



## **Detroit: Origins of the Urban Crisis Revisited**

**Andrew Newman**

**Reviewed:** Thomas J. Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2014, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition, 432 pages.

*The recent reprint of Sugrue's classic history of Detroit's urban crisis highlights the roots of the city's present situation. Andrew Newman discusses how racialized policies and animosities dating back to the industrialization period are relevant to today's urban conflicts, introducing new themes of environmental justice and the dilemma of African-American political institutionalization.*

The last decade has seen a flood of writing, film, photography, and research on Detroit, and with the onset of the city's widely publicized bankruptcy in 2013, media and scholarly attention is only growing. It is not surprising, then, to see a new edition of Thomas J. Sugrue's classic study *The Origins of the Urban Crisis* being added to a growing list of recent releases on Detroit that includes Beth Thompson Bates's *The Making of Black Detroit in the Age of Henry Ford* (2014) and George Galster's *Driving Detroit: The Quest for Respect in the Motor City* (2012), to say nothing of numerous popular books more oriented to a general readership, such as *Detroit City is the Place to Be* (2013).

Detroit, which is in an unprecedented political and economic predicament for a US city, has experienced so much change in the last 18 months alone that it is difficult to see a book written even two years ago still seeming relevant. In a short time, Detroit has become a test bed for radical neoliberal policy measures that appear more akin to structural adjustment measures in the developing world than the often-cited, paradigmatic case of US municipal fiscal crisis, New York City in the 1970s. Indeed, before the widely reported municipal bankruptcy declaration in the summer of 2013, Detroiters actually lost their right to democratic electoral representation at a local level—and thus their voice in matters related to city budgets. A governor-appointed Emergency Financial manager, Kevyn Orr, assumed the Mayor and City Council's powers (Orr's first executive order was, generously, to allow the elected officials to continue to collect their salaries).

This dramatic and relatively underreported turn of events comes on the heels of a truly bewildering decade for Detroiters. The 2000s saw the city lose a greater number of residents than any American city save for New Orleans.<sup>1</sup> It experienced the subprime foreclosure crisis, a controversial new master plan called Detroit Future Cities that divides up the city into targeted zones of strategic investment and dis-investment, and, more recently, waves of redevelopment in the city's urban core, notably in the areas surrounding the central business district and Wayne State University.

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<sup>1</sup> According to the 2010 census, Detroit lost 237,500 residents—25% of its population—in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. While New Orleans lost 29% of its population during this same period, the 140,000 people who left in the wake of Hurricane Katrina is substantially less than Detroit.

In many respects, the residents of the city struggle with both a severe lack of economic resources and, ironically, with what Jane Jacobs (1961) once described as “catastrophic money,” which comes in torrential flows to isolated projects and neighborhoods and tends to exacerbate inequality while being promoted as “saving” the city. While Jacobs’ term was a reference to the social and urban dislocations associated with large-scale urban renewal in the 1960s, “catastrophic money” is an apt description for redevelopment in downtown Detroit in the present moment. A number of high-visibility redevelopment projects such as a new \$450 million ice-hockey arena for the Detroit Redwings may give the impression that money is finally raining on Detroit. However, in order to close the deal, the bankrupt City of Detroit gave away acres of prime downtown real estate for all of \$1, and then subsidized the project with \$284 million in taxpayers’ money. Meanwhile, the cash-strapped city is resorting to mass water shutoffs in its poorest neighborhoods, causing children to be taken from their parents into protective custody because of unsanitary conditions and health emergencies for elderly residents, according to a statement by the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights.<sup>2</sup>

### **Reconsidering the temporality of crisis**

The 2014 Princeton Classics edition of *Origins of the Urban Crisis*, like many reprints, contains a new preface by the author meant to address these changes, and Sugrue offers some insightful commentary on the fiscal crisis and current redevelopment in the city that is optimistic in tone but blunt in asserting that market-driven neoliberal solutions will not revitalize the city on their own. While such a perspective will not be surprising for many urbanists, Sugrue, whose work has a relatively high level of visibility among Detroit-oriented policymakers, could potentially influence the exceedingly narrow public-policy debate on Detroit in this preface—and, hopefully, he will.

Nevertheless, the ultimate test of a good historical account is arguably that it need not be updated in the present day to continue to be relevant to it. And, for the most part, *Origins* is still *the book* to read on Detroit, and more broadly, race, housing, and deindustrialization in the United States. Indeed, whereas many histories—popular and scholarly—still begin by describing the 1967 “riot” as a watershed moment which set Detroit on a path towards decline, Sugrue’s contribution is to give a history of “crisis” leading *up to* the ’67 events, which are still commonly referred to as an “uprising” or “rebellion” by Detroiters. *Origins* focuses on the inequality and discontent that characterized the so-called “boom” years in Detroit, when an often precariously positioned white middle class felt its privilege threatened by the upward mobility of African-American families. As a result, Sugrue argues, territory, housing, and homeownership emerged as the principal battlegrounds over race and class in the city.

In this regard, by focusing on housing and race alongside labor relations, Sugrue demystifies Detroit’s status as a “postindustrial posterchild,” shifting the chronological assumptions around where and how “crisis” is marked. Without a doubt, regional and global shifts in automotive manufacturing (which, as Sugrue demonstrates, began almost immediately after World War II, far earlier than is often assumed) are a vital part of the story of Detroit’s history. But the struggle for “open” housing—as well as the conservative backlash against it—is equally important. In short, many cities around the world may be described as postindustrial, but Detroit looks the way it does today because of American constructs of race, white privilege, and the intertwining of class mobility and homeownership, not just because of factory closures and global outsourcing.

### **The crisis and the institutionalization of African-American political power**

In hindsight, one can see limitations in Sugrue’s approach. His choice of periodization, which ends in the late 1960s, is among the book’s most powerful polemic qualities. But this chronological

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<sup>2</sup> See: [www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=14777&LangID=E](http://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=14777&LangID=E).

frame also raises several questions: was Detroit's subsequent trajectory towards its current predicament simply a *fait accompli*? In his conclusion, Sugrue touches briefly on the gathering momentum towards institutionalized African-American political power that not only led to the election of mayor Coleman Young but also spawned influential grassroots elements such as the African-American-led Revolutionary Union Movements (known as the "RUMs"). But were these efforts—and the visions that animated them—always destined to run their course along with the rest of the Fordist social order? Even if these movements and figures came to the fore at the very end or after the period covered by Sugrue, they also emerged in the crucible of urban and racial politics he describes. It would be illuminating to understand more about how the political seeds of the 1970s, and in particular those related to Black Power and the more radical offshoots of the civil rights movements, were first sown in an earlier, and very different, Detroit.

### **The environmental dimensions of the crisis**

*Origins* was also written in a moment in which American urban historians were just beginning to view environmental issues as central to urban power relations. Thus, despite an intense level of detail placed upon the social effects of industrialization, the environmental effects are rarely mentioned despite the massive concentration of industry near the Rouge River, the Detroit River, and the surrounding Great Lakes (and the often racialized social suffering related to contamination). And while the environmental justice movement in its modern form would not emerge until later, it is unlikely that Detroiters in the periods covered by Sugrue were oblivious to environmental degradation (see, for example, Rector 2014). Detroit, as the French cognate of its name implies, is a riverine city, and relationships with the water through fishing, boating, and simply being amid the landscape have long been important ways of articulating space and place for its inhabitants. This is to say nothing of the importance of land and soil for many rural-to-urban migrants who were claiming a space of their own in Detroit, including rural African Americans and whites from the American South, as well as immigrants from rural areas in Latin America and the Middle East. Many people descended from these groups, and African Americans in particular would go on to contribute to the city's much-vaunted urban agriculture movement in the 1990s and 2000s (Vitiello and Wolf-Powers 2014).

Indeed, if Sugrue's focus on housing and the workplace makes *Origins* an indispensable history, this framework also highlights other aspects of the city's past that need further study, especially from today's perspective. After the period Sugrue describes, for example, *water* emerged as a critical source of contestation at the metropolitan scale. As capital flight grew more pronounced and the balance of economic power began to tilt from Detroit towards suburbs in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, the city managed to retain control of the regional water supply, to the chagrin of elected officials in the white suburbs, whose relationship with the majority African-American-led city from the time of Coleman Young onwards was frequently marked by explicit racial hostility. Now, the Detroit bankruptcy has accentuated the struggle around water. The \$18.5 billion figure, which is often cited as the total of the value of bankruptcy, has been disputed precisely because the Water and Sewerage Department is counted as a \$5.8 billion liability for the city alone, even though it serves a regional population that is four times that of the city (Turberville 2013). Efforts to privatize the water department (taking place in the context of the bankruptcy) triggered a spate of water shut-offs in the summer of 2014 that were expected to leave 30,000 households in the city without running water. The disproportionate suffering by impoverished households with children and senior citizens has drawn condemnation from the UN and galvanized a broad coalition,<sup>3</sup> ranging from home healthcare workers to environmental justice and food security activists. Hydropolitics are currently the most potent flashpoint for contestation over democracy in bankruptcy-era Detroit.

By now, *Origins* is firmly part of the scholarly canon on race and deindustrialization in the United States. Recent events underline why. One can look at any number of tumultuous episodes in

<sup>3</sup> See: <http://peopleswaterboard.blogspot.com>.

Detroit's recent history, ranging from the foreclosure crisis to water politics, and see themes very similar to those guiding Sugrue's work. *The Origins of Urban Crisis* prompts us to rethink the temporality of crisis in general, while foregrounding the importance of race and housing, and above all it reminds us never to underestimate the importance of the anti-civil-rights backlash in shaping current urban politics in America.

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**Andrew Newman** is Assistant Professor of Anthropology at Wayne State University in Detroit. His ethnographic research in France is the focus of a forthcoming book, *Landscape of Discontent: Urban Sustainability in Immigrant Paris* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press), expected for release in spring 2015. He is currently at work on a collective research and writing project called *Detroit: A People's Atlas* and is working on an ethnography focused on the moral economy, food related-activism and grocery stores, soup kitchens, and urban farms in Detroit.

### **To quote this article:**

Andrew Newman, "Detroit: Origins of the Urban Crisis Revisited", *Metropolitiques*, 24 November 2014. URL: <http://www.metropolitiques.eu/Detroit-Origins-of-the-Urban.html>.