

# LIVING LABORATORIES

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*Dan Georgakas*

## LIVING LABORATORIES: FROM DETROIT TO ATHENS AND BACK

### A CONVERSATION WITH DAN GEORGAKAS AND THE SITUATIONS COLLECTIVE

**S***t***ituations:** *The situations in Greece and Detroit are front-page news these days given the dire economic situations and political dilemmas that each faces. Before we discuss things that both have in common, what do you think are the key differences between them?*

**Georgakas:** Modern Greece has always had a dreadful economy that sets off periodic waves of emigration. In contrast, the development of the auto industry in Detroit attracted an enormous influx of foreign and domestic immigrants. Most of the newcomers, who transformed Detroit into the most ethnically diverse city in America, were from Europe. The domestic newcomers were mainly Appalachian whites and African Americans from the heartland of the rural South.

A major consequence of immigration was virulent xenophobia and racism. Detroit became a stronghold of the Black Legion which was far to the right of the Ku Klux Klan. Approximately 10,000 of the Legion's 20,000-30,000 members were in Detroit. The Legion's violence became intolerable in 1936 with the kidnapping and murder of a WPA worker. Eleven participants in the atrocity received life sentences. A rapid demise of the Black Legion followed.<sup>1</sup> Father Coughlin, a Catholic priest who broadcasted a weekly radio show from a suburb of Detroit, was virulently anti-immigrant, anti-black, anti-Semitic and anti-union. Until he was silenced by the Vatican on the eve of World War II, Coughlin had six million listeners.

Hostility to immigrants ebbed during the war years, but discrimination against blacks became institutionalized. A white-initiated race riot occurred in 1943 and black rage erupted in the Great Rebellion of 1967. The election

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<sup>1</sup> Warner Brothers produced *The Black Legion* (1937) which is based on the case with Humphrey Bogart as the lead. Columbia had made *Legion of Terror* a year earlier. The film exposed the multifaceted violence of the Legion.

of the city's first black mayor in 1973 promised a new day but quickly turned into a Boss Tweed tradition that spawned decades of corrupt black mayors. These Detroit events had no parallel in Greece until waves of immigrants began to arrive about the time of Greece's entry into the EU. Golden Dawn might be seen as similar to the Black Legion.

Due to the failure of austerity, Greece saw the rise of SYRIZA and due to the failure to combat racism, Detroit saw the birth of the League of Revolutionary Black Workers.<sup>2</sup> The Eurozone's hostility to SYRIZA, accompanied by European mass media dismissing Portugal, Ireland, Greece and Spain as PIGS, is not unlike the hostility of Detroit's racist elites to the League.

**Situations:** *Detroit illustrates the crisis of a city, a crisis that can be compartmentalized. The crisis in Greece is national with an immediate impact on all of society and to some extent, all of Europe.*

**Georgakas:** That's true, but the auto industry headquartered in Detroit was responsible for millions of jobs in steel making, transportation, mining and other industries. When Detroit went bankrupt, Detroit's creditors, like Greece's, struck at the working class. Their immediate aim was to lower pensions and health care benefits were coupled with proposals to privatize all public institutions of any value.

**Situations:** *They were even talking about selling the collection of the Detroit Institute of Arts.*

**Georgakas:** That was only averted because most of the museum's strongest supporters were suburbanites. Their intervention saved the collection, but there is a parallel in the suggestion that Greece sell off some of its islands.

**Situations:** *The Detroit water company is going to be privatized?*

**Georgakas:** It's been absorbed into a regional entity. More troubling is that as of mid-2015, there were still 69,000 houses threatened with foreclosure and 46,000 people in peril of having their water cut off.<sup>3</sup> The police often do not respond to crimes in certain areas or do not appear until the next day.

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<sup>2</sup> Details about the League and its time are found in Dan Georgakas and Marvin Surkin, *Detroit: I Do Mind Dying* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2014, third edition) and Heather Ann Thompson, *Whose Detroit?* (Ithaca Cornell U Press, 2001).

<sup>3</sup> Diane Feeley, "Detroit's Foreclosure Hurricane," *Against the Current*, V. XXX, N. 3 (July-August, 2025), pp, 10-11. *Against the Current* includes bimonthly commentary on Detroit.

The city had even lost all of its supermarkets until Whole Foods opened a store in 2014. For decades you could drive on a major avenue from the center of the city to the city limits and not see many functioning businesses other than liquor stores, banks and gas stations. If you diverted into the side streets, you found vacant spaces where there had been acres of housing. This reflects a population that has fallen from almost two million to 700,000 with the numbers still declining.

**Situations:** *There must, at least, be some convenience stores.*

**Georgakas:** There are still some neighborhoods that have limited services, but what would be normal commerce in other cities is often absent. Until recently Detroit didn't have a single movie theater. In comparison, when I was a kid there were 5 theaters within easy walking distance of my house. Just two blocks away, there was a flower shop, butcher shop, toy store, two drug stores, two grocery stores, a hardware store, a local appliance store, a barber shop, etc. That was the norm throughout the city.

Most Americans don't understand the hardships now faced by the average Detroiter and know even less about the hardships faced by the average Greek. They also mistakenly think Detroit's ruins stem from the Great Rebellion. In fact, much of the destruction involved chronic fires in the 1970s and 1980s. The night before Halloween became a time when the only question was how many homes would be torched. Many black Detroiters believed the fires were set by real estate interests, not hooligans. They speculated that when property got very cheap, the realtors would show up and gentrify. That sounded a bit paranoid at the time, but de facto that's what has happened. Prices have gotten so low, investors are now buying up the center of Detroit and select areas at literally fire sale prices. The center of the city is like the green zones set up in Iraq. Services are provided, often private rather than public and the area is relatively safe. Similar speculation about real estate interests clearing territory by fires has been voiced about fires around Athens and in the Peloponnesus.

**Situations:** *Among the most famous ruins in Detroit is the large factory complex on the near East Side that was once a Packard plant. When and why was that abandoned?*

**Georgakas:** Most people think it was abandoned in 1967 or during the 1970s, but it occurred much earlier, in 1956, during the boom years. The factory was still functioning productively when Studebaker, the owner at

the time, went bankrupt. None of the Big 3 bought the factory. The auto companies were already planning to move operations to rural states or states hostile to unions. This huge complex in the center of the city with nearby expressways has remained abandoned for nearly sixty years.

**Situations:** *You are arguing that even when things were good, capital squandered potential assets?*

**Georgakas:** Their playbook disdained developing Detroit. A prime example is the J.L.Hudson's, a department store comparable to Macy's in New York and the anchor of downtown commerce, opened Northland, America's first shopping mall in 1954. Northland was placed just the other side of the city limits at Eight Mile Road, which freed the mall from Detroit taxes. An Eastland and a Southland, each just a few blocks beyond the Detroit's borders, soon followed. Detroit's downtown was still prosperous and the average wage in Detroit was the highest in the nation, but capital was already moving out to virtually all-white suburbs.

**Situations:** *How much did the push to the suburbs have to do with what was going on with unions and factories? And how does "white flight" factor?*

**Georgakas:** Let's start with white flight. Many Detroiters had accumulated considerable savings during the war years when rationing was in effect and production was concentrated on military products. When the war concluded, people could afford to move to better neighborhoods. In the case of Detroit's large Greek population, for example, nearly everyone who had been renting bought a house. To be sure, white wariness of desegregation was a factor. More important was the desire to own a house yet without accumulating unbearable debt. Even after moving from being a block from Briggs Manufacturing, I remained in the same racially integrated high school district. When the local Greeks built an expensive new church, it was constructed two blocks closer to the inner city in an integrating neighborhood.

African Americans also wanted to move to better neighborhoods and own rather than rent if possible. The general pattern was that the arrival of blacks generated a withdrawal of whites, but black workers were more like than unlike white workers. They owned cars, often had summer retreats in upstate Michigan, and planned to send their kids to college. This was a time when Detroit could have begun to address "white flight" by stabilizing neighborhoods that were being integrated.

An example of what was not done involves public education. Detroit schools were mostly racially segregated due to segregated neighborhoods. As blacks began to move into previously all-white areas, the city could have rezoned districts to create as much integration as possible. Instead, Detroit used rezoning to keep districts as segregated as possible. Detroit had two excellent magnet schools, Cass Tech in mid-town and Wilbur Wright on the west side. Cass served the college-bound and artistically-minded and Wright offered training that could lead to skilled trade's employment. The city could have created new magnet schools in white districts. Qualified black students would attend those schools, creating an integrated student body not divided by conflicting skills and ambitions. White residents would have grumbled, but they'd have been pleased to have quality schools nearby. Integration would have been fostered without bussing or jabber regarding lower standards. The city, however, chose to build its new schools in districts with the least integration. This structural myopia would set the stage for conditions that resulted in the disastrous 1970s.

The parallel with Greece is that funds from the EU could have improved Greek society, but most of it was syphoned off by corruption (by lenders as well as by Greek politicians) and had conditions that destroyed what little manufacturing Greece possessed. The "loans" were usually earmarked for projects whose major components had to be made abroad, usually in Germany. The long-term effect was that loans projected as bettering the Greek economy actually worsened it.

Detroit consistently followed a similar pathway. A notorious case involved a GM proposal in the late 1970s to build a new assembly plant in the center of Detroit, the first such plant in fifty years. Coleman Young, never serious about trying to bring new industry to Detroit, was thrilled. Detroit was required to offer aid in both cash and tax rebates. In return, GM promised a plant that would employ 6,000 workers, but a contingency to the proposal was that the expressway must be modified with ramps so workers could drive directly into the plant without setting foot in the city.

A major problem for the site was that it included a neighborhood known as Poletown. Despite its name, Poletown was racially integrated and very viable with 4,000 residents who owned their homes and operated many small businesses. Young, who never considered what the funds GM requested might have done if used for community development, decided that Poletown had to be sacrificed on the altar of the new factory. He asserted a dubious claim of eminent domain. The legal response of Poletown residents went

all the way to the Michigan State Supreme Court where Young won by a hair. The new factory turned out to be a dud. Due to faulty equipment and construction, it became notorious for making bad cars. Employment peaked at 3,000-4,000 but finally settled at 2,000. GM had gotten so much land that what had been Poletown was an auxiliary parking lot.

The pattern at the GM factory is typical of how new factories in Detroit are configured. A nearby expressway brings workers to the factory gates and there is a strip of empty landscape ending at a parking lot adjacent to the factory. Gates where activists might distribute literature are eliminated. No regular mass transit services the factories as it once did. This also reflects GM's successful campaign in the 1950s to thwart mass transit in favor of complex expressway systems. The end result is that new plants create no street life or local commerce.

**Situations:** *There are other parallels. The center of Athens has been emptied out and the sprawling suburbs have been encouraged. You lose the dynamic dimension of vibrant street life. Athens was always a lively place and now the center of Athens is where migrants congregate.*

**Georgakas:** I remembered the old Omonia Square very fondly. I used Omonia as a base whenever I was in Athens. Now, it's an area tourists are warned to keep out of, especially at night. Migrant workers are blamed for this change, but we have to consider what capitalism did in their homelands to drive them to Europe and why the EU demands that they remain in border nations like Greece. The development of Detroit's suburbs was not entirely spontaneous. During the 1950s, GM had mounted a national campaign to thwart mass transit in favor of complex expressway systems.

**Situations:** *We have to ask who has the right to the city. What is the nature of the city? In the face of capitalist abandonment, what kind of leverage is left for a city like Detroit?*

**Georgakas:** The odds for change get a lot longer when you have a desolated city with an ever dwindling population. Detroit is now 85% black, which is not good or bad in and of itself, but a strong multi-ethnic base would be far stronger politically. Obviously it is much better to fight when you still have considerable strength. One of the momentous mistakes of the United Auto Workers (UAW) was its response to the black liberation movement when it erupted at its main Dodge assembly plant less than a year after the Great Rebellion. The League of Revolutionary Black Workers that consolidated black

unrest called the UAW to account for its having only a token black presence in its leadership, its failure to get blacks into the skilled trades, its surrender of the shop floor and its generally failing policy of “peaceful coexistence” with management. A wise leadership could have acknowledged these failures and realized that angry black workers could be a force in revitalizing the union. The UAW could have served notice to the Big 3, already fearful of black militants, that black activists would be playing a major role on the union’s front lines.

Imagine what might have occurred if the UAW had gone into alliance with League radicals rather than trying to crush them. League attorney Ken Cockerel who had won landmark civil rights cases could have been asked to use his considerable talents on behalf of the UAW. John Watson, who had turned a college newspaper into Detroit’s third daily, could have been asked to try his hand at making the UAW paper into a dynamic resource. Organizers such as General Baker and Mike Hamlin could have been asked to try their hand at organizing the South. Chrysler activist Ron March could have been allowed his victory at Dodge Main to go forward rather than being denied by the UAW seizing ballot boxes with the assistance of the police. A militant UAW could have staged massive strikes and other actions challenging auto’s flight to anti-union states and an automation program designed to reduce rather than retrain workers. That didn’t happen. Instead, the arrival of the black liberation movement at the doors of the UAW was met with so much hostility that it generated a new slogan: UAW means U Ain’t White.

**Situations:** *I really love this counter history about what if the UAW had dealt with the League differently. If the UAW had pushed for shorter hours and committed to organizing in the South, everything would have changed. We need preemptive strategies when there is still some leverage.*

**Georgakas:** We won’t find any blueprints for change in past strategies, just an orientation that must be reshaped for our times and conditions. I fear things may have to get worse before we see that kind of effort.

**Situations:** *How much worse can it get?*

**Georgakas:** Well, the Greek public voted *Oxi* (no) to the Eurozone’s austerity plan. Greeks thought this would generate a better proposal. They got something worse. Only time will tell how Greeks ultimately respond.

**Situations:** *Let me return to Detroit. It seems the UAW believed it was unthinkable that the auto industry would desert the city. It allowed its cultural fears to overwhelm its economic and organizational long-term interests.*

**Georgakas:** The UAW was myopic. The Detroit radical movement, black and white, spoke often of the challenge posed by automation. The industry could use automation to cut jobs and lower costs by producing lower quality cars. On the other hand, automation could improve products, finance worker re-education and extend benefits. The UAW opted to remain passive as automation rippled through the industry and disappeared jobs of all kinds. Radicals resurrected the idea of reducing the work week to 30 hours with 40 hours pay. That shifts the discussion from shedding workers to shedding the burden of tedious work. That can never happen as long as private profit is at the helm of automation.

**Situations:** *They weren't reading the Grundrisse.*

**Georgakas:** The UAW had decided to trade control of the shop floor and significantly raising wages for health benefits and pensions. This prioritized aging and retired members, mainly white, over younger workers, mainly black. The long-term consequence was to create tensions based on age and race. Moreover, the gains the companies conceded when they were prosperous immediately became giveback demands during the industry's periodic slumps. Long-term benefits won by concessions would be slashed when GM and Chrysler went into bankruptcy. The Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) had understood that whatever gains a contract granted were only enforced as long as the workers remained militant. Totally rejecting contracts as the IWW did was not wise, but the IWW was on the money in stressing control of the workplace. Otherwise a broken contract ends up in the courts, one of the strongholds of capitalism.

Contemporary activists are groping toward some form of anarcho-socialism. This view proposes an anti-authoritarian structure that is still able to get things done but rejects the concept of a vanguard party as essential for revolutionary change. It promotes horizontal governance to the degree possible with severe limits on even that power. At the heart of this approach are democratic controls at the local level in forms that fit the particular circumstances at hand.

**Situations:** *It seems that this question of how best to organize is not really the question at the top of people's minds at this moment. It's probably not insignificant*

*that Greece and Detroit are both under fiscal receivership and we see that in last four years or so, any effort in Greece at resistance (protest movements, general strikes and all the rest) have been completely ineffective. We have seen little in Detroit in terms of resistance movements, but it's not difficult to imagine the response and it would probably be similar as in Greece and would likely be completely ineffectual.*

**Georgakas:** I think resistance has had some effect and there are local resistance groups in Detroit. What is crucial, however, is that Detroit and Greece clearly are the guinea pigs for transnational capitalists and bankers to test just how far they can go with their greed without provoking a mass rebellion. The auto industry basically gave black mayors a free hand to do whatever they wished, however corrupt, as long as there was no insurrection as in 1967. In the meantime, the industry gradually abandoned the city for sites that were difficult to unionize. Similarly, in Greece, New Democracy and PASOK were given a free hand in terms of domestic rule as long while the Eurozone banks used the “bailouts” of 2010 and 2012 to switch privately held debt into public debt.

**Situations:** *Greece and Detroit are similar in that their economies are in shambles and the political system is failing. Even mass uprisings do not seem to achieve change. Under these conditions what are the political possibilities?*

**Georgakas:** While radicals are very good at cataloging what is wrong with capitalist society, we have been poor at projecting how a different society would actually function. It is not good enough to say that we won't behave as they do. What is the basic infrastructure of this new society we desire? At what pace and in what manner do we proceed? A mass audience will not and should not respond to us until we have done this basic work. Otherwise, the situation will worsen and the old style resistance will be recycled, possibly resulting in some new form of authoritarian governance.

**Situations:** *Does that mean there is a real need for people to be planting gardens, creating autonomous zones and stuff like that? You've been dismissive of that, but don't they create a certain kind of leverage?*

**Georgakas:** Grace Lee (Boggs) has said, “I don't know what the next American Revolution is going to be like, but we might be able to imagine it if your imagination were rich enough.” She's suggesting that political change can be rapid once mass consciousness is attained. Same-sex marriage was recently declared a protected constitutional right. The speed of legalizing same-sex marriage during the past decade seems swift until we realize the

modern gay movement began to form in the 1950s when mass consciousness was abysmal. Even gay consciousness left much to be desired. Decades of struggle were needed to alter mass consciousness. The projects you noted, including worker-controlled corporations, reflect an altered consciousness and are portents of a new pathway, but at this time, they remain dependent on the system.

**Situations:** *Why is it that both in the U.S. case and the Greek case radicals continue to use the old tactics: electoral politics, marches and the like which seem to have little effect?*

**Georgakas:** Much of that has to do with the legacy of vanguard parties. I don't know much about the political structures of Greek parties, but I am familiar with the vanguard party mode as practiced here which I believe is also typical of Greek parties such as Antarsya (New Left Current) and the Greek Communist Party (KKE). Meetings of vanguard parties are hierarchically structured with a catechism to be mastered. Minority views often lead to expulsion. Members are warned about writers judged unworthy of being read yet somehow capable of leading unwary readers astray. If that is how a party or movement operates when it has no power, why would it not function in the same manner if it were in power? One aspect of the current generation of activists that I find positive is that most have rejected this kind of political organization.

**Situations:** *You were a key figure in Black Mask. That was quite bold yet successful.*

**Georgakas:** Details of our actions are accurately covered in a number of essays.<sup>4</sup> What I would emphasize here is that we sought to unite revolutionary art forms with revolutionary politics. We didn't want to theorize about art but to create art that advanced our views. Ben Morea, the founder of Black Mask, explored what he thought could be done with black and white images and spaces. I sought a literary style that was easily accessible however complex the vision. We did as much as possible in public spaces. We were familiar with dada, surrealist, situationist and anarchist theory, but they were mainly tool boxes. We were driven by rage. I think General Baker, one

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<sup>4</sup> Most comprehensive coverage is by Gavin Grinder, "Poetry Written in Gasoline: Black Mask and Up Against the Wall Motherfuckers," *Art History* (February 2015) V. 38. No. 1, pp. 170-210. Complete issues of *Black Mask* and other documents in the collectively compiled *Black Mask & Up Against the Wall Motherfucker* London: Unpopular Books and Sabotage Editors, 1993), BM books. Interviews with Ben Morea and Dan Georgakas in Iain McIntyre, "A Conversation with Black Mask" in Josh MacPhree and Erik Reuland (eds.), *Realizing the Impossible: Art Against Authority* (Oakland: A-K Press, 2007), pp.152-167.

of the founders of the League, who told workers at Dodge Main: "Be Mad, Be Mad, Be Mad, Can't Do Nothing If You Ain't Mad." Well, we were mad. Some would say we were maddened or maddening. We were enraged by the general insanity of capitalism. We especially despised celebrity culture and all cultural mechanisms that transform art into commodity. We practiced artistic direct action. *Up Against the Wall Motherfuckers*, which evolved from *Black Mask*, was even more provocative.

I am told *Black Mask* was the first group to use black ski masks in a demonstration. Maybe so. But we didn't use them to conceal our identity. The masks were dramatic devices, even assertions of identity. This is most evident in our march down Broadway in 1967 with a poster declaring Wall Street is War Street. This was public mourning as well as protest. Skulls were carried to remind viewers of the cost of war. This was theater of the streets.

I don't know how effective such efforts would be today. The capitalists have made street art part of their society of the spectacle. Perhaps blogs on the Internet, initiatives such as Kick-Start and other innovation are the cusp of a new cultural thrust. The Occupy Wall Street movement certainly offers an example of contemporary artists and activists devising public political theater that could not be smothered by museums and mass media. Occupy was able to do something no other recent radical movement has accomplished. It reset the terms of economic discourse with its concept of 99% of Americans being controlled by the 1%. That understanding has become a permanent part of mass consciousness. The spontaneous reactions in America and around the world to Occupy, were wonderful. On the other hand, Occupy never figured out how to institutionalize itself. It was a guerilla force that became vulnerable by its futile attempt to hold territory.

**Situations:** *Is there a possibility of a new "cultural front" of the kind you suggest? Don't we have to ask what people are reading on their iPad? There seems to be minimal curiosity and many young people think they are going mad if they truly begin to read.*

**Georgakas:** I would say the immediate effect of the electronic revolution has been to replace serious analysis with a deceptive grab bag of data. Much of that data consists of factoids, which are not minutia, but false statements passing as fact. Norman Mailer coined the word.

**Situations:** *Do you know the motivation, the backstory, for his essay, "The White Negro?" His wife was having an affair with Miles Davis.*

**Georgakas:** I don't know anything about that. For me, Mailer began as a serious critic of America but embraced bizarre sexual ideas and became enmeshed in the culture of celebrity.

**Situations:** *The Internet has become a tool of disinformation, not one of liberation. It may have created the most massive society of control we've ever seen. That system of control has been brought right into our laps and now on our wrists with people pleased to pay for the disservice. A culture of passivity has been created.*

**Georgakas:** I think the problem is like that of automation. The Internet could serve truly noble ends, but capitalism subverts it into an addiction to trivial pursuits. Many Americans think they are well-informed because of the Internet's overabundance of factoids and minutia. Intellectual browsing of bookshelves has largely been replaced by suggestions from Amazon, Inc. to the effect that if you enjoyed book x, you surely will enjoy books x-y-z. I remember an Armenian bookseller in Detroit. You might go to the counter with a title and have him challenge your selection. He'd grab a book and tell you that was what you needed to read. One time I went to buy a text on American literature and he insisted I had to read D. H. Lawrence's *Studies in Classical American Literature*. He wasn't interested in how much I spent. He was a bookseller who wanted to discuss books. You can't have that kind of experience buying a book online or at a bookstore chain like Barnes & Noble.

**Situations:** *Even the libraries are oriented against curiosity and discovery. You can't request stuff so easily today and there are generally no more stacks to wander through. This raises the issue of social media, the Facebook culture. Supposedly, the Arab Spring was the first "revolution" done by social media. However, it really could not be called a revolution and secondly as we have learned these things can be controlled very easily.*

**Georgakas:** The Internet is very useful in researching titles you've already identified. It is also good at transmitting announcements, fact sheets, fundraising and editorial pieces, services once performed by pamphlets and flyers. WikiLeaks has been an exceptional appropriation of the new technology. In terms of revolutionary organization, however, are you going to risk your life for a contact you only know via Facebook or other social media? Do we really believe e-mail agitation is activism? Moreover, the opposition has a far greater leverage using the same technology. The revolution will not be Skyped.

**Situations:** (Peter Bratsis): I wrote an article on the first uprisings in Greece in 2008. I was in a book store in Athens then and saw a line of people getting books. That was part of a real resurgence of the Left in Greece. That generation realized that the days of their parents and grandparents are gone. They were turning to the Left, but I noticed that the bookstore shelves did not feature Castoriadis, Poulantzas and other major figures of Greek intellectual life, or for that matter, the works of Marcuse. There is no intellectual parallel to the bursting anger of this new generation. They had the political will to risk themselves on the streets, but there was no intellectual project.

**Georgakas:** I've read criticism that the *Left Forum* should not allow anyone to speak just because they pay a fee. The *Left Forum* may have its problems, but that is not one of them. Conflicting ideas free to compete must be the essence of a new society. There are other groups that, like *Left Forum*, have national conferences, but we clearly need more events at the local level and not just once-a-year.

In Detroit in the 1960s, the Friday Night Socialism Forum of the Socialist Workers Party was very creative. Most of the speakers were not in the SWP and not necessarily even socialists. I gave my first public speech there, an account of what I had experienced in Greece in 1965 regarding the mass movement that prompted the colonels' coup of 1967. Many radicals got to know one another at those SWP weekly forums. Most of the League founders would show up from time to time, some regularly.

**Situations:** Is anything like that happening in Detroit now? Study groups or anything close to internal education?

**Georgakas:** There are many groups resisting at different levels, but I have no evidence that they have yet coalesced into a mass movement. I haven't lived in Detroit for decades, so I have no special knowledge of study groups. What I can say is that radical public lectures and study groups were common in the 1960s. Some examples were programs sponsored by *Facing Reality* headed by Martin Glaberman, *News & Letters* headed by Raya Dunayevskaya and *Correspondence* headed by James Boggs.<sup>5</sup> They served as a conduit for preserving and advancing the radical tradition. Dunayevskaya introduced me to the work of Marcuse and I first heard of Castoriadis at the Glaberman group. *Correspondence* published vignettes I wrote about Greece.

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<sup>5</sup> Dan Georgakas, "Young Detroit Radicals," in Paul Buhle (ed.), *C.L.R. James: His Life and Work* (New York: Allison Busby, 1968), pp. 185-194.

Another strong characteristic of the Detroit movement was independent publishing. The *Fifth Estate*, now a quarterly, was launched in 1965 and is now the longest publishing English-language, anti-authoritarian newspaper in American history. Even more successful was the creation of *Broadside Press* in 1965 by Dudley Randall, a poet and librarian. Black poets in Detroit, as elsewhere, were furious that mainstream publishers did not include black poets in their anthologies. Randall decided to be an independent publisher of black poets just as *City Lights* in San Francisco had published beat poets. *Broadside* quickly became the most influential publisher of black poetry in America, its books widely read by African American militants as well as by the literati. Unlike his brother, Randall was not a hard core leftist. Nonetheless, like other African American writers, Randall had visited the Soviet Union in the 1930s, became acquainted with a number of Russian writers and was generally favorably impressed by what he saw.

Detroit's activism must not be romanticized. Ultimately our movement failed there just as the national radical movement failed. I believe, however, we used imaginative tactics in various venues and our experiences, good and bad, can be useful to present day radicals. The 1960s for all their agonies were also a time of hope that fundamental and even revolutionary change in America was possible.

An odd example of cultural change was *On the Town*, an entertainment magazine edited by blacks. I was one of the two whites involved. We focused on Detroit's music venues and artists, but our columns often offered political commentary on topics such as King's March in Detroit, Dick Gregory's activism and writers such as James Baldwin. The idea was to build a base among African Americans and slowly attract more white readers.

**Situations:** *Were the MC 5 people part of it?*

**Georgakas:** No, they were associated with John Sinclair who headed a local writer's workshop. Sinclair, however, was never close to Detroit's black radicals and formed the White Panther Party, which was mainly a letterhead organization that aped the Black Panthers. Sinclair was primarily a cultural rebel, but the Detroit police thought it proper to shoot up his center in 1967.

We also had the *Unstabled Coffeehouse*, a theater company founded by Edith Carroll Cantor, a socialist.<sup>6</sup> She was soon joined by Woodie King, Jr. to form

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<sup>6</sup> Discussion of the Unstabled in Dan Georgakas, *My Detroit: Growing Up Greek and American in Motor City* (NY: Pella, 2006), pp.249-254.

the first racially integrated theater in Detroit's history.<sup>7</sup> We produced plays by writers such as Jean Genet, Tennessee Williams, Luigi Pirandello, Le Roi Jones (not yet Amiri Baraka), William Saroyan and Edward Albee. Lily Tomlin, a Detroiter, got her first starring role at the *Unstabled* acting in a Samuel Beckett play. Woodie was keen on producing the work of local playwrights. He produced the first play of Ron Milner, an African American and a play by Reverend Malcolm Boyd, a white Freedom Rider. I acted in a play titled *Sitdown '37* that honored the twenty-fifth anniversary of the historic strike in Flint. The play was performed for the UAW in Flint with many of the original strikers attending. It was very well received, but the UAW never followed up with additional performances or commissions for new plays.

I offer these examples to give a sense of the hope we had that art could help transform society and that you didn't need government grants or wealthy "angels" to survive. I have read a great deal about the young artists now active in Detroit, but I am not aware that they are doing work of the kind I've noted.

***Situations:*** *So we have this cultural decline that parallels the social and political crisis that goes with the failure of government and the living laboratories for physical and monetary receivership and capital abandonment. The cultural response today seems to be a turn to escapism. Instead of taking up the task of articulating a political sensibility, art is increasingly consumerist, trying to escape. We have moved from optimism and the possibility of political change to being part of the now, the escapist consumerist culture.*

**Georgakas:** I am troubled that so many people who want to be filmmakers have no concerns that demand artistic expression. They are always seeking a hot topic to pitch rather than having ideas fomenting from within. They want to be famous. Most poets, in a similar fashion, seem more interested in being an honored artist than having feelings or ideas that demand artistic expression. If one looks at a magazine like *Poets & Writers*, nearly every article is about a university writing program or how to market. In contrast, one of the artistic projects of the 1970s and 1980s was to create an alternative film culture in opposition to mainstream cinema culture. This meant creating independent critical journals, distribution companies and exhibition venues in addition to making films. That movement should have advanced with the new technology, but we were unable to figure out how to use the Internet and DVDs in creative fashion even as many small

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<sup>7</sup> Details on Detroit black arts related to national movement found in James Edward Smethurst, *the black arts movement* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), pp. 228-237.

theaters and distributors were gobbled up by the majors and the number of independent bookstores shriveled.

**Situations:** *Does there still remain a potential for a creative upsurge in Detroit? For example Cornel West has commented on what it means to move from John Lee Hooker and Motown to “be happy” songs. In other words, “don’t worry, be happy.” Too much Mickey Mouse music. Certainly, we should be very worried about the lack of a cultural front in the most desolate cities in the neoliberal era. And is there much cultural resistance in Greece or are we in a period of creativity in which those forms pointing to a solution and creative confrontation are no longer there and we are reduced to protest and resistance?*

**Georgakas:** Marty Glaberman liked to say that revolutionary outbursts often come unexpectedly. Once they blossom, we can track how they had evolved but during that evolution, nothing seemed to be happening. So my following comments need to be seen in that context. The only significant artistic expression I am aware of in Greece is the explosion of graffiti art. Some of the slogans and images are quite striking. When the National Hellenic Museum in Chicago presented this work, I was happy to see it recognized but concerned that exhibition might be an early stage of appropriation.

Recent Greek films are very disappointing. Those receiving international ink are rightly called the Greek Weird Wave. They are more interested in style than content. You can see a dozen of these films and have no idea of the 25-30% unemployment rate, capital flight, scarcity of medicines, suicides, slashing of pensions, reduced salaries, etc. that are the realities of contemporary Greece. Even when a film deals with drug addiction, sexism, or crime, it usually is posed in psychological terms. There are some exceptions each year but no sense of a movement.<sup>8</sup>

One virtue of the commercial Greek films of the studio system of the 1950s-70s that produced some fifteen hundred soap operas, musicals, noirs and romantic comedies is that it managed to capture the spirit of Greek culture. I think that’s why they are so very popular when rerun on Greek national television. That system also produced excellent art films, such as *Stella*, *O Dragos* and *A Girl in Black*, that had a mass audience in Greece.

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<sup>8</sup> *The Building Manager* (2009), *Tungsten* (2011) and *Xenia* (2014) are three Greek films that grapple with contemporary issues.

Cinema in the post-junta movement often combined revolutionary cinematic techniques with leftist content. The most famous of these is *The Traveling Players* by Theo Angelopoulos. Those films were critically lauded, but they also had a large mass audience. Contemporary Greek films that promote themselves as more than entertainment are geared to art house audiences with a marked disdain for popular culture.

**Situations:** *Have you seen any of the films made about contemporary Detroit? There is Detropia, a film financed by the Ford Foundation. The director tries to present the new Detroit without the dialectical tensions that overlap between the old and the new. And there is the film, Searching for Sugarman.*

**Georgakas:** I've seen about half dozen new films about Detroit. They mostly avoid handling hot potatoes in favor of estheticizing the ruins. Some of them don't even bother to talk to one autoworker.<sup>9</sup> A notable exception is *The Life of Grace Lee* which accurately records her life and thoughts in an interesting visual style.<sup>10</sup> Most of *Sugarman* is about the search for Sixto Rodriquez, a Detroit singer who didn't know he was a super-star in South Africa.<sup>11</sup> Considerable footage features the searchers and Sugarman's ardent, white South African fans. When Rodriquez is eventually located, not much follows. Viewers don't learn that although very reclusive and eccentric, Rodriquez ran for mayor of Detroit three times and had worked at Dodge Main just a few years after the collapse of the League. He had attended Wayne State and his daughters clearly have a strong and sophisticated Latino/Latina consciousness. The film is more an overture, than a completed work. Criticism from the Left about the film was rare due to political correctness. I also think Olive Stone's *Untold Story of the United States* suffered from the same syndrome.<sup>12</sup>

**Situations:** *At the Left Forum (2014), Stone presented, but there were very few good questions.*

**Georgakas:** Most interviews follow the softball model of National Public Radio. For example, Henry Wallace was clearly redbaited, but Stone was not

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<sup>9</sup> Reviews of *Detropia*, *DeForce* and *Requiem for Detroit* in Dan Georgakas, "Detroit: An Urban Zombie: Motown Images in Three New Documentaries," *Cineaste* (Fall, 2012).

<sup>10</sup> See my review of "The Evolution of Grace Lee Boggs," *Cineaste* V. XXXIX, N. 2 (Summer, 2014).

<sup>11</sup> Dan Georgakas, "Searching for Sugarman," *Cineaste* V. XXXVIII, N. 2 (Spring, 2013).

<sup>12</sup> Dan Georgakas, "Appraising Oliver Stone's Untold History of the United States," *Cineaste* V. XXXVIII, No. 4, (Fall, 2013).

asked if it was true that most of Wallace's inner circle were members of the Communist Party and what effect that had. Numerous other omissions and simplifications were not addressed. Now, Oliver Stone is a conscientious filmmaker who has consistently explored leftist ideas in films that attract a mass audience. Such artists are not well-served by simple-minded, rah-rah reviews. The only contemporary Greek director to get major distribution in the United States is Costas Gavras, who has lived most of his life in France, where most of his films, like *Z*, have been financed.

**Situations:** *His latest film, Capital: Money is the Master certainly could expand our discussion here. The film is very long and opens in filmic form some of the massive contradictions of Neo-Liberalism. Why aren't we seeing more radical creative confrontation? Is it just finance? I mean radical films will not be underwritten by the Ford Foundation.*

**Georgakas:** John Sayles states it is now much harder to get distribution for his films than when he began as an unknown, and it was very hard then. More than ever, Hollywood is orientated to blockbuster entertainments and special effects. Mainstream critics write more about how much a film earns than if it's any damn good. Since the Reagan years, federal funding for documentaries has waned as has funding for critical journals. We should expect that. *Finally Got the News*, one of the best radical films ever made in America, began as a project of Newsreel, a radical collective.<sup>13</sup> When the League took over the project, the idea was not simply to complete one film but to make Detroit the center of independent radical filmmaking in America.

**Situations:** *You speak of rage. If that rage among the League and other activists was just personal with no intellectual convictions, they could have been bought off easily.*

**Georgakas:** That also applies to filmmakers and other artists. I think we must underscore that during the 1960s-1970s, we thought change was possible. People in theater, music and cinema pursued their visions rather than festival prizes. A librarian thought the course of black publishing could be altered by one publishing house. A handful of black activists thought they could humble the auto barons and their union lapdogs. They had fire in the belly. Some of the Greek militants I have met are like that.

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<sup>13</sup> Extensive discussion of *Finally Got the News* in Georgakas/Surkin, *Detroit: I Do Mind Dying*, pp.107-130.

**Situations:** *You admire the anarcho-syndicalist IWW, but we can't go back.*

**Georgakas:** I agree that we cannot go back and I think the challenges in Greece and the U.S. are different. The American Left, while increasingly committed to new forms of organization, has not yet discovered how to channel the anger of Americans into a viable movement. We have not yet learned how to reanimate and transform the old to make the new. The Greek Left is already connected to a mass movement, but it remains unclear about how it intends to proceed without falling back on the vanguard mindset and charismatic leadership that historically have been so ruinous for Greece.