



Political Economy of Abandonment East St. Louis As Detroit's Mirror

By Jennifer F. Hamer

East St. Louis — life continues in a city abandoned by corporate America.

DETROIT'S GOVERNOR-APPOINTED Financial Manager, bankruptcy attorney Kevyn Orr, told the *Wall Street Journal* that the cash-strapped municipality was “for a long time...dumb, lazy, happy, and rich.”

Detroit is frequently in the news. The former industrial center has suffered financial distress for much of its modern past. The state's newest response to the city's woes was to seize control of the municipal budget and related decision-making.

Orr's blithe comments capture not only his historical ignorance, but also the contempt policymakers often display towards workers and families in poor urban places. Clearly, people rank least among the concerns of Michigan's corporate and state leaders who are, at this moment, making sweeping decisions about the city's future.

Sadly, the story of Detroit is not new or unique. It is shared by many former industrial places in the U.S. Midwest. Several years ago, I set out to research and write about East St. Louis, Illinois — in many ways a smaller Detroit. A former center of industry and transportation, its working and middle-class populations shifted from predominantly white to majority Black in the mid-20th century.

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Like Detroit, East St. Louis experienced dramatic economic shifts as manufacturers and businesses closed up shop and moved elsewhere. Today, its tragic narrative highlights the new urban landscape — industrial cities and suburbs, places tossed away and abandoned by the general public, elected officials and corporate America.

But a focus on “place” is only a small part of the tale. It is the circumstances of residents — mothers, fathers, children, seniors and workers — that most demonstrate the story of America's general disregard for working-class people, especially African Americans in heartland urban spaces.

Located on the Mississippi River just east of St. Louis, Missouri, East St. Louis is a former industrial suburb of St. Louis, Missouri. The city's location on the Mississippi River, proximity to St. Louis, Chicago, Indianapolis and other major heartland metropolitan areas, and business-friendly politics, supported its growth and status as a Midwest transportation and manufacturing hub.

Growth and the Meaning of Work

By the 1930s, approximately 200 industries were located within the city limits. The city and the space surrounding its immediate boundaries were home to Aluminum Ore (formerly Alcoa) Company, Emerson Electric, Hunter Packing, Armour, Swift, National Stockyards, Obeart Nester Glass, and a host of small and large companies.

In the first part of the 20th century, immigrants from southern and eastern Europe migrated to the city for employ-

ment and the opportunities to earn and live an improved quality of life for themselves and their children. African Americans were not far behind. They, too, entered the city in search of jobs, better schools for their children, and a life free of their brutal and dangerous existence in the racially violent and segregated Jim Crow South.

East St. Louis created space for workers and families, but its strategic growth was the product of corporate and manufacturing interests in maintaining a nearby work force, access to transportation, low taxes and a city where industry's needs were primary to municipal government. Still, it was part of a larger cultivation of the American Dream.

Here as elsewhere in the Midwest, the quality of life for men, women and families has always been contingent on their access to work and its accompanying socioeconomic privileges. The power to purchase and accumulate material and social resources such as utilities, homes, vehicles, clothing, education, clothing and food are tied to work and its wages and benefits.

In 1993, historian Mark J. Stern explained that as years moved forward, African American men's and women's employment opportunities, and standards of living, expanded because of a booming economy's demand for new workers, a federal welfare state forged during the 1930s, public protests for civil and economic rights, and union desegregation. Increased civil and purchasing powers enabled African Americans to increase their political contributions to local, regional, and national policies and

politics, furthering a climate of racial and economic reform. Relative to black men and women arriving in Midwestern cities and suburbs in later years, those who arrived in the earlier decades were more likely to have hired into at least an entry-level position and slowly moved their families into the stable working-class. Such families and their offspring were eventually able to move to more upscale housing and schools within the central city, or in metropolitan area suburbs and small cities.¹

In a period of intense racial hostilities and discrimination, East St. Louis was nonetheless among those Midwestern industrial cities (e.g. Detroit, Indianapolis, Kansas City, St. Louis) and industrial suburbs (e.g. Benton Harbor, Michigan; Gary, Indiana) that offered economic and social mobility for African Americans.

Like these other places, its labor pool and population grew steadily. By the mid twentieth century, East St. Louis reached a population of 80,000, its peak. In 1959, it was named *Look* magazine's All American City and, for a short period, in its heyday, it was a place of racial and ethnic diversity, a center of entertainment, retail shopping, quality public education, and mobility.

Diversity is not Equity

We can, and often do, wax nostalgic. Prosperity is not all-inclusive. Despite the *Look* magazine honor, diversity in an All American City was not the same as equity. When African Americans entered East St. Louis, like Detroit and other industrial places, they entered a segregated city.

This meant that men and women had to literally fight for the right to access union supported employment opportunities, decent housing and fair treatment for their children in schools and public spaces.

Despite substantial social and economic gains, and regardless of place, most African Americans lagged far behind middle- and working-class whites. Economically, in the 1960s few held professional or managerial positions, almost half of Black children lived below poverty, and families were systematically denied low-interest loans.

Denied access to low-interest loans, possessing low levels of accumulated wealth, and experiencing continued residential segregation meant that many remained within or on the borders of predominantly black, low-income areas. They were subject to high rents and poor quality housing, many unable to purchase decent housing. In East St. Louis, many families continued to live in poor quality, makeshift houses and without running water well into the 1970s. Unlike whites, black parents were less able to pass their occupational successes to their sons and daughters. The latter were more likely to end up in low-skill occupations regardless of education level and the benefits of parental contacts.²

Older residents will tell you that East St. Louis was far better socially than the southern living conditions their grandparents and parents had left behind. Yet they and their children experienced the highest rates of poverty, incarceration, morbidity, mortality and school incompleteness. Parents who raised children in the city through the 1960s had to protect them from white racial hatred and physical assault. To this end, mothers and fathers necessarily forbade children from walking, playing, riding bikes and skating through all-white neighborhoods.

Whether middle-class, working-class or poor, in East St. Louis or elsewhere, African Americans' hard-earned dollars subsidized the building of city and county buildings, the beautification of parks, training of police, firefighters and safety officials, public universities, and the development of public schools.

Their taxes and patronage sustained shopping malls, restaurants, grocery stores, museums, libraries and public cultural centers. Their labor underwrote the manufacturers' profits and corporations' ability of to increase national and global expansion.

The Ease of Abandonment

As we too well know by now, there exists no social contract between a corporation or manufacturer and the workers and families that make its existence possible. Capital and its leaders are always in search of greater profits. In the mid-twentieth century, many made decisions to leave metropolitan centers and industrial suburbs like East St. Louis.

Why? They wanted to be where they could demand lower or no local taxes; where they would not have to tolerate or pay for worker demands for safety, family wages, and benefits. The suburbs, and regions of the U.S. south and southwest, offered such sanctuaries.

The decisions to shut down East St. Louis assembly lines, downsize or move were decisions that devastated the infrastructure and the very elements of an All American City. The timing of these phase-outs and closings was critical, coinciding with the end of the War on Poverty and its genuine attempts to create a fair and equitable America.

They began just as African-American workers and families were beginning to gain some level of socioeconomic racial equity, move solidly into union labor, and gain living wages and quality schools — all of which could have secured generations in the working and middle classes.

Ironically, African-American workers — their labor, consumer spending and tax dollars — made it possible for others to abandon East St. Louis. Plant closures were facilitated by publicly funded highway systems, research and technologies that eased

issues of transportation, enabled geographical moves, and provided for tax incentives that supported industry growth and profits.

White workers and families also departed, moving into suburbs farther from metropolitan cores and from the African-American families and workers who shared their work ethic, family values and dreams of upward mobility. Their race had privileged them economically and socially, allowing them to benefit from a discriminatory labor market that minimized their competition with African American men and women.

White workers' better and higher paying jobs enabled them to accumulate wealth, especially in the form of property, which was passed down from one generation to another. Their children received quality education in effectively segregated public schools to which Black households contributed tax dollars. Their young adults experienced upward mobility when selected to attend publicly funded universities, which were subsidized by families of color whose children were offered no or limited enrollment.

Freeways, accumulated wealth, and pervasive discriminatory housing policies and practices endorsed white families' escape from declining cities that, in the popular view, were taken over and run down politically, socially and culturally by Black people.

For some African Americans, white worker and family departures did open opportunities for the better quality housing that then became available to Black home buyers; it provided an opportunity for their children to play in city parks and neighborhoods that historically had been spaces of white hostility; it opened doors for Black teacher hires and the development of culturally appropriate curriculum in city schools; it made possible their rise to majority political status within the city's boundaries.

But these changes were hollow and temporarily masked the inhumanity and perniciousness of abandonment. In actuality, African Americans gained political strength and power of a municipal system that was nearly penniless, historically corrupt, and was losing tax revenues daily as business after business left it behind.

What happens when industries walk away from a place that is centered on their presence and growth? It means the loss of the tax dollars necessary to maintain streets, parks, bridges, public buildings, libraries and public safety. Job loss means the deterioration of consumer spending necessary to maintain retail stores and grocers, movie theaters and bowling alleys.

Job loss also leaves families unable to maintain homes and property, or contribute tax dollars necessary to sustain public schools, libraries, and their welfare.

In East St. Louis, property and city taxes were raised as municipal leaders attempt-

ed to plug a deepening revenue hole. But the task was an unfair and impossible one as unemployment and underemployment began hitting record highs for working-class African-American residents.

Many, new to this status, had not yet had the opportunity to accumulate the wealth and financial security necessary to move. Nor could many access housing and employment in surrounding suburbs where racist lending and mortgage practices remained pervasive. A large number of workers and families were essentially trapped in a place that held little mobility for them or much promise for their children.

Divorce rates rose as mothers and fathers struggled to manage families under financial strain. Schools deteriorated and, as journalist Jonathon Kozol once reported, generations of children were left to try their best in crumbling buildings with dated laboratories and obsolete books.

As circumstances worsened, the city became infamous for its rising rates of crime, prostitution, and poverty. By the 1970s, despite good faith efforts of East St. Louis mayors and elected representatives to work with state officials and corporate leaders, the city continued to tumble.

The media generally categorized men, women, and youth into one or more colorful categories of the criminal, lazy, unemployed, welfare recipient — and/or others undeserving of public support or empathy. These historically negative images permitted the general public to define East St. Louis, its residents and leadership as out-of-control, unwilling and unable to practice appropriate discipline or self-governance.

By the 1990s, the mischaracterization of a population made it easy for those in the region, state and nation to hold disdain for and neglect the emotion and tragedy of mothers, fathers, families, workers and children in the city. It also allowed the Illinois Governor to place the city under receivership, disregard the democratically elected municipal leadership, and further dehumanize the Black residents of the city.

State control over the city's budget and spending did not improve the life circumstances of men, women, and families — if that was its intent. Instead, federal, state and even local resources were primarily directed to creditors, regional developers, universities and other entities external to the city.

Easy Pickings and Human Realities

You see, distressed cities are a potential resource for investors, developers and suburbanites. Places like East St. Louis and Detroit offer buildings, land and prime waterfront property that can be auctioned, gentrified and developed for tourism, corporate interests and upscale housing.

They provide middle-class employment, often for suburbanites, as social workers,

case workers, treatment facility directors, detention officers, parole and probation officers, counselors, and various city employees serving the less educated, less skilled, emotionally and financially strained residents who cannot compete for middle-class jobs in their own city.

Broken streetlights, missing stop signs and manhole covers, roadway disrepair, hazardous public space, troubled libraries, closed theaters and recreational facilities, few health service providers and amenities, unreasonably high property and city taxes, and extraordinary increases in housing foreclosures, school incompleteness, unemployment and childhood poverty went relatively unaddressed.

Put simply, the people of East St. Louis were abandoned and remain so today. Children have not been spared. The school district's 2011-2012 report card tells us that the promise of the city's children has been severely curbed.

Among third graders in East St. Louis schools, 38% and 17% did not meet standards in reading and math, respectively. Approximately 40% of eighth graders also failed to meet standards in these fundamental categories of learning.³ The high school graduation rate is about 60% — well below that of the state and the nation. Further, over 90% of school district students are low-income.

Currently, approximately 50% of working age men and women are not in the work force. Among adults 25 and older, 25% have not completed high school education nor its equivalent and only 10% of all residents hold a bachelor's degree or higher.

Seventy percent of homeowners and renters experience housing problems. One-half of residents receive some form of welfare assistance and only half of residents own their own homes. Sixty percent of all housing was built prior to 1960, and this small city has over 100 toxic waste sites within its borders — aerial and ground wastes left behind by long gone industrial executives and manufacturers.

Over 60% of households earned less than \$25,000 in the past year and of these, one-half earned less than \$10,000. The city's population now stands below 30,000 and most alarmingly — trends in the quality of life have grown worse since I completed my research just a few years ago.⁴

Media-reported statistics and reported trends only sanitize the inhumanity of life in an abandoned place where fathers guard their children from packs of stray dogs and take it upon themselves to clean up broken glass and debris from neighboring vacant lots. Here, children play in deserted, decayed houses and structures that the city cannot afford to tear down. Many parents make homes in uninhabitable properties and put

children to bed without enough food — and in the wintertime, without heat.

Youth walk to school among the hazards of streets with no sidewalks, missing stop signs, broken traffic lights. Passengers wait for public buses in the rain and inoperative streetlights. Firefighters manage fires without a hook and ladder truck and other basic station needs. Police patrol and respond to residential concerns with minimal equipment.

Senior women — who suffer from disproportionate rates of diabetes, hypertension and cancers — stay in the workforce well beyond the age of retirement and put their financial concerns and the welfare of others before their own health needs.

Adult brothers and sisters share households, childcare, transportation, groceries and incomes to provide basic necessities for their daughters and sons. People move from one low-paying, low-skill job to another in search of the hours and pay that allow them to support and spend time with their families. Many give up the search for work, but only when one application after another receives no employer response.

Others turn to informal activities such as cutting grass, hauling trash, giving rides, doing hair, and yes criminal activity, to negotiate day-to-day living. Mothers, fathers, and grandparents nurse one another and children ill from simply living in East St. Louis — a federally designated brownfield.

This is no way to live. But America manages inhumanity well when we can keep it isolated from middle-class spaces.

In her classic *Death and Life of Great American Cities* (1961), writer Jane Jacobs advocated for city planning that put residents first. People, Jacobs argued, were what was most valuable about urban spaces. But this thinking has yet to be applied to urban Black Americans or others left behind in former industrial cities and suburbs.

Recent discussions about Detroit and bankruptcy mostly ignore the thousands of men, women and children who were long ago abandoned by the state of Michigan, corporate leaders and the nation. That the public accepts the terms of this discourse only underscores the power of corporations and policymakers, broadly, to diminish the inhumanity of their decision-making.

Beyond race or ethnicity, the tale of East St. Louis is a prelude to what is becoming of America's working class. Detroit is just the biggest city in its sequel. §

Notes

1. Italics excerpted from Hamer, J. *Abandoned in the Heartland: Work, Family, and Living in East St. Louis* (University of California Press 2011), 16-17.

2. *Ibid.*, 17-18.

3. East St. Louis School Year Report Card District Summary, Illinois State Board of Education, http://webprod.isbe.net/ereportcard/publicsite/getReport.aspx?year=2012&code=500821890ds_e.html.

4. East St. Louis City, Illinois, American Factfinder, US Census Bureau of the Census, http://factfinder2.census.gov/faces/nav/jsf/pages/community_facts.xhtml.