



## **New Orleans as a Rust Belt City?**

**Robert J. S. Ross**

*New Orleans needs to recover not only from the 2005 catastrophic flooding of Katrina, but also from a much more enduring situation of post-industrial poverty, which, Robert Ross argues, places New Orleans alongside Detroit, Newark and others as a Rust Belt City.*

As policy-makers and planners think about the future of New Orleans one hopes they would seek to overcome the poverty that was New Orleans' condition before the flood – rather than to reproduce it. To do so requires a “look” at New Orleans that appreciates but is not mesmerized by its uniquely attractive cultural magnetism.

Apart from ecological concerns about which neighborhoods might or should be rebuilt, there is another possible but hidden discourse: Restoration of “*les bon temps*” of the Jazz Quarter and its clubs and festivals is to be desired and largely accomplished. But, as the American populist poet Carl Sandburg asked “Yes but the people, what about the people?” How can the new New Orleans be a place where more of its people achieve material decency and social inclusion? That examination frames New Orleans not so uniquely but as one of a surprising category: the Rust Belt cities that suffer from deindustrialization.

### **Rust Belt cities**

In the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century a broad concept of the roots of urban poverty, African-American disadvantage and municipal fiscal difficulties became widespread. It was summarized as the problem of Rust Belt cities. The narrative, oft-repeated, went like this: as manufacturing left the Northeast-Midwest, the central cities of the various metropolitan areas suffered from joblessness, tax revenue loss and the concentrated poverty of the last big wave of migrants to the big cities – African Americans. The successive destinations of increasingly footloose manufacturing were suburbs of the original central cities (1950's-1980's); then, the Southeast (1950's-1980's); then the Southwest/West (Sunbelt); then the Western Hemisphere (1980's-1990's); then Asia (1990's-present) (Trachte and Ross 1985; Ross and Trachte 1990; Perry and Watkins 1977; Wyly, Glickman and Lahr 1998).

The logic of the linkage between deindustrialization and urban decline worked at both the metropolitan and regional structural level, and the family and neighborhood level, as William J. Wilson famously argued (1987). Wilson attributed the increase in lone mothers among African American ghetto dwellers as driven by joblessness among age-peer men.

The regional specification of the majority of central cities in distress was empirically accurate but analytically misleading. Age of central city was a major predictor of fiscal distress (e.g. Dye 1984) and concentrated poverty. Older cities were settled before automobiles were the dominant mode of personal transport, and before trucks were the dominant mode of goods shipments; thus, they were more center-focused and denser, and more influenced by the era of manufacturing and its ancillary

industries as central city specialties. The boundaries of the suburbs of older cities were defined earlier, and the income gap between cities and their suburbs was greater (Brenner 2002). The Southeast industrialized in the Fifties and Sixties; the southwest and California grew explosively then and continued through the Seventies and Eighties. And so we have it: Rust Belt, central city decline, Northeast, Midwest – a symbolic package.

Now comes the “blue” light of the crime scene investigation that shows the stains not visible with ordinary bulbs. New Orleans is an “old” city and in many ways its population structure, physical form and economic base are similar to that of other old, Rust Belt Cities. Underneath (or actually alongside) America’s most sentimentally honored jazz district is a city not entirely unlike the home of America’s greatest soul recording label: Detroit’s Motown.

## The deindustrialization of New Orleans

New Orleans’ story is much the same as the other older cities which grew under the industrial regime of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Detroit, like Gary, Indiana (steel), Toledo (glass), or Newark (leather, metal works, plastics) suffered manufacturing job loss, massive population transition, and now concentrated poverty. Before the Flood, New Orleans had lost primacy in two infrastructural industries: shipping and oil supply. Originally founded from 1718 as a Mississippi River port, New Orleans thrived on the continent’s need to move the Mississippi River watershed’s mid-continent grain outwards, and to bring manufactured, and, today, steel and primary imports inwards. It still does so. But, averaging 11.2 million tons annually, the Port of New Orleans (Port of New Orleans 2005) was superseded by the Port of Southern Louisiana (POSL), through which 258 million tons passed in 2004 (POSL 2004). Likewise, support activity for the oil drilling industry of the Gulf of Mexico has been Houston’s prize (about 38,000 jobs in 2004), not New Orleans’ (3,700) – even though the Port of New Orleans claimed that 7 of 8 Gulf rigs are in Louisiana territory (U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics 2005).<sup>1</sup>

Even more provocative is the idea of a literal Rust Belt New Orleans. In 1969, 18 out of a hundred New Orleans metropolitan area private sector jobs were in manufacturing – 15 % of total jobs (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1970). By 2004 the manufacturing share in New Orleans private sector employment had declined by more than half (to 7.6 %) of private sector jobs. New Orleans began with a lower level of manufacturing intensity than Toledo or Detroit, but its rate of loss was about the same. And the costs of the trade-off in economic structure were also high. In 2003 the average manufacturing job in New Orleans paid \$43,000 annually (less for hourly employees). By contrast the burgeoning “accommodation and food services” sector which includes the hospitality industry and the smaller “arts and entertainment” subsector, and counted for 16 % of employees and paid but an average of \$16,000. If New Orleans had retained its manufacturing jobs, its labor force would have earned \$571 million more in 2003: that’s a lot of car. Did the poet Robert Frost say it? “Jazz is nice, but won’t suffice?”<sup>2</sup>

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1 If not otherwise referenced, all statistics are from the U.S. Census American Factfinder and the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

2 Apologies to literary experts: the literal Frost reference (*Fire and Ice*) is:

Some say the world will end in fire  
Some say in ice.  
From what I've tasted of desire  
I hold with those who favor fire.  
But if it had to perish twice,  
I think I know enough of hate  
To say that for destruction ice  
Is also great  
And would suffice.

## Urban decline and poverty

With an aged infrastructure, and having suffered relative losses in three higher paying sectors – manufacturing, transportation and utilities, and oil industry support – *New Orleans was a crisis before the crisis*. So now it is a cultural symbol larger than its own history: say “New Orleans,” mean “urban poverty.” Yet, restoration of the *status quo ante* (flood) is the equivalent of saying: give us tourists back our pleasures, the heck with the residents.

As in Detroit and Gary and Newark, African-Americans in New Orleans arrived as surplus laborers from southern agriculture and were then made surplus again by deindustrialization, and now are resident in places where jobs are not being located nor easy to access. They were a majority in New Orleans – 61 % of its residents are black (down from 2/3 pre-Katrina), as compared to 75 % of Detroit, 79 % of Gary, 58 % of Newark.

Just like these other cities was New Orleans’ pre-Katrina poverty rate; Newark, 28 %, Detroit 23 %, Gary (in 2000) 26 %, New Orleans 23 %. All of these older central cities have poverty rates at least twice that of the nation as a whole – 13 % in 2004. By 2009, with the scars of the Great Recession: U.S., 14.3 %; New Orleans 23.8 %; Newark, 23.9 %; Detroit, 36.4 % ; Gary, 32.6 %.

New Orleans exhibits, too, the dense population distribution of its old-city Rust Belt companions, rather than the pattern of the new city Sun Belt towns to which it is in closer proximity. With high density, Black and poor neighborhoods just North of the French Quarter and in the Ninth Ward to its east, the Big Easy ain’t so easy to leave. Fifty-one thousand New Orleans city households (27 %) and seventy seven thousand metropolitan area households (15 %) lacked cars as the emergency preparations took climactic form. Nationwide the fraction was only 10 % of households who lacked cars. By 2009, with selective return of households, 18 % of city households had no cars. Nationally this was 9 %.

## The false promises of the hospitality industry

The neglect of the Crescent City’s Black and poor residents has become a *Topic*. That neglect is part of a larger reality. Drastic inequality creates such differences in social milieus that the more than equal may come to regard the less than equal as an alien or even forgotten part of the social fabric. They are *Not Us*. New Orleans suffered the inequalities of class as intensely as did many other places, where segregation by race and income across city lines was more sharply drawn among the older cities than the more sprawling new ones. The existence of a large and well-off Black professional and governing elite did not make New Orleans’ poor folk less poor. Segregation in New Orleans was and is high – but not among the highest of U.S. big cities.

Dixieland music is fine and New Orleans’ tolerance is justly famous. But deep poverty and segregation put New Orleans in a bad Olympics competition of deprivation. Its murder and violent crime rates, along with its Rust Belt fellow travelers was many times (three or four times) higher than the US average; fear and anxiety were not born in New Orleans in September of 2005.

And now the crux of the matter for planning and policy: recruitment of the hospitality industry (including hotels, restaurants, entertainments venues and casinos) while often touted as revival strategy for Rust Belt cities does not solve the problems of poverty and isolation without other industries and interventions. The French Quarter has come back: it is a marvel and a joy. And even after the slightly selective return migration, the poverty rate is about the same as it was.<sup>3</sup>

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3 One might argue that given the Great Recession and the horrible increases in poverty among New Orleans’ Rust Belt peers (reported above) that the Crescent City did not sink as low as the others. Two notes about that: a) taking pride in 29 % poverty (measured by the US inadequate standard of decency) is paradoxical at best, shameful otherwise; b) New Orleans population in 2009 was 355,000; in 2000 it was 485,000. It is not adventurous to propose that among a substantial fraction of the 130,000 diasporic persons were New Orleans’ poorest residents.

The *city as theme park* is good for the visitors and the managers: but the only place in the country that a hotel room attendant (housekeeper/chambermaid) can send her child to college is Las Vegas – and that's because it is a union town (Meyerson 2004; Flanders 2004). Urban planners and economic development gurus take note; most everywhere else in the US that casinos have promised urban uplift the poor have stayed poor.

Call for Marat, we can get a jazz parade to escort him into town.<sup>4</sup>

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**Robert J.S. Ross** is Professor and former Chair of the Department of Sociology at Clark University. He directs the International Studies Stream and is a senior member of the Urban Development and Social Change program. With Kent Trachte he is the co-author of *Global Capitalism: The New Leviathan* and is the author of *Slaves to Fashion: Poverty and abuse in the new sweatshops*. He acts as a formal and informal adviser to numerous labor rights organizations.

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4 Peter Weiss, from the play/musical *Marat/Sade*: Homage to [Jean-Paul] Marat:

Marat we're poor  
And the poor stay poor  
Marat don't make  
Us wait anymore  
We want our rights and we don't care how  
We want our revolution...Now

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