

Part 5 ⑥ A Case Study of a Specific American City

Grand theories or hypotheses are useful, but they need to be tested. In the 1950s and 1960s I had helped numerous people in the state of California record their oral histories for posterity. Individually they were—in effect—case studies about the evolution of selfhood in the context of organizations and of local community.

I felt I needed a broader perspective. In 1963, I took my first trip around the world with a group sponsored by the American Political Science Association. We met with Japanese legislative and other leaders, government officials in Taiwan, Hong Kong, Thailand and India (including Prime Minister Pandit Nehru and his cabinet), Colonel Nasser's cabinet in Egypt, King Hussein of Jordan, leading members of the Knesset in Israel, and high-level people in Turkey, Yugoslavia, and Spain (it was the time of Franco's regime). For some time I had also been traveling systematically to examine North American cities and states in detail. However, all of this travel did not give me the kind of detailed "laboratory" case study I needed.

Then, in 1966, I was invited by history professor Edward Lurie at Wayne State University to come to Detroit to give the opening paper at a conference sponsored by the U.S. State Department for visiting Fulbright scholars from abroad. It was my first visit to Detroit. I knew the American East and West coasts but not the center, and I was intrigued. I happened to be in New York City the next year at the time when parts of Detroit went up in flames during the so-called "civil disturbance." Still intrigued, as I flew back home to the San Francisco Bay Area, I scheduled a stopover in Detroit hoping to see the situation first-hand, but state militia had cordoned off the city. When I was in Paris on a Guggenheim Fellowship during the spring of 1968, Lurie telephoned me to ask if I knew of a likely candidate for a history professorship at Wayne State; I said I would like to be considered. That summer, after traveling through central and eastern Europe, I gave a paper at Jack Fisher's International Urban

Institute in Ljubljana in Slovenia, then part of Yugoslavia. Coincidentally, Fisher had been invited to bring his institute to Wayne State University. In the fall, we both began to work in Detroit.

At Wayne I taught courses on world cities and became co-director of the Liberal Arts Urban Studies Program. Joyce Garrett, a close friend of Coleman Young, Detroit's first black mayor, had studied abroad and had worked briefly in the U.S. Foreign Service. After taking one of my world cities courses, she orchestrated my being appointed as Director of Detroit's City Planning Department. (The offer came as a surprise to me. I had taken leave from teaching in the winter quarter of early 1979 to travel around South America and I was planning to return full-time to my home in California. That summer I was scheduled to attend an international political science conference in Moscow when Mayor Young asked me to come work for the City instead.)

A new charter had gone into effect for the City of Detroit shortly after Young took office. The new charter decreed that planning for the city not be traditional land-use planning, but instead should be planning to improve the lives of the residents, with an emphasis on social and economic planning. My Co-Director of Urban Studies at Wayne State was urban economist Wilbur Thompson, and we worked closely with geography professors Robert Sinclair and Bryan Thompson. During the decade I was in charge of the program, I expanded my knowledge of economics and geographic theory, which I applied to my work as a city planner and to my ongoing historical research.

The entire time I was in Detroit, I commuted from my home in Berkeley. I had lived on the peninsula south of San Francisco before moving to Berkeley, briefly attending graduate school at Stanford before deciding to finish my doctorate at Harvard, and I knew about the technological revolution that was beginning to take shape in what later became known as Silicon Valley, where I now live. When I began working for Detroit, Chrysler Motor Company, in deep financial trouble, had gone to the federal government for loan guarantees, and President Jimmy Carter asked the Mayor to prepare a plan to diversify Detroit's economy. The Mayor asked me to work on the plan. From that point onward, and as I was supervising the preparation of a Master Plan for the City, I preached the gospel of the coming "computer revolution." For example, in "Detroit's Next Steps" in *The Detrouter*, 3 (3) (March 1981): 47, I said:

“. . . In the next decade we will feel the full impact of the electronics revolution . . .” Under Chairman Roger Smith during the 1980s, General Motors Corporation did move rapidly to robotize its assembly plants, but the auto companies were too entrenched in their old industrial mindset to embrace the full implications of the coming Information Age; nor did the trade unions and most of the black community move rapidly to embrace the new age. It took two more decades before the U.S. government was talking about the “digital divide” that isolated American inner cities from more rapidly changing areas, Compuware was being induced to move its headquarters into downtown Detroit, and the auto companies were busy applying new technology to every facet of their work.