

Detroit's Demise and the Security first Agenda

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Canada's Border Politics

Canada is often characterized as a border nation with much of its population located within a geographic region that lies within 100 kilometers of the U.S. border; however, in spite of our proximity to the U.S., we are relative newcomers to border politics. Many of Canada's land crossings are in rural or sparsely populated regions and thus the border as a territorial limit has had little effect on the Canadian imagination until recently. However, we are quickly recognizing new realities emerging from the mandates of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security since its formation in 2002. The steady militarization of the Mexico-U.S. border is the most obvious manifestation of the new "Security first" mandate. San Diego-based architect, Teddy Cruz, suggests that the changes in the conception of the border are serving to carve up the continent by forming a "political equator" that has emerged in the last decade. Similarly we are witnessing the steady thickening of the border on the Canadian side after a long historical period when the U.S. and Canada shared the world's longest undefended boundary.

Windsor-Detroit History

The Windsor-Detroit region is exceptional in this border geography as it is the largest metropolitan area that straddles the 49th parallel. These twin cities occupy a unique position in North America, and the complications arising from the increasingly bifurcated, post-industrial urban fabric serves as a pretext for thinking about the geopolitics of North America as it is braced between the conflicting mandates of trade and security. These two cities are saddled with the burden of the border as its infrastructure ages and wait times increase. This coupled with the U.S. sub-prime lending crisis and the long, slow death of the American auto industry has led to a growing sense of despondency not seen in the region since the late 1960s.

To suggest that Windsor is dependent on Detroit is to underestimate the relation between the two cities. Windsor became amalgamated as a city in 1930 after the completion of the Ambassador Bridge (1929) and the Detroit-Windsor tunnel (1930). Prior to this time it was a collection of border communities along the shores of the Detroit River. The city of Windsor was founded initially because of the imperial trade advantages that could be gained by locating auto production on the Canadian side in the early part of the 20th century. Hence Windsor was primarily a manufacturing outpost, Detroit's annex in Canada. The trade infrastructure established by the 1930s still serves as the lifeline connecting these two regions. As a result this region can be described as both bi-national and bi-polar, heavily dependent on the fluctuations of a single industry and hence susceptible to cycles of depression and mania.

A vision of the twin cities as a paradigm of modern post-war international relations was put forward in the urban planning schemes of the 1950s and 1960s: a proposed gondola crossing connecting the commercial centers of Windsor and Detroit serves as a poignant reminder of an earlier era, and the historical connections of an urban community whose identity often overrides its respective national agendas. However, much of the modern imprint of Windsor-Detroit has been neglected or abandoned in favor of newer suburban communities that skirt the periphery of this sprawling region where the city gives way to a hybrid “rurbanism”, constantly gnawing away at the rural landscape in a long, slow bid to escape the political and economic problems that began in the 1940s.

Modern Suburbanization

Close to five million people currently live in the Windsor-Detroit metropolitan region (a region that covers approximately 142 square miles). However, most of the population occupies the suburban and exurban towns and cities that form networks around the inner city, whose population has just recently dipped under 1 million. Detroit is often said to be shrinking, but as architect and urbanist Kyong Park points out, Detroit is more accurately moving, pushing outwards toward its peripheries. This ex-urban expansion that is taking place on both sides of border contributes to the fragmentation of the region. On the Canadian side new suburban developments quietly mimic the American disdain for urban culture. A relatively wealthy international suburban donut extends from Bloomfeild Hills, Michigan to LaSalle, Ontario.

At the center of the donut are the two international border crossings that seem to reinforce this centrifugal movement toward the suburban periphery. The separation of this border region began as communities on both sides plotted their exit from the city and the current border problems have been a long time coming. As a relic from an earlier industrial era, the border crossings traverse their respective inner cities, which have become legendary dead zones where one waits to cross between the two countries. The closing of the pedestrian lane of the Ambassador Bridge many years ago sealed off any casual contact between the two cities. Today the picturesque order of the Windsor waterfront serves as a temporary viewing platform to gaze out at the spectacle of Detroit's impressive collection of glass towers and art deco skyscrapers without the supposed dangers of an encounter with inner city Detroit. But behind these waterfront facades, the urban centers have hollowed out. Traveling by car is a precondition to crossing and this has impacted the downtown regions; as a result of this cultural and geographic fragmentation communities on both sides are less connected than at any point in the last eighty years.

Security and History

This steady suburbanization is by no means unique; however it is looking to Detroit's history that we might read a series of population movements and urban planning events that laid the groundwork for the Security-first agenda. The prioritization of security in recent years was not solely born of the events surrounding 9/11. Detroit's legacy of racial segregation coupled with its war-time role as the "arsenal of democracy" made it the first American city to self destruct,

and its decentralization and sprawl became a model for suburban development in the U.S. from the 1950s onward. Detroit's downfall began long before the 1967 riots. In the late 1940s and 50s decentralized planning schemes were set in motion first by the Federal Housing Administration which moved to block financing of new urban housing in favor of suburban planning, followed by the National Defense and Interstate Highway Act of 1956 which financed the construction of freeways that effectively moved affluent white urban populations out to the suburbs, as southern black immigrants moved in as Detroit's war-time economy boomed. The strategy of decentralization that took place in these years was military in essence: the U.S. wished to avoid centralized urban concentrations in order to be less susceptible to foreign bombing campaigns like those carried out by the U.S. forces that devastated the cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. However, the legacy of a bunker mentality emerged as Detroit became increasingly decentralized.

The cold war legacy that underwrites the development of a suburban nation has hardened into an ideology that will take generations to challenge. No change of administration, however drastic, could possibly counter the bunker mentality that began long before the Department of Homeland Security was established. The erosion of the public sphere that had been fully achieved by the 1970s has only recently been challenged by the substitution of virtual communities in the last decade; however the kinds of sequestered spaces that are the mainstay of American life show no signs of changing anytime soon. The

kind of thin or porous borders anticipated in the 1990s after the fall of the Berlin Wall now seem like utopian visions for a transnational future that never arrived.