Book Review Symposium


In 1964 in one of the landmark studies in the emerging field of urban history, the British historian Asa Briggs argued that “every age has its shock city”: places that “the ‘clear-minded’ had to visit if they wished to understand the world” (1964: 56, 55). Briggs’s shock cities were those undergoing rapid growth: Manchester in the 1840s, Chicago in the 1890s, and Los Angeles in the 1930s. In these cities new forms of production, transportation, and culture were radically transforming urban life. Each of these cities called forth commentators, most famously Engels, who attempted to narrate and interpret what they meant for the course of world history.

Today, Detroit is the shock city of decline. Once the fourth largest city in the United States, the undisputed world center of car manufacturing, and, according to the editor of *Time*, the birthplace of industrialization and the American middle class (p.vii), it is now the central mooring point for our understanding of industrial and urban decline. In *Beautiful Wasteland* Rebecca Kinney cogently explores why a steady stream of people have traveled to Detroit to describe how this shock city rose and fell and to prescribe how it can rise again.

*Beautiful Wasteland* is a timely and thoughtful analysis of how many people—former Detroiters, filmmakers, advertisers, developers, photographers, and others—have used Detroit to make sense of the changing world. While it is based largely on close analysis of various texts, from internet posts to advertisements, that represent Detroit’s decline, Kinney keenly moves back and forth between representations of the city and the concrete ways decline and growth take place on the ground. She is not a geographer or historian, but she draws deeply from these fields and in turn makes meaningful contributions to both. Most importantly she shows how discourses of decline in Detroit create new opportunities for neoliberal urbanization and capitalist investment in the city.
Kinney centers her analysis on the role that race plays in producing discourses of decline. She brilliantly shows that many white interpreters narrate Detroit in a way that exculpates themselves, while assigning responsibility for decline to the city’s predominantly black population. This story masks the vast array of institutions and structures that subsidize the advantages of the white middle class, while locating the conditions that create decline within Detroit. To these purportedly race-blind white narrators, the condition of present-day Detroit is indicative of declining responsibility, work ethics, and morality. The resurrection of the city requires newcomers and returnees to resurrect these American ideals by transforming this post-industrial wasteland into a frontier.

In the first chapter of the book Kinney treads into the frightening world of internet commenters—a place few of us dare to go. She carefully unpacks the racially coded nostalgia that “former Detroiters” develop as they visit their old homes in the city and discuss them on online forums. I greatly enjoyed this chapter and I think the conclusions that Kinney reaches about whiteness and nostalgia have application well beyond the internet.

In *White Diaspora* Catherine Jurca (2001:4) notes that white suburbanites have long held a contradictory understanding of suburbs and whiteness as sites of both “advantage” and “abasement”. Suburbs represent the highest order of living, but are also conformist empty places devoted to mass consumption. Thus white suburbanites, including the “former Detroiters” that Kinney encounters on the internet, simultaneously see their suburban ways of life as superior and long for their old communities.

I have conducted nearly 50 oral histories with white suburbanites and nostalgia is an omnipresent theme, even despite my best efforts to not talk about it. What I have found is nearly everyone believes that life was better in the old neighborhood. People looked after each other, they worked harder, there was a meritocracy, the food was better, kids wore pants that fit, couples got married, etc.

Not just my interviewees have this predilection. Many years ago my grandpa and I visited the West Virginia coal town where he grew up. He began working in the mines as a teenager; it was not an easy life. Yet as we drove around a landscape marked by a personal history of exploitation
and deprivation, he longingly described old girlfriends, mines, hunting spots, and gardens long vanished. Like many Appalachians, my grandpa left West Virginia for prosperity in the industrial North. In Akron he lived a long life, owned several homes and lots of Fords, had a wonderful partner, and raised a relatively happy family, but he always longed for West Virginia. This nostalgia was not limited to him either; we went to West Virginia because of my own, somewhat different nostalgia. I wanted to hear stories of strikes and mine disasters and the hard life that he endured there.

*Beautiful Wasteland* adds greatly to our understanding of why nostalgia is such a central part of how white working and middle class Americans construct their sense of self and the world. There are a few characteristics of this nostalgia that are of special interest to geographers. The first of these is that nostalgia is always rooted in both mythical time and space. The manufacture of nostalgic space-times helps maintain the notion that a better life is and was possible. The second is that this nostalgia obscures the frequent misery of white working and middle class life. Nostalgia separates white Americans’ unpleasant circumstances from those of black and brown people. In turn nostalgia neatly partitions the conditions and people that created times of American greatness from those that are responsible for the present crisis. The third, and I think the most interesting conclusion that Kinney continually raises, is that Detroit is not just a place of individual longing, but of national and even global nostalgia. You do not need to have ever set foot in Detroit to feel nostalgic for its past.

By recounting Detroit’s rise as the shock city of decline and the nostalgia that accompanies it, Kinney exposes some of the broader contours of how we use cities to narrate the course of history and progress. Why are people on both the right and the left (see many recent forays to Dubai) so inclined to make cities the lens through which we come to terms with our place in the world? What understandings of growth and decline do such narratives produce? How do these narrative often help to reproduce and/or mask the very conditions that caused decline in the first place?

I am very interested in these questions in part because I study Pittsburgh—a former industrial city that commentators offer as a contrast to Detroit. In present-day mythology Pittsburgh represents
the possibility to remake an industrial city into a booming center of the post-industrial economy. Happy cyclists ply riverside trails, housing developments fill brownfields, robotic cars roam the streets, and neighborhoods bustle with medical researchers, artists, and computer scientists drawn to a city that frees them to unleash their creative energies (see, for example, Thrush 2014). At the height of the financial crisis when journalists headed to Detroit in droves to document the decline of American greatness, they turned to Pittsburgh for a story of hopeful transformation. In 2009, the Obama administration hosted the G20 conference in Pittsburgh: “both a beautiful backdrop and a powerful example for our work”(Obama 2009a). On the final day of the conference Obama told a story of Pittsburgh that contrasts markedly with that typically told about Detroit. After “hard times”, he said:

Pittsburgh picked itself up, and dusted itself off, and is making the transition to job-creating industries of the future … It serves as a model for turning the page to a 21st century economy, and a reminder that the key to our future prosperity lies not just in New York or Los Angeles or Washington–but in places like Pittsburgh. (Obama 2009b)

It is striking that two very similar cities have such different stories told about them. Both have experienced steady population decline. Both have entrenched unemployment and poverty. Both are starkly segregated. Both have crumbling infrastructure that endangers public health. Both are important centers of the post-industrial economy, including education, medicine, research, finance, and corporate administration.

The two primary differences between the regions are simple and help explain the contrast in their stories. The first difference is that most manufacturing (and deindustrialization) in the Pittsburgh region took place in the suburbs not the city. If you travel a few miles outside Pittsburgh to Clairton, Duquesne, or Aliquippa you see Detroit-like levels of disinvestment and abandonment, but these industrial suburbs are not where narrators go to tell the story of urban renaissance or decline. The second and probably more important difference is that Detroit is a majority black city and Pittsburgh is a majority white city. As a result Pittsburgh never experienced the same levels of
disinvestment. Pittsburgh’s leaders have always been dutifully loyal to investors and the region’s elite. The discourse of Detroit’s ruin that Kinney carefully unpacks is part of a longer project of sabotaging black political power in the city. In this regard the narrative of Detroit’s decline is exceptional, rather than “parallel” to the standard accounts of industrial cities (p.xxv).

To return to my earlier question: what are the characteristics of narratives of urban decline? One is that they tend to render cities as homogenous and static things. Decline is occurring in the city, a concrete place with defined boundaries. As thingification tends to do, this focuses attention on the thing itself rather than the processes that produce it. As Kinney explains we look at Detroit and see prairies and abandoned houses, not the flight of capital from the city, institutional racism, or speculative investment that fosters and maintains high levels of vacancy (see Akers 2013). Focusing on the thing itself masks the uneven development that links the city to the region and the world.

Narratives of decline also allow the lessons of one city to apply to all. What is true of Detroit and Pittsburgh is also true of Evansville, Lowell, and every other industrial city. This prevents us from thinking through a key difference between massive industrial cities, such as Detroit, Pittsburgh, or Cleveland, and smaller industrial towns. The decline that occurs in regions near the top of the urban hierarchy is often cannibalistic as local investors move assets from one place or activity to another. In these regions, decline is simply the other side of growth. This is markedly different than the many small industrial towns that dot the Rustbelt. These were never places where economic power was concentrated and it is here, as we were reminded in November 2016, that narratives of decline have been most politically potent.

Narratives of urban growth and decline emerge, as Briggs argued, in times of rupture. One of the key characters in 19th century literary depictions of industrial cities was the person who moves to the city to make it big. We see these hard strivers most notably in Horatio Alger, but also in the work of Dickens, Howells, and Dreiser. It is usually impossible to disentangle the lives of these characters from the cities where they live. The same character re-emerges in the early 1980s, the height of deindustrialization, in the form of Rocky or Alex, the protagonist in Flashdance. In both the 1880s and the 1980s, the city was the stage for aspirational individual narratives that construct human beings as free liberal subjects whose choices ultimately determine their destiny.
The production of these subjects and the city exist in tandem. Today is no different and it is telling that Kinney’s book ends with Quicken Loans founder Dan Gilbert and his attempt to restore Detroit to greatness. As Kinney notes, Gilbert and Michigan leaders are concerned with attracting “New Detroiters” to the city (p.129). This is a fitting end to the book. Having shown how narratives of decline render a still very populated Detroit empty and mask the conditions that produced its abandonment, we finally meet Detroit’s savior: a figure that represents the exact forces that decimated it in the first place.

References


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