

⁴ AFL-CIO, "Facts About Working Women," <http://www.aflcio.org/women/wwfacts.htm>; and "Unions Are Important for Minorities," <http://www.aflcio.org/uniondifference/uniondiff12.htm>.

⁵ Nelson Lichtenstein, *State of the Union: A Century of American Labor* (Princeton University Press, 2002), 2.

Heather Ann Thompson, *Whose Detroit? Politics, Labor, and Race in a Modern American City* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001).

When one of the most economically vital areas of the United States becomes one of the least desirable places to live, and loses population like a melting ice cube loses mass, the situation cries out for an explanation. In recent years, historians have begun to supply answers to the question of what happened to Detroit, a project that has important insights for the status of other Rust Belt cities. Thomas Sugrue's *Origins of the Urban Crisis* is the best known contribution in this growing field. Heather Ann Thompson's *Whose Detroit?* takes a different tack than Sugrue, and in so doing highlights political dynamics in the Motor City that heretofore remained obscured. For Thompson, Detroit is a setting in which we can explore the development of American political liberalism and conservatism, as well as their more marginal variants. Thompson's book, though hampered somewhat by conceptual ambiguities, is a significant and original contribution to the field.

In Sugrue's analysis, Detroit and other cities are sites of conflict that fell into decline because of the failure to achieve integration of blacks at work, schools, and perhaps most importantly, in housing. This decline had early roots; Sugrue argues against those who see the 1960s as a crucial turning point. Instead, the 1960s are the product of forces long in operation, most importantly, the multi-faceted exclusion of African Americans since their arrival en masse during World Wars I and II.

Thompson offers a different take on almost all of these points. First, she says it is wrong to see Detroit and liberalism as in decline; the city is still good for blacks, and liberalism offers more places and power for blacks than it did in the past. Labour went into decline, she agrees, but this was because of bad strategic choices. Second, the 1960s were a crucial turning point; the bad decisions made by labour, specifically the United Auto Workers, occurred in that crucial decade. Last, though Thompson's is very much a story of conflict – the title refers to continuing struggles of radicals, liberals, and conservatives to define Detroit's future – she emphasizes throughout the instances where blacks and whites worked together, whereas Sugrue showed the bitter conflicts of white vs. black.

Thompson is at her most compelling when she recounts the everyday abuse experienced by black workers in the auto industry and black citizens segregated into the city's poorest neighborhoods. Each chapter begins with details of the life of James Johnson Jr., an autoworker who, like many other Detroiters, experienced and witnessed severe discrimination and terror (in his case, the lynching of a cousin) while living in the Deep South, and to a shocking extent saw more of the same once in the supposedly more egalitarian North. Unlike others, however, Johnson lost control of himself while at work, and in 1970 responded to workplace discrimination with a shooting spree that left two foremen and one co-worker dead.

Substantively, the book has eight chapters that chronicle events from the 1950s through the middle 1970s. Thompson wisely concentrates on the real decade of upheaval, 1965 to 1975, rather than "the Sixties" as such. Primary topics are struggles for political control of city hall, police brutality faced by Detroit's black communities, and exploitation and discrimination in the auto industry. Throughout, she emphasizes uneasy coalitions of the white and black left and radical left in their efforts for reform, and the continuing failure of the city's leadership to understand the plight of the city's African Americans.

The failure of this leadership, especially the supposedly representative UAW, contributed greatly to fueling grievances and ultimately revolutionary pressures from below. Black radicals, especially the various "RUMs," or "Revolutionary Union Movements," are key players in this story as they fight for the protections of black workers that the UAW deemed unworthy of effort. Black auto workers were concentrated in the most dangerous jobs, some even losing their lives as their employers forced them to work despite medical problems, or when faulty machines ravaged their bodies. A vibrant, radical left flourished in this environment of deprivation, frustration and abuse, and Thompson skillfully captures it through her research into their leaders' papers and the many newsletters, papers and flyers. The black radicals were joined by and sometimes conflicted with a variety of communist, socialist or liberal groups.

Thompson's research uncovers some of the ugliest aspects of life in Detroit, especially the police brutality and workplace exploitation. Though critical readers may suspect she is not providing the whole story (more on that below), these are undeniably horrible tales of racial oppression occurring in the supposedly promised land of the urban north. Hundreds of miles from Dixie, even up near the Canadian border, black workers endured racial slurs at work and blocked promotion paths. RUMs at various auto plants called wildcat strikes because the UAW would not, and when its popularity seemed to promise black radical candidates elected into UAW leadership, the out of touch union resorted to crafty maneuvers to have those candidates defeated and the

status quo retained. The police department created in 1971 a special unit called STRESS, or “Stop the Robberies, Enjoy Safe Streets.” This program of undercover police typically worked by having a decoy act as an easy robbery victim, such as a drunk or a solitary woman, while other officers watched hidden from view. But STRESS proved too aggressive, making thousands of arrests but managing to kill 22 suspects in less than three years. Unauthorized searches of black-owned homes became a fact of life in Detroit, and though the outraged community strongly protested the reckless unit, it worked unhampered for years until it ran into trouble in the courts. The authorities’ steadfast refusal to respond to these worker or citizen demands for reform was a significant factor in leading to rising tensions in the city, and for Thompson suggests that Detroit might have turned out differently if leadership had listened, understood and had some will to act.

My criticisms of the book are perhaps, fitting my own training, the criticisms of a sociologist. Most centrally, I would have preferred more work explaining the concepts used to illuminate the analysis. To her credit, Thompson does not resort to some undefined “racism” as an uncaused causal factor to explain these dynamics. However, she replaces the “racism” that might be invoked in less sophisticated analyses with another undefined term: conservatism. Thompson’s story is filled with ideological labels that serve to categorize the various actors in the story, most often conservative, liberal, or radical. Occasionally, “conservative” is modified with “racial” or “political.” These labels do a lot of work in the analysis, but almost no space is spent defining them. If it was conservatism, racial or otherwise, that led to support by some Detroit residents for programs like STRESS, then one wonders just what this conservatism was, where it came from, and why it had such a strong grip on the minds of so many.

Thompson’s analysis is sensitive, detailed, and at many points deeply moving. Yet the conservatives who populate it come across as thick headed or simply evil. Why would some Americans so strongly resist the efforts of other Americans to achieve equality? Though we learn much of the lives of tortured blacks such as Johnson, we learn little about their fellow white workers, and why they would be driven to such aggression. We know much of the roots of Jim Crow discrimination in the Deep South, but white discrimination in the North is relatively unstudied.

Thompson is far from alone in this neglect; Sugrue’s study excepted, studies of race relations and labour rarely make any effort to understand the roots of white resistance to integration. Yet, as Paul Frymer has argued, just as we would not view it as sufficient if we treat “racism” sometimes expressed by blacks (some of which are detailed by Thompson) as simple racism, we should also avoid treating the racism expressed by whites at the bottom of society as

simple racism, or simple “racial conservatism.” A fuller understanding of the struggle for Detroit requires some understanding of why working class white Detroiters fought so hard to hold what they had rather than allowing others to share in the meager bounty – or why they did not seek to move up, through college and professional schools, and then out.

This project would almost certainly require some understanding of the white ethnic experience. Gerald Gamm’s *Urban Exodus: Why the Jews Left Boston and the Catholics Stayed* would likely provide insights for historians seeking to account for these dynamics. Thompson’s prose is filled with ethnic Polish and Italian names, she discusses a group called the Black Polish Conference, as well as the move to bring a GM plant to the Poletown section of Detroit (Thompson describes this effort as a gift from Mayor Coleman Young and does not mention that the residents strongly opposed the project). Yet Thompson never seeks to account for the role of white ethnicity in her account, though it pops up in the narrative again and again.

An understanding of white conflicts with blacks would also necessitate a closer look at actual crime statistics. Thompson should be commended for bringing the history of policy/public relations, a neglected but crucial topic in studies of urban racial strife, to the front and center. Though we should never take white complaints of black crime at face value, the fact was that crime was indeed increasing in Detroit, as measured by murder rates. This does not excuse the outrageous and unconstitutional excesses of STRESS, but it helps us to understand some of the anti-crime hysteria of the period and the law and order politics that it encouraged.

A critic might also contend that Thompson’s focus is too narrow, and so she misses important contextual factors that shaped Detroit. I am hesitant to make this charge because Thompson does a superb job of including various political contextual factors – the Vietnam War is here, as is Third World efforts at decolonization, both through the writings of radicals. Moreover, she rightfully points out the effects of the oil price shocks of the 1970s and then the coming of competition from Japanese auto makers. Yet I wanted to see some reference to the fact that much of America’s investment in the auto industry in the last few decades has not been in Detroit (Sugrue argues that this process of capital flight actually began in the 1950s). Rather than revitalizing the city with new plants, American automakers have built new plants in rural areas, such as GM’s Saturn plant in Tennessee. Foreign automakers similarly avoided Detroit, and indeed any big city. Auto plants literally sprouted in what were formerly cornfields. Why was this the case? This omission may be important, because it may be that the labour unrest that Thompson describes so vividly was actually what caused this capital investment to flee Detroit to rural America, as well as to foreign countries.

A final point: Thompson takes an interesting position on the rise of black political power in the city. She argues that this is a good thing; she urges us to see that blacks never before had the power that came with Coleman Young and other city leaders. Yet one can also argue that black political power in Detroit was more symbolic than real. Is black control of a city that was only a shadow of its former self, a city laid waste by years of capital flight, worth great pride or praise? One might claim that African Americans took power at the worst possible moment, when memories of former glory were still fresh, but the trajectory of economic decline was well underway, and the new black leadership could be hit with much of the blame. Regardless of how one comes down on this question, Thompson's work is valuable for forcing us to think in fresh ways about this tragic story.

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Mark A. Lause, *The Civil War's Last Campaign: James B. Weaver, The Greenback-Labor Party, and the Politics of Race and Section* (Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, Inc., 2001).

A troublesome aspect of U.S. history for Marxian analysis is America's failure to turn to socialism during the industrial surge of the late nineteenth century. Even the search for viable radical insurgencies during that period has borne little fruit, except for a Populist moment in the 1890s. And agrarian radicalism diverged from the working class upheaval called for in Marxist dogma. Lause re-examines the empirical record and finds a precedent actually existed prior to Populism. The Gilded Age did spawn class struggle, which produced a Greenback-Labor Party in 1880. Although the third party polled few votes, its very existence, according to Lause, indicates a dialectic was operative. The fact that the new organization was stillborn was not due to lack of potential mass opposition to plutocracy. Lause argues overt political repression preserved the two-party monopoly on public power.

Lause's interpretation is not intended to supplant other scholarship, but his thesis does, in fact, challenge at least the emphasis of much earlier historiography. Most historians locate the G.L.P. within a model stressing entrenched partisanship, continuity across time, the centrality of national debates on currency reform, and the ebb and flow of other "greenback" parties both before and after 1880. From this perspective, the "soft" money issue was primarily an intra-