

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.

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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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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

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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 negativity 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 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.

DUKE

Notes

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- 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.
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- 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.
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- 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.

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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).
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CHAPTER 1: A TALE OF ONE CITY

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- 6 The neighborhoods originally planned for the District have no precedent in actually existing social-cultural formations in the city but, rather, would be built essentially from the ground up, their personality and character predetermined by Olympia Development to attract people to "live, work, and play" in Downtown Detroit. These imitation neighborhoods cannot but remind one of French philosopher Jean Baudrillard's postmodern take on the dialectic of the abstract and the concrete: