



Urban Decline Is Not Natural

Jason Hackworth

Is urban decline inevitable for cities affected by deindustrialization? While many scholars espouse the idea that it is a normal part of a place's economic life cycle, Jason Hackworth argues that urban decline is not natural, but rather produced, typically by factors that have little to do with economics and everything to do with social and political—and often racial—conflict.

The fate of formerly industrial cities in the Global North—places like Detroit, Liverpool, and Leipzig—has been a consistent topic in the shrinking cities literature. Frequently, explanations of their decline center on a depiction of deindustrialization that is natural and inexorable. As offshoring, roboticization, and other production-line efficiencies undermined the demand for labor, residents struggled to make ends meet, and many eventually moved elsewhere. The notion is that places like Detroit—or at least its struggling neighborhoods—have entered the twilight of their “lives” because of these processes. Within this paradigm, urban decline is natural—not natural in a biophysical sense, but natural in the sense that it is driven by a set of more or less autonomous economic forces that are largely beyond the control of individual city managers.

I would like to suggest that urban decline is not as “natural” as it is framed to be. It is produced, and often by factors that are as much social or political as they are economic in a conventional sense. Consider a few cases around the world. Montreal lost much of its manufacturing and finance capital in the 1970s, not because of natural economic obsolescence, but because investors feared the consequences of separatism. Belfast was effectively redlined by investors until the 1997 peace accord because of fears that social conflict there would undermine profits (Power *et al.* 2010). The Toxteth Riots, provoked by police brutality and systemic discrimination against Liverpool's black community, inhibited investment in the city's L8 postal district for decades (Thompson 2016). These cases highlight a pernicious cycle that is not exclusively economic in origin, and is very difficult for city managers to escape. Social conflict can lead to diminishing economic investment; diminishing economic investment can lead to social conflict.

Social conflict can take a variety of forms but it is particularly impactful when it occurs between unequal groups. The American Rust Belt—cities of the formerly heavily industrial Midwest—offers a vivid illustration of this. Consider the issue of land abandonment—arguably the most visible feature of urban decline. The region is home to 268 neighborhoods in 49 cities where at least half of the housing has been abandoned and demolished since 1970 (Hackworth 2016a). In many of those cities, extreme housing-loss neighborhoods (EHLN) compose half or more of the city's land area. To explain the presence of such vacancy, scholars have generally attempted to link such spaces to the “natural” economic cycle, but no other factor is associated as closely with extreme housing-loss areas as is the presence of African Americans (Hackworth 2016b). I argue that EHLNs in such cities are as much the residue (and continued presence) of institutional and interpersonal racism as they are of “natural” economic decline. The “social conflict”—which, in this case, is just a polite, indirect way of saying “white supremacy” against African Americans—became codified into laws and lending practices that restricted capital access, and made physical decline almost an inevitability for neighborhoods and cities where black people were numerically dominant. There

was nothing “natural” about this—it was rooted in the supremacist notion that black people were not worthy of the same financial and residential privileges as white people.

On the supply side, historical and contemporary redlining—restricting, overpricing, or eliminating mainstream mortgage capital for communities of color—artificially restricted capital to certain neighborhoods and cities over others. These practices have taken a variety of forms over the years, from legal open redlining maps in the 1930s (Bradford 1979) to federal government prohibitions on construction loan insurance if too many black people lived near a white community (Squires and Velez 1987), to loans that are higher-interest to African Americans, even when controlled for income and wealth (Wyly *et al.* 2009). Though all of these practices were nominally outlawed by the 1968 Fair Housing Act and the 1977 Community Reinvestment Act, activists continue to find differences in access to mortgages, appraisers who refuse to work in certain cities (like Detroit), and banks who refuse to locate branches in black neighborhoods (Clark 2015; Eaves 2015; Swarms 2015). In total, these practices restrict or fully block much-needed capital to neighborhoods. Without access to (mainstream) capital, housing very quickly falls into disrepair—much of it gets abandoned outright.

Figure 1. Derelict housing in Cleveland, Ohio



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Land abandonment is also produced by a series of ugly demand-side forces. Scholars have noted the often extraordinary efforts that whites have taken to avoid living near black people, and how real-estate agents, predatory investors, and banks have exploited this sentiment (Hirsch 1998; Sugrue 2005). White residents, realtors, and politicians enforced a spatial apartheid through an array of restrictive covenants, informal understandings by neighborhood groups and realtors, and simple violence (Massey and Denton 1998). Many of these practices were made illegal, and overt racism is less socially acceptable among white people than it was before (Brown 2013), but the refusal of whites to live near blacks, even of the same economic class, is stubbornly persistent (Desmond

2016). Though there are some moderate signs of desegregation occurring in the suburbs, inner-core black-majority cities are becoming more monolithically African-American (Hackworth 2016a). The near-blanket refusal of white people to live near, or be educated with, African Americans is devastating for the demand for housing in such cities. Houses that cannot be sold to predatory cash-only investors are often simply abandoned.

The emptying of American Rust Belt cities is thus not just a passive response to the pressures of deindustrialization. When measured, the level of deindustrialization is far less associated with land abandonment and population loss than the percentage of African-American people in a given city (see Hackworth 2016b, 2016c). The difference, for example, between the percentage of vacant lots in Detroit and Duluth (Minnesota) is vast, but the relative loss in manufacturing jobs is similar. The percentage of African American people living in each city, by contrast, is vastly different. Detroit is over 80% black, while Duluth is just over 2%. This pattern holds across the Rust Belt. The more African-American a city, the greater the level of land abandonment.

Figure 2. Land abandonment in Cleveland, Ohio



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How well have shrinking cities scholars integrated race—and social conflict more generally—into understandings of growth and decline? The short answer: not very well. In many cases, it is simply omitted altogether. Abandonment is simply an economic process, while other factors, like race, are outside the parameters of consideration. In other studies, race is mentioned, but as either implicitly or explicitly spurious. Here, land abandonment and urban decline are *primarily* economic processes. Racism is happening in parallel to this, and is perhaps an exacerbating force, but not a causal one driving it. Within such narratives, blacks in northern cities were disproportionately affected by processes of land abandonment primarily because they were the most disadvantaged group when the economic conditions reached their nadir. Finally, and most dubious, is the notion that black politicians and people actually engineered the movement of whites to the suburbs for political advantage. Race is involved but only to the extent that “militant” black mayors came to

power and drove white people to the suburbs. In the most extreme version of this thesis, Glaeser and Shleifer (2005, p. 2) write about Detroit's first black mayor, Coleman Young:

In his 24 years as mayor, Detroit's Coleman Young drove white residents and businesses out of the city, [similar to how] Zimbabwe's President Robert Mugabe abused white farmers after his country's independence, openly encouraging their emigration even at a huge cost to the economy.

Land abandonment, within this facile narrative, is portrayed simply as a logical response (of white people) to being pushed from the city (by black people).

While these approaches vary significantly in political intent and analytical approach, none explicitly positions racism against black people in northern cities as a significant causal force in the production of land abandonment. I would like to end by suggesting that not just race, but social conflict more generally, be taken seriously in studies of urban decline. The heavy concentration of vacant lots in Cleveland, Detroit, and Buffalo are not the automatic outcome of industrial obsolescence or natural population outflow. They are the residue of decades of institutional and interpersonal discrimination against African Americans. Other cities in the world will reveal different patterns of social conflict than the American Rust Belt, but the underlying issue is likely to be the same. Urban decline is not a natural occurrence; it is as much about social conflict, and the political decisions that flow from that, as it is about economic or "natural" factors.

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Jason Hackworth is a professor of planning and geography at the University of Toronto. He has written about a variety of issues, including urban decline, gentrification, public housing, and neoliberalism. He is currently writing a book on the intersection between social conflict and urban decline.

To cite this article:

Jason Hackworth, “Urban Decline Is Not Natural”, *Metropolitiques*, 11 April 2017.
URL: <http://www.metropolitiques.eu/Urban-Decline-Is-Not-Natural.html>.