

The War on the Poor

Plenitude and Penury in Detroit

E.B. Maple (Peter Werbe)
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Capitalism is never good to all of its subjects. Regardless of its carefully honed mythology of democratic access to success and class mobility, capitalist society is a system of looting whereby a few at the top and a small substratum below them hog the vast majority of wealth.

Looting, the forcible extraction of wealth by a powerful minority from a defenseless or passive majority, is the keystone of capitalism and has been since its inception. This hemisphere was looted from its original inhabitants, its minerals, forests soil and animals looted to finance the empires of Europe. Slaves were looted from Africa to create the original capital accumulation and industrialization through slave labor. And through looting and exploitation of the poor and working classes of this country and the world, a colossal empire of capital has been established.

But there is a capitalist wheel of fortune (or rather misfortune) whose needle has swung to and fro over the centuries, endowing one region or population with affluence while condemning others to penury. A region or even a class which one day seems favored may face ruin the next. And so it happened in Detroit as well as in many other urban and rural regions of this country.

The working class of Detroit once briefly (and relatively) prospered (it was never as great as the propagandists would have it) in what was proudly known (by some) as the Motor Capital of the world. Workers owned homes and could live lives close to that of the middle class. Then the needle began to swing, and the general de-industrialization of the U.S. which began in the 1970s left Detroit looking like a ghost town, its once humming factories idle or shuttered.

Left without wage work, great numbers of people were forced onto government welfare programs in order to meet minimal survival needs. Contrary to the extravagant claims of its opponents, welfare never provides more than a scarcely livable pittance (it's estimated that the hourly take-home income for welfare is \$1.10 an hour for a forty hour week), at the price for submission to the humiliations of the bureaucracy that administers it. Now, as economic conditions worsen in the U.S. and even those paltry stipends are being cut off, the State of Michigan must bear the responsibility for its victims.

On October 1, 1991, the State of Michigan ended General Assistance welfare, a program for single adults, leaving 83,000 people, 40,000 of them in Detroit, literally penniless. In late November, two men died of asphyxiation while seeking shelter in an abandoned house on Detroit's southwest side. They were homeless after having been cut off General Assistance (GA) and were using a charcoal brazier for warmth in the unheated house during an unseasonable cold snap in which temperatures dropped to seven degrees.

An old man everyone called Leroy who hung around the downtown YMCA talking wild, but who was harmless and rarely even panhandled, froze to death the same night in another unheated building within walking distance of City Hall. Upstate, a woman dumped from state aid was forced to cut her blood pressure medicine dosage in

half as a cost reduction measure and died from a stroke several days later. These three incidents are far from a full count of direct and indirect deaths resulting from the State budget cuts.

The Rich and the Poor

Not many miles from downtown Detroit and the Cass Corridor district where this newspaper is published, there is a complex of well-lit, well-heated, lavishly decorated shopping malls. As I write in early December, they are full of glittering commodities readied for the Christmas shopping season. Their parking lots are full of late-model cars as shoppers bustle from store to store, arms laden with gift-wrapped packages in a scene from an updated Norman Rockwell painting.

Recession? What recession? The affluent look and act like nothing has changed since the wealthy's halcyon days of the Reagan era. In the Cass Corridor things are different. This decaying area has long been a center of the city's underclass. But now the scythe of capitalist austerity, which began cutting a slow swath through the working class as early as the 1970s, is accelerating with a vengeance.

With income increasingly malapportioned to the high side, and more high-roller scams such as junk bonds, merger buy outs, and the banks and real estate market crashing against capital's rocky reefs, the hammer is coming down hard on those closest to the economy's margins.

The rulers remain pitiless, offering only platitudes about an upturn in the economy while ignoring that this recession, now in its seventeenth month, is the longest since the Second World War. The middle class, its back against the wall with credit card debt and an unsustainable life-style, growls at the classes below rather than confront its masters above, fearing that the line between it and the destitute is narrowing with each dour government quarterly report of economic slide.

Officially, unemployment in Michigan is almost ten percent, making the word recession slip close to the dreaded "d" word—depression. And it looks like a depression the farther one gets from the affluent suburban malls. More and more stores and other businesses are abandoned and boarded up, more houses and apartment buildings burned out, and there are more fields where buildings and whole neighborhoods once stood.

(The annual Thanksgiving Day parade was a particularly pathetic sight, with mounted cops, floats, marching bands and Santa Claus making their way down the city's main avenue as onlookers lined the street in front of boarded-up and half-demolished hulks of buildings. The homeless shuffled along the sidewalk listless and silent as ghosts.)

But perhaps the most dramatic indicator of collapse is the presence of beggars everywhere in the city. An old white man with one leg screams incoherently while pushing himself in his wheelchair down the middle of a deserted street that once was a main thoroughfare. Every local restaurant and the nearby university campus are surrounded by panhandlers and each trash container has destitute women and men sifting its contents for the possibility of a deposit bottle treasure.

"Please, sir, let me pump your gas," becomes the plaintive plea at the local gas station; "I just need a few more dollars to get a room at the Westwill for the night."

"Oh, thank you, sir, thank you, God bless you, sir," the 45-year-old black man tells me, sounding like a voice out of Dickens, after I part with a dollar having just dropped \$20 on my dinner. Before I drive off to my comfortable home and he heads for the fleabag hotel, he assures me, "I'm not into crime or dope or anything like that." I think, he probably was an auto worker before Chrysler shipped its work out to Mexican border plants where they can pay \$1.25 an hour, and I wonder why there aren't more people into crime and drugs.

Previously, the impoverished could expect a minuscule state stipend which paid their rent, the assumption being that since the poor will always be with us, as the Bible intones, there was a minimum obligation on the part of society, through the state, to provide housing for those who couldn't afford any. Even this patronizing and dehumanizing form of liberal largesse has evaporated as frenzied looting by the monied classes sends greater and greater numbers down the tube to oblivion.

In Detroit and Michigan the immediate crisis of the poor was precipitated by the unceremonious dumping from the welfare rolls of all so-called "able-bodied" welfare recipients. This move played well in the suburbs since

the image of black, male loafers was beyond the tolerance of a hard-pressed and racist white middle class. The governor of Michigan, one John Engler, knew it would, and like every opportunist politician from David Duke to George Bush, he has exploited these racist fears and resentments to the maximum.

The mode is always the same: scapegoat the victim. “These people could find jobs if they really wanted” is the refrain you hear over and over. Ten percent unemployment? They can get jobs if they take four buses out to the MacDonald’s in the suburban mall mentioned above and work for a minimum wage, every one of them, right?

The problem is that “these people” don’t turn out to reflect the stereotype of those who were the recipients of the Michigan General Assistance program. Social workers estimate that 75 percent have a physical or mental disability that prevents them from working. Half of them are women, many middle aged, sick or injured but not quite sick or injured enough to qualify for disability programs. Others range from the mentally disturbed to the illiterate and unskilled, to drug addicts and alcoholics, and many just down on their luck—in other words, people who have fallen through capital’s cracks.

Capitalism Means Class War

Attacking the poor was the easy answer to the State’s budget deficit. Welfare is universally despised and scapegoated by conservative voters, and its recipients are considered socially and electorally expendable by them and the politicians. So it was those already living in intolerable conditions who got the chop. At a stroke, thousands were pushed outside the capitalist system—no wage work, no commodity consumption.

The left-liberal response was predictable, a call mainly for a return to prior horrible and inhuman conditions (under “enlightened” liberal Democrats?) and a campaign against the hateful Gov. Engler (even though many cuts had already been initiated under the toxic Blanchard whom he had defeated). Without trivializing the immediate crisis now faced by thousands of people, demanding merely the reinstatement of the miserable dole system seems unimaginative in the extreme.

The limited demand for subsistence charity has the effect of freezing this vicious caste system in place with public and private donations barely sustaining the poor while never forcing the affluent and the powerful to face the consequences of their organized greed. In fact the whole of society is increasingly brutalized by the existing state of affairs. There is a worldwide holocaust going on against the wretchedly poor; the rich sip drinks and read their investment portfolios by their swimming pools and ski chalets while the poor die of cholera and exposure.

Yet merely focusing on the hateful Engler is a grave mistake. Certainly, he is fully responsible for his actions as an administrator of this holocaust, and thus guilty of murder. But he is also only a representative of a system. Getting rid of Engler for a kinder, gentler capitalist system is a pathetic illusion.

Capitalism by its very nature is class war—war by the rich against the poor. The poor, the foreign colonies, the ecosystem, the workers and the very possibility of a continuity in human culture all must be looted and destroyed, reduced to sacrifice zones for the empire and the power pyramid of the rich. In some historic periods, however, the level of exploitation is greater than in others—both as exploitation-extraction becomes more complex and costly, and as the character structure of the ruling classes becomes more brittle, ossified and rapacious.

We are in one of those periods, after a decade of unabashed greed and theft when the rich systematically increased their wealth at the expense of the other classes at home and internationally. The misery quotient has risen accordingly. The rich feel no constraints since combativeness on the part of either the workers or the poor is now (for the time) only a distant memory.

Elaborating a politics that can respond both to the immediate crisis of survival and the real sources is problematic to say the least. Obviously, immediate needs take place over any strategy, whether we like it or not. Even a revolution’s first priority becomes how people will feed themselves.

But the idea that “economic growth” and more jobs are the solution to capitalism’s crisis-by-design is only a preparation for capital’s next strategy to reorganize itself for the ends of the power system. A 1990s-style “New Deal” public works program organized by the state and the capitalist corporations would spell a disaster distinct from the “let-them-eat-cake” strategy of the right, but ultimately just as horrendous.

A response capable of leading us out of this endless cycle of misery and despair must move beyond demanding reforms from the modern pharaohs of the global work machine. Not only must privilege and maldistribution be attacked, but the very content of a civilization based on production of commodities and exchange, a civilization that everywhere erodes human autonomy, destroying and replacing natural economies with the market, subsistence with production, mutual aid with a war of all against all, plenitude with poverty, being with hoarding, community and concern with power—all at the expense of the majority, and to the grotesque, spirit-distorting illusory benefit of the rich. If we want to meet our real needs—the first one being to live in an authentic human society in community with rather than at war with our fellows, there can be no return to any semblance of this world once we undertake our journey.

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