
Driving Detroit: The Quest for Respect in the Motor City.

GEORGE GALSTER 2012. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press. 328 pp. ISBN 978-0-8122-4429-8

Detroit is in the news on an almost daily basis. The city has been going through decline and change at unprecedented levels. This has attracted not only the attention of international journalists, but scholars as well. There is no shortage of books, articles and stories about Detroit. However, when it came time for me to select a book to assign to my class on North American cities – a course which culminated in a field trip to Detroit – there was only one logical choice from the plethora of books published in recent years. George Galster's book *Driving Detroit: The Quest for Respect in the Motor City*, is by far the most authoritative, well-researched and accessible books on Detroit. While other academic works on the city have focused on one specific aspect, and many recent non-academic works focus on a description of the sensational (Binelli 2013; LeDuff 2013) Galster, a fifth generation Detroitite, takes a broader perspective and tries to understand the economic, social, cultural and political elements which 'drive' Detroit and Detroiters.

Galster's primary question is to try to understand why Detroit is the way it is. It is a diagnostic portrait of the city, rather than a description of what it has become. As the subtitle suggests, he focuses on the region's quest for respect, as defined by the ability to obtain, retain and expand physical, social and psychological resources. He asks whether the metro Detroit area helps its residents achieve this respect.

To focus on this quest for respect, three themes are examined in great detail. The first is what Galster refers to as the 'economic engine of anxiety'. Because Detroit is built around producing cars, a durable good susceptible to fluctuating demand, the fundamental nature of Detroit's economy is unstable. That, combined with psychologically demeaning work on the assembly line and oppressive management creates a context where the region's population is anxious and feels under threat.

The second theme focuses on housing. Galster calls the housing market in Greater Detroit the 'housing disassembly line'. Speculative developers make huge sums of money by creating new housing on the edges of the region, which is surplus to Greater Detroit's housing needs; the region's population has remained stagnant for more than four decades. This causes a 'chain of moves' which allows individual households to 'move up' to better housing as new supply is added each year. This chain continues until there are houses in the least competitive areas where no one wants to live in, so they become vacant. This housing is predominantly found in the city of Detroit and can help explain why 160,000 homes were abandoned between 1970 and 2000 (p. 221). This process is augmented by a fragmented regional political structure which encourages such a scenario.

The third theme is the dual dialectic of power struggles between labour and capital and between Black and White. Your ability to succeed in the region depends on where you fit within these dialectics and the book provides numerous examples of these forces at play. For all three themes, Galster resolutely concludes that Greater Detroit 'fundamentally *disrespects* its citizenry' (p. x). To cope and adapt to this disrespect, residents have turned to extreme class and racial segregation, city-suburb divisions, identity politics, unions, violence and intolerance, among other strategies, which collectively inhibit the region from adequately responding to the economic changes it is facing.

Driving Detroit does not provide answers on how to fix Detroit. Its aim is to better understand how the city and its region got to where they are today. But laced through the text is a structural analysis of the political, economic and social geography of the region and the state of Michigan. Much of what happened in Detroit is influenced by what happened in the suburbs and that these forces are beyond the city's ability to control. The rules of the game are stacked against Detroit, and the city is powerless to change these rules on its own. Any real solutions will require higher levels of government to change the rules of the game which govern the region. In this analysis, Galster offers a different perspective than the normal

message that Detroit failed financially because it was corrupt, inept and unable to make the necessary spending cuts in order to balance its books.

Driving Detroit successfully balances the line between the needs of academic rigour and thoroughness, and a style and language accessible for non-academic audiences. For both academics and non-academics interested in Detroit, this book provides an informative, engaging and often entertaining (through its generous use of music lyrics, poetry and literature) assessment of what happened to Detroit. This is made more colourful by two non-academic additions to the text: above-mentioned cultural references, and a running narrative on several Detroit families. As the book turns to different topics and periods of Detroit's history, we learn the fate of these families throughout the course of the twentieth century.

There are a lot of 'sensational' stories about Detroit, with many authors eager to vividly describe a city in ruins; the decline of Detroit is treated as a spectacle: look at how bad things are here (see LeDuff 2013). *Driving Detroit* gives a much more careful and systematic account of the city. It is pessimistic, but it is pessimistic because of an analysis of the city, rather than because it merely describes Detroit's decline. Any reader of Galster's book is in a much better position to critically analyse these many media, popular and descriptive texts about Detroit.

Two small points are worth mentioning. The book is exclusively about Detroit: anyone searching for an account of the city embedded into theoretical or conceptual debates about deindustrialisation, race relations, governance or other academic discussions, will not find that here. There is neither discussion of theory nor any literature review. There is also no discussion about American cities more generally; Detroit is analysed, but not placed in a wider American urban context. But the book's aim, as

is explicitly stated in the introduction, is to understand Detroit, not place it in theoretical debates or compare it to other cities. The second point is that while chapter 1 provides a 'driving tour' of the city in order to give the reader a good sense of the city's geography, some readers without any prior knowledge of the spatial layout and history of Detroit city may find it difficult to follow. Some more detailed maps at various geographic scales (Figure 1 on page 13 is a very basic map of the city and its immediate suburbs), as well as more photos (there are thirteen in total) would have helped here. Having said that, the maps on pages 157–159 (Figures 17–20) showing Detroit's racial composition over the last 80 years are powerful images which illustrate how much the city has changed.

For my students, *Driving Detroit* proved to be the best introduction to the city that they could get. Reading it before we visited the city greatly enhanced our experience in Detroit. The students could put what we saw into greater context and understood much more about the landscapes they were seeing. It meant that our discussions with guest speakers – including George Galster – were far more engaging and interactive. The students' knowledge of the city, largely gained through the book, meant that our guests could also learn a lot from their perspectives and insights. Anyone wishing to have similar experiences when visiting Detroit, or those simply wanting to know more about this great American city, would be wise to read this book.

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References

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