Motor City: The Story of Detroit

by Thomas J. Sugrue

“You can see here, as it is impossible to do in a more varied and complex city, the whole structure of an industrial society.” So wrote essayist Edmund Wilson, reporting on a visit to the Motor City in the 1930s. As the capital of America’s most important industry—automobile manufacturing—Detroit became a global symbol of modernity and of the power of American capitalism and the labor that built it.

A second-tier commercial and industrial city at the end of the nineteenth century, Detroit was home to machine and stove manufacturing, cigar making, pharmaceuticals, and food production. But the city had natural advantages that suited it for automobile production. Located in the heart of the Great Lakes region, Detroit had all of the ingredients for industrial growth: it was close to the nation’s major centers of coal, iron, and copper mining; it was easily accessible by water and by land; and it was near the nation’s leading, well-established production centers. Still, it was not a great metropolis. When Henry Ford founded the Ford Motor Company in 1903, Detroit was only the nation’s thirteenth largest city.

Of the 125 auto companies that sprang up in Detroit in the early twentieth century, Ford quickly rose to the top. A restless innovator, Ford devised the modern assembly line. In 1908, the fledgling company introduced the Model T, a car whose standardized production would revolutionize the industry. Six years later, with hopes of building a stable, loyal workforce, Ford announced the five-dollar day, leading to a dramatic increase in pay for industrial workers. Word of Ford’s high wages—along with Ford’s international recruiting efforts—turned the Motor City into one of the most racially and ethnically diverse places in America. The auto magnate recruited skilled artisans from the shipyards of Scotland and England and blue-collar workers from the rural Midwest, as well as workers from Mexico and Lebanon, and African Americans from the city’s rapidly growing population of southern migrants. By 1940, Ford was one of the largest private employers of African Americans in the United States.

A handfull of major automobile manufacturers—notably Chrysler, General Motors, Packard, Ford, and a few smaller companies—survived the technological and managerial transformations that created the modern auto industry. Ford was, by far, the most influential. Its assembly line became the model for the mass production of cars worldwide; its social service programs, especially the company’s efforts to “Americanize” immigrant workers (including a graduation ceremony where blue-collar workers walked into a melting pot wearing their national garb and came out dressed uniformly as “Americans”), became models for “welfare capitalism.” And Ford’s technological innovations, culminating in the construction of the massive River Rouge plant—one that employed
more than 90,000 workers at its peak—brought visitors from around the world to marvel at the might and ingenuity of American industry. Business analysts coined the term “Fordism” to describe Detroit’s distinctive contribution to the technologically advanced, labor-intensive, highly productive form of modern industrial capitalism.

By the mid-twentieth century, one in every six working Americans was employed directly or indirectly by the automobile industry, and Detroit was its epicenter. The “Big Three” auto firms—General Motors, Ford, and Chrysler—were all based in metropolitan Detroit. The auto industry consumed vast amounts of steel, glass, copper, and (later) plastic, fueling the rise of a host of auto-related industries in and around the city. Detroit was, in the words of one historian, a “total industrial landscape,” a place where hundreds of thousands of blue-collar workers found work on the assembly lines, in stamping and tool-and-die plants, in foundries, and in a myriad of small factories that made all sorts of parts, from spark plugs to hood ornaments. The reach of the auto industry extended far into Detroit’s suburbs and into the small towns of the upper Midwest, where manufacturers made everything from auto glass to engine mounts. The dependence of towns like Toledo, Ohio, and Flint, Michigan, on the auto industry led to a common adage: “When Detroit gets a cold, the whole Midwest gets pneumonia.”

The auto industry employed vast numbers of working Detroiters and, not surprisingly, became a major target for the industrial union movement. During the Great Depression, organizers from the United Automobile Workers (UAW) engaged in lengthy, often brutal struggles to gain recognition from Detroit’s auto producers. At Chrysler and General Motors plants (beginning in nearby Flint, Michigan), blue-collar workers engaged in “sit-down” strikes to pressure employers to provide living wages and decent benefits. Ford was the site of some of the bloodiest battles over unionization. The auto giant hired its own private security force to deter labor organizers, leading to the infamous “Battle of the Overpass” at the massive Ford River Rouge plant, where union supporters were savagely beaten. Still, the UAW succeeded. Its success was the result of intensive grassroots organizing, with the support of the federal labor law, particularly the 1935 National Labor Relations Act, which required employers to allow union organizing and to recognize duly elected trade unions. By 1941, after a hard-won victory at Ford, the UAW negotiated contracts with every major auto firm. By the end of the 1940s, the Big Three offered generous wages and extensive benefits (including unemployment insurance, retirement benefits, and health insurance) that made auto workers among the best paid in the country. In the 1950s, social scientists and journalists held up the auto industry as an example of the end of class conflict in America. They argued that auto workers, who enjoyed hefty paychecks and good benefits, had become “embourgeoisé”—that is, they had entered the ranks of the middle class. By the mid-twentieth century, a majority of Detroit residents were homeowners; many autoworkers saved money to send their children to college; and tens of thousands could even afford lakeside summer cottages—leading to the rise of blue-collar resort towns throughout Michigan.

**LIVE BY THE CAR, DIE BY THE CAR**

By 1950, Detroit had become the fifth largest city in the United States, home to nearly two million people. But in the midst of that prosperity, the auto industry restructured its operations. Between
1948 and 1967—when the auto industry was at its economic peak—Detroit lost more than 130,000 manufacturing jobs. The auto industry began to decentralize its production, building new plants in suburban “greenfields” and in the small towns of the upper Midwest and, increasingly, the Sunbelt. Many smaller auto-related manufacturers also left the city in search of low-wage workforces and open land for new factories. At the same time, the auto industry experimented with new labor-saving technology—called “automation”—that replaced many assembly-line jobs with new machinery. The results were devastating. Many of the large, early twentieth-century factory buildings in the city emptied out. The massive Dodge Main plant, which employed more than 30,000 workers at its peak, winnowed its workforce to a few thousand before closing in 1980. Ford’s River Rouge plant hemorrhaged jobs beginning in the 1950s—and although it continues operations today, it has but a few thousand workers, a shadow of its World War II–era might.

Like other northeastern and midwestern cities, Detroit’s deindustrialization came at a moment when the city’s white population was suburbanizing. Between World War II and the 1960s, the city’s African American population rose exponentially, as hundreds of thousands of blacks were lured to the city by the promise of high-paying industrial jobs. Just as they arrived, those jobs—especially the entry-level positions that had served as the first rung on the economic ladder—were disappearing. By 1967, when Detroit erupted with one of the worst race riots in American history, the city had already lost tens of thousands of manufacturing jobs, had experienced massive white flight, and had seen many of its neighborhoods (especially those that had been built in the shadow of the major automobile plants) gutted by depopulation and disinvestment.

By the 1970s, Detroit’s image had been completely transformed from the mighty engine of American capitalism to the embodiment of America’s urban woes. The auto industry, buffeted by the oil crisis during the Nixon and Carter administrations, continued to contract. The rise of international competition, especially from Japan and Germany, further weakened Detroit’s auto industry. Chrysler, the smallest of the “Big Three,” filed for bankruptcy in 1979, while Ford and General Motors struggled with reputations for producing gas-guzzling behemoths and faced serious deficits. Although the fortunes of the auto industry eventually rose again, especially during the economic boom of the 1990s and the growth in popularity of sport-utility vehicles, the Big Three would continue to struggle for market share in an economy increasingly dominated by overseas manufacturers. Detroit, already weakened by decades of disinvestment and depopulation, fared badly. The Motor City was nearly completely abandoned by whites (who today comprise just a little over 10 percent of the city’s population). Metropolitan Detroit is still home to the Big Three headquarters, but the city’s population has plummeted to 886,000; its job base continues to shrink; and its skyline is now dominated by the rotting hulks of old factory buildings. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, boomtown Detroit is a distant memory, visible only in the old factory buildings and rubble-strewn lots that were once magnets of opportunity. A fitting symbol of Detroit’s transitory industrial might is Ford’s Highland Park plant—home to the first assembly line—now empty and deserted, a stark monument to the city’s history as the cradle of the modern American consumer culture.

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