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Op-Ed Columnist

An American Catastrophe

By [BOB HERBERT](#)

Detroit

In many ways, it's like a ghost town. It's eerily quiet. Driving around in the middle of the afternoon, in a city that once was among the most productive on the planet, you see very little traffic, minimal commercial activity, hardly any pedestrians.

What you'll see are endless acres of urban ruin, block after block and mile after mile of empty and rotting office buildings, storefronts, hotels, apartment buildings and private homes. It's a scene of devastation and disintegration that stuns the mind, a major American city that still is home to 900,000 people but which looks at times like a cross between postwar Berlin and the ruin of an ancient civilization.

Detroit was the arsenal of democracy in World War II and the incubator of the American middle class. It was the city that taught mass production to the rest of the world. It was a place that made cars, trucks and other tangible products, not derivatives. And it was the architect of the quintessentially American idea of putting people to work and paying them a decent wage. It's frightening to think seriously about what we've allowed to happen to this city and what is now happening to the middle class and the American economy as a whole.

I was in Detroit with Harley Shaiken, a professor at the University of California, Berkeley, who specializes in labor issues. He grew up in Detroit and his love for the city and its people are palpable, as is his grief for the horrors the city has endured.

The popular narrative of what happened to Detroit contains a great deal of truth but its focus is too narrow to account for the astonishing decline of this former industrial colossus. Yes, there were the riots of 1967, and white flight; and political leadership that was not just shortsighted but at times embarrassingly incompetent and corrupt. And, yes, the auto industry was a case study in self-destruction.

But as Mr. Shaiken points out, Detroit was still viable enough for the Republican Party to hold its convention here in 1980, when it nominated Ronald Reagan. And it was not the riots, but the devastating recession of the early '80s that really knocked the city senseless. "That's when the place really cracked," said Mr. Shaiken, "and that was about aggressive globalization and the lack of an industrial policy, not the riots."

Detroit and its environs are suffering the agonies of the economic damned because of policies, crafted at the highest national and corporate levels, that resulted in the implosion of crucially important components of America's manufacturing base. Those decisions have had a profound effect on the fortunes not just of Detroit, or even Michigan, but the entire U.S. economy.

"We've been living with the illusion that manufacturing — making things — is so 20th century," said Mr. Shaiken, "and that we could succeed by concentrating, for example, on complex financial instruments while abandoning the industrial base that sustained so many American families."

The idea that the fallout from the wrongheaded economic concepts of the past 30 or 40 years

could be contained, with the damage limited to the increasingly troubled urban areas while sparing prosperous suburbia, has now proved as phony as Bernie Madoff's fortune. Americans, whether they live in big cities, suburban towns or rural areas, need jobs, and when those jobs are eliminated (for whatever reasons — technological advances, globalization) without being replaced, the national economy is guaranteed at some point to hit a wall.

Professor Shaiken and I drove past vast lots filled with rubble and garbage and weeds, past the old Michigan Central Terminal, which was once Detroit's answer to New York's Grand Central Terminal but which has long since been abandoned; past a onetime Cadillac manufacturing plant that is now an empty lot.

We stopped at an old Ford plant and stood in a stiff, cold wind, reading a plaque put up by the Michigan Historical Commission: "Here at his Highland Park plant, Henry Ford began the mass production of automobiles on a moving assembly line. By 1915 Ford built a million Model T's. In 1925 over 9,000 were assembled in a single day. Mass production soon moved from here to all phases of American industry and set the pattern of abundance for 20th century living."

Professor Shaiken's grandfather, Philip Chapman, took a job at the Highland Park plant in 1914, earning five dollars a day, and worked on production at Ford until his retirement in the mid-1950s.

We're at a period no less significant to the U.S. than Mr. Chapman's early years at Ford. We need a revitalized industrial policy, including the creation of whole new industries, if American families are to prosper in the coming decades. If there is any sense of urgency about this in the hearts and minds of our corporate and government leaders, I've missed it.

