualize the League's harsh denunciations of the UAW, one need only look at conditions inside the plants. A big reason for the League's support among even moderate black workers was the UAW's refusal to challenge the Big Three over the horrendous safety conditions in Detroit's auto plants. After the Treaty of Detroit in 1958, a chilling dialectic took effect: worker productivity soared in concert with workplace accidents. Reported accidents increased 30 percent between 1958 and 1970.²⁴ A 1973 report found that *significantly more people died each year inside U.S. factories than on the battlefields in Vietnam*. The report "estimated 65 on-the-job deaths per day among auto workers, for a total of some 16,000 annually. Approximately half of these deaths were from heart attacks. There were also 63,000 cases of disabling diseases and about 1,700,000 cases of lost or impaired hearing. These statistics did not include many long-term illnesses endemic to foundry workers and others exposed to poisonous chemicals and gases, nor did they include deaths and injuries made by accident."²⁵ These 16,000 deaths pale in comparison to the toll of industrial diseases, which the Public Health Service estimated took 100,000 lives each year. Foundry workers, machinists, and coarse-metal finishers had a significantly greater chance of having fatal heart disease and lung disease than other workers. These were the jobs that Detroit's black workers were primarily assigned.²⁶

Indeed black workers bore the brunt of exploitation during this time. According to Tripp, "Generally, as the proportion of Black workers grew in the factory, the working conditions tended to deteriorate. Tasks that had been

performed by two White workers were assigned to one Black worker. Black workers characterized this as niggermentation.”²⁷

The factory with the most League membership was Chrysler’s Eldon plant, where 70 percent of the workforce was black and the majority of the work was “machining metal parts.” Among the four thousand workers at the plant, three thousand injuries occurred each year that were serious enough to warrant examination by workmen’s compensation lawyers.²⁸ On May 26, 1970, Gary Thompson, a black twenty-two-year-old Vietnam veteran was killed when his jitney overturned and crushed him. Less than two weeks earlier, Mamie Williams, a fifty-one-year-old woman, despite being ordered to stay home by her doctor, was told to return to work or risk being fired and losing all the benefits she’d gained from twenty-six years of employment at Chrysler; the next week she passed out on the line and died shortly thereafter.²⁹ Two months later, on July 15, James Johnson, a black worker, came to work and killed two foremen and a machine operator. He was represented in court by the League’s cofounder Kenneth Cockrel, who went on the offensive, declaring, “We’ll have to put Chrysler on trial for damages to this man caused by his working conditions.”³⁰ Cockrel then took the jury to Eldon to see the inhumane conditions under which Johnson had spent years laboring. The jury ruled that the work conditions were so awful that they had caused Johnson to suffer the psychological breakdown that led him to kill the three men; Johnson was sent to a state hospital, and Chrysler was ordered to pay him \$75 in benefits every week.³¹

The League situated its critique of these conditions within the broader economic context. From the end of the war to 1969, “wages had increased by 25 percent, while profits went up 77 percent, dividends 60 percent, personal corporate incomes 80 percent, and undistributed corporate profits 93 percent.”³² While the exploitation of black workers stood out, the LRBW understood that their condition could not be separated from the class dynamics of capitalism. Jerome Scott has summed up the League’s position on the relationship between racism and class exploitation:

There was a high level of racial discrimination in the plant and [LRBW members] recognized that. But that wasn’t the motivating force. The motivating force was more of a mixture of, “Alright, they treat us like dogs. But not just because we’re black. They’re treating these white folks like dogs, too.” They put us in the worst jobs, so we understand that they have this racial overtone. But the real content is that they’re making a ton of money off of us. And that exploitation is true for us and it’s true for everybody else that works in this plant.³³

Another LRBW member, Leah Rogers, insists, "It wasn't just a black thing, even though the name of the organization was the League of Revolutionary Black Workers. It had to be involved with coalescing with people across national lines or racial lines." The role of white Detroiters in the Great Rebellion had convinced many within the League that white workers could participate in the revolutionary struggle.³⁴ The League's legal team was multiracial, and the League's activism put them in contact with a number of radical organizations. As Mike Hamlin, a member of the League's Executive Committee, recalls, Detroit was at the vanguard of revolutionary activity in the late 1960s and early 1970s: "Everyone who was a leftist came to Detroit because we were drawing workers to Marxism." A list of white-led organizations that worked alongside the League in Detroit includes the International Socialists, Students for a Democratic Society, the Revolutionary Communist Party, the Socialist Workers Party, the white-led United National Caucus (which had formed within the UAW to challenge the union's racist and pro-business policies), People Against Racism, Fredy Perlman's Detroit printing cooperative, and the Motor City Labor League (which was instrumental in getting the Marxist lawyer Chuck Ravitz elected as the judge of Detroit's Records Court in 1972), among others. These groups were active inside Detroit's factories or on Wayne State's campus, many with their own newspapers.³⁵ According to John Williams, also a member of the Executive Committee, the League's position in relation to these groups was that "the black worker in and of itself played a pivotal role, and Marx spoke to [that role] when he told the white workers, 'yeah, there's nothing you can do as long as your black worker is in chains.'"³⁶ Attempts at racial solidarity saw mixed results and were undoubtedly complicated by the ascendancy of white supremacist groups throughout Detroit in the post-Rebellion years: the neo-Nazi group Breakthrough, for instance, set up a picket line at Grosse Pointe High School to protest a speech there by King in July 1967.³⁷

The reactionary potential of white workers was of course apparent in the late 1960s in Detroit, and across the country, as politicians stoked racial fears and mobilized nativist sentiments among the white electorate. In the 1968 Democratic Primary in Michigan, the far-right, openly racist candidate George Wallace received the most votes, running, as John Watson put it, on a "populist, fascist" campaign that portrayed bankers and fat cats "in an alliance with the niggers" against white workers.³⁸ Nevertheless, while the League's program was based on the principle that blacks were the vanguard, and black workers the "vanguard within the vanguard," of the struggle against capitalism, they remained committed to the elimination of oppression and exploitation among the working class as a whole.

The League's efforts were not limited to struggles inside the factory. The Black Student United Front, formed under the tutelage of the League, used tactics such as walkouts and building occupations to fight a school system they viewed as illegitimate. In one memorable action, 150,000 Detroit students "made Malcolm X's birthday a holiday by conducting a successful walkout." Furthermore, many of the League's female activists were formerly active in the West Central Organization, which organized Detroit neighborhoods targeted for urban renewal. Sheila Murphy Cockrel remembers that the Organization "took on issues like land use policies, how landlords took care of rental property, police-community relations—that whole set of local, daily-life issues."³⁹ Women activists were instrumental in shifting the League's energy and resources to these community struggles. Marian Kramer of the League recalls, "One faction said that the focus should be in the plants, at the point of production. I said, 'Yes, but all those men got to come back into the community; they live somewhere. We've got to be organizing both places.'"⁴⁰ Women also fought against the male supremacist attitudes prevalent among men in the League. They formed the Black Women's Committee to organize the wives of men fired for wildcat strikes and combat male dominance in League leadership. In Ilene Baker's words, the women were initially seen as "handmaids." However, Kramer insists, although they were frequently "shit upon," women eventually emerged from their "second class status" within the League to become leaders of the organization.⁴¹

The League was able to publicize its multifaceted struggles by creating a broad communications network. As Chris Robé has pointed out, due to innovations like offset printing, which "allowed for easy and cheap printing[.] . . . 1967 to 1973 marks the explosion of the underground press within the United States."⁴² The League was at the cutting edge of this trend, operating its own bookshop and printing shop. In addition, John Watson was elected editor of Wayne State University's newspaper, the *South End*, which had a daily distribution estimated at eighteen thousand. The direction the *South End* took under Watson is evident from the masthead he adopted for the paper: "One class-conscious worker is worth 100 students." Struggles on Wayne State's campus soon resulted in the creation of the Black Studies Center in 1970 at Wayne State University.⁴³

In 1969 James Forman, formerly of SNCC and the Black Panthers, joined the League. Money from his "Black Manifesto"—which called on religious organizations to give reparations to "support things like a Black publishing company, a Black workers' strike fund and a land bank"—helped finance the League's 1970 film, *Finally Got the News*.⁴⁴ In the film, a collaboration between the League

and a white film collective, Newsreel, Kenneth Cockrel delivers an eloquent and devastating critique of capitalist exploitation and imperialism, which, as it captures the tenor and force of the League's ideological orientation, is worth quoting at length:

[Capitalists] give you little bullshit amounts of money for working—wages and so forth—and then they steal all that shit back from you, in terms of the way he got his other thing set up, his whole credit gimmick society, man—consumer credit: buy shit, buy shit on credit. He gives you a little bit of shit to cool your ass out, and then steals all that shit back, with shit called *interest*: the price of money. Motherfuckers are non-producing, non-existing . . . motherfuckers who deal with paper. There's a cat who will stand up and say to you he's in "mining." And he sits in an office, man, on the 199th floor in some motherfucking building on Wall Street, and he's in "mining." And he has papers, certificates, which are embroidered and shit, you know, stocks, bonds, debentures, obligations, you know. He's in "mining." And he's sitting up on Wall Street and his fingernails ain't been dirty in his motherfucking life. He went to Phillips Andover or Exeter. He went to Harvard, he went to Yale, he went to the Wharton School of Business, and he's in "mining"? And the motherfuckers who deal with intangibles are the motherfuckers who are rewarded in this society. The more abstract and intangible your shit is, i.e. stocks—what is a stock? A stock certificate is evidence of ownership in something that's real. *Ownership*. He owns and controls and therefore receives, you know, the "benefit from." That's what they call profit. He fucking with stuff in Bolivia, he fucking with shit in Chile. He's Kennecott. He's Anaconda. He's United Fruit. He's in "mining." He's in what? He ain't never in his life produced shit. Investment bankers, stockbrokers, insurance men—it's motherfuckers who don't do nothing.

At the time of the film, despite decades of automation and capital flight, black industrial workers were still central to the engine of capital accumulation. In 1970, though the Big Three's market share was declining, General Motors, Ford, and Chrysler were each among the world's five largest manufacturing companies. By 1968 black workers constituted a majority in the production departments of these megacompanies.⁴⁵ The Eldon Avenue plant *produced all of Chrysler's axles*, so shutting down Eldon was tantamount to shutting down Chrysler's operations.⁴⁶ The strategic position of black workers in the production process was the basis for Watson's claim in *Finally Got the News*: "There are certain groups which could just stop work tomorrow, and it might cause

some kind of minor disruption in terms of the overall running of the society. But there are certain other groups, that if they stopped working tomorrow, the whole system is going to cease to function.”

Although *Finally Got the News* never achieved a wide release in the United States, it did help to spread the League’s message to an international audience. The film was released just as the “hot autumn” of industrial strikes in Italy was coming to an end, and Watson was invited to lecture to workers there and to introduce *Finally Got the News* at the Pesaro Film Festival to.⁴⁷

But while the film allowed the League to spread its ideological vision, the production of *Finally Got the News* also brought to light key contradictions within the organization. In keeping with its Leninist approach, the League’s Executive Committee dealt with the organization’s strategic concerns. Only two of the seven members of the Committee, however, were factory workers or organizers, and none of them were women. This hierarchical structure allowed the Committee to become somewhat alienated from the rank and file. Many of the college-educated members on the Committee thought it vital to engage in an ideological campaign to popularize and justify League tactics. Leaders like Watson and Cockrel saw the film as a tool of propaganda that would facilitate the creation of a nationwide organization, Black Workers Congress (BWC), which they felt was necessary to more effectively combat the national corporations they were challenging. Toward this end, Black Star Productions was formed under Watson to create further films. But as Dan Georgakas pointed out at the time, many rank-and-file members “were concerned with the kinds of problems the [Black] Panthers had encountered in trying to expand nationally. The unifying factor was a feeling that there should be more factory work and less media activity.”⁴⁸ These and other tensions would eventually hasten the decline of the League.

Repression and the Collapse of the League

They are applying a sticks and carrots policy on us. First they beat us with sticks . . . and then with carrots. —SERBIAN APHORISM

In a *South End* article from 1969, Luke Tripp, a member of the League’s Executive Committee, characterized elites’ response to League activism as “the honky’s carrot and stick policy”: “with one hand” elites promoted advancement opportunities for individual African Americans, while “the other hand threatens the community with the stick (the police force).”⁴⁹

In terms of the carrot, the LRBW lost momentum precisely because of the reforms it won within the factories and the UAW. Executive Committee member

General Baker suggests, “The UAW and Chrysler Corporation had made some fundamental changes to try to alleviate the contradictions we’d talked about, but they’d never give us credit for it. Chrysler created an urban affairs department. . . . Walter Reuther came and offered to help us take over Local 3. Minorities began to get elected in local plants. There was a new Black vice-president at Dodge Main. They upgraded a lot more Blacks in staff positions.”⁵⁰

David Goldberg has shown that activists in the struggle for tenants’ rights were similarly co-opted and integrated into the “power structure.” These struggles were particularly acute in units owned by the Goodman Brothers, the city’s most infamous slumlords. According to the *Inner City Voice*, Goodman Bros. units “are overpopulated with gigantic rats, cinches (bed bugs) and roaches.”⁵¹ With help from the West Central Organization and activists in the League, the United Tenants for Collective Action (UTCA) organized tenants’ councils and rent strikes in six Goodman Bros. properties. Goodman soon decided that it would be too costly to make the repairs that tenants were demanding, and so they “agreed to turn over to the UTCA the management and control of seventeen of [their] apartment buildings, most of them in the 12th Street area.” Goodman stipulated that they would still earn 25 percent of the units’ income. The League’s General Baker and Marian Kramer suggested UTCA reject the deal, arguing that Goodman would still profit while activists did all the day-to-day work to maintain and improve the apartments. Nonetheless UTCA leaders agreed to the deal, seeing it as an opportunity to gain the local ownership integral to Black Power politics. But as Goldberg notes, the UTCA struggled to maintain its contradictory position as both landlords and tenants’ rights organizers, especially as the government funds that the organization relied on dried up. As a result, the organization “quickly sought to turn a profit to satisfy lenders, all but abandoning its political activism and grassroots origins.”⁵²

Where the carrot was not enough, the stick was always poised to strike. Many of the League’s most successful organizers were fired from Detroit’s plants because of their role in organizing strikes. Even more effective in disciplining the organization was the police. As Cockrel puts it in *Finally Got the News*, “When Chrysler is attacked . . . it pushes a buzzer and gets the Hamtramck Police Department. The whole city structure goes into action. At Ford, you are dealing with Dearborn. The fact that we closed down Dodge Main, the basic assembly plant for Chrysler operations in this entire country, means we got a response. We got police. We got injunctions from the courts.” A familiar mythology, one that portrayed the radical workers as criminals and communist extremists, legitimated this repression. After the first DRUM strikes, the international office of the UAW sent a letter to all UAW members describing the

League as the “voice of a worldwide propaganda network” and claiming that “Negro members are too intelligent to permit themselves to be used as pawns by an outside group of extremists who want to divide us and create chaos.” Emil Mazey, a social-democratic leader of the UAW, “gave an interview to the press describing the League as a ‘black peril’ which was worse than the ‘red peril’ of the 1930s.” With the full support of the *Free Press*, Chrysler obtained an injunction illegalizing DRUM protests in front of the Dodge Main plant.⁵³

The League also faced repression in its struggles outside the plants. In 1969 Wayne State University went so far as to suspend operations of the *South End* until Watson was removed as editor. Even Reuther took part in the campaign to remove Watson.⁵⁴ Moreover, in response to the student militancy spearheaded by the League’s Black Student United Front, Judge James Lincoln instituted more punitive measures in his court. As the *sole* judge in Detroit’s juvenile court, Lincoln was an influential figure in the criminal justice system, handling nearly 1 percent of the *nation’s* delinquency and neglect cases between 1960 and 1977 and becoming president of the National Council of Juvenile Court Judges in 1971. In 1968 he “issued a memorandum calling for the arrest of juveniles found loitering around schools.”⁵⁵ By 1969 police officers were permanently stationed in the city’s high schools.⁵⁶ As Michael Stauch Jr. has written in his dissertation on Detroit’s punitive turn, “with the onset of militant, collective struggles led by African American youth in Northern cities, juvenile delinquency became increasingly racialized. Juvenile penology, in turn, lost the thrust to treat young people as ‘maladjusted’ individuals, and began to see them as ‘case-hardened’ criminals acting en masse as gangs.”⁵⁷

The League and its affiliates may have had more resources to withstand this multifaceted repression had it won any of its union elections against the UAW, but in elections at Dodge Main and Eldon, the police, the company, and the UAW national headquarters worked in concert to rig the votes against the League’s popular candidates: at the request of the UAW, the union’s ballot boxes were held overnight in police stations.⁵⁸ True, the League had alienated many workers with its denunciations of “Polish Pigs” and “Peckerwood Honkies,” as well as its characterizations of the UAW and TULCA as “Uncle Tom’s Cabin.” But it seems that, in a fair election, the League would have had enough support to beat the UAW in at least a couple of plants.⁵⁹

After these losses, however, the League lacked the financial resources to provide for workers fired for strike activities, as well as to deal with pressure from the criminal justice system. Some of this pressure was strictly financial: cars that had bumper stickers supporting the League were constantly being ticketed. Other forms of pressure were more violent. As Cockrel put it, “They

tried to destroy our organization. They tried to kill leaders like General Baker and Chuck Wooten. Most all of the members of our central staff had to go to trial sometime in the year of 1969.”⁶⁰ Baker recalls that the League was “under such harassment and intimidation by the police, FBI, Internal Revenue Service, that personally I never did think we were going to live very long. We had too many close calls. Fred Lyles . . . was head of the United Tenants Union and was shot and paralyzed right after the Dodge strike. We thought the shot basically was aimed for me. . . . You didn’t sleep the same place most nights. You just tried to build whatever organizational strength you could and educate as many workers as you could to try to keep the struggle on course.”⁶¹

This pressure intensified conflicts about the Executive Committee’s decision to spend money on films and speaking tours. Initially the Committee responded to criticisms by purging dissident members, but things eventually came to a head at a heated meeting between the Executive Committee and the rank and file.⁶² According to Jerome Scott, FBI infiltrators intensified these tensions at the meeting, which ended in the collapse of the League.⁶³

One group split off to join the Black Workers Congress, which never became more than “a scheme for possible unification, a promise without fulfillment.” The majority of the rank and file, however, “retreated” into political education. Marian Kramer suggests, “The split was a good thing for us, because it made us understand that we needed an education to go to the next level. We had just about won every reform in the factory that had to be won.”⁶⁴ These members embarked on more than a year of daily study of Marxist texts. Alonzo Chandler remembers, “The basic thing that we grasped out of that educational period, whether we were studying Lenin or Mao-Tse-Tung or Marx or whatever . . . was the deep-rootedness of economics in all of this . . . economics based on a money system that doesn’t just use money as a means of exchange, but uses money to manipulate people.”⁶⁵ These workers eventually merged with the California-based Communist League, a multiracial organization that catalyzed wildcat strikes throughout the early and mid-1970s.⁶⁶ When these activists led a wildcat strike in 1973 at Ford’s Mack Avenue plant, the police and the UAW’s own “goon squad” teamed up to violently break the strike. Afterward a police officer told UAW officials, “I’m glad we’re on the same side.”⁶⁷

The League was also undercut by capital’s increasing capacity to relocate away from militant workers. Following the production boom of the early 1960s, manufacturing employment in Detroit decreased 27 percent between 1967 and 1977. The recalcitrance of workers in the face of automation and dangerous working conditions was a major factor in this process. Nationally there were 5,200 strikes per year between 1967 and 1974, making this period

“the most sustained period of wildcat strikes in history.” In 1968 the number of strikes in Michigan’s industries set a postwar record, and in 1970 “strike-related production losses . . . surpassed anything in Michigan’s history.” As one League worker at the Eldon plant put it, “[Chrysler will] have to move the factory or let us have it.” Corporations generally chose the former response.⁶⁸

Detroit’s Black Panther Party

While some folks might think it was nonviolent marching and singing that spurred the integration of the big city police departments, those of us who were there know that it was the white cops’ fear of getting shot. —TONY NORMAN of Detroit’s Black Panther Party for Self-Defense, quoted in Rahman, “Marching Blind,” 2009

This section is dedicated to the late Ahmad A. Rahman: revolutionary, political prisoner, and educator.

Whereas in most cities across the United States the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense (BPP) was the most prominent black Marxist organization, in Detroit this was not the case, as the League dominated the city’s leftist scene during the late 1960s and early 1970s. As Jerome Scott recalls, the League placed some of its members into the Panthers’ ranks to keep tabs on the group. Both groups wanted to create a “black Bolshevik” vanguard party, but they clashed on the question of tactics. At the 1970 antirepression conference in Detroit, Cockrel criticized the Panthers for supporting reckless tactics like fighting the police and then having to spend all their resources on court battles. A bigger source of contention, James Geschwender writes, was that many in the League “believed that the Oakland-based Black Panther Party was moving in the wrong direction by concentrating on organizing lumpen elements of the Black community. The League did not believe that a successful movement could be based upon the lumpen, as they lacked a potential source of power. The League believed that Black workers were the most promising base for a successful Black movement because of the potential power derived from the ability to disrupt industrial production.”⁶⁹

Whatever one thinks of these criticisms, it cannot be denied that the Panthers were seminal in their willingness to organize the criminalized “surplus population”—in Marxist terminology, the “lumpenproletariat.” Leftists had long recognized that crime and criminalization were political-economic symptoms, but they were not willing or able to organize the criminalized population into a potent political force. The first group to do so was the Nation of Islam, a black nationalist group founded in Detroit during the Great Depression.

While serving a stint in a federal penitentiary in 1945 for resisting the draft, Nation leader Elijah Muhammad realized that mainstream civil rights organizations “had no programs to recruit and to transform the most oppressed members of the race: convicts, dope addicts, pimps, young delinquents, prostitutes, criminals, and the permanently unemployed.” After shifting its efforts to these groups in the postwar period, the Nation experienced a dramatic upsurge in membership, from a low of about 1,000 in 1945 to between 65,000 and 100,000 in 1960. In 1957 four thousand people filled Detroit’s Temple of Islam to listen to an address by Malcolm X, which included a call for the “little man in the street . . . to take matters into his own hands.”⁷⁰

The Black Panther Party attempted to organize these same strata into a revolutionary force. As BPP cofounder Bobby Seale wrote, “Marx and Lenin would probably turn over in their graves if they could see the lumpen proletariat Afro-Americans putting together the ideology of the Black Panther Party. Both Marx and Engels used to say that the lumpen proletariat wouldn’t do anything for the revolution. But today, in a modern technological society, with the CIA, FBI, electronic surveillance and cops armed and equipped for overkill, here are black Americans demanding our constitutional rights, and demanding that our basic desires and needs be fulfilled, thus becoming the vanguard of the revolution, despite all attempts to totally wipe us out.”⁷¹

The Panthers issued a ten-point list that included, among other things, a program for combating poverty, racism, militarism, and police violence. Point 7 states: “We believe we can end police brutality in our black community by organizing black self-defense groups that are dedicated to defending our black community from racist police oppression and brutality.” This resonated with working-class blacks throughout urban America, who had been subjected to police brutality and repression in their communities for years as the state attempted to mythologize political-economic issues as problems of “criminality.”⁷²

The Panthers became famous for their armed confrontations with the police. But state repression soon caused the group to shift to a strategy of “community control” centered on “survival programs”: “The Free Breakfast Program, the People’s Free Food Program, The Intercommunal Youth Institute, the Legal Aid Education Program, the Free Busing to Prisons Program, the Free Commissary for Prisoners Program, the People’s Free Shoe Program, the People’s Free Clothing Program, the People’s Free Medical Research Health Clinic, the People’s Sickle Cell Anemia Research Foundation, the People’s Free Ambulance Service, the People’s Free Dental Program, the People’s Free Optometry Program, the People’s Free Plumbing and Maintenance Program, and the Community Housing Program.”⁷³

These community programs were well received by working people of all races in Detroit and across the country. As Panther leader Carlton Yearwood said, "When we provide free breakfasts for poor kids, we provide them for poor whites and poor blacks."⁷⁴ Like the League, the BPP developed a willingness to collaborate with radical white organizations. BPP leader Kathleen Cleaver saw the Panthers as "the vector of communication between the most important vortexes of black and white radicalism in America."⁷⁵

In May 1968, the same month as the DRUM wildcat at Dodge Main, the Detroit chapter of the Black Panther Party was officially born. In addition to combating police, by 1969 the BPP operated a free health clinic, offered a free rodent extermination service, and was serving free breakfast to Detroit children at three locations, two on the city's West Side and one on the East Side.⁷⁶ The Panthers' plan was to emphasize nonviolent aspects of their program in the hopes of winning community support and avoiding the police repression that had been visited upon Panther chapters throughout the country. State violence, however, proved able to quash even these efforts.⁷⁷

Repression of the Black Panther Party

The universal appeal of the Panthers' community programs was what most worried FBI director J. Edgar Hoover, who oversaw the Bureau's Counterintelligence Program (COINTELPRO). The program began in 1956, with a plan to "increase factionalism, cause disruption and win defections" inside the Communist Party USA, whose membership declined from eighty-five thousand in 1942 to fewer than three thousand by the late 1960s. According to the 1975 Congressional Church Committee, throughout the 1960s and early 1970s, the government launched "a secret war against those citizens it consider[ed] threats to the established order."⁷⁸ During the 1960s COINTELPRO took aim at the student New Left, the Socialist Workers Party, Martin Luther King Jr., and Black Power radicals. By the end of the decade the program's main goal was preventing the rise of a revolutionary black movement. The primary target became the Panthers, a group that Hoover declared to be the "greatest threat to the internal security of the country" in 1969. The FBI launched 233 operations against the Panthers, including raids, infiltration, and assassinations of BPP leaders.⁷⁹

The government treated *all* aspects of BPP's operations as security threats, even the Breakfast for Children program, as a memo that Hoover wrote to an FBI operative on June 1969 reveals:

One of our primary aims in counterintelligence as it concerns the [Black Panther Party] is to keep this group isolated from the moderate black and white community which may support it. This is most emphatically pointed out in their Breakfast for Children Program, where they are actively soliciting and receiving support from uninformed whites and moderate blacks. . . . You state that the Bureau under the [Counterintelligence Program] should not attack programs of community interest such as the [Black Panther Party] "Breakfast for Children." You state this because many prominent "humanitarians," both white and black, are interested in the program as well as churches which are actively supporting it. You have obviously missed the point.⁸⁰

In the ensuing months, the FBI distributed leaflets in communities warning that the BPP's breakfast programs were serving "poisoned food" to children. On September 8, 1969, police raided the Breakfast for Children program in Watts, California. In Detroit, the FBI went to absurd ends to sabotage the Party's newspaper, the *Black Panther*, the sales of which helped fund Party operations. According to an FBI memo, in 1970 Detroit FBI agents doused a shipment of the newspaper with "a solution capable of duplicating a scent of the most foul smelling feces available."⁸¹ The execution of this mission rendered thousands of newspapers "unsaleable." This is not the only tactic police used to undermine the *Black Panther*, a newspaper with a weekly circulation of 139,000 in 1970 that consistently called police officers "Pigs" and documented incidents of police brutality in Detroit. According to Rahman:

The *Black Panther* had become an increasingly ubiquitous symbol of black power's transgression of place, and the police department worked daily to disrupt its sales. Numerous Panthers and community workers selling the paper reported being stopped, arrested, beaten, and charged with either assaulting the officers who beat them or resisting arrest. One legal investigator noted on August 10, 1970, "17 year old [Black Panther] girl was ticketed for littering, witnesses said melee ensued & girl hit with blackjack." On August 25, 1970, Patrolmen Caldwell "bust[ed five] newspaper salesmen on Woodward & State for interfering with pedestrian traffic. . . . A woman tried to help & was beaten by Ptr. Colbert." By October, police had issued twenty-four tickets to paper-selling Panthers for "impeding the pedestrian flow of traffic" on just one Detroit Street.⁸²

Armed confrontations were increasingly commonplace as Detroiters attempted to counter police violence. In spring 1969 the Republic of New Afrika,

a black Nationalist group leading a campaign for \$400 billion in reparations from the U.S. government, hosted a meeting at New Bethel Church in Detroit. Police presence outside the meeting was heavy, and as Republic members filed out of the church, a shootout ensued in which one officer was killed, another was injured, and four Republic members were wounded. The police proceeded to arrest 142 people in the church, including many children, for murder.⁸³ In another legal victory that proved disturbing to both liberal and conservative elites, the League's Kenneth Cockrel successfully defended and won acquittal for the two black activists who were charged with the police killings. In court, the Marxist lawyer acknowledged that the defendants killed the officers, but he attacked the legitimacy of the police, which he painted as a corrupt, racist organization that functioned as a tool of oppression.⁸⁴ As in the trial of James Johnson, Cockrel's ability to go from the defensive to the offensive—in the first case, putting Chrysler on trial, and in the second, putting the whole system of criminal justice on trial—demonstrated the willingness of working-class Detroiters to accommodate a structural critique of capitalist social relations rather than capitulate to mythological thinking.⁸⁵ This was further proven by the election of Cockrel's law partner Justin "Chuck" Ravitz as judge of Detroit's criminal court in 1972, largely thanks to the groundswell of public support generated through these high-profile cases. At the time the openly Marxist Ravitz was called the "first radical judge in the U.S." by the *New York Times*.⁸⁶

Where mythologies failed to take hold, however, the state's punitive arm was there to administer the necessary repression. The police used the New Bethel incident as a pretext to raid and destroy the BPP headquarters. A few weeks later more BPP members were arrested, some on the charge of robbing a prostitute whom the police had observed donating her money to the Panthers, others on the charge of robbing local black businesses, many of whom had likewise donated to the BPP and actively denied the police's charges. All charges were dropped, but not before much of the BPP's time and money were tied up in court proceedings.⁸⁷ Across the nation, police harassment was a constant theme, as "police used petty laws, like unlawful use of bullhorn or loitering, to harass the Panthers."⁸⁸ The many arrests drained the Panthers' resources: between 1968 and 1969, 739 members were arrested, at a cost of \$4.9 million in bail.⁸⁹

In the summer of 1969 someone shot a bullet through the head of nineteen-year-old Michael Baynham during a BPP meeting and fled before anyone could confirm who had done it. The *Free Press* did not report on the incident; the police immediately labeled the death a suicide and closed the case. BPP leaders understood that the group had been infiltrated, as this death was no anomaly:

state authorities killed twenty-seven BPP members during 1969 alone. This number included Fred Hampton, chairman of the Party's chapter in Chicago. In a planned assassination, state operatives drugged Hampton then shot him in the head while he slept next to his pregnant partner.⁹⁰

By this time, Geronimo Pratt, the BPP's deputy minister of defense and a decorated veteran of the Vietnam War, had organized the Panthers into a formidable force, with military capacities that included sandbag fortifications, underground tunnels, and sizable arms caches. It proved difficult for local police departments to overpower the Panthers, and this led to the first-ever SWAT raid, in 1969, which targeted the BPP's LA headquarters. During this four-hour shootout, police fired five thousand rounds of ammunition and prepared to detonate dynamite on the roof. Internal memos reveal that the FBI intended to "neutralize Pratt as an effective BPP functionary." In 1970 he was arrested on trumped-up murder charges. Like so many others during this time, Pratt became a political prisoner, serving twenty-seven years behind bars, eight of which were spent in solitary confinement, before the charges were vacated.⁹¹

At the same time, the widespread implementation of "stop-and-frisk" tactics gave police officers the discretion to harass any and all street-level political activity. In the words of one member of the Detroit chapter of the Black Panther Party, these tactics allowed the Panthers to become the police's "punching bags."⁹²

As state repression accelerated, in Detroit and elsewhere, efforts to check this violence through legal means were blocked. In Detroit the police successfully resisted activists' attempts to institute a citizen review board. The leader of Detroit's Police Officers' Association said that all critics of police were "part of a nefarious plot by those who would like our form of government overthrown." In May 1970 the *Free Press* reported that the Detroit chapter of the NAACP had filed twenty-four separate charges of police brutality against the Black Panthers; each of these charges was subsequently dismissed.⁹³ All this made it clear to Detroit Panthers that the legal system would not protect them from the police. And so, after BPP leader Malik McClure's mother's home was raided, the underground military wing of the BPP, led by several soldiers recently back from Vietnam, accelerated its operations.⁹⁴

In the summer of 1970 a black teenager was shot in the *back of the head* by a police officer. The officer claimed the boy attacked him with a broomstick, and he faced no criminal investigation. In response, BPP member Lawrence White attacked and wounded two police officers. The police then raided White's home, and a ten-hour shootout ensued. When White, a former marine, finally surrendered, DPD officers "nearly beat him to death."⁹⁵

On October 24 tensions rose even higher when a police officer assaulted a salesman of the *Black Panther*. A fight broke out in which a Panther killed a black police officer. According to the *Free Press*, that night paramilitary officers laid “siege” to BPP headquarters: one hundred officers in armored personnel carriers swarmed the address and initiated a shootout. This firefight lasted nineteen hours. As Judge Ravitz put it, “This could have been the showdown—a holocaust. It could have been 1967 again, and more.” But largely thanks to Nadine Brown of the *Michigan Chronicle*, an activist who mediated the conflict, fifteen BPP members eventually surrendered without losing their lives. All fifteen were charged with murder and conspiracy to murder. Each was eventually acquitted of all charges, but, as was the case with the League, the legal fees and the time and energy required to wage battles in court drained the Panthers.⁹⁶

By the early 1970s state repression had led to the Panthers’ undoing. The arrests that these operations produced, the deaths they caused, the mistrust and paranoia that pervaded the organization because of widespread infiltration and use of informants, the intraparty divisions insidiously fomented by Hoover and his staff—all this led to the Panthers’ collapse.⁹⁷

The Dialectic of Repression and Integration

The decline of the League and the BPP occurred in the context of the decline of myriad other movements of the time: the Black Power struggle, the antiwar movement, student rebellions, and anticolonial struggles, among others.⁹⁸ In particular, the internal divisions that eventually contributed to the dissolution of the League are indicative of larger trends within black political development in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The similarities and differences between the problems of the League and those of other organizations shed light on the transformation in black radicalism during a time of increasing incorporation of blacks into the American political apparatus in the aftermath of the civil rights reforms of the mid-1960s.

The efflorescence of Black Power lasted from 1966 to 1974. This period witnessed various and wide-ranging attempts to harness and weld together the myriad forces of black political life—the grassroots energy of the black populace, the organizational skills and national esteem of old guard civil rights leaders, the militancy of young activists, the influence of the growing class of black politicians, along with artists and intellectuals—into a movement capable of defining and implementing a political program for black people. These efforts resulted in several national Black Power conferences and black political conventions, produced various attempts to create an independent black political

party, contributed to the election of black public officials across the country, and led to historic protests against international imperialism. Affirmations of black cultural values and attempts to ameliorate the specific problems faced by black people served as a powerful salve against racial discrimination and marginalization, and for many the new black political class represented an unprecedented embodiment of the public will in the country's highest institutions.

Many of these initiatives were also stymied by the drive for racial unity in the face of ideological diversity. While many in these movements recognized the reality of contradictions and variance among black people, the predominant reasoning held that these differences should be subordinated to ethnic unification. The League's avowedly interracial, class-oriented political program was a notable departure from this prevailing tendency of Black Power discourse, particularly from "the momentary hegemony of nationalist activists within early seventies black political culture," which called on blacks to "close ranks" and deal with their internal debates "behind closed doors." According to Cedric Johnson, this "repressive tendency . . . hinders the development of open, principled debate," and such a framework essentially shuttled black political development into the familiar framework of ethnic pluralist politics. According to this framework, which often relied on a misreading of American political history, white ethnic political incorporation had occurred thanks to the strength of ethnic solidarity.⁹⁹

In the eyes of Dr. Nathaniel Wright Jr., chairman of the 1967 Black Power conference in Newark, New Jersey, "Black Power was essentially the fulfillment of the deferred process of black assimilation into American political, cultural, and economic institutions."¹⁰⁰ In the context of black politics in the postsegregation era, the drive for racial unity led to the idea of a singular black political subject, which allowed newly incorporated black politicians to claim to represent the authentic will of the black masses and use their authority in that capacity to implement policies which were often detrimental to their working-class black constituencies.

Between 1964 and 1971 the number of elected black officials increased from 100 to 1,860.¹⁰¹ By 1974 there were 104 black mayors, many of them elected in cities that had just experienced rebellions.¹⁰² This occurred alongside a dramatic uptick of government employment for black college graduates, which allowed many middle-class blacks to find employment even as the industrial economy stagnated: "By 1970 the government employed 57 percent of all black male college graduates, and 72 percent of all black female college graduates." Many of the newly elected officials deployed progressive-sounding rhetoric but advanced economic programs that mostly benefited their middle- and upper-class

constituents. As Johnson has written, “Although Black Power evocations of Third World revolution and armed struggle carried an air of militancy, the real and imagined threat posed by Black Power activists helped to enhance the leverage of more moderate leadership elements, facilitating integration and patronage linkages that delivered to them urban political control and expanded the ranks of the black professional-managerial stratum. The threat of black militancy, either in the form of armed Panther patrols or the phantom black sniper evoked by public authorities amid urban rioting, facilitated elite brokerage dynamics and political integration.”¹⁰³

Black people were incorporated into the political structure of cities at a time when the economy of those cities was transforming from one based on manufacturing to one based on white collar industry, tourism, and high-end consumption. According to the political scientist Adolph Reed Jr., the “pro-growth” politics of the “corporate city” brought black politicians into the fold of the ruling class at the same time as it necessarily dispossessed the working classes of those cities, especially in later years when the federal funds that such politics relied on were cut. As such, newly elected black mayors and city councilors had little choice but to administer a political program that was detrimental to most of the base that got them elected, a politics based around wooing corporations and real estate developers through tax breaks and subsidies, securitizing downtown from poor residents in order to facilitate consumption by the wealthier classes, and eventually presiding over highly regressive austerity programs.¹⁰⁴

Many Black Power advocates at the time were aware of the potential for such dynamics. Of the 1967 Newark Conference, Julius Hobson, an activist with the Congress of Racial Equality, noted, “The general consensus of this gathering was that we need to transfer the economic power wielded by white men in the Black ghettos of America to Black men.”¹⁰⁵ Further, in the early 1970s it had become evident to many black nationalists that black political incorporation had failed to ameliorate the condition of poor blacks. Notable in this respect is Amiri Baraka. One of the most prominent public figures of the Black Power moment, Baraka had been instrumental in organizing the Black Power conferences, in marshalling the coalition that would lead to the election of Kenneth Gibson as the first black mayor of Newark, and in organizing efforts to create an independent black political party. In the mid-1970s Baraka shed his hardline nationalist stance for its apparent shortcomings, adopting in its stead “Marxism-Leninism-Mao Tse-Tung thought.” In 1974 he explained, “Those of us who were still determined to serve the people began to understand that merely putting Black faces in high places, without changing the

fundamental nature of the system itself, served to make that system more dangerous, since for the masses of us . . . the hardship, exploitation and oppression continued.”¹⁰⁶ Echoing Baraka’s sentiments, many cultural nationalists and Black Power organizations adopted an overtly Marxist ideological posture around this time, causing vitriolic denunciations from their former allies, who saw Marx primarily as a “white” thinker.

The Marxist-nationalist schism proved to be a death knell for the temporary unity that had been achieved among the sundry ideological factions of black political life. The rise of ideological conflicts led both camps to privilege ideological education over populist political strategies. The mid-1970s gave rise to a proliferation of local study groups, of both the nationalist and Marxist variety, which, according to Johnson, “despite their progressive veneer . . . were equally grounded in undemocratic pedagogy that maintained status hierarchy.” While the brokerage dynamics of the black political conventions are more obvious (the Congressional Black Caucus, for example, explicitly sought to serve as the “legitimate spokesman on national issues” for the black population), the emphasis on ideological expertise, with its implicit privileging of intellectuals over workers, revealed a “muted elitism within black radical discourse.”¹⁰⁷ The contention that ideological clarity must be achieved before struggles can be carried out understandably undermined the kind of grassroots mobilizations which had characterized the civil rights and Black Power movements. As such, each side in the sectarian split receded from popular struggles in the years to come.

The history of the League of Revolutionary Black Workers flows as well through these broader contours. Certainly charges of elitism could be leveled against members of the League’s Executive Committee, as only two of the seven were factory workers. The split among the members of the Committee which led to the League’s dissolution in 1971 was to a large extent precipitated by this hierarchical structure, consequent charges of elitism, and the conflict over the importance of ideology versus on-the-ground organizing. According to Georgakas’s and Surkin’s account of the split, “The in-plant people charged that the BWC wing liked to be with ‘bourgeois’ people and with white folks more than they liked to be with black workers. Cockrel was cited for having what was termed an arrogant and authoritarian attitude toward comrades. Watson was charged with having become a dreamer who let transoceanic trips and filmmaking fantasies replace his former vision of a worker-led American revolution.”¹⁰⁸

The tendency toward a top-down, ideologically stringent structure is evident also before the split, as in a *South End* article by Luke Tripp in which the

Executive Committee member declared that political education should “cultivate a firm and correct political orientation, an industrious and pure style of work, and flexible strategy and tactics.”¹⁰⁹ It’s important to note as well that James Forman’s membership in the League was understood by some members to have caused the split. As a nationally recognized organizer with a history in SNCC, Forman personified the elite-driven, ideological orientation that alienated much of the rank and file. “Above all,” Forman wrote, “I wage the ideological struggle—the drive for political education.”¹¹⁰

Such a framework should not serve, however, as a totalizing schema. Both factions after the split could be said to have retreated into ideology: the BWC focused its efforts on a broad-based, national-level ideological campaign to try to draw workers and other organizations to their cause, while those who joined with the Communist League formed intensive Marxist study groups. It must be remembered, however, that the strength of the LRBW’s political education, its ability to make Marxism appeal to workers, constituted a large part of its operational force and appeal to leftist organizations around the world. “One of the significant contributions I think the League made,” said member Wiley Rogers, “was to implant the idea of analysis and study within the working class.”¹¹¹ In the case of the LRBW, rather than revolutionary posturing or sectarianism, Marxist ideology was a practical means of understanding and responding to the material conditions faced by workers. Jerome Scott recalls searching for a way to analyze the situation: “We ended up with Marxism, Marxism-Leninism as the theory that related most closely to our lives. And mind you we were production workers, and Marxism was written for workers.”¹¹² John Taylor, a white worker associated with League members at the Eldon Avenue plant, explained, “The first time I read the *Communist Manifesto* was late 1969. I thought, ‘This is far out. They are talking about this plant.’”¹¹³ The alliance of intellectuals, workers, and community activists, and the cross-fertilization between them, was an integral part of the League’s power.

In fact neither political incorporation nor ideological dogmatism fully accounts for the subsequent history of the League. The privileging of filmmaking, propagandizing efforts, and the attempt to spread the League’s vision to cities across the country may well have undermined its ability to address worker struggles. However, the economic situation was undoubtedly more impactful in this regard, as 1973 saw the unwinding of the Great Boom, the permanent elimination of most manufacturing jobs from the urban centers of the northern United States, and thus the elimination of the conditions that had produced industrial trade-unionism. The study circles of the Communist

League, which became the Communist Labor Party, were in part a response to changing conditions. Losing their intellectual wing, General Baker recalls, “became the basis for [them] to become tolerant of the educational process”: “We withdrew totally from all participation in mass activity and began the tedious process of struggling with a Marxist education. . . . The more you learned the more conservative you became in choice of tactics.” For Baker, this process was integral in transforming the working class, in Marxist terms, from a class *in itself* to a class *for itself*: “Objectively, the working class is already revolutionary. They’ve gotta do *something* to get the necessities of life. What *we’ve* got to do is help the working class develop the intellectual capacity to understand what’s happening.”¹¹⁴

Baker ran unsuccessfully for state legislature on the Communist Labor Party ticket in 1976 and on the Democratic Party ticket in 1978, on his second attempt coming in second out of a field of nine. Ken Cockrel was elected to city council in 1978, where he served until 1982 and, true to his militant rhetoric, did not in his short tenure capitulate or back down from his Marxist perspective, usually casting the lone dissenting vote on matters of economic development, corporate tax breaks, and other issues that continue to plague the city.¹¹⁵ These forays into the formal political process do not constitute “incorporation” so much as an attempt to bring radical politics to the electoral level. While these efforts were clearly unsuccessful in bringing about the revolutionary transformation at the heart of the League’s program, neither did former members come to preside over neoliberal austerity programs and paramilitary policing regimes; rather, they continued, in various capacities, to challenge them, which we’ll see throughout the rest of this book.

Where the carrot of integration of moderate black leadership into political office failed to quell the challenge of black radicalism, the stick of repression was there to administer the necessary excess of force. Nowhere is the dialectic of integration and repression more evident than the official stance of the FBI’s COINTELPRO, which, despite being officially disbanded, continued to inform the ideological and programmatic elements of subsequent initiatives throughout the early 1970s. FBI memos and documents relating to the early 1970s national black political conventions reveal a general strategy of targeting “black extremists” for repression while legitimating and protecting “the pursuit of black political goals through conventional channels.” Johnson writes, “The Bureau’s policy of selective targeting was allegedly intended to protect ‘legitimate political activities’ among blacks. In promoting moderate forms of black politics, state investigatory activities worked hand in hand with other state maneuvers like the community action programs and the War on Poverty

initiative to shape black political life in a more conservative direction.”¹¹⁶ It is to this conservative direction that we now turn.

Controlling “Revolutionary Attitudes”

I met Marx, Lenin, Trotsky, Engels, and Mao when I entered prison and they redeemed me. For the first four years, I studied nothing but economics and military ideas. I met black guerrillas, George “Big Jake” Lewis, and James Carr, W. L. Nolen, Bill Christmas, Torry Gibson, and many, many others. We attempted to transform the black criminal mentality into a black revolutionary mentality. As a result, each of us has been subjected to years of the most vicious reactionary violence by the state. Our mortality rate is almost what you would expect to find in a history of Dachau. —GEORGE JACKSON, *Soledad Brother*, 1970

During the late 1960s and early 1970s, as governments violently cracked down on radical movements throughout the United States, the rate at which new inmates were thrown into prison increased more rapidly than at any time in the twentieth century, eclipsing even the rate during the penal crisis of the Great Depression.¹¹⁷ Loïc Wacquant, a prominent sociologist at UC Berkeley, expressed a common myth when he wrote that the prison boom that has occurred in the United States in the past fifty years was “contrary to all expectations.” In fact, as the state accelerated its violent crackdown of radical organizations, many within these organizations foresaw the imminence of mass incarceration. At the same time that the French philosopher Michel Foucault, in his widely celebrated *Discipline and Punish*, wrote that the “widespread, badly integrated confinement of the classical age” was coming to an end and that “the specificity of the role of the prison and its role as link are losing something of their purpose,” Black Panther leader Assata Shakur accurately predicted the exact opposite: “In the next five years, something like three hundred prisons are in the planning stages. This government has the intention of throwing more and more people in prison.”¹¹⁸

As underemployed blacks were thrown in prison en masse, leaders like George Jackson of the BPP organized prisoners as part of the Panthers’ general strategy of turning the lumpenproletariat into a revolutionary force. *The number of prison uprisings increased from five in 1968 to forty-eight in 1971.*¹¹⁹ Jackson wrote at the time, “Only the prison movement has shown any promise of cutting across the ideological, racial and cultural barricades that have blocked the natural coalition of left-wing forces at all times in the past.” Indeed although the majority of rebelling prisoners were black, Jackson insisted on the uprisings’ socialist character: “If a man wants to relate to my blackness, fine, but I would prefer he relate to me on the basis of my status as a soldier in the

WORLD revolution.”¹²⁰ The state’s response to the increasing number of prisoner uprisings was to turn prisons into sites of “low-intensity warfare.”¹²¹

The most famous uprising was in Attica, the maximum-security prison in New York where the most recalcitrant prisoners were sent. On September 19, 1971, a couple weeks after Jackson had been assassinated in San Quentin Prison, 1,300 prisoners took control of Attica. On national television, the prisoners made demands such as “adequate food, water, and shelter,” “effective drug treatment,” an “inmate education system,” and “amnesty from physical, mental, and legal reprisals.” In response, Governor Nelson Rockefeller ordered police and National Guardsmen to quash the uprising, which they did, but only after killing twenty-nine prisoners and ten of the guards who had been taken hostage.¹²²

The national media initially blamed the deaths on the Attica rebels. The *New York Times* suggested that “the deaths of these persons by knives . . . reflect a barbarism wholly alien to civilized society. Prisoners slashed the throats of utterly helpless unarmed guards.”¹²³ But days later an autopsy revealed that the prisoners had not killed a single person; the raiding officers had killed all thirty-nine men.¹²⁴

Soon after the uprising, Rockefeller allocated \$4 million to Attica to enhance the security apparatuses at the prison and search out new sites for a “maxi-maxi prison” to place militant prisoners.¹²⁵ The narrative was clear: Attica had not been a political uprising but a riot by lawless criminals and communist agitators. As Dan Berger has shown, this narrative legitimated the state’s authoritarian response: this is when supermax prisons were built to lock up the country’s most recalcitrant prisoners, keeping them in solitary confinement for twenty-two to twenty-three hours a day.¹²⁶

As the prison warden of Marion, the nation’s first supermax prison, explained in 1973, “The purpose of the Marion control unit is to control revolutionary attitudes in the prison system and in society at large.”¹²⁷ In the mid-1960s Marion was the only supermax prison in the country; by 1997 there were more than fifty-five.¹²⁸ The Marion model of “indefinite lockdown and limited access to the outside, brutal segregation and random attacks . . . has become the dominant model of prison in America.”¹²⁹

In these supermax prisons, which cost between \$30 million and 75 million to construct, “physical contact is limited to being touched through security doors by correctional officers while being put in restraints or having restraints removed. Most verbal communication occurs through intercom systems.”¹³⁰ These prisons offer “virtually no educational” programs, and the books available for reading are extremely limited. Supermaxes are set up so that never

again will a prisoner like George Jackson have the chance to be “redeemed” by revolutionary literature.¹³¹ Had he served his prison sentence in a supermax, Malcolm X would surely not have been a member of a prison debate team that beat MIT’s debate team.¹³²

Law and Order

In Detroit and around this country, the authoritarian response *inside* prisons paralleled an authoritarian response *outside*. Police funding offers one barometer of this process: between 1962 and 1977 local government spending on police increased from around \$2 billion to \$9 billion. In 1970 there was one paramilitary police unit in the United States; five years later there were five hundred, and Detroit and most major cities had their own paramilitary unit.¹³³ To understand this shift, let us take a closer look at the way political elites managed and mythologized social turmoil in the late 1960s.

As Marxist criminologists Morton Wenger and Thomas Bonomo observe, “The loss of confidence in the ability of a particular form of the capitalist state to handle its own social contradictions can as easily lead to a shift of allegiance by the socially insecure masses to a more proactive and brutal capitalist regime.”¹³⁴ This is precisely what happened in the late 1960s. Richard Nixon won the 1968 presidential election with an appeal that included the claim that the “crime problem” would be solved “not [by] quadrupling the funds for ‘any governmental war on poverty,’ but convicting more criminals.” The counter-revolution that James Boggs had predicted just a few years earlier was taking shape. The liberal War on Poverty had already demonstrated that it was unable to restore corporate profitability and quell widespread dissent—and so the War on Crime was ratcheted up.¹³⁵

In Detroit, liberal elites were under attack for their inability to restore law and order. Predating the contemporary “New Detroit” revitalization efforts by almost fifty years, in the wake of the Rebellion, liberal elites had assembled the New Detroit Committee (NDC), a coalition of union higher-ups, community leaders, political elites, members of the black middle class, and corporate CEOs. The NDC, the “backbone of any liberal attempt to improve conditions in the Motor City and regain political legitimacy after 1967,” sought to quell the city’s tensions via urban renewal and racial redistribution, promising to invest millions in downtown development and community programs. As Judge Crockett recalls, NDC’s primary concern was “to sort of quiet things down” after the Rebellion.¹³⁶ The historian and Detroit native Heather Ann Thompson writes that, at the outset, the NDC operated under the assumption that “black mili-

tants were relatively minor figures” who “posed a long-term threat” only if civil rights issues continued to be ignored by the state.¹³⁷ The NDC therefore was prepared to “listen to, and even to fund, black radicals.” New Deal funding was thus channeled to radical programs that included the Community Patrol Corps, which emulated the Black Panthers’ famous police patrols. Teens in “all-black uniforms” patrolled the city and monitored instances of police brutality.¹³⁸ By supporting such programs, liberals signaled their attempts to fund, and thereby politically integrate and co-opt, local dissidents.¹³⁹ This incorporation strategy didn’t always work, as, for example, when Detroit’s Federation for Self-Determination, an organization made up of local activists such as Cockrel, Grace Lee Boggs, and Reverend Cleage, turned down a \$100,000 NDC grant which stipulated that the money was not to be used for “political” purposes. Rejecting the money, Cleage said, “We will not accept white supervision and control.”¹⁴⁰

Whereas activists complained that NDC proposals were both inadequate and mostly about co-optation, many conservative elites feared that NDC’s contacts with local militants would facilitate a revolution. Heather Ann Thompson points out that in the span of a couple of years, “‘marginal’ black radicals had managed to take over the media of key liberal institutions such as Wayne State University, and were encouraging black students to take over the very schools that liberal School Board members were trying to integrate. Worse yet, black radicals had joined with whites in the call for an all-out urban revolution.”¹⁴¹

In 1969 Wayne County Sheriff Roman Gribbs stepped in to mediate this situation with an iron fist. Gribbs was elected mayor of Detroit having run a campaign that centered on the promise to end liberal permissiveness, create an elite police unit to deal with civil disturbances, and wage an “all-out fight against crime in the streets.”¹⁴²

As we have seen, the crime panic of the late 1960s did have important roots in reality—the reality of increasing crime rates. Nationally, reported street crime *quadrupled* between 1959 and 1971, and rates of violent crime and homicide doubled between the early 1960s and early 1970s.¹⁴³ Detroit’s population decreased by 300,000 between 1950 and 1970; during these years the white population nearly halved, while the black population more than doubled. (These two racial groups made up 98 percent of Detroit’s population in 1970.)¹⁴⁴ In 1970, the year that Gribbs took office, there were more than twenty-three thousand reported robberies. The city’s homicide rate more than *tripled* between 1960 and 1970.¹⁴⁵ As many as two-thirds of these murders were linked to the drug trade.¹⁴⁶ This was the time of a devastating heroin epidemic, one with roots in the Vietnam War: 30 percent of U.S. soldiers used heroin during their

time in Vietnam, and heroin was imported into the country at cheap rates during and after the war.¹⁴⁷ “One journalist cited as many as fifty thousand heroin addicts on [Detroit’s] streets, spending over a million dollars a day to feed their habits.”¹⁴⁸ By the time Gribbs took office “an army of drug addicts lived in the remains of 15,000 inner-city houses abandoned for an urban renewal project which never materialized.”¹⁴⁹

When one considers the problems of deindustrialization, along with Detroit’s dramatic demographic shifts, racial tensions, and widespread unemployment, the rising crime rate is a tragic and foreseeable outcome.¹⁵⁰ Liberal critics of mass incarceration tend to obscure the reality of crime, arguing that rising crime rates were an invention white elites used to justify a regressive program of racial discrimination. There is truth to these sentiments, as racial disparities in the criminal justice system more than attest to. To deny the reality of violent crime, however, shifts the focus away from the political-economic causes of crime like deindustrialization and the gutting of the welfare state, issues that also disproportionately affect minority populations. Such interpretive moves make invisible the support of poor people and minorities for anticrime members, as, for example, the black activists in New York City who campaigned for Governor Rockefeller’s draconian drug laws in the late 1960s.¹⁵¹

Both the League of Revolutionary Black Workers and the Black Panthers developed alternative strategies to explain and combat the country’s crime issue. While League leaders acknowledged that crime and heroin addiction were real problems, they viewed the country’s moral panic as an elite-driven strategy to obfuscate the class struggle. As Watson says in *Finally Got the News*:

There’s a lot of confusion amongst white people in this country, amongst white workers in this country, about who the enemy is. The same contradictions of overproduction . . . are prevalent within the white working class, but because of the immense resources of propaganda, publicity . . . white people tend to get a little bit confused about who the enemy is. You take a look at white workers in Flint for instance, in the automobile industry, who are pretty hard pressed because the Buick plant up there is whipping their ass. . . . But who do they think the enemy is? . . . Crime on the streets is the problem.

BPP founder Huey Newton said that most criminals were simply “illegitimate capitalists”; like Watson, he understood that although white workers and black workers occupied similar “objective” positions in the economic structure, the racialized, law-and-order narrative of urban crisis made it so that white workers would “feel more and more that it’s a race contradiction rather

than a class contradiction.” The Panthers’ “survival programs” sought to address the roots of crime and immiseration by providing impoverished residents with food, shelter, health care, and political education.¹⁵²

When police harassment made sales of the *Black Panther* a less tenable source of income, Panthers began robbing Detroit’s drug houses, both to earn money and as an attempt to address the interrelated problems of drugs and violent crime. BPP member Ahmad Rahman recalls, “Drug-related crime began to wreak havoc in Black neighborhoods nationwide, diluting calls for community control as citizens turned to the police for relief. Many black people began to shift to the political ‘right.’ . . . Calls for community control of police, became calls for the police—and more prisons.”¹⁵³

After a botched raid on a “drug den” that resulted in one death, Rahman was captured by police.

When his case went to trial Rahman discovered that the Panther Party superior he and the other young comrades took orders from was an FBI informant and the dope house break-in was part of a COINTELPRO designed to capture “the four most active and productive Panthers in the area—Rahman and his three co-defendants.” Rahman, who was nowhere near the murder when it occurred, pled not guilty. The other three pled guilty [and] were found guilty of felony murder. The shooter in the case served only 12 years and was set free, but for Rahman, who fought to prove his innocence, it would be more than two decades before Gov. John Engler commuted his sentence.¹⁵⁴

There are two points worth stressing here. First, it was only after radical working-class groups like the Panthers and the League were brought down that the punitive strategy of mass incarceration could be implemented in poor neighborhoods without meeting violent resistance. The second, related point, is that the war on crime was actually part and parcel of the repression of these radical groups (the very groups that were attempting to combat the causes of crime). During these years *crime* operated as a signifier that demonized political resistance and collapsed the social causes of the urban crisis into an individualized, moral problem—a perfect example of the process of mythologization. Law and order, rather than progressive social change, could then “resolve” the crisis.¹⁵⁵

As already mentioned the Kerner Report called for more “training, planning, adequate intelligence systems, and knowledge of the ghetto community.”¹⁵⁶ The Omnibus Crime Control and Safe Streets Act of 1968 dedicated \$1 billion per year to bolstering U.S. police forces with “computers, helicopters, body

armor, military-grade weapons, SWAT teams, shoulder radios, and paramilitary training.”¹⁵⁷ Many of the strategies that police adopted to control working-class militancy at home had their precedents in counterinsurgency tactics used by U.S. forces to quell communist movements abroad. During the Cold War, the Office of Public Safety had worked closely with the CIA to train police in South Vietnam, Iran, Uruguay, Argentina, and Brazil. As scholar-activist Alex Vitale writes, upon their return to the United States, imperial officers “moved into law enforcement, including the Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA), FBI, and numerous local and state police forces.” The director of the Office of Public Safety, Byron Engle, testified before the Kerner Commission, “In working with the police in various countries we have acquired a great deal of experience in dealing with violence ranging from demonstrations and riots to guerilla warfare.”¹⁵⁸

By January 1971 the new, highly militarized police unit that Gribbs promised was instituted; it was called Stop the Robberies, Enjoy Safe Streets (STRESS). STRESS was a local—and particularly brutal—iteration of a national trend to bolster police departments against the threat of “guerilla warfare.”¹⁵⁹ According to the *Detroit News* article unveiling the program, in a tactic borrowed from police in New York City and the Bay Area, “decoy units” would be sent undercover in “high-crime” areas to play-act as vulnerable citizens, resembling

old women, old men, businessmen, grocery clerks and gas station attendants. . . . They will be prime bait for robbers who prey on such people. And they will be armed and ready. . . . The disguised men will work in teams so that the one being used as a decoy will never be out of sight of one or more of his buddies. . . . “We are going to look like people who live and work in Detroit,” said [District Inspector] Smith. “We are going to make ourselves the victims of crime, rather than other members of the community.”¹⁶⁰

In the 1971 police murdered an unarmed black Detroiter named Clarence Manning Jr. As part of a decoy operation, a STRESS officer disguised as an intoxicated hippie had provoked Manning, and when Manning approached him, several STRESS officers jumped out of their hiding spots and killed him.¹⁶¹ This murderous behavior was all too common. Within six months of its unveiling, STRESS, which was composed of one hundred officers, most of them white, made forty-six arrests *daily* using this entrapment technique. In this period, STRESS fatally shot fifteen citizens, thirteen of them black.¹⁶² These STRESS killings were the primary reason why DPD had the highest rate of per capita civilian killings of all U.S. police departments in 1971—four times the rate in New York City.¹⁶³

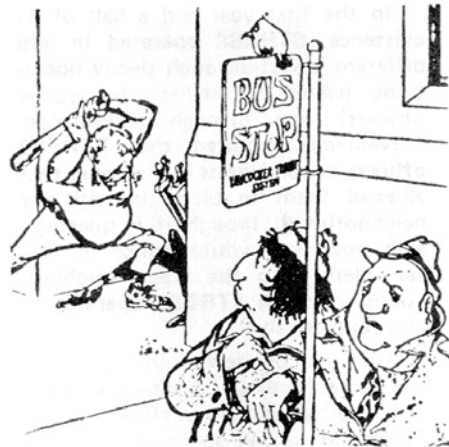


FIGURE 4.1. Cartoon mocking the brutality of the decoy tactics used by STRESS. Source: Schultz, *Detroit under STRESS*, 3.

"Let's not get involved - he might be a STRESS officer going about his job."

In September 1971 five thousand protesters marched in Detroit demanding an end to STRESS and condemning the murders of the Attica rebels. Cockrel announced, "STRESS will be abolished. We're going to show them discipline the man never knew existed in the black community."¹⁶⁴ He and radical groups like From the Ground Up presented STRESS as a "tool of those in power" used to intimidate and terrorize impoverished black Detroiters, and decried the increasing "utilization in the domestic law enforcement scene of new terminology, operating techniques, weaponry and equipment produced from the 'test fields' of counter-insurgency activity abroad." From the Ground Up insisted, "We, the people of Detroit, need to confront the divisions brought about by the unjust and criminal distribution of wealth and control of life resources."¹⁶⁵

A 1973 poll found that 65 percent of black Detroiters disapproved and 78 percent of white Detroiters approved of STRESS.¹⁶⁶ Many wealthier members of the black community, however, supported STRESS—signaling a growing class cleavage within the black community. Days after the 1971 protest, the *Detroit News* published an article titled "Black Leaders Support STRESS."¹⁶⁷ Black business organizations and black homeowners' associations threw their support behind STRESS. The city's main black newspaper, the *Michigan Chronicle*, published an article titled "STRESS Protest Shows Blacks Short on Foresight":

The biggest issue in Detroit for the past four years has been crime in the streets. In recent months more aggressive enforcement, plus participation by citizens, has lessened the problem somewhat. . . . The civil



FIGURE 4.2. Nathaniel Johnson, witness to the STRESS murder of Clarence Manning Jr., standing with his lawyer, Kenneth Cockrel (right). After spending months in jail following his run-in with STRESS officers, Johnson was acquitted of the erroneous charge of armed robbery. Source: Schultz, *Detroit under STRESS*, p. 20.

disturbances of 1967 should remind black people not to attempt to destroy something they can't replace. There is no merit in biting the hand that feeds you. It is understandable that many blacks harbor resentment against police because of past atrocities. But when one of these idle, non-productive, soap box pork choppers calls a policeman "pig" while at the same time sucking on a barbecue bone, his thinking faculties are not together.¹⁶⁸

This support persisted in spite of the fact that in their first thirty months of operation, STRESS units launched an estimated five hundred raids without search warrants. During one of these raids in 1972, STRESS officers murdered a Wayne County sheriff's deputy in what was believed to be an inner-police-department battle over control of the city's drug trafficking. As Surkin and Georgakas write, after a fatal shootout involving three black militants,

“Commissioner Nichols went on television describing [the three men] as ‘mad-dog killers.’ In the weeks which followed, STRESS put the black neighborhoods under martial law in the most massive and ruthless police manhunt in Detroit history. Hundreds of black families had their doors literally broken down and their lives threatened by groups of white men in plain clothes who had no search warrants and often did not bother to identify themselves. Eventually, 56 fully documented cases of illegal procedure were brought against the department. One totally innocent man, Durwood Forshee, could make no complaint because he was dead.”¹⁶⁹

It was not until the city’s first black mayor, Coleman Young, came into office in 1974 that the rogue police unit responsible for the deaths of at least twenty Detroit citizens was finally retired. But the demise of STRESS—which Young described as an “execution squad”—did not spell the end of aggressive anticrime measures. In fact the opposite was true: criminalization would only intensify as black liberals took control of Detroit’s political establishment.¹⁷⁰

Race, Crime, and the 1973 Mayoral Election

Already the big question in cities like Detroit is whether a way can be found for these outsiders to live before they kill off those of us who are still working. How long can we leave them hanging out in the streets ready to knock the brains out of those still working in order to get a little spending money?—JAMES BOGGS, *American Revolution*, 1963

A long record of community activism, buoyed by a string of remarkable legal victories, led many to believe that Kenneth Cockrel was a viable candidate in the 1973 mayoral elections. But after considering a run, Cockrel decided against it, on the grounds the time was not yet ripe to seek revolutionary struggle inside mainstream political institutions (though by the late 1970s Cockrel changed his mind and successfully ran for city council).¹⁷¹

With Cockrel on the sidelines, the election pitted John Nichols, the city’s hard-nosed white police commissioner, against Coleman Young, a black state senator with a long history of labor organizing.¹⁷² Nichols ran on a straightforward law-and-order platform. But, as Stauch Jr. has documented, Young “made a powerful case as a more viable law-and-order candidate than the city’s own Police Commissioner.” In a speech one month before the election, Young declared Detroit to be the nation’s “murder capital” and claimed that Nichols had allowed the city’s crime problem to accelerate during his tenure as police commissioner. Young distributed campaign flyers that read, “Can YOU live with Detroit’s Crime Rates?” and “JOHN NICHOLS DID NOT DO THE JOB!”¹⁷³

Young proposed a program of “law and order, with justice.” He said he would integrate and reform the police department, making it a “people’s police department,” while at the same time launching a broad initiative to stamp out criminals and defend the rights of crime victims. Rather than perpetuate the dragnet approach, which had drawn the ire of many in the black community, Young promised a “community policing” approach that would allow citizens to work closely with police in order to more precisely target criminals. In a speech to the Detroit Economic Club, Young promised to launch “more intensive undercover investigations” and to institute harsher laws for drug traffickers.¹⁷⁴ He would help actualize Henry Ford II’s goal of making Downtown Detroit a “safe spot” to invest in. The black state senator further ingratiated himself with business leaders by insisting that the black community would stand behind his administration, whereas if Nichols was elected mayor, it would only fuel racial polarization and social unrest. “Who better than a black mayor,” Young asked, “can deal with the dudes on Dexter, on Livernois, and start turning things around?”¹⁷⁵

Race proved central to the election. In an incredibly close final tally, Young eventually triumphed by securing 92 percent of the black vote, whereas Nichols took 91 percent of the white vote. In his famous inaugural address, Young declared:

I recognize the economic problem as a basic one, but there is also the problem of crime, which is not unrelated to poverty and unemployment, and so I say that we must attack both of these problems vigorously at the same time. The Police Department alone cannot rid this city of crime. The police must have the respect and cooperation of our citizens. But they must earn that respect by extending to our citizens cooperation and respect. We must build a new people-oriented Police Department, and then you and they can help us to drive the criminals from the streets. I issue a forward warning now to all dope pushers, to all ripoff artists, to all muggers: It’s time to leave Detroit; hit Eight Mile Road. And I don’t give a damn if they are black or white, or if they wear Superfly suits or blue uniforms with silver badges: Hit the Road.¹⁷⁶

At Young’s inaugural celebration, black leaders shared the platform with the new mayor and supported him in his crusade against crime. U.S. District Court judge Damon Keith, for example, a former civil rights activist, challenged Young to “lead a revolt of the people of this community for justice and against crime” by “ridding this city, root and branch, of the criminals who are committing murders, rapes, and assaults on the people of this city.”¹⁷⁷ One

Detroit News reporter wrote, “The best-intentioned, strongest civil libertarian, most white mayor of Detroit . . . would have felt uncomfortable saying what Young and Keith said about crime.”¹⁷⁸

The support for Young’s law-and-order campaign highlights the dialectic of repression and integration taking shape at the time. In the context of systematic violence against poor black Americans—from pervasive unemployment to state brutality and the systematic repression of dissident movements—a better regime of racial representation would be necessary if capitalism was going to legitimate itself in urban America. But as we will see in the next chapter, the integration of many middle-class black Americans into the political establishment occurred alongside, and was inextricably linked to, a deterioration in living standards among the poorer segments of the working class—a deterioration that continues to this day.

Post-Fordism and Mass Incarceration

c. 1974–2013

The more a ruling class is able to assimilate the foremost minds of a ruled class, the more stable and dangerous becomes its rule. —KARL MARX, *Capital*, vol. 3

Automation got rid of half of the working force, and the half that's working won't say shit. —GENERAL BAKER, early 1990s, quoted in Mast, *Detroit Lives*

In the minds of many metro Detroiters, Coleman Young is synonymous with Detroit's decline. During Young's twenty-year tenure (1974–94) the condition of the city steadily deteriorated, making Young an easy scapegoat, as is exemplified in the cheap assessment of Harvard University's Glaeser and Shleifer: "In his 24 years as mayor, Detroit's Coleman Young drove white residents and businesses out of the city."¹ Young personifies to a great degree the racial divide, both real and perceived, between the city and the suburbs which grew in the post-World War II years. In his inaugural address, his admonition to criminals and dope addicts to "hit Eight Mile Road," were understood by many suburbanites as an attack—he wanted not to solve Detroit's problems but to foist them onto the suburbs. Not only is this type of thinking deliberately obfuscating, but it totally eliminates the material causes of Detroit's decline (including its connection to the more prosperous suburbs), blaming them instead on the

supposed reverse racism of the city's first black mayor. In the early 1990s Sheila Murphy Cockrel, widow of Ken Cockrel, summed up the mythological view of many suburban whites: "Detroit would be OK but for the Blacks taking over.' That's a comfortable analysis for people to make about the last thirty-five to forty years' worth of economic history in this city."²

In order to properly assess Young's reign, we need to keep some context in mind. By the time black politicians were beginning to gain some power, urban centers were already experiencing structural crises that limited the scope of their actions. "With relatively few exceptions," Manning Marable writes, "the black mayors and councillors were caught in an unenviable position, between black constituents with high expectations, a massive fiscal debt, a deteriorating industrial and commercial base, and an alienated and fearful white constituency."³

For David Goldberg, the way elites co-opted Detroit's tenants' rights struggles is symbolic of the dilemmas and contradictions facing black politicians in the post-Rebellion era:

The approach of Goodman Bros. to Black grassroots organizing against slum conditions mirrored in various ways the broader approach taken as Blacks mobilized for political power, self-determination, and community control during the late 1960s and 1970s. When confronted with grievances resulting from negligence and racial exploitation, whites ceded certain aspects of outward political and economic control of cities like Detroit. In the process, they absolved themselves of being held responsible for the failures that their actions or privilege had ensured. By co-opting and manipulating calls for community control and Black power, companies like Goodman Bros.—and on the national stage, the Johnson and Nixon administrations—effectively inaugurated what soon became a policy of benign neglect, leaving Black politicians, businesspeople, and activists to take the fall for their inability to overcome externally institutionalized racial limitations and obstacles to collective Black economic and political development.⁴

It is clear, then, that Young was certainly not responsible for the decline of Detroit, whose industrial economy had been in the process of disappearing for almost thirty years by the time Young took office. Nonetheless Mayor Young did have some room for political maneuver, and the policies of his administration were instrumental in determining how the effects of this decline would play out. As Cockrel, now a city councilor, put it in 1979, Young's administration was composed mostly of "fake leaders" who were "not up to the fight" of

taking on the political and corporate elites who were holding the city hostage. Indeed, Young, a former socialist, had long “made his peace with capitalism” by the time he became mayor. He cozied up to multinational corporations, giving them lavish gifts at the expense of social spending. Meanwhile, as rates of poverty and unemployment grew, Young’s willingness to criminalize the most disadvantaged sections of the black working class was “central to the growth of mass incarceration in Detroit.”⁵

The series of black mayors who followed Young—Archer, Kilpatrick, Cockrel Jr., and Bing—largely followed in his footsteps, attempting to revitalize Detroit through a combination of corporate subsidies, Downtown development, criminalization, and austerity. However, we should be careful about framing such policies, as the media so often tends to do, as the result of moral failings, corruption, or incompetence. As Adolph Reed Jr. has written, the issue is “not that black regimes are led by inept, uncaring, or mean-spirited elitists; in fact, black elected officials tend to be somewhat more attentive and liberal than their white counterparts in their attitudes about social welfare issues.” The problem is rather that black urban regimes (those led by black mayors and majority black city councils) operate “in a local political culture and system dominated hegemonically by the imperatives of the very ‘growth machine’ that is the engine of black marginalization.”⁶

The economic policies of these regimes certainly did benefit some of their constituents, leading to a growing class division *within* black America: “The percentage of African-Americans making at least \$75,000 more than doubled from 1970 to 2014, to 21 percent. Those making \$100,000 or more nearly quadrupled, to 13 percent (in contrast, white Americans saw a less impressive increase, from 11 to 26 percent).”⁷ In Detroit these gains came as “legal” segregation ended, and many upwardly mobile African Americans took the opportunity to join the white residents who left the Motor City for the suburbs. This created a vicious spiral: as people left, their absence gutted the city’s tax base and further isolated the city’s poorest residents; as things worsened, those who could afford it often left, perpetuating the cycle.

This context tends to be obscured in mythical accounts of Detroit’s demise. For example, a prominent *New York Times* feature on Detroit’s bankruptcy begins, “In a matter of decades, Detroit went from one of America’s most prosperous cities to one of its most distressed. Here is a look at how the collapse of this metropolis—battered by financial missteps, racial tensions and leadership lapses—culminated in insurmountable debt that led the city to file for bankruptcy.” Focusing on five categories—“reliance on a single industry,” “racial tensions,” “shortcomings of leadership,” “lack of an efficient transit system,”

and “impact of poverty”—the feature is a paragon of mythological history. As we have seen, Detroit’s “decline” is the result of the contradictions of a capital accumulation process stretching back at least to the beginning of the twentieth century, not just “a matter of decades.”⁸ Moreover, to isolate certain features of the destructive socioeconomic system—which at certain times caused “prosperity” and at others “distress”—is misleading. Certainly if another industry shared prominence in Detroit, if political leadership had made different decisions, if racial tensions had been less pronounced, things may have turned out better for the Motor City. However, the causes of Detroit’s decline put forward by the *Times* and others are in fact *symptoms* of underlying political-economic issues: What were the causes of racial tensions? Why was there so much poverty? Why did capital flee the Motor City? What constrained the city’s leadership? Which powerful groups blocked the city from obtaining an “efficient transit system”?

Any genuine attempt to answer these questions brings us beyond matters of policy failures and irrational actions and forces us to confront the troubling dynamics of capitalism.

Early Tests for the People’s Police Department

After the right-wing reaction set in, everybody was happy that they had a Black mayor. The Black middle classes were bought off with jobs and favors. The more radical elements were told, ‘Thanks for your help in getting us here, but we don’t need you now.’ A lot of us were jettisoned. I know of so many people who weren’t able to get employment, and were hounded and jailed. —GENE CUNNINGHAM, Detroit activist and politician, early 1990s, quoted in *Detroit Lives*

It did not take long for Young’s “law and order, with justice” political program to be put to the test.⁹ Just weeks after the November election, a group of black men kidnapped and murdered two black children. Mayor-elect Young responded that the black community had a “collective responsibility to put an end to such senseless and terrible crime.” Local black leaders echoed this message. “Blacks who perpetrate crimes against their own people,” said former SNCC member Larry Nevels, “are not our brothers, they are the enemy.” Barry Hankerson, a member of the grassroots organization United Black Coalition, called for an “all-out war on crime.” “In the past,” the *New York Times* noted, the Coalition “had bitterly accused the police department. . . . This time, the coalition rallied to the side of the police.”¹⁰

In support of this war on crime the federal government gave \$441,000 to Detroit for its “mini-station program,” which placed police officers downtown and throughout the city in “high-crime areas.” In addition to this program,

Young immediately set about integrating the police department. In the wake of this integration, the scholar-activist Herb Boyd wrote in the *Black Scholar*, “The increased number of minority officers has vastly improved police-community relations and has definitely reduced the number of civilian complaints brought against the police. . . . With a black officer on the scene of an arrest, especially the arrest of a black suspect, the likelihood of excessive force and brutality are minimized.”¹¹

In late July 1975 Young’s police department faced its most serious test when Andrew Chinarian, a white bar owner, killed Obie Wynn, a young black man, in the alley behind Chinarian’s bar. Chinarian was picked up by police and soon released on a \$500 bond; when news of his release spread, black people throughout the local area took to the streets in violence. In the ensuing days the “worst racial confrontation to strike Detroit” since the 1967 Rebellion broke out. In the midst of this violent unrest, Marian Pyszko, a local factory worker and Holocaust survivor, unwittingly drove through the area, and several black youth pulled him out of his car and bludgeoned him to death with a piece of concrete. The police proceeded to lay down a dragnet, making more than a hundred arrests but quickly releasing all but five suspects—the so-called Livernois Five—who would eventually be tried for Pyszko’s murder.¹²

Young’s first attempt to control the black residents who took to the streets was to go to the area in person. But when he refused the group’s demands that Chinarian’s bar be burned down, someone threw a brick at him. His next move was to tell his police commissioner to deploy as many black and female officers as possible to the area.¹³ In another effort to put a “friendly face” on state attempts to restore order, Young actively recruited community “peacekeepers,” volunteers who came mostly from local civil rights organizations, to patrol and restore order in the Livernois area.¹⁴

Not all political organizations, however, were so easily recruited to support this law-and-order response. Radical groups like the Revolutionary Socialist League and the Communist Labor Party (formed by Communist League activists) supported the protesters and gave legal aid to the Livernois Five. Kenneth Cockrel represented one of the accused men in court and got him released.¹⁵ More common among the black establishment, however, was the opinion of the black activist and journalist Nadine Brown. In an editorial for the *Michigan Chronicle* she claimed, “All blacks and any other people need to do now is get behind the mayor’s program to move this city ahead. Putting roadblocks in his way is like cutting one’s own throat.”¹⁶ Michael Stauch Jr. sums up the response of black leaders to the violent unrest: “During and after the Livernois disturbance, civic, community and church leaders organized parishioners to

work with police against the young men and women involved in the Livernois disturbance. . . . For upwardly mobile members of the black community, Young's election signaled the culmination of the goals of the Civil Rights and Black Power movements and therefore the end of militant street action against ensconced power relations."¹⁷

Although city authorities eventually succeeded in pacifying the Livernois area, their response did little to address the conditions that had led to the disturbance. And indeed the following summer the issues of crime and violent unrest resurfaced again in spectacular fashion. At a summer concert at Cobo Hall, hundreds of poor black youths descended on the mostly white crowd, assaulting and stealing from many among them and attacking the Downtown commercial center. Witnesses reported that the youth chanted at the concert-goers, "We want what you've got." Mayor Young's immediate response was again to dispatch as many black officers as possible to restore order in the area. Forty-seven people were arrested.¹⁸

After the Cobo Hall incident Young recalled 450 laid-off police officers, instituted a citywide 10:00 p.m. curfew for people seventeen years old and younger, and dispatched a "police gang squad" to "crack down" on youth gangs and to arrest anyone violating the curfew near Downtown. Young called for an "all-out war on juveniles responsible for the increase in crime." "I want the pimps, prostitutes, gangs and youth rovers off the streets," he added. In response to Young's call to action, the city council amended the city's stop-and-frisk policy, giving police legal sanction "to take any suspicious person, at any age, who failed to produce adequate identification into the precinct station." This stop-and-frisk policy would become permanent. The *Detroit News* printed a list of alleged gang members, justifying the decision to do so by claiming, "This is war. . . . The *News* will continue to identify youngsters at war against the city."¹⁹ One such identified youth visited the newspaper to insist that the root of the crime problem was the city's bleak economic situation. "If they give me a job," he said, "we'll guarantee no more of this fighting." But rather than providing jobs for the city's youth, business leaders were increasingly determined to keep them away from Downtown. The "mini-riot" at Cobo Hall was front-page news in the *Free Press*, and it ran alongside the headline "Merchants Say Crime Is Ruining Business."

Black leaders were unequivocal in their support for Young's "all-out war" on crime. The president of Detroit's branch of the NAACP pledged that his group would "do everything in its power to support an all-out drive against the lawlessness that is prevailing." Urban League president Francis Kornegay went so far as to call for a return to STRESS tactics to bring the city's criminals to heel. The prominent black UAW leader Robert Battle signaled the union's intention

to aid in the “fight against street gangs.” Moreover, weeks after the Cobo incident, civil rights groups organized a March against Crime. Thereafter these groups formed the Coalition to Resist Crime, which combined with business groups to “mobilize civil rights tactics against the perceived crime wave gripping the city.” Evidencing the growing moral and class division within black America, the article announcing the Coalition stated, “Coalition is taking aim at crime; Blacks see rights gains lost to thugs.”²⁰ Court of Appeals Judge Vincent Brennan soon added his stern voice to the fray, demanding “adequate police protection” for the city’s key commercial areas and calling for juvenile offenders to be treated in the legal system as adults. “I don’t buy this so-called mythical age of 16,” the judge declared. “We’ve got hardened criminals in this city who are only 13.”²¹

Michigan soon passed the 650-Lifer Law, an adaptation of New York’s draconian Rockefeller Drug Laws, which called for *life imprisonment* for the distribution or possession of 650 grams or more of any Schedule I or II opiate. A few years later, when the police arrested forty-one members from the YBI gang that had cornered the city’s heroin trade, the courts opted for a harsh punitive response. One Michigan judge stated during the proceedings, “Whether rehabilitation is even a goal of our current penal system is an open question.”²²

As Young launched his war on crime, the Pulitzer Prize-winning author Studs Terkel visited Detroit and reported, “There’s a new attitude in the city. . . . The police are no longer looked upon as a foreign army of occupation. . . . It reflects a new respect between the people and the police.”²³ To be sure, police brutality had decreased significantly with the end of STRESS and the integration of DPD, and local animosity toward the police seemed to decline. But while this new era of post-rebellion civil harmony was being hailed, *the prison population simultaneously ballooned*: in Young’s first decade in office, the number of Michiganders in state prison increased from 8,630 to 14,658.²⁴ As black mayors were elected across urban America, the situation was similar: between 1971 and 1981 the national unemployment rate doubled and the prison population in the United States increased by 45 percent.²⁵

In Detroit those caught up in the penal dragnet faced brutal conditions in the state’s lock-down facilities. Cockrel and his law partner, Chuck Ravitz, drew attention to the conditions in Wayne County Jail in a lawsuit in the early 1970s. Citing common instances of vermin infestation and faulty plumbing and electricity, the radical lawyers asserted, “Conditions in the jail rob [inmates] in many instances of their right to a fair trial, because the inmate may be induced to plead guilty to charges against him in order to get out of Wayne County jail.”²⁶

But most political elites were concerned with the victims of street crime, not of state violence. By this time, Detroit was the nation's "murder capital," with much of the violence linked to the heroin trade, in which DPD was largely complicit. One muckraking journalist reported at the time that "as many as 200 Detroit policemen [were] involved in city-wide heroin corruption" by extorting and protecting the city's main dealers.²⁷

Though Young and the black community worked together to clean up the city's police department and dismantle the heroin trade, chastising drug dealers and corrupt cops alike, no amount of police reform or moralizing could address the deeper socioeconomic causes of crime and addiction. As we've seen, during his inaugural address Young recognized that crime is "not unrelated to poverty and unemployment" and promised to attack the causes of the latter. But his attempts to do so were thwarted.

In 1977 Young published the Moving Detroit Forward plan, a revitalization program centered on the development of a sleek Downtown commercial center, rehabilitated housing, incentives for industrial capital to come to Detroit, and an enhanced police force. Young requested \$2.57 billion from the federal government to enact his plan. But Washington—which, following the collapse of the War on Poverty, began cutting back on social aid to cities—allocated Detroit *less than one-third of what Young requested*. Meanwhile the mayor's attempts to create a transport system that united the suburbs with the city were blocked. In response, Young issued a statement: "Our problems have not been caused by local mismanagement, but rather by national economic trends aggravated by Federal neglect and policies which have favored the suburbs at the expense of the city. For twenty years, suburban growth has been subsidized by the Federal government at the expense of the cities through policies, which gave the suburbs cheap roads, housing, water, and other developmental necessities. This allowed them to meet market demands for the replacement of aging central city housing and precluded its construction of the inner-city."²⁸

The Revolution from Above

Raising unemployment was an extremely desirable way of reducing the strength of the working classes—if you like, that what was engineered there in Marxist terms was a crisis in capitalism which re-created a reserve army of labor, and has allowed the capitalists to make high profits ever since. —ALAN BUDD, economic advisor to British prime minister Margaret Thatcher, 1992, quoted in Trilling, "A Nightmare Experience"

In order to make sense of the policies of Coleman Young and other black politicians in the 1970s, and the role that the federal government played in

shaping these policies, we need to examine the broader crisis of global capitalism. Young was elected the same year that the Great Boom of the post-World War II years—which saw unprecedented and sustained rates of growth for twenty-five years across the capitalist world—began its explosive unwinding. The mid-1970s economic crisis was at its core a crisis of declining profitability and overaccumulation. As capitalists were investing more and more money into machinery in order to outproduce other capitalists, the capacity to produce commodities outpaced the capacity to consume them—not least because people thrown out of work by automation lacked purchasing power. For large U.S. companies, the crisis was all the more acute now that companies in Germany and Japan (whose economic growth the United States supported after the war so as to combat communism) were outcompeting them on the international market.²⁹ At the same time, rising wages and protests in industrial centers around the world ate into profits and kept corporations from investing. These contradictions would bring the world economy crashing down. Between 1974 and 1976, “industrial output dropped 10 percent in the Global North. The American stock market lost half its value and the world system was rocked by the two biggest bank failures since the Depression, as Franklin National in the U.S. and Bankhaus Herstatt in Germany both collapsed. With recessionary forces kicking in, businesses rapidly cut back and layoffs mounted. The number of people officially unemployed in the major capitalist countries nearly doubled from eight to fifteen million.”³⁰

According to Keynesian orthodoxy, when capitalists don’t invest, governments should. And so governments everywhere pumped money into the economy at the first sign of recession in 1971. But the expanded money supply caused inflation to soar: the relative value of the dollar to gold went from \$35 an ounce in 1971 to \$800 an ounce in 1979.³¹ In general, as inflation rose, producers hiked up commodity prices in an effort to maintain profitability. And as governments continued to try to spend their way out of the crisis, essentially printing money to pay their way, a vicious spiral was created.

This problem was exacerbated by the 1973–74 oil crisis, which saw oil prices quadruple. (As the Marxist scholar-activist Vijay Prashad has shown, OPEC’s decision to raise prices was a response to rising commodity prices, as well as a tactic to weaken the stranglehold Western countries had over the economies of the oil-producing nations.) As oil prices went up, demand for autos declined; U.S. auto production fell 29 percent during the embargo.³²

The result of all this was *stagflation*: economic stagnation combined with high rates of inflation. One of the most significant effects of this situation was the consignment of a significant portion of the working class to *permanent*

unemployment. In the U.S., black workers were hit hardest: “The recessions of 1969–1970 and 1973–1975 forced at least 550,000 black workers permanently out of the job market. . . . By 1978, only 10.8 million out of 18.1 million black persons over 14 years of age could find employment.”³³ Meanwhile federal policy facilitated a massive influx of migrant workers, with the result that the foreign-born population of the United States increased around 50 percent from 1970 to 1980. In Detroit alone, the Hispanic population increased around 400 percent between 1940 and 1980. These workers were thus thrust into competition with underemployed black workers.

The economic crisis led to declining tax revenue for municipalities across the country. With New York City on the brink of bankruptcy, a financial coup occurred, one with deep parallels to Detroit’s recent bankruptcy. David Harvey suggests:

It was a kind of major experiment, in which the investment bankers took over the budgetary structure of the city. It was a financial coup as opposed to a military coup. And they then ran the city the way they wanted to do it and the principle they arrived at was that New York City revenues should be earmarked so that the bondholders were paid off first and then whatever was left over would go to the city budget. The result of that was that the city had to lay off a lot workers, had to cut back on municipal expenditures, had to close schools and hospital services, and also had to make user charges on an institution like CUNY (City University of New York), which up until that point was tuition-free. What the bankers did was to discipline the city along ways which I think they didn’t have a full theory for, but they discovered neoliberalism through their practice. And after they had discovered it, they said, ah yes, this is the way in which we should go in general. And of course this then became the way that Reagan went and then it became, if you like, the standard way the International Monetary Fund starts to discipline countries that run into debt around the world.³⁴

In 1979 Paul Volcker, chairman of the Federal Reserve, declared, “The American standard of living must decline.”³⁵ This heralded an offensive against the working classes and the Global South that would restore corporate profits at the expense of social spending, decreased wages, broken unions, and impoverishment for a majority of the country (a process now known as neoliberalism).³⁶ The offensive was mythologized as a war against laxity and laziness. Americans had for too long been complacent, the story went, expecting that standards of living would keep rising no matter how hard they worked, and liberal

governments had exacerbated things with lavish social programs that scared off investment.

In 1980 Volcker spiked interest rates to 20 percent.³⁷ This caused a dramatic shrinking of the economy, as high interest rates made it exceedingly expensive to borrow money, thus stalling investment and driving down prices. Small businesses and homes, which largely run on credit, were hamstrung by the increased price of money: from 1977 to 1981, the rate of small business failure and personal bankruptcies nearly tripled.³⁸

In 1970 the Nixon administration had considered a similar monetary policy. However, “the political costs of sustaining a serious anti-inflationary policy . . . quickly proved unacceptable.”³⁹ Given the intensity of social protest taking place in 1970, this hesitancy makes sense; to manufacture an economic crisis at that point would have been to risk social revolution. However, a decade later, with radical groups decimated by state repression, the gambit was able to succeed. But the remaining vestiges of working-class resistance still had to be quashed. With that in mind, Reagan recomposed the National Labor Relations Board. He appointed Donald Dotson as chairman, a man who once claimed that “unionized labor relations have been the major contributors to the decline and failure of once-healthy industries” and have facilitated the “destruction of individual freedom.” Between 1975 and 1984 unions in the United States lost 4 million workers, and the percentage of the labor force that was unionized decreased from 29 to 19. By the end of 1982 public employees, whose unions had grown in tandem with the postwar welfare state, as well as “truckers, steelworkers, meatpackers, and workers in the trucking, airline, rubber and agricultural-implement industry *had all agreed to major concessions.*”⁴⁰

The Volcker Shock and the attack on unions had a decisive effect on the resolution of the 1979–82 auto crisis, which had led the Big Three to lay off 300,000 workers in 1980 alone. (In total, the United States lost 6.8 million manufacturing jobs between 1978 and 1982.)⁴¹ Marxist writer Nicole Aschoff explains:

Imports, labor unrest, and the skyrocketing costs of oil and raw materials created a serious profit squeeze in the 1970s. . . . After intense negotiation, Congress passed the Chrysler Loan Guarantee Act in late 1979, creating a federal board to oversee restructuring of the company in exchange for \$1.3 billion in loans. Chrysler returned to profitability in 1982, paid back its loans in 1983, and by 1985 all three US automakers were making record profits. But what is most striking about the two crises is that they were both resolved by pushing the costs of the crisis onto working people, allowing the firms to regain profitability and continue

on as they always had. As part of the 1979 loan agreement, the Treasury forced the UAW to open its contract, give back \$462.5 million in wage and benefit gains, and agree to the permanent elimination of more than a third of Chrysler's hourly workforce. The concessions were an historic blow to autoworkers and signaled to the rest of the country that it was open season on organized labor. GM and Ford quickly secured concessions of their own.⁴²

With unions decimated, capital had carte blanche to reorganize labor processes, incorporating new "labor-saving" machinery and robotics. In Detroit, as unemployment skyrocketed between 1980 and 1982, rates of drug overdose doubled and suicides increased 20 percent.⁴³

In the early 1970s Huey Newton argued that the coming era of capitalist globalization would mean "the boomeranging of conditions and practices found in the darker nations of the Third World (and ghettos of the US), such as deindustrialisation, structural unemployment, state retrenchment and super-exploitation, back into the general (white) population of the US." If white workers couldn't be organized into a multiracial working-class movement, Newton predicted, they would align with racist demagogues who scapegoated minorities and foreigners for whites' downward mobility.⁴⁴

Unfortunately his analysis proved prescient. Elected president in 1980, Ronald Reagan's plan to "make America great again" by cutting corporate taxes, bolstering military spending, and slashing welfare spending was justified, in part, by a mythology that demonized foreigners as well as black criminals and "welfare queens." As elsewhere, this type of fear-mongering had fatal consequences in Detroit. In 1982 Vincent Chin was murdered in Highland Park by two white Chrysler employees, who blamed the Japanese auto industry for recent layoffs in Detroit and took revenge on the twenty-seven-year-old Chin, a Chinese American draftsman who was celebrating his bachelor party. As unemployment and inequality have continued to rise in the decades since, the nativist mythology that underpinned this hate crime is making an ugly resurgence, as President Trump repeatedly claims that the Chinese are "ripping us off" and that Americans need to be strong enough to take them on.

The Coleman Young Years Revisited

With this context in mind, we can take a more sober look at the policies of the Young administration. With federal funds lacking and municipal debt accelerating, Young became a fiscal conservative. From 1978 to 1984 he fired

6,000 municipal workers, including at least 1,500 cops. To lure investment he reduced the corporate tax rate; to make up for the subsequent drop in revenue, he raised income taxes. In addition to lowering corporate taxes, Young used public funds to subsidize Downtown investment, in hopes of spurring revitalization. In a deal that eerily resembles the contemporary construction of Little Caesars Arena, the mayor borrowed \$40 million against future block grants from the government in order to fund the Red Wings' Joe Louis Arena. As we saw in the introduction, forty years later the Red Wings' owner, Mike Ilitch, wanted a new stadium, and the Detroit public again paid for much of its construction.⁴⁵

In addition to subsidizing Downtown development, Young attempted to lure industrial firms to the city. But this was no easy task. One way that industrial capitalists escaped the economic crisis was by fleeing the United States—with its expensive, rebellious workers—and investing in new low-wage areas throughout the Global South. Between 1970 and 1993 the number of transnational corporations (with headquarters in three or more countries) increased from seven thousand to thirty-seven thousand, accounting for the majority of world trade. Between 1978 and 1992 seventy nation-states underwent structural adjustment programs issued by the International Monetary Fund—largely due to defaulting on their debts after Volcker jacked up interest rates—which opened these countries up to international investors. As a result, foreign direct investment nearly quadrupled in the 1980s.⁴⁶

It was in this context that, in 1980, Coleman Young promised to clear 465 acres of land in Poletown so that General Motors could build a factory there. The government used eminent domain to evict 3,500 people, 114 businesses, a school, a hospital, and sixteen churches. As is shown in the remarkable film *Poletown Lives!*, Young's attempt to displace the racially integrated neighborhood was met with strong resistance. Poletown residents picketed across the city, occupied buildings, and launched a campaign to boycott GM. This struggle drew the attention of Green Party candidate Ralph Nader, who denounced the GM deal as "corporate socialism." One Detroit activist commented, "All I can see is that they're taking from the poor and giving to the rich." Cockrel was the only city council member to vote against the deal. All around the world, he said, governments were "falling over themselves" to attract mobile capital, and companies knew they had municipalities "in a bind."⁴⁷ In vain, he insisted his fellow politicians should support the Poletown residents in their struggle against such corporate tyranny.

Lacking support from local politicians, however, the Poletown resistance waned after a suspicious series of arsons drove many longtime residents out

of the area. The struggle was brought to a violent climax when a SWAT team descended on an occupied church, removing and arresting twelve people, including four women in their seventies.⁴⁸

Ultimately the site cost Detroit more than \$200 million in “procurement and clearing” and was sold to GM for \$8 million. Detroit did not have \$200 million in spare funds, so it used more than \$100 million of grant money, which was meant to support low-income citizens, to fund the project. Detroit also offered GM a twelve-year, 50 percent tax rebate worth \$60 million for a factory that created hardly any new jobs, instead replacing jobs from older factories. This was the new logic of global capitalism: Detroit, one of America’s poorest cities, was borrowing hundreds of millions of dollars to subsidize the operations of General Motors, at the time the world’s second richest company.⁴⁹

The same logic continues to this day, as we saw in the contemporary corporate subsidies detailed in chapter 1. The main difference is that, with a few exceptions, in the 1980s corporate elites still had more profitable places to invest around the world, and so they mostly rejected Detroit’s lavish deals. The Renaissance Center stands as the most potent symbol of this rejection. The brainchild of a 1970 public-private partnership spearheaded by Henry Ford II, the RenCen was meant to be the centerpiece of economic revitalization in the wake of the Great Rebellion of 1967. After six years of construction, the Renaissance Center was unveiled in 1977. Part consumption space, part corporate headquarters, and part luxury hotel, the modernist glass towers beckoned commerce to Detroit’s waterfront Downtown. But commerce was not forthcoming. The Renaissance Center cost the city \$350 million in public money. In 1996 it was sold to Highgate Hotels for \$72 million, and then resold to General Motors for what the company’s vice chairman described only as “the right price.” At the time of its sale, the Renaissance Center had 17 percent vacancy.⁵⁰

Over the next decade unemployment and violent crime rose together, and as Detroit became the country’s murder capital, the businesses and residents that could leave generally did: the city’s population decreased by 200,000 throughout the 1980s. But for the fleeing workers, there were few places to go in the state; former industrial hubs like Flint and Pontiac were also reeling in the face of deindustrialization. In the 1980s Michigan lost a total of 250,000 jobs.⁵¹

As levels of poverty grew more dire, Young spent \$60 million in public funds to build Millender Center, an upscale apartment building, as part of a broader effort to turn Downtown Detroit into a vibrant commercial center. To stimulate investment, Young also used public housing funds to remove blight, which Mayor Mike Duggan continues to do today. Between 1980 and 1987 the Detroit

government demolished 36,000 homes; during that time only 4,500 homes were built.⁵² Predictably this aggravated the problem of homelessness, which was already endemic across the United States: between 1981 and 1989 the percentage of Americans who experienced homelessness increased from 5 to 15.⁵³

The effort to entice Downtown investment also included the People Mover, a one-track elevated train that circles Downtown Detroit and began operation in 1987. The Mover's original cost was \$200 million, with annual running costs of \$12 million. Two decades after its opening, the People Mover was running at less than 3 percent of its capacity; almost entirely devoid of passengers, it snaked through Downtown like an apparition of the city's decline. While these projects were being funded, Chrysler threatened to move production away from the Motor City. Young responded by selling \$130 million in "limited-tax general obligation bonds, which voters had not approved, to help finance Chrysler's Jefferson North Assembly Plant. At the time, analysts projected the deal would cost the city a total of \$235 million in principal and interest over 20 years."⁵⁴

The legacy of the Poletown plant is another stark reminder of capitalism's inherent creative destruction. In late 2018, less than forty years after the city destroyed the neighborhood to make way for GM's factory, the company announced that it was closing the plant as part of a plan to cut \$6 billion in costs and lay off 15 percent of its salaried workforce. This was after the federal government spent \$51 billion to keep the company afloat during its 2009 Chapter 11 bankruptcy. While GM claims the cuts are necessary to maintain profitability, it has spent over \$10 billion buying back its own stock shares since 2015. The city of Hamtramck, which only recently dug itself out from under state emergency management, has been receiving about \$850,000 per year in revenue from the plant, over 5 percent of the city's total yearly budget. Hamtramck mayor Karen Majewski summed up capitalism's historical vicissitudes: "They did this in 1980 when they destroyed homes to build the facility. Did GM care? No, they sacrificed little old ladies, their churches and homes for that plant. They did not care, and I don't think there's any reason they do now."⁵⁵

Crime and Punishment

Michigan, especially Detroit, now looks like a Third World country. . . . People died in Michigan when cuts occurred in the General Assistance. A close friend of mine died for lacking the transportation to get the kidney medicine. —**MARIAN KRAMER**, "Remarks on the National Welfare Rights Union," 1994

In the 1980s crack-cocaine imports into the United States soared (often with CIA complicity).⁵⁶ In the Detroit area fifty thousand people became addicted to crack, and its distribution became a \$1 billion industry. In urban areas throughout the country, high unemployment and easy access to guns created the conditions for violent struggles to corner this emerging market. Between 1984 and 1989 the homicide rate of black males ages fourteen to twenty-four doubled; in major cities, one-third of *all* homicides were linked to the crack trade in 1988.⁵⁷

This crisis, a result of structural political-economic dynamics that left millions of poor urban residents permanently unemployed, was treated by the government as a problem of crime. This framing served to both legitimate and administer the response to the crisis, offering a simple explanation (crime as moral failing) while also providing a solution (tougher anticrime measures). Throughout the 1980s a series of criminal justice reforms were passed with bipartisan support, resulting in longer prison sentences for drug crimes, the implementation of a 100:1 disparity in sentencing between convictions for arrests related to crack and those related to cocaine, increased funding for police militarization, and further incentives for police departments to participate in the war on drugs. (Departments were allowed to keep 90 percent of any “drug-tainted” property seized in raids.)⁵⁸ The number of drug-related arrests in Detroit nearly *tripled* between 1980 and 1988. By 1988 nearly three-quarters of arrestees in Detroit were drug users.⁵⁹

The law-and-order response was justified, in part, by the myth of the “crack baby.” In 1986 *Newsweek* declared “crack babies” the largest national news story since the Vietnam War, and *Time* named crack the “issue of the year.” The *Detroit Free Press* ran cover stories like “Schools: System’s Unprepared to Handle Influx of Crack-Damaged Children.”⁶⁰ But a recent study led by Dr. Hallam Hurt, the chair of neonatology at the Albert Einstein Medical Center, came to the conclusion that “the crack baby was a myth.” As reported by *Al Jazeera*: “‘We were really preparing for the worst,’ Hurt said. ‘We had reports of psychologists saying this was going to be a biologically inferior underclass, might not even be able to dress themselves.’ But after 25 years of research she found there were no differences in the health and life outcomes between babies exposed to crack and those who weren’t. . . . What did make a difference for those babies, however, was poverty and violence.”⁶¹

The war on drugs went hand in hand with dramatic cuts to welfare. In the early 1990s Republican governor John Engler, who was nearly recalled after hundreds of thousands of Michiganders signed a petition to oust him, eliminated general assistance, removing ninety thousand state residents from the welfare rolls. Meanwhile, between 1985 and 1992 twenty-three new prisons

were constructed in Michigan. In 1993 the state spent \$1.32 billion to incarcerate forty-four thousand people, each prisoner costing eleven times the average welfare payment.⁶²

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s a number of groups in Detroit combated the problems of government neglect and immiseration, questioning the state's law-and-order framework. Marian Kramer helped form the Michigan Welfare Rights Organization (part of the National Welfare Rights Union), which organized welfare recipients against a system that, in her words, "punish[es] people, especially children, for being poor."⁶³ This organization worked with the Detroit Organization of Tenants in the fight for rent control and affordable housing. At the same time a multitude of groups fought to unify the city's public transport system with the suburbs, though suburbanites consistently blocked this initiative, with devastating effects to Detroit's economy: in the 1980s all jobs created in metro Detroit were in areas where there was no public transport, but nearly one-third of Detroit households had no car.⁶⁴

This era witnessed a flourishing of community groups in the city. Alternatives for Girls formed in 1987 to "serve homeless teenage girls and young women" and participate in AIDS education. The Westside Mothers organized residents in neighborhoods decimated by federal neglect and the crack epidemic. Core City Neighborhoods fought the crack epidemic by organizing for affordable housing and economic uplift.⁶⁵ Save Our Sons and Daughters organized against street violence and the crack epidemic. In 1988 the Boggess and Dorothy Garner formed We the People Reclaim Our Streets, an organization that held marches against the ravages of crack-cocaine.⁶⁶ And in 1991 the Boggess and other activists held a People's Festival, which celebrated the "new spirit rising in Detroit": "It is found where people are rehabbing abandoned houses, walking against crack and crime, planting gardens, reclaiming our neighborhoods as places of safety and peace for ourselves and our children. It is a spirit born out of the depths of a city crisis. For too long our neighborhoods have been allowed to deteriorate. For too long our scarce tax dollars have gone to subsidize megaprojects with little return to the people. For too long our streets have been places of violence and danger."⁶⁷

But despite the efforts of these and other groups, law-and-order policies were in full effect throughout the poorest and most marginalized parts of the country. On April 30, 1992, this provoked a militant response as impoverished communities of color in Los Angeles took arms in a week-long uprising. The immediate catalyst was the acquittal of the four police officers who pulled over Rodney King, an unarmed black man, on a traffic stop, then proceeded to beat him severely as he lay prone, begging them to stop. In a week of violence, over

eleven thousand people were arrested, sixty-three people were killed, and more than \$1 billion in property was damaged.⁶⁸

As in the Great Rebellion in Detroit, the national media mythologized this event, describing the protesters as “rioters,” “thugs,” and “looters.” In the *Detroit Free Press*, where the “riot” was front-page news for five straight days, generally unmentioned was the fact that black unemployment was more than 40 percent in Los Angeles. Stripped of most context, the “rioters” were depicted as exploding in “violent rage,” and the newspaper concluded that a “gulf of hatred separates races.” Protesters in Detroit and Highland Park marched in solidarity with Rodney King and the LA protesters, but the primary coverage they received in the *Free Press* was a story titled “Riot Rumors Make Shop Owners Shaky.”⁶⁹

President George H. W. Bush, following long historical precedent, invoked the Insurrection Act of 1807 to send in federal troops to restore order in LA. Military soldiers and Border Patrol agents blasted into poor neighborhoods. Border Patrol agents raided Latino communities and arrested a thousand undocumented immigrants, “despite the fact that most were never formally charged with any riot-related offense.”⁷⁰

Later that year Malice Green, an unarmed thirty-five-year-old black man, was pulled over by two white plainclothes police officers in a poor neighborhood on Detroit’s West Side, who alleged that he had parked near a drug house. A group of officers, with no justifiable provocation, “beat, kicked and bludgeoned” Green to death. “The attack,” the *Press* wrote, “evoked images of Rodney King.” In the days that followed, hundreds of Detroiters gathered to mourn Green’s death. Wary of the LA uprising, Coleman Young responded by intensifying police patrols in the city’s deeply impoverished West Side neighborhoods. No uprising ensued—in large part because the state had successfully repressed and incarcerated the most militant members of Detroit’s working class. Only the first two officers on the scene were convicted in Green’s killing, and each was released after serving significantly abridged sentences.⁷¹ Malice Green, an unemployed steelworker, was one of many casualties in the war on drugs, a war that treated poor people of color like Green as *enemy combatants*.

In the wake of the Rodney King uprising, the Democratic Party moved all the way to the right on the issue of crime in the 1992 elections. During his presidential campaign, Bill Clinton positioned himself as a law-and-order liberal, and once elected, he signed into law the 1994 Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act and the 1996 Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act. These laws increased mandatory minimum sentences; financed the largest prison construction project in world history; instituted

three-strikes legislation (issuing mandatory life sentences for three-time convicts); increased the number of agents controlling the flow of migrants coming across the border following NAFTA (which thrust small farmers into competition with transnational agricultural companies, forcing 1.3 million Mexican farmers off their land in the mid-1990s); and enacted policies that resulted in a 300 percent jump in immigrant detention in the 1990s.⁷² “As the violent crime rate plummeted in the 1990s,” the political scientist Marie Gottschalk writes, the “number of violent and property offenses prosecuted rose, as did the time served by people convicted of violent offenses.”⁷³

The 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act was the second flank of Clinton’s assault on the poor. The Act decreased the federal budget for antipoverty programs by more than \$500 million; banned parole and probation violators from receiving federal aid and public housing *for a full decade*; placed a lifetime ban on Temporary Assistance for Needy Families and Food Stamp benefits for convicted drug felons; put a five-year lifetime cap on welfare receipt; and issued a mandate to states to decrease those on state doles. Another key part of this Act is what is known as workfare: to keep their benefits, welfare recipients now had to accept *any* job that was offered to them, at *any* wage, or lose their benefits.⁷⁴

In Detroit the Michigan Welfare Rights Organization led the struggle against these draconian policies by organizing impoverished people throughout the city. The Organization denounced the government for creating a “new Great Depression.” They called for “adequate income above the poverty level, adequate and affordable housing, employment at prevailing wages, equal and quality healthcare, and quality child care. Although slavery was abolished in this country over 210 years ago, mandatory work legislation has in effect restored slavery in this country, regardless of race.”⁷⁵

It was an uphill battle, and it is still being fought. Within seven years of its passage, the number of welfare recipients in the United States decreased from 12.7 million to 5 million. At least 40 percent of those who had been taken off the doles had *not* found jobs, putting them, in their struggle to survive, on a collision course with the country’s recently bolstered criminal justice system, whose budget had increased from \$22 billion in 1980 to \$130 billion in 1997.⁷⁶

“They’ll Be Better Off in Prison”

When he was elected, Young had no program for stopping crime. All he could propose in his inaugural speech was that the criminals should hit 8 Mile road. But he did have a dream, the dream that he could get the corporations to stay in Detroit by bribing them with tax

abatements. Today Young's dream has turned into a nightmare. Crime has not hit 8 Mile road, but industry has. —JAMES BOGGS, "Rebuilding Detroit: An Alternative to Casino Gambling," 1988

We're going to pay \$200,000,000 to \$300,000,000 to house a baseball team when we can't house the homeless. —GENE CUNNINGHAM, early 1990s, quoted in Mast, *Detroit Lives*

In 1994 Coleman Young left office due to health reasons that soon led to his death. At the time Detroit's population was around one-third of what it had been when Young first took office, and the percentage of Detroiters who were black had increased to around 70. Attempts to transform Downtown into a commercial hub had been an expensive failure: by 1995, 20 percent of the city's 480 Downtown buildings stood "empty, or at best thinly occupied." Camilo Jose Vergara drew national attention for his article in the design and architectural magazine *Metropolis* in which he offered a solution for Downtown Detroit: "I propose that as a tonic for our imagination, as a call for renewal, as a place within our national memory, a dozen city blocks of pre-Depression skyscrapers be stabilized and left standing as ruins: an American Acropolis. We could transform the nearly 100 troubled buildings into a grand national historic park of play and wonder."⁷⁷

Dennis Archer, the city's new mayor, had other plans: not to turn Downtown into a museum but to continue efforts to remake it as a thriving commercial center.⁷⁸ The "crown jewel" of Archer's plans to revitalize the city was Comerica Park. In 1997 construction on the new stadium began on twenty-five acres in the heart of Downtown at a cost of \$300 million, 38 percent of which was publicly financed.⁷⁹ The new stadium, named after Comerica Bank, was leased to Mike Ilitch, owner of the Tigers baseball team. At the time, *Forbes* magazine ranked Ilitch as "one of the nation's wealthiest individuals."⁸⁰ Two years later ground broke on a new football stadium that would neighbor Comerica Park. Ford Field, owned by Henry Ford's grandson, cost \$430 million to build, 36 percent of which was publicly financed.⁸¹

The final piece of Archer's vision for a revitalized Downtown was put in place in 1996, when a statewide ballot passed allowing casinos to operate in Michigan. Three casinos were built in Downtown by 2000. In spite of promises that the casino industry would "bring 50,000 to 80,000 jobs," the casinos employed a total of 7,500 people.⁸²

Like many of his predecessors, Mayor Archer stated that crime was "the No. 1 problem confronting the city" and that combating it would be integral to the city's attempts to "attract businesses that can provide jobs." By this point the official unemployment rate in Detroit was 25 percent. Throughout the

1990s this reserve army of labor was confronted by an increasingly authoritarian police force. The Malice Green murder was no anomaly: from 1990 to 1998 DPD killed ten citizens per year, making Detroit cops the deadliest in the country.⁸³

Police forces across the United States were becoming more militarized: in the late 1990s, \$750 million in equipment was sent to police departments, including 181 grenade launchers. The federal government mandated that all subsidized equipment be used within one year, creating a massive local incentive for departments to launch military-style operations.⁸⁴ In Detroit these paramilitary units were used mostly on drug raids in the city's poorest neighborhoods.⁸⁵

In 1998 Michigan's legislature passed truth-in-sentencing legislation which drastically reduced prisoners' chances for parole; for prisoners serving the same crime, the average length of sentence increased 50 percent between 1981 and 2005. This increase cannot be linked with crime, only with the mythical perception of increasing crime: between 1986 and 2006 the incarceration rate in Michigan had more than tripled, while violent crime had *dropped* by 30 percent.⁸⁶ As the director of the Michigan Department of Corrections put it, "Prisons were a real growth industry for a while."⁸⁷

In 2001 UNICOR, a government-owned corporation, earned \$588 million in revenue by selling products made by federal prisoners; two-thirds of UNICOR products were purchased by the U.S. Department of Defense. The minimum wage paid to these inmates was 23 cents per hour.⁸⁸ By 1998 in addition to its forty-one correctional institutions, there were fifteen prison camps in Michigan. Heather Ann Thompson notes:

The Michigan State Industries (MSI)—the division of the Michigan Department of Corrections that oversees prison labor—began making everything from farm equipment to steam engines, boilers, barrels, copper wire, cigars, tombstones, shoes, and laundry products. It was soon operating a textile mill that could compete with operations south of the Mason-Dixon line. By 2000, MSI was running 29 factories in 18 prisons, and, as it reported proudly, its self-sufficiency and employment of more prisoners helped to save "the state the cost of civilian wages, salaries and other costs which were paid out of the Department's budget in the past." Meanwhile of course, factory doors across the City of Detroit were shutting. . . . As one community leader in Detroit noted woefully, "[f]or the first time, I'm seeing guys make a conscious decision they'll be better off in prison than in the community, homeless and hungry."⁸⁹

Prelude to the Bankruptcy

Since the national attention is on birth control, here's my idea: If we want to fight poverty, reduce violent crime and bring down our embarrassing drop-out rate, we should swap contraceptives for fluoride in Michigan's drinking water. We've got a baby problem in Michigan. Too many babies are born to immature parents who don't have the skills to raise them, too many are delivered by poor women who can't afford them, and too many are fathered by sorry layabouts who spread their seed like dandelions and then wander away from the consequences. —NOAH FINLEY, "Michigan is Breeding Poverty," 2012

Like those who came before him, when Kwame Kilpatrick became mayor in 2002, his options were highly constrained by a harsh reality: hundreds of thousands of people in his city were what James Boggs had called "expendables." The disposability of this population was shown in the U.S. government's response to Hurricane Katrina. Invoking the Insurrection Act of 1807, President George W. Bush ordered federal troops into New Orleans—the U.S. city with the highest per capita prison population and an unemployment rate of 50 percent—on a "shoot to kill" mission against all "looters" attempting to survive a storm that killed more than a thousand people.⁹⁰

Constrained by a political-economic system that had no regard for most of his city's residents, Mayor Kilpatrick's options for governing Detroit—at the time the poorest large city in the country, a city that was more than 80 percent black, a city with a dubious credit rating, declining population, decimated industrial base, and \$150 million-plus deficit—were extremely limited. Kilpatrick implemented austerity, reducing the municipal workforce by more than four thousand people, and supported aggressive crime-fighting measures.⁹¹

In the hysterical political climate following 9/11 the Arab residents in the Detroit suburb of Dearborn were violently targeted by police equipped with the War on Terror's surplus military equipment.⁹² As Sally Howell and Andrew Shryock write, in Dearborn the U.S. Border Patrol began "using 'unannounced, rotating checkpoints' to search automobiles for illegal aliens, drugs, and terrorists. . . . a U.S. Justice Department spokesman in Washington, D.C., said of the probe: 'It's the largest investigation in the history of the United States.' . . . The result, so far, has been dozens of arrests—mostly for graft, identity forgery, cigarette smuggling, and other black market crimes—and the purported discovery of an 'operational combat sleeper cell' of four 'al-Qaeda terrorists' (who might just be hapless immigrants who fit the profile . . .)."⁹³

In addition to promoting the wars on crime and terror, Kilpatrick would also prove amenable to a brand of neoconservative politics ascendant at this time, embodied most memorably by Bill Cosby. Though his reputation today

has been all but destroyed after being convicted of sexual assault and sentenced to ten years in prison (and having been accused by more than sixty women of sexual assault, rape, and many other charges dating back decades), Cosby was in the early 2000s one of the country's most beloved public figures. His political stance is a rehashing of the underclass ideology that has animated debate about the urban poor for over half a century. In Cosby's particular strain of this well-worn doctrine, gangsta rap, baggy jeans, absent male role models, anti-intellectualism in the black community, and other moral failings are the cause of black poverty, problems whose alleviation lies in an amalgam of parental responsibility, mobility through education, and private philanthropy. In a 2004 speech commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of the *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court decision, Cosby blamed poverty on the failings of the poor themselves: "The lower economic people are not holding up their part in this deal."⁹⁴ Strange apologetics for police brutality, ridiculous associations between the naming practices of black families and criminality, and the moral contagion of black youth's fashion choices peppered Cosby's tirade. In his formulation, the only barriers keeping the black urban poor from enjoying the prosperity granted to middle- and upper-class blacks by civil rights reforms are their own attitudes.

Cosby's vision was embraced by significant segments of the black political class. After this speech for the NAACP, Cosby was invited to address the National Urban League, Jesse Jackson's Rainbow/PUSH coalition, and the Congressional Black Caucus. Kilpatrick openly endorsed Cosby's remarks, and later that year the mayor invited him "to lead an invitation-only 'town hall' meeting to address Detroit's soaring murder rate."⁹⁵ On a speaking tour in 2007, Cosby addressed a packed room at Detroit's St. Paul Church of God in Christ, upbraiding the all-male audience—"Men? Men? Men! Where are you, men?"—to protect their women and children as a remedy for poverty and "black-on-black crime."⁹⁶ Rather than falling into the trap of the false consciousness thesis, we should recognize the reasons why this type of thinking "resonates with the black mainstream."⁹⁷ Black conservatism does not represent co-optation by white elites, but has rather been a mainstay of African American political life since emancipation, personified by Booker T. Washington and his philosophy of legal segregation and black self-help. The same sentiments animated much of Black Power discourse, with its emphasis on "closing ranks," "community control," and general notions of self-sufficiency, which often scorned integrationism and redress through formal political institutions.

Crucially this type of thinking legitimates the neoliberal order. Another endorsement of Cosby's remarks came from then-senator Barack Obama. "Bill Cosby got into trouble when he said some of these things," Obama explained in an interview with Oprah Winfrey. "But I completely agree with his underlying premise: We have to change attitudes."⁹⁸ Understanding crime as a moral problem rather than as a political-economic problem serves to justify both law-and-order policies and the elimination of the social safety net. The social factors that have led to the disintegration of working-class black communities are eliminated, and the market is naturalized as the only legitimate arbiter of human social relations. Regular people, Obama claimed in his celebrated 2004 address to the Democratic National Committee, "don't expect government to solve all their problems" and "don't want their tax money wasted by a welfare agency."⁹⁹

This brand of neoconservatism was also operative in Detroit, as Kilpatrick linked the city's economy to the global financial market in a way that was much more direct than in previous decades. As the city's pension obligations grew and its taxable revenue shrank, Kilpatrick negotiated a deal with Wall Street that he estimated would shave almost \$300 million per year in pension obligations. In 2005 the city issued \$1.4 billion in securities to Wall Street banks. Kilpatrick then bought swaps from UBS and SBS Financial Products, which locked in Detroit's interest payments on this long-term debt to Wall Street at the *fixed* rate of 6 percent.¹⁰⁰

At the time, the voices of council members who resisted the deal were drowned out by the mythic belief that Wall Street financial schemes would save the city. The *Free Press* accused the dissenting council members of having their "heads in the sand," calling it a "sound deal . . . akin to refinancing a mortgage." (The irony is that 56 percent of black homeowners who purchased a mortgage in 2006 were foreclosed on within five years by the very same banks that Kilpatrick was negotiating with.) Bond Buyer, Wall Street's premier guide to the municipal investment market, was so enthralled it awarded the deal the 2005 Midwest Regional Deal of the Year.¹⁰¹

Three years later, however, after the stock market crashed and interest rates plummeted, Detroit was left in the lurch. By 2012 Detroit's liability on the deal, *in addition to the principal owed*, had increased to \$439 million.¹⁰²

After Kilpatrick resigned following an unrelated corruption scandal, David Bing came to office in 2008. He responded to the city's mounting debt by firing nearly one-third of the municipal workforce. These cuts implicated the police department more significantly than previous bouts of downsizing: fewer than two thousand officers were retained, meaning "fewer cops [were] on patrol in

the city than at any time since the 1920s.” The remaining officers mostly serviced Downtown, and emergency response times in the periphery of the city were soon estimated at an hour.¹⁰³

In 2009 Robert Bobb was appointed emergency manager for Detroit Public Schools, said to be having fiscal problems. As we saw in the introduction, his solution was to close thirty schools and transition DPS to a charter system. When Bobb, who was paid a six-figure salary, stepped down two years later, DPS was in more debt than when he began closing schools, and the school system was well on its way to being the most friendly in the nation to charters.¹⁰⁴

For all the austerity measures, the city’s revenue fell a full 20 percent between 2000 and the end of Bing’s first and only term, as the population decreased by another 250,000 people. The city’s unemployment rate, meanwhile, was 45 percent (for parolees, this figure was as high as 70 percent). These numbers are only slight exaggerations of the national trend: more than 25 percent of black and Hispanic workers was jobless in 2011. The poverty rate among white workers, meanwhile, increased from 3 to 11 percent in first decade of the millennium; in those same years, the median income for working-age households of all races fell by more than 12 percent.¹⁰⁵

Following the financial crisis of 2007–8, the U.S. government bailed out the banks and the auto industry with more than \$700 billion. For Detroit’s working class, no such gifts were forthcoming. Instead the keys to their city were handed to an emergency manager whose job it was to bring Detroit out of its fiscal crisis. As already mentioned in chapter 1, this was to be done by yet more austerity, dispossession, and corporate subsidies. And as Emergency Manager Orr acknowledged in his initial report on the city, in order for the city to become a profitable place to invest in, its “endemic” crime problem had to be addressed. With this in mind, the broken-windows policing advocate James Craig was soon brought in.¹⁰⁶

As Marx reminds us in *The 18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, history repeats itself, “the first time as tragedy, the second as farce.”¹⁰⁷ We have documented the tragic effects of capitalism’s first major attempts in the twentieth century to overhaul Detroit, and now that capitalists are returning to the city en masse, the jubilant support for their profit-seeking efforts can only be seen as a farce—but a farce with fatal consequences. At the same time, with respect to anticrime measures as an ostensible solution to Detroit’s social problems, we are well past the realm of the farcical. But for the tens of thousands of Detroiters who will spend some part of their life behind bars, for their friends, families, neighbors, and comrades, it is no laughing matter.

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Conclusion

Competing Visions for Detroit's New Era

Who remembers all that? History throws its empty bottles out the window. —CHRIS MARKER, *Sans Soleil*, 1983

People always ask us, “Why can’t we have another League of Revolutionary Black Workers?” Because those days are over with. When we talk about something now, we’re talking about a party for the working class as a whole, the unemployed, or never worked or whatever. It’s got to be based on that rising class, and what’s happening out here, and the question of technology, and the fact that we need a new society. —MARIAN KRAMER, “A Media Project with the League of Revolutionary Black Workers”

The brief history we have told here is an attempt to allow the reader to make sense of the dramatic shifts underway in contemporary Detroit. To conclude, we’d like to offer some thoughts on the challenges faced by those seeking to contest the architects of the so-called New Detroit, and build a city that better serves the needs of all Detroiters.

Resilience or Resistance?

Post-9/11 politics, according to the Marxist scholar Mark Neocleous, have been defined by the triad anxiety-trauma-resilience, which has become the framework to understand everything from ecology to natural disasters, psychology, urban planning, national security, corporate management, parenting, and all that is in between: “The state now assumes that one of its key tasks is to imagine the worst-case scenario, the coming catastrophe, the crisis to come, the looming war attack, the emergency that could happen, might happen and probably will happen, all in order to be better prepared. . . . Resilience is nothing if not an apprehension of the future, but a future imagined as disaster/attack and then, more importantly, recovery from the disaster/attack.”¹

The concept of resilience also reigns in the economic arena. In financial institutions such as the World Bank and the IMF, the doctrine of resilience has become crucial. The key assumption of this type of thinking is that economies, and economic subjects, must be made more resilient in a situation of global market volatility. Workers must be made more resilient to low wages and underemployment; local and regional economies must be made resilient to the vicissitudes of uneven geographical development, as whole industries move across the globe at the drop of a hat; producers and consumers must become resilient to the wild fluctuations of the commodity market; citizens must be made resilient to withstand retirement without a pension, social security, or public health care; the skyrocketing number of depressed and insomniac individuals must be made resilient to a state of living defined by atomization, hypercompetitiveness, and technological consumption; and ensuring student resilience “is central to improving their academic performance” in underfunded and for-profit schools.²

Crucially, all of this resilience works to support capital accumulation. The more resilient the worker, the more docile she will be; the more resilient the consumer, the more he will be able to buy; the more resilient the citizens, the less the state is responsible for their well-being and the more public services can be privatized and turned into avenues for profit; and on and on. Capital “both generates and thrives on the anxiety that lies at the core of bourgeois subjectivity.”³

Resilience evacuates politics. By always anticipating the traumatic event to come, resilience forecloses the possibility for a political mobilization that would imagine a future in which traumatic disasters would not so readily occur. “We can be individually anxious about the state of the world and about

what might happen but our response must be resilience-training, not political struggle.”⁴

Resilience is a buzzword in contemporary Detroit. Although this is in some sense nothing new—decades ago, Coleman Young claimed that Detroit was “the most resilient city in America”—the concept seems to have come into fashion especially since the city’s supposed revival and can be seen as underpinning the city’s ability to have apparently bounced back from years of decline and neglect. Recall that the city’s motto is “We hope for better things. It shall rise from the ashes.” Resilience appears everywhere that people are talking about the city. The promotional video made by Dan Gilbert’s company as part of its bid to host Amazon’s second headquarters calls Detroiters “the most resilient people on the planet.” A *Huffington Post* article claims, “Together, Detroit’s citizens and its leaders are revealing a new playbook for building and rebuilding resilient communities in America.” A local artist is quoted in the *New York Times* saying, “People often use the word ‘revitalization’ in Detroit, but I think of resilience.” Dennis Archer Jr., son of the former mayor, says of the city, “We’re resilient. We’re going to win.” An article on the website of the World Bank on the topic is titled “Detroit’s Future City Framework Offers Lessons on Resilience.” One economist sees in Detroit “resilience in action.” The planning director of the City of Detroit gave a presentation in July 2017 called “Putting Design to Work: How Design Is Building a Resilient Detroit.” In a 2015 exhibit at the Detroit Institute of Arts on Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera, NPR sees “A Portrait of a Resilient City.”⁵ The list could go on.

Where did this resilience come from? Thanks to its history as the manufacturing hub of the world, Detroit is perceived as hard-working, epitomizing the blue-collar, midwestern work ethic. And because of years of neglect and hardship, Detroiters have had to find a way to get by on their own, without the traditional supports of city services and secure jobs. “Detroit hustles harder.” Journalists admire the “survivalist spirit of Detroit,” the ability of its people, the city’s greatest asset, to “adapt.”⁶ Many, even those with no connection to the city, seem to find themselves rooting for Motown. Detroit, as we noted in the introduction, is a sort of analogy for the fortunes of the country in general, the poster child for processes that have transformed urban life across America. As one writer put it, “If New York is a measure of our financial might and Los Angeles a yardstick for our imagination, Detroit is a gauge of our soul.”⁷

Certainly there is truth to these sentiments. Detroit has experienced the worst of the myriad crises plaguing American cities. It ranks near the top on most every metric of urban despair. Despite this, many in the city still thrive, still make do on their own, with the support of their community. However, one

is left to wonder, what choice is there other than resilience? *Resilience* seems to indicate nothing other than an attempt to positively frame the creative destruction that has crushed the city. Certainly Detroiters are resilient, but how many have been laid off, imprisoned, beaten by police, had their welfare slashed, been blamed for their own hardship, had their water shut off, their schools closed, their neighborhoods decimated in the name of austerity while Downtown flourishes? Sure, Detroiters are resilient. But what is the alternative? Death? Sheer destruction? One can't help but think that resilience is just another way to romanticize poverty. Given the choice between resilience and prosperity, comfort, and stability, it's obvious which option most Detroiters would choose.

Resilience becomes the ultimate goal of human social relations only within a political-economic system that continually reproduces crises and continually asks the working classes to pay for the cost of those crises. We have seen what resilience has meant in the history of Detroit. The question now is how to avoid the resilience that will become necessary in the future.

Beyond Mythologies

The demand to give up the illusions about its condition is the demand to give up a condition which needs illusions. . . . Criticism has plucked the imaginary flowers from the chain not so that man will wear the chain without any fantasy or consolation but so that he will shake off the chain and cull the living flower. —KARL MARX, quoted in Fromm, *Beyond the Chains of Illusion*, 1962

Fantasy is what people want, but reality is what they need. —LAURYN HILL, *MTV Unplugged No. 2.0*, 2002

The interlinked political, moral, ecological, and humanitarian crises facing human civilization are difficult to refute. A report issued by the United Nations in October 2018 warns that humanity has only twelve years to mitigate climate change or face global catastrophe by the end of the century. The changes necessary to prevent this would involve “rapid, far-reaching and unprecedented changes in all aspects of society.”⁸ We have reached a situation of unprecedented inequality. As the number of billionaires grows—there are more than 600 worldwide—the situation for the working class becomes more desperate and insecure. Wages are stagnant, automation displaces more and more people, and stable jobs are increasingly scarce: in 2011 the number of workers in the world between the ages of twenty-five and fifty-four who were unemployed, vulnerably employed, or economically inactive was 2.4 billion,

compared to only 1.4 billion workers that had stable, full-time jobs.⁹ At the end of 2018 more than 68 million people had been displaced from their homes due to poverty, dispossession, climate change, or war.¹⁰ Meanwhile, for those privileged groups living in the wealthier parts of the world, mental health is deteriorating. Nearly 16 percent of Americans take antidepressants, 40 percent suffer from insomnia, and nearly 20 percent admit to suffering from an anxiety disorder. Thirty years ago “the average age for the first onset of depression was 30. Today it is 14. . . . At this pace, over 50 per cent of our younger generation, aged 18–29, will succumb to it by middle age.” Nor is this mental anguish simply an American problem: the global suicide rate has increased 60 percent in the past forty-five years.¹¹

The Marxist psychoanalyst Erich Fromm suggests, “The irrationalities of any given society result in the *necessity* for its members to repress the awareness of many of their own feelings and observations. This necessity is the greater in proportion to the extent to which a society is not representative of all its members. . . . The repression of the awareness of facts is, and must be, supplemented by the acceptance of many fictions. The gaps which exist because we refuse to see many things around us *must be filled so that we may have a coherent picture*.”¹² Since capitalism is a social form that requires obfuscation for its functioning, a politics based on lies and manipulation should be conceived as the fullest expression of capitalist logic. And as the crisis of humanity has deepened, in order to retain their power, political and corporate elites have had to rely on grander mythologies, as well as more robust repressive forces. Authoritarian politicians have gained power in the United States, the Philippines, Brazil, Austria, France, and elsewhere. To seize power, these demagogues have utilized a mythical discourse that acknowledges people’s economic and existential insecurities but blames those insecurities on a series of scapegoats: corrupt politicians, socialists, the liberal media, criminals, oppressed minorities, refugees, terrorists, and others—all the while implementing policies that exacerbate the crisis by creating new opportunities for international corporate elites to profit.¹³

The more this dialectic of creative destruction and mythologization develops, the more dangerous and violent things become. But at the same time, the system’s legitimacy becomes more precarious, and more space is created for a radical politics based on an awareness of lived personal and political reality, based on a struggle for dignity and well-being rather than immiseration and myth-making. According to Fromm:

Needs like the striving for happiness, belonging, love, and freedom are inherent in [human] nature. They are also dynamic factors in the historical

process. If a social order neglects or frustrates the basic human needs beyond a certain threshold, the members of such a society will try to change the social order so as to make it more suitable to their human needs. . . . The relation between social change and economic change is not only the one which Marx emphasized, namely, the interests of new classes in changed social and political conditions, but that social changes are at the same time determined by the fundamental human needs which make use, as it were, of favorable circumstances for their realization.¹⁴

In many ways, Fromm's vision is reflected in the later activism of James and Grace Lee Boggs, the legendary activists who have had a tremendous influence on contemporary Detroit-based activism. Dismayed by the failures of Communist regimes, and by the sexist, racist, and generally closed-off and unimaginative thinking that plagued the U.S. leftist scene, the Boggsses increasingly foregrounded their politics on the concept of dialectical humanism, which aims to give a "moral and spiritual dimension" to the materialist struggle for power and resources.¹⁵ Their aim has been to help people to start building, from the ground up, a society that is "more suitable to their human needs." The basic idea is that socialism is not some distant utopia; it is something we must start to build in the here and now.

In the early 1990s the Boggsses organized Detroit Summer, which brought young people together with activists to work "in small groups on collaborative projects such as planting gardens, rehabilitating homes, and creating murals."¹⁶ In 2012 Grace Lee Boggs and Scott Kurashige published *The Next American Revolution*, in which they articulated the view that revolutionary politics "should not be mainly a struggle for state power. It should revolve around going to people at the grassroots, helping them to transform their inner and outer lives, and encouraging them to think for themselves in order to create self-reliant local communities."¹⁷ In his recent book, *The Fifty-Year Rebellion*, Kurashige offers a survey of a diverse array of community activists working in this vein, attempting to build a "revolutionary reconstruction of society from the ground up."¹⁸

Toward the end of her life, Grace Lee Boggs saw Detroit as the ideal place for this revolutionary process to occur:

Detroit, which was once the symbol of miracles of industrialization and then became the symbol of the devastation of deindustrialization, is now the symbol of a new kind of society, of people who grow their own food, of people who try and help each other, to how we begin to think, not so much of getting jobs and advancing our own fortunes, but how we depend

on each other. . . . When you look out and all you see is vacant lots, when all you see is devastation, when all you see—do you look at it as a curse, or do you look at it as a possibility, as having potential?¹⁹

Inspiring though it is, Grace Lee Boggs's vision of contemporary Detroit—as a city full of “possibility,” as a place where a “cultural revolution . . . is emerging from the ground up . . . as awesome as the transitions from hunting and gathering to agriculture eleven thousand years ago”—is difficult to reconcile with the continuing devastation of the city and the dominance of global corporations and political elites in Detroit's affairs, elites who have attempted to co-opt and thwart the very initiatives promoted by Kurashige and Boggs.²⁰

Consider the James and Grace Lee Boggs School, a radical educational institution founded in 2013 by seasoned Detroit teachers and activists (where one of us briefly worked as a summer intern). Kurashige delineates the structural issues facing the project: “Whereas [other alternative schools] promise (often falsely) to help urban youth move up within the world of education and the global capitalist order, the Boggses maintained that our existing academic and economic systems were set up to promote exploitation and dehumanization.” “There's a different way to do education that's not dehumanizing,” says Julia Putnam, the school's principal. “We get to practice how to be in society the way we think society should be.” The Boggs school recognizes that small pilot schools like itself must be “more than boutique successes or alternatives. Detroiters continue to struggle to build a movement that can apply the best lessons obtainable to revive a public school system that is rooted in the realities and concerns of a majority black and working-class city.”²¹ But despite this recognition of the need for systemic change, the school has had to make concessions to the powers that be in order to continue operation: “In a sign of stark reality, the Boggs School's founders made the difficult and controversial decision to apply for a charter.” Further, the success of the Boggs school has been used by some on the right to justify further privatization of schools, a process which, as we saw in chapter 1, is devastating the city's, and the country's, educational process, as many leaders at the Boggs school acknowledge.²²

Another sign of activism's co-optation by local elites is the effort to reclaim vacant land. Detroit has experienced an efflorescence of urban farming in recent years, as individuals and organizations take back abandoned lots, sometimes by the hundreds of acres, in an effort to establish neighborhood-level, sustainable food systems. Again, Kurashige recognizes the problems at stake here: “The city's veteran gardeners saw the vast expanse of vacant lots and abandonment as an opening and opportunity, but the issue of what to do with

those presumed vacant spaces has become increasingly contentious over the past decade.” Despite activists’ vision, wherein “members of the community could control and determine the use of land in perpetuity, based on people’s needs rather than market value,” corporations and powerful individuals have profited from Detroit’s land policies, as we saw in chapter 1. One example stands out: the wealthy finance capitalist John Hantz has positioned himself as an advocate of urban farming, piggybacking on the movement’s goodwill while promoting large-scale, for-profit urban farming. In 2012 Hantz bought two thousand city-owned parcels on the East Side for *eight cents per acre*, without an appraisal.²³ Despite criticism of the deal, which activists aptly described as a massive “land grab,” in early 2019 Hantz was able to manipulate the ideological support for local farming initiatives to secure another 450 parcels of “mostly vacant” properties from the city at the same bargain-basement price, and he intends to put this land to profitable use.²⁴

In each case, local movements organizing on the basis of community needs in opposition to market forces met with two interrelated problems: a lack of power over the structural political forces that circumscribe individual action, leading to some necessary capitulation to those forces, and the ability of vested interests to manipulate activist strategies to their own ends, ends which themselves frustrate the goals of community activists and feed into the market mechanisms that dispossess communities. The form of activism championed by Boggs and Kurashige is undoubtedly vital and impactful, as it sees hope in areas of the city long neglected and written off by those in power. There seem to be clear limitations, however, to this vision. When looking at Detroit, people like Grace Lee Boggs may see “possibility” and “potential,” but so do people like Dan Gilbert and the Ilitches. The question is: Who is in a strategic position to enact their vision? Political and corporate elites control most of the city’s land, resources, and media outlets; they also control the criminal justice system and can bring violence to bear on those who oppose their interests. If it is true, as Fromm and the Boggses suggest, that the next revolution will require the masses to make a “spiritual leap” and affirm their collective humanity, it is also true that there are powerful groups that are fully committed to stopping this spiritual revolution from occurring, insofar as it interferes with the workings of bourgeois society. This is a fundamental issue in capitalism: the power of corporate elites makes genuine democracy very difficult to realize.

Oversimplifying matters a bit, we can highlight a basic contradiction between two types of politics that have animated the city’s leftist scene for decades. On the one hand, there is the type of confrontational, class-based politics advocated by the League of Revolutionary Black Workers, many of

whose members remain active in the city's political scene; on the other hand, there is the more horizontal, aspirational politics espoused by the Boggses. Over the years, activists from each camp have been critical of the others' approach. Those in the Boggses' camp tend to point out that Marxist organizations have had their day, and that although their ideals sound lofty, in practice they have routinely become dogmatic, non-democratic, non-inclusive, secretive, paranoid, and overly self-righteous. Furthermore, when these groups have become overtly militant, they have regularly been crushed by violent state forces. The Marxist response is basically that although the type of politics espoused by the Boggs is aspirational and inclusive, it is ultimately ineffectual, amorphous, and not up to the monumental task of confronting a very powerful capitalist class.

Both camps have their points. As the history we have provided shows, there is no successful model of leftist politics that can simply be replicated by contemporary activists. If there were, we wouldn't be in this mess. The question is: how will a grassroots politics emerge that can synthesize what is best from both of these camps, and build an organization that stays true to socialist ideals while avoiding political co-optation?

We do not pretend to have an answer to this question, nor do we feel it is our place to put forward some kind of political program. By the time this book is published, neither of us will be living in Detroit, and all we hope is that this book can be of some help to the multitude of Detroiters struggling to forge a more equitable society. We find hope in the diverse cast of activists who came together for the October 28, 2018, "Teach-In on the actual situation facing hundreds of thousands of people who live in the city of Detroit," which was organized around the following premise:

The city has been underdeveloped by the financial institutions, the service sector and industrial plants. Over the last decade or more some 250,000 people have been forced out of Detroit through job losses, mortgage and property tax foreclosures, utility shut-offs involving water, heating and lighting, school closings and environmental degradation. We have to build fightback movements, which challenge the illegitimate right of the ruling class to govern at our expense by placing the interests of the masses at the forefront of any political and social program. We need to be organized at the grassroots levels to defeat the enemies, which are continuously exploiting and repressing the people of Detroit and other municipalities throughout the state, the country and indeed the world.²⁵

Whatever one thinks of the viability of socialism, or of the tactics of various leftist organizations, one thing should be clear from the preceding chapters. So

long as Detroit remains organized around the principles of capitalism—private property concentrated in the hands of the few, wage labor for the masses, the endless pursuit of profit—there is no remedy to the problems of poverty, exploitation, inequality, unemployment, dispossession, unsatisfying and degrading working conditions, environmental degradation, etc. These are problems that are *inherent* to capitalism, and they simply cannot be resolved by philanthropy or liberal reforms. All those thinking about Detroit's future should be honest about this. If people decide that capitalism is the only feasible way of organizing society, they are essentially concluding that these issues are acceptable, and that any alternative would probably be worse. It is not our intention to pardon or obscure the atrocities that have been carried out in the name of Socialism or Communism, be they in China, the Soviet Union, Cambodia, or elsewhere. Some of Marx's writings give the impression that, once the capitalist class is overthrown, all of society's problems will magically disappear. This way of thinking has proven to be as dangerous as it is false. So, while any attempt to actualize a communist society would undoubtedly be filled with unforeseeable problems and contradictions, one thing is certain: remaining within the capitalist status quo may be profitable for the elite architects of the New Detroit, but it surely augurs disaster for most people in Detroit.

Notes

INTRODUCTION: MARX IN DETROIT

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- 36 "Taking Back Detroit," directed by Stephen Lighthill (Available Light, 1980), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bzEoyXTf22o>.
- 37 This book draws heavily on past writings about Detroit. We are significantly indebted to the works of James and Grace Lee Boggs, Steve Babson, Martin Glaberman, Daniel J. Clark, Michael Stauch Jr., Stephen Meyer III, Dan Georgakas and Marvin Surkin, Thomas Sugrue, Ahmad Rahman, Heather Ann Thompson, Sidney Fine, Stephen M. Ward, Robert H. Mast, Elizabeth Esch, Nelson Lichtenstein, David Goldberg, Herb Boyd, Wilma Henrickson, A. Muhammad Ahmad, and Scott Martelle. We would also like to acknowledge the great reporting done by Ryan Felton, Abayomi Azikiwe, Allie Gross, Steve Nealing, and Diane Bukowski, among so many others.
- 38 There have been a tremendous number of films, poems, books, oral histories, and articles that have demonstrated the vibrancy, diversity, and specificity of Detroit's cultural history. Our aim is not to downplay any of these; rather, we hope that our Marxist approach will supplement and give added context to the city's rich cultural history.
- 39 Christopher McAuley, "On Capitalist Origins," *Solidarity*, November–December 2002, <https://solidarity-us.org/atc/101/p724/>.
- 40 Hardt and Negri, *Commonwealth*, 7. Marx spoke often about capital, and the capitalist mode of production, but rarely mentioned capitalism. For Marx, capital is both a process and a thing. It is the private wealth of the capitalist class, but it is also "value in motion," and capital encompasses the range of social relationships that facilitate the ongoing and ever-growing accumulation of private wealth. Throughout this work we follow the common usage among Marxists and refer to *capital* as a shorthand for the capitalist class, or simply as a shorthand for the most powerful corporations.

- 41 Quoted in Arrighi, *Adam Smith in Beijing*, 18. Tronti's *Operai e capitale* (Workers and Capital), in which this essay appears as a postscript, is not yet, at the time of our writing, available in English translation, so we have relied on Arrighi's interpretation; we have also looked at other works by Tronti that have been published in English.
- 42 Marx and Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*.
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- 44 Pizzolato, "Transnational Radicals," 25–27. The wildcat strikes launched by the League and other worker groups were of particular interest to Tronti and the Italian *operaismo* movement, which was "not moved by an ethical revolt against factory exploitation, but by political admiration for the practices of insubordination that they invented" (Tronti, "Our Operaismo").
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- 52 James Bennet, "A Tribute to Ruin Inks Detroit," *New York Times*, December 10, 1995.
- 53 Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts into Air*, 99–100. Throughout this book we use the term *creative destruction* as an informal shorthand for the immense destruction that is required for capitalism to reproduce itself on an ever greater scale. Of course, in any process, social or physical, often something must be destroyed so that something else can be created. However, capitalism is set apart from other social systems in that its reproduction "systematically transforms the material conditions to which [it] originally responded" (Perlman, *The Reproduction of Daily Life*, 2). Moreover the level of destruction that capitalism requires is incommensurably large: the environmental degradation inherent in a system that treats nature as a "gigantic gasoline station," city forms and entire ways of life that are built and cultivated only to be demolished, the economic and existential anguish that results when processes of capital flight and automation render workers expendable, brutalizing work conditions and wars fought over access to new markets, violent police tactics and the repression of resistance movements, forced migrations and mass detainments, and on and on. See Heidegger, "Memorial Address."
- 54 In his analysis of primitive accumulation, Marx wrote that peasants were "first forcibly expropriated from the soil, driven from their homes, turned into vagabonds, then whipped, branded and tortured by grotesquely terroristic laws into accepting

the discipline necessary for the system of wage labor.” Only after this spectacular violence occurs, Marx insists, can “the silent compulsion of economic relations [set] the seal on the domination of the capitalist over the worker. Direct extra-economic force is still of course used, but only in exceptional cases. In the ordinary run of things, the worker can be left to the natural laws of production, i.e., it is possible to rely on his dependence on capital, which springs from the conditions of production themselves, and is guaranteed in perpetuity by them” (Marx, *Capital: Vol. 1*, 899). As many scholars and activists have pointed out, however, force is not simply an irregular or intermittent requirement for the reproduction of capital; extra-economic force is a constant feature, and primitive accumulation is an ongoing process. See in particular *Caliban and the Witch* by Silvia Federici and *War Power, Police Power* by Mark Neocleous. Our history of Detroit will demonstrate the consistency of extra-economic force in the reproduction of capitalist social relations.

55 Quoted in Georgakas and Surkin, *Detroit, I Do Mind Dying*, 73.

56 Barthes, *Mythologies*, 142–43.

57 The concept of commodity fetishism shows that capitalist social relations are, at their core, centered on the obfuscation of their true nature. Marx begins *Capital* with the primary unit of capitalism: the commodity. At first apparently simple, the commodity is, in reality, “abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties.” To use his classic example, a table is very simple; it is a plane with four legs made of wood. But as soon as a table becomes a commodity, it transforms, becomes imbued with magical capabilities: “It not only stands with its feet on the ground, but . . . it stands on its head, and evolves out of its wooden brain grotesque ideas.” On the market, we do not see the producers of the table; all we see is a price tag. It is as if the table, in addition to all its material properties, contains a metaphysical property: its market value. Now tables, and all other commodities, are in reality products of human labor; this is where their value comes from. The money used to buy commodities is, also, an abstract representation of human labor. The exchange of commodities, then, is the exchange of one product of human labor for another. However, the exchange of commodities in the market appears not as an exchange of labor but as an exchange of a table for money. This is the essence of the fetish of the commodity: “It is a definite social relation between men, that assumes, in their eyes, the fantastic form of a relation between things.” (Marx, *Capital*, 41, 81–83, emphasis added). So long as I participate in capitalism, I have no choice but to act as if each commodity is necessarily endowed with value. This is what Alfred Sohn-Rethel in *Intellectual and Manual Labor* calls a “real abstraction”: although the table does not actually possess any suprasensible quality, our social intercourse is predicated on treating it as if it does. In Marx’s philosophy, one finds, “not merely the ‘reduction’ of ideology to an economic base, and within this base, of exchange to production, but a much more ambiguous and mysterious phenomenon of ‘commodity fetishism,’ which designates a kind of proto-‘ideology’ inherent to the economic base itself” (Žižek, *Parallax View*, 170).

58 Lincoln, *Theorizing Myth*.

59 On this point, see Toscano and Kinkle, *Cartographies of the Absolute*.

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- 61 Our analysis of myth is inspired by the reading Charles Taylor gives to Hegel's critique of the Enlightenment's dismissal of religion (*Hegel*, 184).
- 62 As Marx writes, "It is, in reality, much easier to discover by analysis the earthly core of the misty creations of religion, than, conversely, it is to develop from the actual relations of life the corresponding celestialised forms of those relations. The latter method is the only materialistic, and therefore, the only scientific one" (*Capital*, 493–94). In Toscano's words, it is not a matter of referring "representations to a material basis, but of showing the socio-historical necessity and rootedness of the 'phantoms'" that proliferate in capitalist society (*Fanaticism*, 188).
- 63 Lincoln, *Theorizing Myth*.

CHAPTER 1: A TALE OF ONE CITY

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"Simulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being, or a substance. It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal" (*Simulacra and Simulation*, 1). However, instead of these neighborhoods, the area around the arena is now filled with new parking lots, and the Neighborhood Advisory Committee assembled by Olympia to advise on the project has complained that the company's promises to invest in housing and other development in the area have gone unfulfilled. See Louis Aguilar, "Cass Corridor Neighbors See Unfulfilled Promises in Little Caesars Arena District," *Detroit News*, November 5, 2018, <https://www.detroitnews.com/story/news/local/detroit-city/2018/11/05/ilitch-little-caesars-arena-detroit-development-plans/1850015002/>.

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- 186 Steve Neavling, "Mounting public pressure puts brakes on Detroit's facial-recognition technology," *Detroit Metro Times*, July 3, 2019, <https://www.metrotimes.com/detroit/mounting-public-pressure-puts-brakes-on-detroits-facial-recognition-technology/Content?oid=22062719>; Steve Neavling, "Detroit police commissioner who was arrested at meeting won't be charged," *Detroit Metro Times*, July 18, 2019, <https://www.metrotimes.com/news-hits/archives/2019/07/18/detroit-police-commissioner-who-was-arrested-at-meeting-wont-be-charged>; George Hunter, "Detroit chief defends facial recognition technology after Tlaib criticism," *Detroit News*, August 20, 2019, <https://www.detroitnews.com/story/news/local/detroit-city/2019/08/20/detroit-chief-defends-facial-recognition-technology-after-tlaib-criticism/2059414001/>.
- 187 Samuel Stein, "Capital City."
- 188 Tomba, *Marx's Temporalities*, viii. Historical materialism is not a skeleton key for the comprehension of history but "a practical mode of intervention into history. . . . Insofar as it is incomplete, history is produced constructively by a historiography able to trigger off the explosive charge of the past in the present."

CHAPTER 2: FORDISM AND THE SO-CALLED GOLDEN YEARS

- 1 Michiko Kakutami, "Review: 'Once in a Great City' Chronicles Detroit's Glory Days," *New York Times*, September 14, 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/15/books/review-once-in-a-great-city-chronicles-detroits-glory-days.html>; Bomey, *Detroit Resurrected*.
- 2 Barthes, *Mythologies*, 124.
- 3 The Henry Ford, Greenfield Village, accessed September 2017, <https://www.thehenryford.org/visit/greenfield-village/>.
- 4 The Henry Ford, Ford Rouge Factory Tour, accessed September 2017, <https://www.thehenryford.org/visit/ford-rouge-factory-tour/>.
- 5 The Henry Ford, Henry Ford Museum of American Innovation, accessed September 2017, <https://www.thehenryford.org/visit/henry-ford-museum/>.
- 6 The Henry Ford, Evolution of Our Collection, accessed September 2017, <https://www.thehenryford.org/history-and-mission/evolution-of-our-collection/>.
- 7 The Henry Ford, Creating Our Campus, accessed September 2017, <https://www.thehenryford.org/history-and-mission/creating-our-campus/>.
- 8 The Henry Ford, Henry's Assembly Line, accessed September 2017, <https://www.thehenryford.org/visit/henry-ford-museum/exhibits/made-in-america-manufacturing/>.

- 9 Marx, *Capital*: Vol. 1, 604.
- 10 Meyer, *The Five Dollar Day*, 2.
- 11 Babson et al., *Working Detroit*, 18.
- 12 Montgomery, *The Fall of the House of Labor*.
- 13 Marx, *Capital*, 1023.
- 14 Marx, *Capital*, 1021, 1035.
- 15 Babson et al., *Working Detroit*, 18–19.
- 16 Quoted in Zimbalist, “The Limits of Work Humanization,” 51.
- 17 Babson et al., *Working Detroit*, 30. In his classic work, *Labor and Monopoly Capital*, Harry Braverman summarizes the viewpoint of Taylor and his ilk: “Workers who are controlled only by general orders and discipline are not adequately controlled, because they retain their grip on the actual processes of labor. So long as they control the labor process itself, they will thwart efforts to realize the full potential inherent in their labor power. To change this situation, control over the labor process must pass into the hands of management, not only in a formal sense but by the control and dictation of each step of the process” (69). Taylor’s precept was that “the cost of production is lowered by separating the work of planning and the brain work as much as possible from the manual labor.” This enforced “division between the labour of head and hand” is, for Marxists, a basic definition of alienation. See Sohn-Rethel, *Intellectual and Manual Labor*, 4.
- 18 Babson et al., *Working Detroit*, 49.
- 19 This separation between the “head” and the “hands” in Taylorist industrial production is the subject of Fritz Lang’s 1927 masterpiece, *Metropolis*. The film depicts faceless masses of exhausted and demoralized workers at the whims of leviathan machines controlled by their capitalist bosses. The plot of the film revolves around the factory owner’s son’s attempt to lead a revolution among the workers and reconcile the “head” with the “hands.”
- 20 Babson et al., *Working Detroit*, 3, 18.
- 21 By 1969 the percentage of wage or salaried employees increased to 84 percent, and self-employed workers was down to 9 percent. See Zimbalist, “The Limits of Work Humanization,” 52.
- 22 Meyer, *The Five Dollar Day*, 18.
- 23 Babson et al., *Working Detroit*, 30, 32. Craft unions, composed of skilled workers, generally took the position that their unique skills gave them a strong bargaining position with the owners, and they resisted “diluting” their ranks by allowing unskilled workers to join. Such a stance is perfectly understandable from the standpoint of these workers and is not so much a product of the prejudice of craft unions as one of myriad internal divisions that have tended to undermine solidarity throughout the labor movement’s history.
- 24 Coopey and McKinlay, “Power without Knowledge?,” III.
- 25 Lenin, “A ‘Scientific’ System of Sweating.”
- 26 Shwartz and Fish, “Just-in-Time Inventories in Old Detroit,” 53.
- 27 Murray and Schwartz, “Collateral Damage,” 127.
- 28 Meyer, *The Five Dollar Day*, III, 120–21.

- 29 Quoted in Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*, 126.
- 30 Meyer, *The Five Dollar Day*, 77–78, 115–24; Babson et al., *Working Detroit*, 35.
- 31 Meyer, *The Five Dollar Day*, 77–78, 115–24, 147–61; Coopey and McKinlay, “Power without Knowledge?,” 112; Babson et al., *Working Detroit*, 35.
- 32 Meyer, *The Five Dollar Day*, 162.
- 33 Babson et al., *Working Detroit*, 8–21.
- 34 Babson et al., *Working Detroit*, 32–33.
- 35 Babson et al., *Working Detroit*, 34.
- 36 Vargas, *Proletarians of the North*, 59, 60, 62; Meyer, *The Five Dollar Day*, 171, 186, 193. Because of this, all the major auto companies kept surplus workers on hand to replace striking or inefficient workers.
- 37 Wolf, “Spies, Lies and War.”
- 38 Lucia, “The Unemployed Movements of the 1930s”; Meyer, *The Five Dollar Day*, 170–75; Babson et al., *Working Detroit*, 39–40.
- 39 Babson et al., *Working Detroit*, 56.
- 40 Baran and Sweezy, *Monopoly Capital*, 251; Marable, *How Capitalism Underdeveloped Black America*, chapter 1; Vargas, *Proletarians of the North*, 59; Boyd, *Black Detroit*, 92.
- 41 Quoted in Boyd, *Black Detroit*, 92.
- 42 Robinson, “The Production of Black Violence,” 288.
- 43 Alkalimat, *Introduction to Afro-American Studies*, 124; John Williams, “Interview,” League of Revolutionary Black Workers, 2017, <https://www.revolutionaryblackworkers.org/video/>; Esch, *The Color Line and the Assembly Line*, 96. One anecdote reveals the horrible role that capitalists cast for black workers; it comes from an interview that Lloyd Bailer, one of Detroit’s first black economists, conducted with a manager of a Detroit auto factory: “I asked if Negroes were not employed anywhere in the plant. He said ‘yes, some jobs white folks will not do; so they have to take niggers in, particularly in duco work, spraying paint on car bodies. This soon kills a white man.’ I inquired if it ever killed Negroes. ‘Oh, yes,’ he replied. ‘It shortened their lives, it cuts them down, but they’re just niggers.’” Quoted in Norman McRae, “Detroit in Black and White,” in Henrickson, *Detroit Perspectives*, 366.
- 44 McRae, “Detroit in Black and White,” 367; Martelle, *Detroit*, 133–34; Karen Dash, “Slum Clearance Farce,” *Nation*, April 1, 1936.
- 45 Babson et al., *Working Detroit*, 44; Vitale, *The End of Policing*, 48.
- 46 Marable, *Malcolm X*, 26.
- 47 Schultz, *Detroit under STRESS*, 1.
- 48 Feeley, “Black Workers, Fordism, and the UAW.”
- 49 Marable, *Malcolm X*, 29; Ward, *In Love and Struggle*, 33; Johnson, “Coming to Terms with Actually-Existing Black Life.”
- 50 Feeley, “Black Workers, Fordism, and the UAW”; Babson et al., *Working Detroit*, 44–45.
- 51 This was around the same time that Ford established Fordlandia, an industrial town in the Amazon, where Ford expected to create operations that would provide latex for 2 million cars in the United States. There Ford implemented a similar

system of intense labor discipline and moral Puritanism as in Detroit. However, within a couple of years, tired of being treated like “dogs,” the workers participated in a massive uprising, destroying much of the newly established company facilities and running their capitalist bosses out of town. See Grandin, *Fordlandia*; George Hunter, “Detroit Police Diversity Issues Predate National Debate,” *Detroit News*, March 8, 2015, <http://www.detroitnews.com/story/news/local/wayne-county/2015/03/07/detroit-police-department-diversity/24570427/>; Martelle, *Detroit*, 128–32; Forest Davis, “Labor Spies and the Black Legion,” in Henrickson, *Detroit Perspectives*, 370–75.

- 52 Norwood, “Ford’s Brass Knuckles,” 367.
- 53 Coopey and McKinlay, “Power without Knowledge?,” 115. This aligns with the work of Michel Foucault, who in *Discipline and Punish* argues that one of the major functions of the modern prison is to have a reserve of desperate people who can be used to infiltrate radical movements.
- 54 Babson et al., *Working Detroit*, 59.
- 55 Vargas, *Proletarians of the North*, 62.
- 56 Martelle, *Detroit*, 114; McNally, *Global Slump*, 66; “Automobiles,” History Channel, 2010, <http://www.history.com/topics/automobiles>.
- 57 Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis*, 18; McNally, *Global Slump*, 64.
- 58 Babson et al., *Working Detroit*, 52.
- 59 Babson et al., *Working Detroit*, 48.
- 60 McNally, *Global Slump*, 65–66.
- 61 Marx, *Capital*, 353.
- 62 Amin, *Unequal Development*, 101; Robinson, *A Theory of Global Capitalism*, 147.
- 63 Prabhat Patnaik, “Bubbles, Stocks and Crashes,” *MRonline*, March 3, 2018, <https://mronline.org/2018/03/03/bubbles-stocks-and-crashes/>.
- 64 McNally, *Global Slump*, 114–15; Harman, *Zombie Capitalism*, 150–53.
- 65 Murray and Schwartz, “Collateral Damage,” 128.
- 66 Martelle, *Detroit*, 114; Baskin, “The Ford Hunger March,” 33.
- 67 Valocchi, “The Unemployed Workers Movement of the 1930s,” 197; Lucia, “The Unemployed Movements of the 1930s”; Martelle, *Detroit*, 114.
- 68 Government welfare was eventually reduced to just “milk and bread.” Lucia, “The Unemployed Movements of the 1930s”; Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*, 127; Martelle, *Detroit*, 121–22; Piven and Cloward, *Poor People’s Movements*, 61.
- 69 Babson et al., *Working Detroit*, 56–57.
- 70 Burton Folsom, “Michigan Resists the New Deal,” Michigan Center for Public Policy, March 2, 1998, <https://www.mackinac.org/346>.
- 71 Reed, “Between Obama and Coates,” 13. As Reed effectively argues, attempts to portray the New Deal’s exclusions primarily in terms of racism or “whiteness” are belied by the overwhelming exclusion of poor white workers.
- 72 Piven and Cloward, *Poor People’s Movements*, 42.
- 73 Rusche, “Prison Revolts or Social Legislation.”
- 74 On August 14, 1939, the *Detroit Free Press* published an article titled “Preacher Traces Causes of Crime: Negro Duties to Race Are Discussed,” in which it was

- reported that the “Nation’s Negro population [is] 9.6 percent of the whole and the percentage of Negro inmates in penal institutions [is] 27.” The preacher insists that whatever the material causes, moral solutions, rather than political-economic ones, would be required: “The church is free enough and has enough man power in it to tackle this problem and solve it to a great extent.” We can thus see that the mythological view that crime was not just a political-economic symptom, but also a problem of morality, a view that legitimates processes of dispossession in contemporary Detroit, has a long history in the city; efforts on the part of black elites to moralize and reform the recalcitrant behavior of a black “underclass” are also deeply rooted. See also “African Americans in the United States, Michigan and Metropolitan Detroit,” Center for Urban Studies, February 2002, Working Paper Series, No. 8, <http://www.cus.wayne.edu/media/1356/aawork8.pdf>; Patrick Langan, “Race of Prisoners Admitted to State and Federal Institutions, 1926–1986,” U.S. Department of Justice, May 1991, <https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/125618.pdf>, p. 6.
- 75 Rusche, “Prison Revolts or Social Legislation”; Adrienne Eaton et al., “A History of Jackson Prison, 1920–1975,” Research Paper, University of Michigan, Residential College Social Science Research Community, winter 1979.
- 76 Rusche, “Prison Revolts or Social Legislation.”
- 77 Lorence, *Organizing the Unemployed*, 38–39; Folsom, *Impatient Armies of the Poor*, 305–6; “Murder Charges Asked after Red Mob Fights Police,” *Detroit Free Press*, December 8, 1932; John Newsinger, “From Class War to Cold War,” *International Socialism*, no. 73 (December 1996), <http://pubs.socialistreviewindex.org.uk/isj73/newsing.htm>; Babson et al., *Working Detroit*, 54.
- 78 Black workers were refused housing in Dearborn near the plant; they were forced to live in Inkster. During the Depression, Ford took over Inkster’s economically devastated African American neighborhoods. Not trusting black workers to manage their own finances, he withheld more than 80 percent of black workers’ wages and spent it as he saw fit to manage the Inkster community—a practice that continued until a minimum wage law was passed in 1933. Esch, *The Color Line and the Assembly Line*, 108–9; Howe and Widick, “The UAW Fights Race Prejudice”; Alan Brinkley, “Last of His Kind,” *New York Times*, December 17 1995, <http://www.nytimes.com/1995/12/17/books/last-of-his-kind.html?pagewanted=all&src=pm>; Babson et al., *Working Detroit*, 44; Esch, *The Color Line and the Assembly Line*, 92.
- 79 To be sure, “the activities of the Communist Parties in the United States . . . left large sectors of the black population untouched”; however, by 1931—the year that the Communist Party led a campaign to defend the nine young blacks accused of rape in the Scottsboro case—there were over one thousand black members in the CPUSA. Foner and Allen, *American Communism and Black Americans*, 116–17; Sitkoff, *A New Deal for Blacks*, 47; Alkalimat, *Introduction to Afro-American Studies*, 128–33; Jacob Zumoff, “The Party and Black Liberation,” *Jacobin*, August 8, 2015, <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2015/08/communist-party-scottsboro-cominterm-zumoff-debs-racism/>; Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe*; Holger Weiss, “‘Negro Workers, Defend the Soviet Union and the Chinese Revolution!’ The International Trade Union Committee of Negro Workers and the Political Rhetoric of the Negro Worker,”

Viewpoint Magazine, February 1, 2018, <https://www.viewpointmag.com/2018/02/01/negro-workers-defend-soviet-union-chinese-revolution-international-trade-union-committee-negro-workers-political-rhetoric-negro-worker/>.

- 80 "A Slap at Moscow," *Detroit Free Press*, October 9, 1935; Martelle, *Detroit*, 129.
- 81 Sit-down strikes were largely an adaptation of tactics used against workers by capitalists in previous walkouts: Babson et al., *Working Detroit*, 62.
- 82 Babson et al., *Working Detroit*, 79.
- 83 Lichtenstein, *State of the Union*, 21–24.
- 84 Lichtenstein, *State of the Union*, 30–35.
- 85 McCloud, "Solidarity Forever." McCloud's account is highly critical of Sidney Fine's work, *Sit-Down*, which is the standard account of the strike. She criticizes Fine for his failure to substantially deal with the political attitudes of the workers taking part in the strike and for downplaying the role that militant leftist workers played.
- 86 McCloud, "Solidarity Forever," 41–43.
- 87 Murray and Schwartz, "Collateral Damage"; Silver, *Forces of Labor*. While this tactic managed to dissipate and disperse the class struggle, the diffusion of auto plants into a spider-like network caused a significant decline in productivity, allowing more efficient Japanese and German plants to quickly gain much of the Big Three's market share in the postwar years—a process that would have drastic results for the employment prospects of Detroiters in the decades to come.
- 88 Babson et al., *Working Detroit*, 80–81.
- 89 Babson et al., *Working Detroit*, 86, 91.
- 90 Babson et al., *Working Detroit*, 92.
- 91 Babson et al., *Working Detroit*, 92, 110; Tompkins Bates, *The Making of Black Detroit in the Age of Henry Ford*, 245.
- 92 Cowie and Salvatore, "The Long Exception," 12; Martelle, *Detroit*, 139; Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis*, 19; Boggs, *The American Revolution*, 53; Steve Fraser, "The Good War and the Workers," *American Prospect*, September 20, 2009, <http://prospect.org/article/good-war-and-workers-0>; Ward, *In Love and Struggle*, 35.
- 93 Franklin D. Roosevelt, "The Great Arsenal of Democracy," December 29, 1940, *American Rhetoric*, accessed October 2017, <http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/fdrarsenalofdemocracy.html>. Note also that Roosevelt's speech opens, "This is not a fireside chat on war. It is a talk on national security." In *Critique of Security*, Mark Neocleous writes that the Roosevelt presidency was a crucial time in the consolidation of the regime of "security" in the United States. The concepts of national security and social security, both originating at this time, were instrumental in securing the order of capital and establishing a mode of citizenship based on wage labor and stratification of the working classes (76–105).
- 94 Fraser, "The Good War and the Workers"; Woodford, *This Is Detroit*, 155; Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis*, 19; Georgakas and Surkin, *Detroit*, 27–28; Babson et al., *Working Detroit*, 120; Jones, "An End to the Neglect of the Problems of the Negro Woman!"
- 95 Lichtenstein, *The Most Dangerous Man in Detroit*, 75.
- 96 Lichtenstein, *The Most Dangerous Man in Detroit*, 104–204.

- 97 Glaberman, *Wartime Strikes*, 3. There is ample evidence that FDR and others in his administration had prior knowledge of the attacks on Pearl Harbor and allowed them to happen anyway. When one considers that defense production, which finally pulled the economy out of the recession, could only be fully mobilized after the attack and the government's subsequent ban on civilian production, one is left with the grim conclusion that the FDR administration saw the attacks as a means to jumpstart the war economy. See *September 11: The New Pearl Harbor*. Directed by Massimo Mazzucco. Italy, Luogo Comune, 2013; Lichtenstein, *The Most Dangerous Man in Detroit*, 154–71.
- 98 Glaberman, *Wartime Strikes*, 1–5.
- 99 Lichtenstein, *The Most Dangerous Man in Detroit*, 176–93.
- 100 Boggs, *The American Revolution*, 20; Brecher, “The World War II and Post-war Strike Wave”; Nelson, “How the UAW Grew,” 14.
- 101 Glaberman, *Wartime Strikes*, 39.
- 102 Babson et al., *Working Detroit*, 124.
- 103 Glaberman, *Wartime Strikes*, 37.
- 104 Roosevelt, “The Great Arsenal of Democracy.”
- 105 Glaberman, *Wartime Strikes*, 42; Babson et al., *Working Detroit*, 123.
- 106 Glaberman, *Wartime Strikes*, 44.
- 107 Babson et al., *Working Detroit*, 124.
- 108 Mollenkopf, *The Contested City*, 25.
- 109 Glaberman, *Wartime Strikes*, 44, 14, 43.
- 110 Boggs, *The American Revolution*, 19–20; Brecher, “The World War II and Post-war Strike Wave”; Seidman, *American Labor from Defense to Reconversion*, 78–79; Howe and Widick, “The UAW Fights Race Prejudice”; Glaberman, *Wartime Strikes*, 50; Babson et al., *Working Detroit*, 123.
- 111 Glaberman, *Wartime Strikes*, 49.
- 112 Glaberman, *Wartime Strikes*, 98–134.
- 113 Matthew Goldstein, “Detroit: From Motor City to Housing Incubator,” *New York Times*, November 4, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/04/business/detroit-housing.html>.
- 114 Mollenkopf, *The Contested City*, 74.
- 115 McNally, *Global Slump*, 27.
- 116 By 1953 the combined U.S. and Canadian share of global steel production was 46 percent; their share of global TV production was 84 percent; their share of cotton woven fabric production was 50 percent; and their share of global auto production was 80 percent. Ikeda, “World Production,” 80–83; McNally, *Global Slump*, 27, 89; Magdoff and Sweezy, *The Deepening Crisis of U.S. Capitalism*, 12.
- 117 Piketty, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*.
- 118 Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis*, 126; Clark, *Disruption in Detroit*.
- 119 Clark, *Disruption in Detroit*, 179.
- 120 As one San Francisco banker explained in 1948, “Labor developments in the last decade may well be the chief contributing factor in speeding regional dispersion of industry. . . . Large aggregations of labor in one [central city] plant are more subject

to outside disrupting influences, and have less happy relations with management, than in smaller [suburban] plants” (quoted in Mollenkopf, *The Contested City*, 143).

- 121 Neocleous, *Critique of Security*, 95.
- 122 Neocleous, *Critique of Security*, 98.
- 123 Neocleous, *Critique of Security*, 102–4.
- 124 Branko Marcetic, “The FBI’s Secret War,” *Jacobin*, August 31, 2016, <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2016/08/fbi-cointelpro-new-left-panthers-muslim-surveillance>. On the Hollywood Blacklist, see *Red Hollywood*. Directed by Thom Andersen and Noël Burch, 1996.
- 125 Marable, *Race, Reform, and Rebellion*, 19; Taylor, *From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation*, 35; Mast, *Detroit Lives*, 219; Bellamy Foster and McChesney, “Surveillance Capitalism”; Babson et al., *Working Detroit*, 139.
- 126 Babson et al., *Working Detroit*, 131.
- 127 Seidman, *American Labor from Defense to Reconversion*, 1; Brecher, “The World War II and Post-war Strike Wave”; Babson et al., *Working Detroit*, 129.
- 128 Truman, *Memoirs*, 498. The use of the army to repress worker struggles was only one feature of the nascent military-industrial complex. This complex facilitated the pacification of labor movements at the same time as it alleviated the problem of overproduction that plagued the U.S. economy after the war effort ended: real output in the United States rose 65 percent between 1940 and 1944, and the military-industrial complex provided a much-needed outlet for surplus production. Within two decades, for example, more than half of the production in the electronics industry was purchased by the U.S. military. As Jonathan Bellamy Foster and Robert McChesney point out in their important essay, “Surveillance Capitalism,” although President Eisenhower is mostly remembered for warning of the specter of the military-industrial complex, it is less often noted that he was instrumental in assembling this complex. In 1946 General Eisenhower, then chief of staff of the army, issued a memo in which he wrote, “The future security of the nation demands that all those civilian resources which by conversion or redirection constitute our main support in time of emergency be associated closely with the activities of the Army in time of peace.” In Eisenhower’s vision, industrial and technological development would be “organic parts of our military structure. . . . Close integration of military and civilian resources will not only directly benefit the Army, but indirectly contribute to the nation’s security.”
- 129 Brecher, “The World War II and Post-war Strike Wave”; Babson et al., *Working Detroit*, 129–30.
- 130 Babson et al., *Working Detroit*, 130.
- 131 Brecher, “The World War II and Post-war Strike Wave”; Babson et al., *Working Detroit*, 131.
- 132 Brecher, “The World War II and Post-war Strike Wave.”
- 133 Brecher, “The World War II and Post-war Strike Wave.”
- 134 Clark, *Disruption in Detroit*, 25, 17, 25, 48, 20, 17.
- 135 Babson et al., *Working Detroit*, 138–39.

- 136 Lichtenstein, *State of the Union*, 114–20; Camp, *Incarcerating the Crisis*, 49–50; Boggs, *The American Revolution*, 121–22; Halpern, “I’m Fighting for Freedom.”
- 137 Lichtenstein, “UAW Bargaining Strategy and Shop-Floor Conflict,” 363.
- 138 Appiah and Gates, *Africana*, 181–82; Marable, *Race, Reform, and Rebellion*, 29; West, “The Role of the National Negro Labor Council in the Struggle for Civil Rights”; Marable, *How Capitalism Underdeveloped Black America*.
- 139 Clark, *Disruption in Detroit*, 37, 41, 46, 43.
- 140 Lichtenstein, “UAW Bargaining Strategy and Shop-Floor Conflict,” 365.
- 141 Lichtenstein, “UAW Bargaining Strategy and Shop-Floor Conflict,” 371.
- 142 Clark, *Disruption in Detroit*, 53.
- 143 As Clark writes, “Between 1953 and 1954 independent automakers, such as Hudson and Packard, lost nearly half of their remaining market share. . . . They could not afford much of the newest technology and could no longer compete with the Big Three” (*Disruption in Detroit*, 97, 102).
- 144 Clark, *Disruption in Detroit*, 107, 95, 144–45.
- 145 Clark, *Disruption in Detroit*, 120–24; Lichtenstein, “UAW Bargaining Strategy and Shop-Floor Conflict,” 370. The corporate media hysterically depicted this deal, which included unemployment insurance, as the coming of communism; in reality, Big Three officials had ensured that unemployment benefits were “low enough to provide [workers] with an incentive to look for another job in the event of a long layoff.” See Clark, *Disruption in Detroit*, chapter 7.
- 146 Cutcher-Gershenfeld et al., “The Decline and Resurgence of the U.S. Auto Industry”; R. E. Houston, “Model T Ford Production,” Model T Ford Club of America, February 14, 2007, <http://www.mtfca.com/encyclo/fdprod.htm>; Baran and Sweezy, *Monopoly Capital*, 108.
- 147 Clark, *Disruption in Detroit*, 144; Ward, *In Love and Struggle*, 145.
- 148 Boggs, *The American Revolution*, 22–27.
- 149 After the massive strikes in 1945–46, the Big Three used automation as a tactic to quell unrest. In 1946 GM introduced the first “successful automated transfer line,” and in 1947 Ford introduced his Automation Department.
- 150 We thank Virginia Leavell for alerting us to this point. Dyer-Witheford, *Cyber-proletariat*, 39.
- 151 Stein, “Labor History Symposium,” 334, 342–43.
- 152 Boggs, *The American Revolution*, 13.
- 153 Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis*, 141; Georgakas and Surkin, *Detroit*, 25; Clark, *Disruption in Detroit*, 126.
- 154 Baran and Sweezy, *Monopoly Capital*, 261; Clark, *Disruption in Detroit*, 183. It is important to keep in mind that many unskilled jobs at the time were incorrectly labeled semiskilled. See Braverman, *Labor and Monopoly Capital*, 297.
- 155 Ward, *In Love and Struggle*, 238.
- 156 Gonzalez, “Two Reflections on Nelson Peery’s Life”; Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis*, 151, 147; Luby and Hedegard, “A Study in Civil Disorder in Detroit”; Marable, *Race, Reform, and Rebellion*, 252.
- 157 Babson et al., *Working Detroit*, 137, 138.

- 158 Mollenkopf, *The Contested City*.
- 159 Mollenkopf, *The Contested City*, 104–9.
- 160 Babson et al., *Working Detroit*, 115.
- 161 “Scores Hurt in Rioting at Housing Unit,” *Detroit Free Press*, March 1, 1942.
- 162 Glaberman, *Wartime Strikes*, 31; Boyd, *Black Detroit*, 143–44; Denby, *Indignant Heart*; Feeley, “Black Detroit.”
- 163 Jay and Leavell, “The Material Conditions of the Great Rebellion.”
- 164 On the question of arming the black community, see Williams, *Negroes with Guns*; “Martial Law at 10 p.m. US Troops Moved In,” *Detroit Free Press*, June 22 1943; Williams, *Our Enemies in Blue*, 141–42; White and Marshall, “June, 1943,” 418–28; Sitkoff, “The Detroit Race Riots of 1943”; *Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders*, 48; Murakawa, *The First Civil Right*, 31–35.
- 165 Murakawa, *The First Civil Right*, 31–35.
- 166 Murakawa, *The First Civil Right*, 31–35; Farley et al., *Detroit Divided*, 36; Conot, *American Odyssey*, 497; Babson et al., *Working Detroit*, 119–20.
- 167 Chris Wright, “It’s Own Peculiar Decor.”
- 168 Mollenkopf, *The Contested City*, 143.
- 169 Clark, *Disruption in Detroit*, 51, 64.
- 170 Eisinger, *The Politics of Displacement*, 172; Harold Norris, “Dislocation without Relocation,” in Henrickson, *Detroit Perspectives*, 474–76; Woodford, *This Is Detroit*, 155–64; Farley et al., *Detroit Divided*.
- 171 Wright, “Its Own Peculiar Decor”; Sheehan, “Revitalization by Gentrification.”
- 172 Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis*, 205.
- 173 Reed, “Between Obama and Coates,” 16.
- 174 Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis*, 209–58; Ward, *In Love and Struggle*, 54–55. Sugrue notes that the number of these attacks “peaked between 1954 and 1957, when the city’s economy was buffeted by plant closings, recession, and unemployment, limiting the housing options of many white, working-class Detroiters” (233). This evidence may give greater credence to Reed’s insistence on the economic logic underlying the actions of white homeowners.
- 175 Marable, *Race, Reform, and Rebellion*, 120; Harvey, “The Right to the City,” 34; Harvey, *Rebel Cities*, 50.
- 176 Babson et al., *Working Detroit*, 160.
- 177 Babson et al., *Working Detroit*, 135.
- 178 Wright, “Its Own Peculiar Decor.” The state’s investment in suburbanization was also deeply influenced by auto industry executives. The Interstate Highway Program, directed by a former GM executive, was, Wright argues, “a thinly disguised way to increase the dominance of the car as the primary means of transport.” There is a clear precedent to this sort of collusion: in the 1920s and 1930s a “coalition of companies, including automobile, trucking, steel, rubber, and others, led by the president of General Motors, systematically bought up and destroyed the trolley systems in dozens of cities”—including Detroit.
- 179 At the same time, during the first negotiations to establish the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade in the late 1940s, the grounds were being prepared for capital’s

- flight far beyond U.S. suburbs. Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis*, 149; Camp, *Incarcerating the Crisis*, 133; Harvey, *The Enigma of Capital and the Crises of Capitalism*; Gibson and Jung, *Historical Census Statistics on Population Totals*, table 23, "Michigan—Race and Hispanic Origin for Selected Large Cities and Other Places: Earliest Census to 1990"; Woodford, *This Is Detroit*, 155–64; Farley et al., *Detroit Divided*.
- 180 Goldberg, "From Landless to Landlords," 157.
- 181 Babson et al., *Working Detroit*, 157.
- 182 Babson et al., *Working Detroit*, 157–58.
- 183 Goldberg, "From Landless to Landlords," 158.
- 184 Mollenkopf, *The Contested City*, 76.
- 185 Mollenkopf, *The Contested City*, 77–81; Diamond, *Chicago on the Make*, 142.
- 186 Harvey, "The Right to the City," 34; Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts into Air*.
- 187 Mollenkopf, *The Contested City*, 80.
- 188 Diamond, *Chicago on the Make*, 143–47.
- 189 Mollenkopf, *The Contested City*, 179; Diamond, *Chicago on the Make*, 151.
- 190 Weber, "Extracting Value from the City," 528, 527.
- 191 Norris, "Dislocation without Relocation," 474–76; Woodford, *This Is Detroit*, 155–64; Farley et al., *Detroit Divided*; Sheehan, "Revitalization by Gentrification."
- 192 Ward, *In Love and Struggle*, 147.
- 193 Da Via, "A Brief History of Detroit's Black Bottom Neighborhood"; Ward, *In Love and Struggle*, 148; George Hunter, "Revival of Detroit's Cass Corridor Crowds Out Criminals."
- 194 Engels, *The Housing Question*, 74–77.
- 195 Mollenkopf, *The Contested City*, 173–74.
- 196 Mollenkopf, *The Contested City*, 176.
- 197 Quoted in "The 1967 Detroit Rebellion," *Revolutionary Worker*, no. 915 (July 13, 1997), <http://revcom.us/a/v19/910-19/915/det67.htm>.
- 198 Murakawa, *The First Civil Right*, 64–65.
- 199 Warren Stromberg, "What about the Negro Crime Rate?," *Detroit Free Press*, June 23, 1957; emphasis added.
- 200 Hall et al, *Policing the Crisis*, 102.
- 201 Reed, *Stirrings in the Jug*, 18.
- 202 In the words of a former Detroit factory worker, B. J. Widick, "What Detroit needed, Mayor Louis C. Miriani insisted, was more vigorous law enforcement to curb the criminal elements roaming the streets." B. J. Widick, "Mayor Cavanaugh and the Limits of Reform," in Henrickson, *Detroit Perspectives*, 484; Eisinger, *The Politics of Displacement*, 61.
- 203 Joseph Turrini, "Phooie on Louie," *Michigan History Magazine*, November/December 1999, 10–17; "Who Killed Marilyn? News Offers \$5,000 to Solve Crime," *Detroit News*, December 1969; John Mueller, "All Police Ordered on 6-Day Week," *Detroit Free Press*, December 29, 1960; Ron Martin, "Crackdown Draws Fire of NAACP," *Detroit Free Press*, January 1, 1961; John Millhome, "Inner City Is Chief Target in Crime-Reduction Drive," *Detroit Free Press*, July 9, 1962; Taylor-Bonds, *Calling Detroit Home*, 36–37.

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 Ron Martin, "Crackdown Draws Fire of NAACP," *Detroit Free Press*, January 1, 1961.

CHAPTER 3: THE CONDITIONS OF THE GREAT REBELLION

- 1 James Mudge, "Mayor's Secret Riot-Spy Network Flopped," *Detroit Free Press*, July 27 1967.
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- 3 David Simon, "Baltimore," *The Audacity of Despair*, April 27, 2015, <http://davidsimon.com/baltimore/>.
- 4 "Brown v. Ferguson."
- 5 We owe this point to Virginia Hotchkiss.
- 6 "Difference Engine: Luddite Legacy," *Economist*, November 4, 2011, <https://www.economist.com/blogs/babbage/2011/11/artificial-intelligence>.
- 7 Cutcher-Gershenfeld et al., "The Decline and Resurgence of the U.S. Auto Industry"; U.S. Department of Transportation, Bureau of Transportation Statistics, "Table 1-23"; Boggs, *The American Revolution*, 48; Georgakas and Surkin, *Detroit*, 28; Bellamy Foster and McChesney, "Surveillance Capitalism."
- 8 Marable, *Race, Reform, and Rebellion*, 28; Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis*, 126.
- 9 Boggs, *Living for Change*, 117; B. J. Widick, "Mayor Cavanagh and the Limits of Reform," in Henrickson, *Detroit Perspectives*, 486.
- 10 Mollenkopf, *The Contested City*, 93.
- 11 *Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders*, 51; Bracey, Meier, and Rudwick, *Black Workers and Organized Labor*, 212-14; Widick, "Mayor Cavanagh and the Limits of Reform," 488-89; Joseph Turrini, "Phooie on Louie," *Michigan History Magazine*, November/December 1999.
- 12 Georgakas and Surkin, *Detroit*, 28; Luby and Hedegard, "A Study in Civil Disorder in Detroit"; Widick, "Mayor Cavanagh and the Limits of Reform," 489; Marable, *How Capitalism Underdeveloped Black America*, 49.
- 13 For a summary of the War on Poverty in Detroit, and its Head Start and job-training programs, see Thompson, *Whose Detroit?*, 32-33.
- 14 Fine, *Violence in the Model City*, 89.
- 15 Babson et al., *Working Detroit*, 168.
- 16 Cowie and Salvatore, "The Long Exception," 16.
- 17 Reed, "Between Obama and Coates," 18.
- 18 Mast, *Detroit Lives*, 225; Fine, *Violence in the Model City*, 57.
- 19 Goldberg, "From Landless to Landlords," 161.
- 20 Goldberg, "From Landless to Landlords," 162-64.
- 21 *Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders*, 51; Peter Eisinger, *The Politics of Displacement*, 63; Georgakas and Surkin, *Detroit*, 156.
- 22 Fine, *Violence in the Model City*, 97.
- 23 Widick, "Mayor Cavanagh and the Limits of Reform," 489.
- 24 Kelley, *Freedom Dreams*, 75.
- 25 Johnson, *Revolutionaries to Race Leaders*, 14.

- 26 Babson et al., *Working Detroit*, 107.
- 27 Ward, *In Love and Struggle*, 50–52; Jones, “An End to the Neglect of the Problems of the Negro Woman!”
- 28 Johnson, “Coming to Terms with Actually-Existing Black Life.”
- 29 Johnson, *Revolutionaries to Race Leaders*, 20.
- 30 Ward, *In Love and Struggle*, 118; Johnson, *Revolutionaries to Race Leaders*, 15–16.
- 31 Ward, *In Love and Struggle*, 158, 166.
- 32 Denby, *Workers Battle Automation*; Ward, *In Love and Struggle*, 284; Pizzolato, “Trans-national Radicals.”
- 33 Johnson, *Revolutionaries to Race Leaders*, 15;
- 34 Boggs, *The American Revolution*, 84–85.
- 35 Ward, *In Love and Struggle*, 277, 302, 325.
- 36 Cleage, *The Black Messiah*, 3.
- 37 Widick, “Mayor Cavanagh and the Limits of Reform,” 488; Herb Boyd, *Black Detroit*, 137, 195.
- 38 Cleage, “Myths about Malcolm X.”
- 39 Malcolm X, *Malcolm X Speaks*.
- 40 Johnson, *Revolutionaries to Race Leaders*, 50–51.
- 41 Marable, *Malcolm X*, 304.
- 42 Ahmad, “The League of Revolutionary Black Workers”; Kelley, *Freedom Dreams*, 78; Bloom and Martin, *Black against Empire*, 410; Marable, *Malcolm X*, 263.
- 43 Williams, “The Potential of a Minority Revolution.”
- 44 Mast, *Detroit Lives*, 307.
- 45 For a comprehensive history of RAM, see Maxwell C. Stanford’s thesis, “Revolutionary Action Movement (RAM): A Case Study of an Urban Revolutionary Movement in Capitalist Society”; Kelley, *Freedom Dreams*, 75–84; Rahman, “Marching Blind,” 194.
- 46 When General Baker received his draft notice to serve in the Vietnam War, he responded with a legendary rejection letter: “When the call is made to free the black delta areas of Mississippi, Alabama, South Carolina; when the call is made to FREE 12th STREET HERE IN DETROIT, when these calls are made, send for me, for these shall be Historical Struggles in which it shall be an honor to serve!” ASM began distributing leaflets claiming that if Baker was forced to serve in the armed forces, fifty thousand blacks would show up to the induction to protest. Though this was a bluff—RAM’s and ASM’s numbers remained relatively small—the government feared an insurrection, and General Baker was subsequently declared unfit for duty. In 1965 RAM published an open statement to the Vietnamese National Liberation Front declaring their solidarity with the Vietnamese people against American imperialism. Azikiwe, “General Gordon Baker, Jr.”; Ahmad, “The League of Revolutionary Black Workers”; Bloom and Martin, *Black against Empire*, 32–33.
- 47 Kelley, *Freedom Dreams*, 71; Bloom and Martin, *Black against Empire*, 28–29.
- 48 Camp, *Incarcerating the Crisis*, 34.
- 49 Bloom and Martin, *Black against Empire*, 30.
- 50 Camp, *Incarcerating the Crisis*, 38.

- 51 It is important to note that the “nonviolent” civil rights movement was always intricately linked with and received protection from an armed “violent” component. See Williams, *Negroes with Guns*; Marable, *Race, Reform, Rebellion*, 77.
- 52 Thompson, “Unmaking the Motor City in the Age of Mass Incarceration,” 45; Marable, *How Capitalism Underdeveloped Black America*, 124.
- 53 Widick, “Mayor Cavanagh and the Limits of Reform,” 488; Harry Golden, “Mayor Assails ‘Irresponsible’ Critics of Police,” *Detroit Free Press*, October 22, 1965; Marable, *How Capitalism Underdeveloped Black America*, 124; Harry Golden, “New Law Asked to Battle Crime,” *Detroit Free Press*, November 19, 1965.
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- 56 “Police Kill Woman in Vice Case,” *Detroit Free Press*, July 6, 1963; Ward, *In Love and Struggle*, 304.
- 57 “Lessons Learned from City’s Racial Violence,” *Detroit Free Press*, August 14, 1966.
- 58 “Lessons Learned from City’s Racial Violence”; “37 Seized in New Outbreaks,” *Detroit Free Press*, August 11, 1966; “Lessons Learned from City’s Racial Violence”; Ahmad, “The League of Revolutionary Black Workers.”
- 59 *Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders* concluded that Kercheval had “the city’s most effective police-community relations program” (48). “Lessons Learned from City’s Racial Violence.”
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- 61 Don Lenhouse, “Three Arraigned in Grocer’s Killing,” *Detroit Free Press*, December 28, 1966.
- 62 Eric Morgenthaler, “Blind Queenie Sounds Out a New Home,” *Detroit Free Press*, June 26, 1967; Stan Putnam, “Tragedy Stalked His Park of Fun,” *Detroit Free Press*, June 26, 1967; *Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders*, 48.
- 63 “5 Freed in Killing in City Park,” *Detroit Free Press*, June 27 1967; John Griffith, “Did a Youth in the Gang Actually Fire Fatal Shot?,” *Detroit Free Press*, December 31, 1968; Bloom and Martin, *Black against Empire*, 87.
- 64 “NY Police Seize 16 in Plot to Kill NAACP Chief,” *Detroit Free Press*, June 22, 1967; Kelley, *Freedom Dreams*, 90.
- 65 “Woman Standing in Doorway Is Slain by 2 Men,” *Detroit Free Press*, July 2, 1967; Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis*, 244; *Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders*, 48.
- 66 Nancy Solomon, “40 Years On, Newark Re-examines Painful Riot Past,” NPR, July 14, 2007, <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=11966375>; Bloom and Martin, *Black against Empire*, 85; Mudge, “Mayor’s Secret Riot-Spy Network Flopped”; “The 1967 Detroit Rebellion.”
- 67 “The 1967 Detroit Rebellion”; Camp, *Incarcerating the Crisis*, 54; Fine, *Violence in the Model City*, 160.
- 68 “The 1967 Detroit Rebellion”; “Blind-Pig Raid Was Spark,” *Detroit Free Press*, July 24, 1967.

- 69 Cluster, *They Should Have Served That Cup of Coffee*, 71.
- 70 Fine, *Violence in the Model City*, 178.
- 71 *Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders*, 40–50; “The 1967 Detroit Rebellion”; “AP Newsmen Probe Cause of Race Riots,” *Detroit Free Press*, July 31, 1967; Stauch, “Wildcat of the Streets,” 61.
- 72 Dyer, “Rebellion in Detroit.”
- 73 *Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders*, 51; Camp, *Incarcerating the Crisis*, 55; “LBJ Approves All-Out Drive to End Strife,” *Detroit Free Press*, July 25, 1967.
- 74 Fine, *Violence in the Model City*, 187, 193; *Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders*, 53; Bloom and Martin, *Black against Empire*, 89; “Looter Killed; 724 Held as Riot Spreads,” *Detroit Free Press*, July 24, 1967; Dyer, “Rebellion in Detroit.”
- 75 Locke, *The Detroit Riot of 1967*, 41.
- 76 Fine, *Violence in the Model City*, 200.
- 77 Rahman, “Marching Blind.”
- 78 Fine, *Violence in the Model City*, 201.
- 79 “LBJ Approves All-Out Drive to End Strife”; “An Orgy of Pillage Erupts behind Fires and Violence,” *Detroit Free Press*, July 25, 1967; “LBJ Vows to Resist Violence,” *Detroit Free Press*, July 25, 1967; “Negro Editor Hits Police for Lack of ‘Firm Action,’” *Detroit Free Press*, July 26, 1967.
- 80 Ahmad, “The League of Revolutionary Black Workers”; “LBJ Approves All-Out Drive to End Strife”; “An Orgy of Pillage Erupts behind Fires and Violence”; “LBJ Vows to Resist Violence”; “Negro Editor Hits Police for Lack of ‘Firm Action.’”
- 81 Fine, *Violence in the Model City*, 202–3, 231.
- 82 Fine, *Violence in the Model City*, 222.
- 83 Fine, *Violence in the Model City*, 231.
- 84 Ulbrich, “Riot or Rebellion,” 112.
- 85 Saul Friedman, “Expert Fears Long Struggle in Riot Area,” *Detroit Free Press*, July 27, 1967; John Griffith, Jerome Hansen, and James C. Dewey, “White Looter Is Killed; Death Toll 36,” *Detroit Free Press*, July 27, 1967.
- 86 Locke, *The Detroit Riot of 1967*, 111.
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- 88 Dyer, “Rebellion in Detroit.”
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- 90 *Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders*, 57; Larue Heard, “A Sniper Was under Fire, but a 4-Year-Old Girl Died,” *Detroit Free Press*, July 27, 1967; Ludy Wax, “Legislator Defends Shooting,” *Detroit Free Press*, July 26, 1967; Bloom and Martin, *Black against Empire*, 89; John Griffith and James C. Dewey, “2,600 Jailed; New Riots Hit Outstate Area,” *Detroit Free Press*, July 26, 1967.
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- Dewey, "White Looter Is Killed; Death Toll 36"; Azikiwe, "Lessons from the Detroit July 1967 Rebellion and Prospects for Social Transformation"; Hershey, *The Algiers Motel Incident*.
- 93 Fine, *Violence in the Model City*, 233.
 - 94 Thompson, *Whose Detroit?*, 64.
 - 95 *Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders*, 59–60; Bloom and Martin, *Black against Empire*, 87; Rahman, "Marching Blind," 184; Fine, *Violence in the Model City*, 259.
 - 96 Author interview with Jerome Scott, March 5, 2019.
 - 97 Vogel, "Capitalism and Incarceration Revisited."
 - 98 Berger, "Social Movements and Mass Incarceration," 62.
 - 99 Camp, *Incarcerating the Crisis*, 53–54.
 - 100 Fine, *Violence in the Model City*, 197.
 - 101 Williams, *Our Enemies in Blue*, 303; Bloom and Martin, *Black against Empire*, 89.
 - 102 Fine, *Violence in the Model City*, 195, 199, 244.
 - 103 Stark, *Police Riots*, 128–29.
 - 104 Bellamy Foster and McChesney, "Surveillance Capitalism."
 - 105 "The 1967 Detroit Rebellion," *Revolutionary Worker*; Babson et al., *Working Detroit*, 171.
 - 106 Bloom and Martin, *Black against Empire*, 86–87. The shift in consciousness that occurred with many rebels evokes the writings of Frantz Fanon. In his seminal work, *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon argues that a violent struggle allows "the accumulated libido to dissolve as in a volcanic eruption" and eventually results in the "veritable creation of new men." Fanon, however, also wrote that "a legitimate desire for revenge' . . . cannot sustain a war of liberation" (52, 37, 139).
 - 107 Georgakas and Surkin, *Detroit*, 14.
 - 108 "Romney Asks Race Reforms," *Detroit Free Press*, July 31, 1967.

CHAPTER 4: REVOLUTIONARIES AND COUNTERREVOLUTIONARIES

- 1 Brent Lang, "Inside Kathryn Bigelow's Journey to Tell 'Detroit's' Harrowing Story," *Variety*, August 1, 2017, <http://variety.com/2017/film/features/detroit-kathryn-bigelow-john-boyega-1202511077/>.
- 2 Boggs and Kurashige, *The Next American Revolution*, 147.
- 3 John Eligon, "A White Director, the Police and Race in 'Detroit,'" *New York Times*, August 2, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/02/movies/kathryn-bigelow-mark-boal-detroit-police-brutality.html>.
- 4 Reed, "The Kerner Commission and the Irony of Antiracist Politics."
- 5 Touré Reed writes, "Even as Randolph declared his support for a fair employment practices act at the March on Washington, he stated plainly that antidiscrimination alone would do African Americans little good in the face of 'profit-gearred automation' that was destroying 'the jobs of millions of workers black and white.' Randolph and Rustin thus identified public works, full-employment policies, and a minimum-wage hike as essential to closing the racial economic gap" ("Between Obama and Coates," 19).
- 6 Vitale, *The End of Policing*, 14.

- 7 Hall et al., *Policing the Crisis*, 240–41, 290–97; Camp, *Incarcerating the Crisis*, 59.
- 8 Martin Luther King Jr., “Beyond Vietnam,” April 4, 1967, Stanford University, Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute, http://kingencyclopedia.stanford.edu/encyclopedia/documentsentry/doc_beyond_vietnam/; Bloom and Martin, *Black against Empire*, 3; Bellamy Foster and McChesney, “Surveillance Capitalism.”
- 9 Bloom and Martin, *Black against Empire*, 286; “Streets of Fire: Governor Spiro Agnew and the Baltimore City Riots, April 1968,” Maryland State Archives, <http://teaching.msa.maryland.gov/000001/000000/000061/html/t61.html>.
- 10 The money used by Americans to purchase foreign goods was no longer recycling back into the United States. Instead, foreigners were increasingly purchasing goods made by non-U.S. firms, and were trading in their U.S. dollars for their gold equivalent, draining the United States of its gold reserves and pushing the U.S. government into debt. “Whereas in 1951, the United States’ holdings of gold represented 3.5 times the amount of the country’s net short-term indebtedness, in 1971 these holdings covered no more than 22 percent of this external debt.” This dynamic was integral to the U.S. government’s 1971 decision to terminate the convertibility of the dollar to gold, ending the Bretton Woods system, which had overseen the international monetary system since 1944, paving the way for the rampant currency speculation that continues to this day. Magdoff and Sweezy, *The Deepening Crisis of U.S. Capitalism*, 12; McNally, *Global Slump*, 90; Amin, *Unequal Development*, 120; Arrighi, *Adam Smith in Beijing*.
- 11 *League of Revolutionary Black Workers: A Media Project with the League of Revolutionary Black Workers*, 2017, <https://www.revolutionaryblackworkers.org/video>.
- 12 The working title of the book is “Class, Race and Revolution—Voices from the Point of Production: The Story of the League of Revolutionary Black Workers.”
- 13 John Watson, “Black Editor: An Interview,” *Radical America* 2, no. 4 (July–August 1968): 30–38, reprinted in *Viewpoint Magazine*, January 13, 2015, <https://www.viewpointmag.com/2015/01/13/black-editor-an-interview-1968/>.
- 14 Watson, “Black Editor.”
- 15 Georgakas and Surkin, *Detroit*, 18–21; Rahman, “Marching Blind,” 189.
- 16 James Dewey, “Chrysler Denies Report of Hamtramck Plant Move,” *Detroit Free Press*, October 4, 1968.
- 17 The League had contacts with black-led organizations such as the United Black Brothers, who had shut down the Ford Mahwah plant in New Jersey for three days in April 1969, and the Black Panther Caucus, which, in addition to their organizational work within GM’s plant in Fremont, California, worked hand-in-hand with the United Farmworkers. Camp, *Incarcerating the Crisis*, 61; Fine, *Expanding the Frontier of Civil Rights*, 322–27; “Speech on the League of Revolutionary Black Workers,” Second National Conference of the Marxist-Leninist Party, USA, Fall 1984, Communist Voice, [http://www.communistvoice.org/WAS8501LRBW.html#WAS](http://www.communistvoice.org/WAS8501LRBW.html#WAS;); Babson et al., *Working Detroit*, 172.
- 18 Tripp, “Black Working Class Radicalism.”
- 19 Thompson, *Whose Detroit?*, 124.

- 20 Babson et al., *Working Detroit*, 181–83.
- 21 Tripp, “Black Working Class Radicalism in Detroit.”
- 22 “Reuther’s Dead: Black Struggle Continues,” *Inner City Voice* 2, no. 6 (June 1970): 1, http://freedomarchives.org/Documents/Finder/DOC513_scans/League/513.LeagueofRevolutionaryBlackWorkers.InnerCity.June.1970.pdf.
- 23 Author interview, March 5, 2019.
- 24 Babson et al., *Working Detroit*, 183–84.
- 25 Georgakas and Surkin, *Detroit*, 88.
- 26 *League of Revolutionary Black Workers: A Media Project with the League of Revolutionary Black Workers*; Susan Watson, “Nader Group Says Auto Firms Ignore Health Perils,” *Detroit Free Press*, September 8, 1973; Babson et al., *Working Detroit*, 183–84.
- 27 Tripp, “Black Working Class Radicalism in Detroit.”
- 28 Babson et al., *Working Detroit*, 184.
- 29 Georgakas and Surkin, *Detroit*, 87.
- 30 Georgakas and Surkin, *Detroit*, 86.
- 31 “A Ruling against Reason,” *Detroit Free Press*, March 13, 1973; Georgakas and Surkin, *Detroit*, 86; Thompson, *Whose Detroit?*. Management’s claims that automation and new machinery were the cause of increased productivity were proved mythical by the failure of the Lordstown plant in Ohio. Designed as a paragon of automation, the computer-controlled plant engineered jobs to a fraction of a second and, claiming a production speed of 103 cars per hour (compared to only 64 at Dodge Main), was the fastest assembly line in the world. “The only problem with Lordstown,” write Georgakas and Surkin, “was that it didn’t work.” The model produced at Lordstown, the Vega, “turned out to be one of the worst-built cars in America.” Two years after the factory opened, 97 percent of workers voted to strike over working conditions; this is despite the fact that there were no large minority groups in the factory and the workforce had no known old-time radicals or hardcore unionists. Georgakas and Surkin, *Detroit*, 104–5.
- 32 Georgakas and Surkin, *Detroit*, 89.
- 33 “The Role of Black Workers,” *League of Revolutionary Black Workers: A Media Project with the League of Revolutionary Black Workers*.
- 34 Author interview with Jerome Scott, March 5, 2019.
- 35 “The Role of Political Education,” *League of Revolutionary Black Workers: A Media Project with the League of Revolutionary Black Workers*.
- 36 “The Role of Black Workers,” *League of Revolutionary Black Workers: A Media Project with the League of Revolutionary Black Workers*.
- 37 Azikiwe, “Lessons from the Detroit July 1967 Rebellion.”
- 38 *Finally Got the News*.
- 39 Mast, *Detroit Lives*, 182.
- 40 Robé, “Detroit Rising,” 131, 147; Lewis-Coleman, *Race against Liberalism*, 105.
- 41 “The Role of Women,” *League of Revolutionary Black Workers: A Media Project with the League of Revolutionary Black Workers*.
- 42 Robé, “Detroit Rising,” 130.

- 43 Pizzolato, "Transnational Radicals," 28.
- 44 Ahmad, "The League of Revolutionary Black Workers."
- 45 Pizzolato, "Transnational Radicals," 20.
- 46 Georgakas and Surkin, *Detroit*, 86–102.
- 47 Pizzolato, "Transnational Radicals," 25–27, Tronti, "Our Operaismo."
- 48 Georgakas, "Finally Got the News," 6.
- 49 Luke Tripp, "D.R.U.M.—VANGUARD OF THE BLACK REVOLUTION: Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement States History, Purpose and Aims," *South End* 27, no. 62 (1969); 8, http://freedomarchives.org/Documents/Finder/DOC513_scans/League/513_LeagueofRevolutionaryBlackWorkers.TheSouthEnd.1969.pdf.
- 50 Mast, *Detroit Lives*, 309.
- 51 Quoted in Goldberg, "From Landless to Landlords," 162.
- 52 Goldberg, "From Landless to Landlords," 171–75.
- 53 Thompson, *Whose Detroit?*, 122; "Speech on the League of Revolutionary Black Workers," Second National Conference of the Marxist-Leninist Party, USA; Dewey, "Chrysler Denies Report of Hamtramck Plant Move."
- 54 Thompson, *Whose Detroit?*, 102.
- 55 Stauch, "Wildcat of the Streets," 4, 291.
- 56 Boyd, *Black Detroit*, 214; Thompson, "Unmaking the Motor City in the Age of Mass Incarceration," 49.
- 57 Stauch, "Wildcat of the Streets," 289.
- 58 *Finally Got the News*; "Militant Loses Runoff in Disputed UAW Vote," *Detroit Free Press*, May 29, 1971.
- 59 Babson et al., *Working Detroit*, 174.
- 60 Georgakas and Surkin, *Detroit*, 75. As David Goldberg notes, most League activists believe that TULC was behind the failed attempt to assassinate Baker. (The bullet actually hit Fred Lyles, a Black Power activist, who was standing next to Baker.) See Goldberg, "From Landless to Landlords," 183.
- 61 Mast, *Detroit Lives*.
- 62 Ernie Allen, "Dying from the Inside: The Decline of the League of Revolutionary Black Workers," in Cluster, *They Should Have Served That Cup of Coffee*, 100.
- 63 Author interview, March 5, 2019.
- 64 "On the Split," *League of Revolutionary Black Workers: A Media Project with the League of Revolutionary Black Workers*.
- 65 "On Political Education," *League of Revolutionary Black Workers: A Media Project with the League of Revolutionary Black Workers*.
- 66 These activists also formed the Communist Labor Party in 1974, which ran General Baker as a candidate in the Michigan legislature in 1976.
- 67 Thompson, *Whose Detroit?*, 203.
- 68 Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis*, 144; Taylor, *From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation*, 59; Stauch, "Wildcat of the Streets," 12; Babson et al., *Working Detroit*, 186; Georgakas and Surkin, *Detroit*, 102.
- 69 Geschwender, "The League of Revolutionary Black Workers," 9; Georgakas and Surkin, *Detroit*, 166.

- 70 Marable, *Race, Reform, and Rebellion*, 55–56; Marable, *Malcolm X*, 132–33.
- 71 Seale, *Seize the Time*, ix–x.
- 72 Bloom and Martin, *Black against Empire*, 72.
- 73 Spencer, *The Revolution Has Come*, 131.
- 74 Bloom and Martin, *Black against Empire*, 292
- 75 As Robyn C. Spencer points out, while Panthers' work with white radicals caused members like Janice Garrett-Forte to make a "big leap . . . [from,] you know, kill all white people, to understanding that it is a class struggle," many of the rank and file were wary of entering into coalitions with whites. This issue undermined the attempted unification between the Panthers and SNCC, whose leader, Stokely Carmichael, dismissed Marxism as a "white ideology." Spencer observes, however, that the FBI was also complicit here: "The FBI fueled tensions between them with the goal of creating a split" (*The Revolution Has Come*, 81–83, 140).
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- 77 Rahman, "Marching Blind"; Bloom and Martin, *Black against Empire*, 292.
- 78 Marcetic, "The FBI's Secret War," *Jacobin*, August 31, 2016, <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2016/08/fbi-cointelpro-new-left-panthers-muslim-surveillance>.
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- 80 Bloom and Martin, *Black against Empire*, 177.
- 81 Marable, *Race, Reform, and Rebellion*, 124–25; Bloom and Martin, *Black against Empire*, 177, 186; Major, *A Panther Is a Black Cat*, 301; Rahman, "Marching Blind," 210.
- 82 Rahman, "Marching Blind," 209–10.
- 83 "Crockett Does Disservice," *Detroit Free Press*, April 24, 1969; Rahman, "Marching Blind," 190.
- 84 Thompson, *Whose Detroit?*, 128–35.
- 85 Georgakas and Surkin, *Detroit*, 9–11, 86, 164–67.
- 86 Jerry M. Flint, "Detroit Lawyer Becomes First Radical Judge in U.S.," *New York Times*, November 12, 1972.
- 87 Rahman, "Marching Blind," 190–91.
- 88 Spencer, *The Revolution Has Come*, 76.
- 89 Spencer, *The Revolution Has Come*, 89.
- 90 Rahman, "Marching Blind," 192; Marable, *Race, Reform, and Rebellion*, 109.
- 91 Bloom and Martin, *Black against Empire*; Rahman, "Marching Blind"; Kleffner, "The Black Panthers."
- 92 Rahman, "Marching Blind," 196–97.
- 93 Williams, *Our Enemies in Blue*, 218; Rahman, "Marching Blind," 197–99; Andrew Mollison, "Panthers Harassed, Gribbs Told," *Detroit Free Press*, May 23, 1970.
- 94 Rahman, "Marching Blind," 197–99.
- 95 Rahman, "Marching Blind," 207.
- 96 "Policeman Killed, Another Wounded," *Detroit Free Press*, October 25, 1970; "15 Are Arraigned in Slaying of Black Policeman," *Detroit Free Press*, October 26, 1970; Rahman, "Marching Blind," 210–11.

- 97 Bellamy Foster and McChesney. "Surveillance Capitalism"; Bloom and Martin, *Black against Empire*, 212.
- 98 "Speech on the League of Revolutionary Black Workers," Second National Conference of the Marxist-Leninist Party, USA.
- 99 Johnson, *Revolutionaries to Race Leaders*, 74, 88; Dean E. Robinson, "Black Power Nationalism as Ethnic Pluralism: Liberalism's Ethnic Paradigm in Black Radicalism," in Reed and Warren, *Renewing Black Intellectual History*.
- 100 Johnson, *Revolutionaries to Race Leaders*, 64.
- 101 Spencer, *The Revolution Has Come*, 143.
- 102 Thompson, *Whose Detroit?*, 219.
- 103 Taylor, *From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation*, 59; Johnson, "The Panthers Can't Save Us Now."
- 104 Reed, "The Black Urban Regime: Structural Origins and Constraints," in *Stirrings in the Jug*, 79–116.
- 105 Quoted in Johnson, *Revolutionaries to Race Leaders*, 65.
- 106 Quoted in Johnson, *Revolutionaries to Race Leaders*, 151.
- 107 Johnson, *Revolutionaries to Race Leaders*, 163, 126, 161.
- 108 Georgakas and Surkin, *Detroit*, 133.
- 109 Georgakas and Surkin, *Detroit*, 76.
- 110 Quoted in Georgakas and Surkin, *Detroit*, 135.
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- 112 "The Role of Political Education," *League of Revolutionary Black Workers: A Media Project with the League of Revolutionary Black Workers*.
- 113 Georgakas and Surkin, *Detroit*, 92.
- 114 Mast, *Detroit Lives*, 310–13.
- 115 *Taking Back Detroit*; Mast, *Detroit Lives*, 184–85.
- 116 Johnson, *Revolutionaries to Race Leaders*, 98–101.
- 117 Vogel, "Capitalism and Incarceration Revisited."
- 118 Wacquant, *Punishing the Poor*, 114; Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 297, 306; Julia Felsenthal, "Ava Duvernay's *13th* Is a Shocking, Necessary Look at the Link between Slavery and Mass Incarceration," *Vogue*, October 6, 2016, <http://www.vogue.com/article/13th-ava-duvernay-review>.
- 119 Jackson, *Soledad Brother*, 14; Camp, *Incarcerating the Crisis*, 71–72.
- 120 Quoted in Berger, *Captive Nation*, 159, 100.
- 121 Berger, *Captive Nation*, 129.
- 122 Marable, *Race, Reform, and Rebellion*, 127.
- 123 Bloom and Martin, *Black against Empire*, 378.
- 124 Camp, *Incarcerating the Crisis*, 71.
- 125 Camp, *Incarcerating the Crisis*, 82.
- 126 Berger, *Captive Nation*; Pizarro and Stenius, "Supermax Prisons," 251.
- 127 Camp, *Incarcerating the Crisis*, 88.
- 128 Pizarro and Stenius, "Supermax Prisons," 251.
- 129 Berger, "Social Movements and Mass Incarceration," 9.

- 130 Berger, "Social Movements and Mass Incarceration," 9; Camp, *Incarcerating the Crisis*, 88.
- 131 Jackson, *Soledad Brother*.
- 132 Linebaugh, *The London Hanged*, xxii.
- 133 Marable, *How Capitalism Underdeveloped Black America*, 124.
- 134 Wenger and Bonomo, "Crime, the Crisis of Capitalism, and Social Revolution," 685.
- 135 Forman, *Locking Up Our Own*, 76, 20.
- 136 Mast, *Detroit Lives*, 172.
- 137 Thompson, *Whose Detroit?*, 73; The coalition helped win support for the City of Detroit Fair Housing ordinance, an attempt to ameliorate some of the housing discrimination that had galvanized activists before and after the rebellion. Azikiwe, "Lessons from the Detroit July 1967 Rebellion."
- 138 Stauch, "Wildcat of the Streets," 179–83.
- 139 In one striking example of this dynamic, in Chicago there were myriad efforts to "incorporate gangs into the legitimate local power structure" in order to quell dissidence and violence among black youth to leverage more community development funding. In 1967 a \$957,000 Office of Economic Opportunity grant "used the Woodlawn area's existing gang structure—the Blackstone Rangers and the Devil's Disciples—as the basis of a program to provide remedial education, recreation, vocational training, and job placement services to youths." Also in 1967 the Vice Lords gang registered as a corporation and the next year received a \$15,000 grant for an urban renewal campaign. Diamond, *Chicago on the Make*, 196.
- 140 Goldberg, "From Landless to Landlords," 170. Azikiwe, "Lessons from the Detroit July 1967 Rebellion."
- 141 Thompson, *Whose Detroit?*, 85–88, 92, 101.
- 142 Thompson, *Whose Detroit?*, 80.
- 143 Thompson, "Unmaking the Motor City in the Age of Mass Incarceration," 46; Usmani, "Did Liberals Give Us Mass Incarceration?"
- 144 Gibson and Jung, *Historical Census Statistics on Population Totals*, "Table 23. Michigan—Race and Hispanic Origin for Selected Large Cities and Other Places: Earliest Census to 1990."
- 145 George Hunter, "Dec. Surge Dims Hopes for Dip in Detroit Murders," *Detroit News*, December 28, 2015, <http://www.detroitnews.com/story/news/local/detroit-city/2015/12/27/homicides-track-hold-steady-detroit/77959798/>; Usmani, "Did Liberals Give Us Mass Incarceration," 174.
- 146 Stauch, "Wildcat of the Streets," 355.
- 147 Stauch, "Wildcat of the Streets," 372.
- 148 Stauch, "Wildcat of the Streets," 355.
- 149 Georgakas and Surkin. *Detroit*, 167. When considering the scope of the city's crime problem, we have no choice but to disagree with Heather Ann Thompson. In "Unmaking the Motor City in the Age of Mass Incarceration," she argues that rising crime reflected little more than the dubious nature of crime statistics. She also seeks to downplay the scope of the city's homicide problem. "Despite the fact that the national homicide rate had risen from 5.5 per 100,000 people in 1965 to 7.3 in 1968,

- the nation's citizenry—be it in the Delta or in Detroit—was not in fact suffering a record-setting crime wave. The murder rate had been far higher in the 1930s—as high as 9.7 per 100,000. Indeed, if one looks at the entire 20th century, it is remarkable how much safer the 1960s were compared to previous decades. Not only was a U.S. citizen less likely to be murdered in the early to mid-1960s than they were at other points in the 20th century, but their risk of meeting a violent death actually went up after the nation began a war on crime” (44). To be sure, the crime problem was exaggerated by political elites, but to deny the reality of a devastating crime problem is highly misleading.
- 150 Even the dissident group From the Ground Up (which was formed from the Motor City Labor League) wrote in the early 1970s, “One cannot speak of ‘high crime areas’ in Detroit. The entire city is such an area, though sections of the center city, riddled with poverty, police complicity in drug traffic, and double high rates of unemployment, are, to be sure, the ‘highest crime areas’” (Schultz, *Detroit under STRESS*, 9).
- 151 Forman, “Racial Critiques of Mass Incarceration,” 114.
- 152 Newton, *The Huey Newton Reader*, 156; Spencer, *The Revolution Has Come*; Narayan, “The Wages of Whiteness in the Absence of Wages,” 2482–500.
- 153 Shabazz, “Ahmad A. Rahman’s Making of Black ‘Solutionaries.”” Shabazz adds, “Long before Michelle Alexander’s book about mass incarceration and the ‘New Jim Crow,’ Rahman saw what was coming and attempted to counter it.”
- 154 Shabazz, “Ahmad A. Rahman’s Making of Black ‘Solutionaries.””
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- 156 Vitale, *The End of Policing*, 14.
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- 158 Vitale, *End of Policing*, 50.
- 159 Elizabeth Hinton quoted in Kurashige, *The Fifty-Year Rebellion*, 27.
- 160 Robert Pavich, “The Little Lady May Be a Cop: Disguised Policeman to Fight Detroit Street Crime,” *Detroit News*, January 13, 1971. Jerome Scott remembers seeing suspicious things like drunken white guys walking around black neighborhoods with money falling out of their pocket. Author interview. March 5, 2019.
- 161 Schultz, *Detroit under STRESS*, 15.
- 162 Darden and Thomas, *Detroit*, 50; Pavich, “The Little Lady May Be a Cop.”
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- 165 Schultz, *Detroit under STRESS*, 43, 57.
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- 168 “Stress Protest Shows Blacks Short on Foresight: Slayton,” *Michigan Chronicle*, November 17, 1971.
- 169 Georgakas and Surkin, *Detroit*, 168, 171, 169–70. In another remarkable legal victory, Cockrel won a full acquittal for Hayward Brown, the militant accused in the shootout

- with police, not by claiming that Brown did not kill the police, but rather that STRESS was an illegitimate institution. Thompson, *Whose Detroit?*, 149–51, 194.
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CHAPTER 5: POST-FORDISM AND MASS INCARCERATION

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- 2 Mast, *Detroit Lives*, 185.
- 3 Marable, *Race, Reform, and Rebellion*, 123–24.
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- 5 Mast, *Detroit Lives*, 273; Stauch, “Wildcat of the Streets,” 21.
- 6 Reed, *Stirrings in the Jug*, 98–99.
- 7 Valerie Wilson and William M. Rodgers III, “Black-White Wage Gaps Expand with Rising Wage Inequality,” Economic Policy Institute, September 20, 2016, <http://www.epi.org/publication/black-white-wage-gaps-expand-with-rising-wage-inequality/>; Henry Louis Gates Jr., “Black America and the Class Divide,” *New York Times*, February 1, 2016, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/07/education/edlife/black-america-and-the-class-divide.html?mcubz=0&_r=0.
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- 11 Dauenbaugh, “Coleman Young’s Detroit,” 29–31; Boyd, “Blacks and the Police State,” 58–60; Blauner, “Internal Colonialism and Ghetto Revolt”; *Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders*; Marable, *How Capitalism Underdeveloped Black America*, 162.
- 12 Stauch, “Wildcat of the Streets,” 120–39.
- 13 This logic parallels Frantz Fanon’s point about the repression of colonial uprisings: “Every time there was a rebellion, the military authorities sent only the colored soldiers to the front line” (*Black Skin, White Masks*, 83).

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- 29 Arrighi, *Adam Smith in Beijing*, 154.
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- 36 "Neoliberalization has never been about a once-and-for-all liberalization, an evacuation of the state. Instead, it has been about imperfectly repurposing the state and its associated relays of policy intervention, in a manner broadly consistent with the globalizing class project for the regressive social redistribution of incomes and surpluses, and with the ever-shifting currents of transnational financialization and corporate globalization" (Peck, Theodore, and Brenner, "Neoliberalism Resurgent?," 275).
- 37 Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, 24; McNally, *Global Slump*, 35.
- 38 The most dramatic effect of this interest rate increase, it should be noted, occurred in the Global South: third world debt had increased from \$47.5 billion to \$560 billion in 1980. When the interest hike made it impossible for countries to pay back their debts, structural adjustment programs were imposed by the International Monetary Fund, enforcing austerity programs and opening these countries to the

intrusions of foreign capital. The effects were, and continue to be, genocidal: in African countries, per capita healthcare spending halved between 1975 and 1990. See McNally, *Global Slump*, 98–129; Marable, *How Capitalism Underdeveloped Black America*, 242–43.

- 39 Arrighi, *Adam Smith in Beijing*, 127.
- 40 During this time, class composition in metro Detroit shifted dramatically: the workers' movement was no longer being led by male workers in private industry. As the manufacturing unions were decimated, public-sector unions grew rapidly, mostly in the suburbs, where the welfare state had expanded dramatically in the postwar era. Meanwhile, as the mostly male manufacturing industries issued mass layoffs, the metro area added 110,000 jobs between 1960 and 1980, and 98 percent of these (mostly low-wage) jobs were taken by women, resulting in a dramatic shift in gender relations throughout the area. More than one-third of metro Detroit workers claimed that they were harassed on the job. Babson et al., *Working Detroit*, 201–4; "Status of Labor Unions," Center of Concern, <https://www.coc.org/files/unions.pdf>; Adams, "Changing Employment Patterns of Organized Workers"; Aschoff, "Imported from Detroit."
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- 45 Boyd, *Black Detroit*, 246; John Gallagher, "How Detroit Went Broke: The Answers May Surprise You—and Don't Blame Coleman Young," *Detroit Free Press*, October 11, 2016, <http://www.freep.com/story/news/local/michigan/detroit/2013/09/15/how-detroit-went-broke-the-answers-may-surprise-you-and/77152028/>.
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- 53 Beckett and Herbert, *Banished*, 25.
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- 91 Gallagher, "How Detroit Went Broke";
- 92 The most definitive and accessible work about the 9/11 conspiracy is Massimo Mazzucco's documentary, *September 11—The New Pearl Harbor*. Other serious researchers are David Ray Griffin, Christopher Lee Bollyn, and Joseph P. Farrell. It is surprising to us how many Marxist theorists have ignored the mountain of evidence suggesting a 9/11 inside-job/cover-up, preferring instead to stigmatize the truth community as "conspiracy theorists." While many conspiracy theorists are haphazard and sloppy thinkers, this should not cause us to make the dire mistake of *a priori* dismissing all conspiracies.
- 93 Howell and Shryock, "Cracking Down on Diaspora," 73–74.
- 94 Quoted in Johnson, *Revolutionaries to Race Leaders*, 223.
- 95 Johnson, *Revolutionaries to Race Leaders*, 278n7.
- 96 Ta-Nehisi Coates, "'This Is How We Lost to the White Man': The Audacity of Bill Cosby's Black Conservatism," *The Atlantic*, May 2008.
- 97 Coates, "'This Is How We Lost to the White Man.'"
- 98 Quoted in Johnson, *Revolutionaries to Race Leaders*, 279.
- 99 Quoted in Johnson, *Revolutionaries to Race Leaders*, 279.
- 100 Gallagher, "How Detroit Went Broke."
- 101 Gallagher, "How Detroit Went Broke"; McNally, *Global Slump*, 126; Darrell Preston and Chris Christoff, "Only Wall Street Wins in Detroit Crisis Reaping \$474 Million Fee," *Bloomberg*, March 13 2013, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2013-03-14/only-wall-street-wins-in-detroit-crisis-reaping-474-million-fee>.
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- 106 Kevyn Orr, "Re: Recommendation Pursuant to Section 18(i) of PA 436," City of Detroit, Emergency Manager's Office, July 16, 2013, https://www.michigan.gov/documents/snyder/Detroit_EM_Kevyn_Orr_Chapter_9_Recommendation_427831_7.pdf.
- 107 Marx, *The 18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, 15.

CONCLUSION: COMPETING VISIONS FOR DETROIT'S NEW ERA

- 1 Neocleous, *War Power, Police Power*, 198. Crucially, Neocleous emphasizes this "training" aspect, for however resilient you are, the future attack could always be worse than anything you have imagined. And so the work of resilience training is never over.
- 2 Schumaker, "The Demoralized Mind"; Hanson, Austin, and Lee-Bayha, "Ensuring That No Child Is Left Behind," 3.
- 3 Neocleous, *War Power, Police Power*, 201.
- 4 Neocleous, *War Power, Police Power*, 203–4. Resilience is widely mobilized in academic and public policy discourse on urban poverty and the educational performance of minority poor children. In this context, resilience has become a sort of positive version of the "underclass" trope. Instead of blaming the urban poor for their supposed cultural deficiencies, those traits that are presumed to have caused the success of certain individuals in the neoliberal economy are singled out and promoted as the key to success for the group as a whole. We can see the connection of this logic to that of underclass discourse by looking at the obverse: if the success of one individual is the result of her own initiative and inborn traits, then the failure of the rest of the group is likewise the result of inborn traits and personal failings. Singling out those individuals whose resilience allowed them to escape poverty directs attention away from a politics that would attempt to eliminate the structural causes of poverty, while also legitimating the poverty of large segments

of the population by blaming the poor themselves for their condition. One could also connect this to Adolph Reed Jr.'s critique of the prevalence of "self-help" politics in black urban communities. This version of underclass ideology forecloses traditional political avenues for redressing social problems by arguing that initiatives within poor communities themselves are superior to official political responses. "It is," Reed points out, "only with respect to social policy affecting poor minority citizens that such expectations seem reasonable" (Reed, *Stirrings in the Jug*, 127). The ideology of self-help fits easily with that of resilience in legitimating the condition of the urban poor: it separates this population from the rest of the polity, justifying this separation by arguing that their poverty is best addressed through their own initiative. Our thanks to an anonymous reviewer for pointing out this aspect of resilience.

- 5 "Coleman A. Young, 79, Mayor of Detroit and Political Symbol for Blacks, Is Dead," *New York Times*, December 1, 1997, <http://www.nytimes.com/1997/12/01/us/coleman-a-young-79-mayor-of-detroit-and-political-symbol-for-blacks-is-dead.html>; "Move Here. Move the World," n.d., www.detroitmovestheworld.com; Tracy Hoover, "Detroit: A Resilient Community We All Got to See," *Huffington Post*, August 9, 2016, https://www.huffingtonpost.com/tracy-hoover/detroit-a-resilient-com_b_11392476.html; Melena Ryzik, "For Detroit Artists, Almost Anything Goes," *New York Times*, July 15, 2015, https://www.nytimes.com/2015/07/16/arts/design/for-detroit-artists-almost-anything-goes.html?_r=0; Frank Bruni, "The Spirit and Promise of Detroit," *New York Times*, September 9, 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/09/opinion/frank-bruni-the-spirit-and-promise-of-detroit.html>; Chisako Fukuda, "Detroit's Future City Framework Offers Lessons on Resilience," World Bank, March 22, 2014, <http://blogs.worldbank.org/sustainablecities/detroit-s-future-city-framework-offers-lessons-resilience>; Noah Enelow, "Beyond Bankruptcy: The Resilience of Detroit," *Ecotrust*, August 19, 2013, <https://ecotrust.org/beyond-bankruptcy-the-resilience-of-detroit/>; Maurice Cox, "Putting Design to Work: How Design Is Building a Resilient Detroit," July 10, 2017, <https://melkinginstitute.org/events/putting-design-work-how-design-building-resilient-detroit>; "In Detroit's Rivera and Kahlo Exhibit, a Portrait of a Resilient City," NPR, March 16, 2015, <https://www.npr.org/2015/03/16/393393697/in-detroits-rivera-and-kahlo-exhibit-a-portrait-of-a-resilient-city>.
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- 7 Bruni, "The Spirit and Promise of Detroit."
- 8 "U.N. Climate Panel: Only 12 Years Left to Mitigate Climate Catastrophe," *Democracy Now!*, October 8, 2018, https://www.democracynow.org/2018/10/8/headlines/un_climate_panel_only_12_years_left_to_mitigate_climate_catastrophe; Sinéad Baker, "Trump Suggests the Climate May Actually Be 'Fabulous' after an Ominous UN Report on Looming Disaster," *Business Insider*, October 10, 2018, <https://www.businessinsider.com/trump-doubt-un-climate-change-report-2018-10>.

- 9 Bellamy Foster and McChesney, *The Endless Crisis*, 145.
- 10 Vijay Prashad, "There Is No Refugee Crisis: There Is Only a Crisis of Humanity," *Monthly Review Online*, September 15, 2018, <https://mronline.org/2018/09/15/there-is-no-refugee-crisis-there-is-only-a-crisis-of-humanity/>.
- 11 Bellamy Foster, "This Is Not Populism"; "Brazil: Far-Right Bolsonaro Wins First Round of Presidential Election," *Democracy Now!*, October 8, 2018, https://www.democracynow.org/2018/10/8/headlines/brazil_far_right_bolsonaro_wins_first_round_of_presidential_election; "How Far-Right Parties Are Faring across Europe," *The Local*, October 14, 2017, <https://www.thelocal.fr/20171014/how-far-right-parties-are-faring-across-europe>; "Facts and Statistics," Anxiety and Depression Association of America, n.d., <https://adaa.org/about-adaa/press-room/facts-statistics>; Amy P. Cohen, Deborah Azrael, and Mathew Miller, "Rate of Mass Shootings Has Tripled Since 2011, Harvard Research Shows," *Mother Jones*, October 25, 2014, <http://www.motherjones.com/politics/2014/10/mass-shootings-increasing-harvard-research>; Sabrina Tavernise, "U.S. Suicide Rate Surges to a 30-Year High," *New York Times*, April 22, 2016, www.nytimes.com/2016/04/22/health/us-suicide-rate-surges-to-a-30-year-high.html?hp&action=click&pgtype=Homepage&clickSource=story-heading&module=first-column-region®ion=top-news&WT.nav=top-news&_r=0; Schumaker, "The Demoralized Mind"; Tricontinental Research Institute, "In the Ruins of the Present," *Monthly Review*, March 26, 2018, <https://mronline.org/2018/03/26/in-the-ruins-of-the-present/>.
- 12 Fromm, *Beyond the Chains of Illusion*, 123–24, emphasis added.
- 13 Tricontinental Research Institute, "In the Ruins of the Present."
- 14 Fromm, *Beyond the Chains of Illusion*, 81–82.
- 15 Ward, *In Love and Struggle*, 326.
- 16 Ward, *In Love and Struggle*, 331.
- 17 Boggs and Kurashige, *The Next American Revolution*, 89.
- 18 Kurashige, *The Fifty-Year Rebellion*, 115.
- 19 Boggs and Kurashige, *The Next American Revolution*, 89, 148–49; "The Answers Are Coming from the Bottom': Legendary Detroit Activist Grace Lee Boggs on the US Social Forum and Her 95th Birthday," *Democracy Now!*, June 22, 2010, https://www.democracynow.org/2010/6/22/legendary_detroit_activist_grace_lee_boggs.
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mirror the authors of *Policing the Crisis*: “We cannot presume to offer quick solutions to these problems of strategy and struggle. We have deliberately refrained from entering directly into this question, because it is a matter which we believe must be resolved in struggle, rather than on paper. We hope, nevertheless, that our argument has served to highlight certain aspects and to clarify the terrain on which answers can be sought” (Hall et al., *Policing the Crisis*, 393–94).

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