

Poletown: Community Betrayed

Bill Blank

1990

a review of

Poletown: Community Betrayed by Jeanie Wylie. 1989, University of Illinois Press

For centuries, capitalism has systematically destroyed or relocated minority and ethnic groups. A particularly repulsive local example occurred during the last decade in Detroit's "Poletown" neighborhood, where a thriving community was destroyed to build a General Motors Cadillac plant nobody needed and few wanted.

This highly automated factory didn't even fulfill its limited number of meaningless job opportunities and has been shut down repeatedly since it began operation in 1985—and that's the best thing about this bitterly ironic luxury car project among the urban ruins.

Finally, a powerful book has snuck into mainstream reading lists detailing this tragedy which accelerated Detroit's economic demise, and more importantly, furthered its social fragmentation.

Jeanie Wylie's work is somewhat related to the film, "Roger and Me," but her examination claws deeper than Michael Moore's plea for more jobs. For although the story is depressing, Wylie continually emphasizes the values of community over the empty promises of labor and the state.

This should be a required textbook for any government class wanting to know the real meaning of "eminent domain" (which allows government to grab any land it desires). Wylie exposes the culprits: the city, state and federal governments, GM, the UAW, the church, and the politicians, through extensive research and photographs, vividly describing the brutal removal of 4,200 residents (mostly working-class Poles and blacks) during 1980 through 1982 in compassionate, personal narratives.

in Wylie's interviews, World War II veterans and other witnesses make comparisons to the Nazis. Bulldozers, arson raids, and police round-ups assault the residents, until the last hold-outs are literally dragged away in front of a media eager to move on to the next story.

Events like the 1967 city-wide riots are often blamed for making Detroit a cement ghost town. However, *Poletown: Community Betrayed* illustrates not only the blunders of the auto industry, but the forces behind the continued destruction of communities, pioneered by the white man's attack on Native Americans and carried on today in corporate atrocities under the twin lies of progress and profit.

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