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Tourism, art and urban neighborhoods

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Abstract: One of the most troubling aspects of cultural studies, is the lack of comparative cases to expand the horizons of micro-sociology. Based on this, the present paper explores the effects of gentrification in one neighborhood, Riverwest in Milwaukee, Wisconsin USA. This essay-review explores the role of arts, not only as creating an image of neighborhoods, but as a mechanism to prevent the commoditization of spaces. Riverwest has never been commoditized as a tourist-product like many other tourist-sites. The concept of patrimony and heritage are placed under the lens of scrutiny in this investigation. To some extent, some cities are produced to be consumed while others do not, is one of the intriguing points this research explores.

Key Words: Art, Modernity, Capitalism, Commoditization, Tourism.

1. Introduction

Tourists come to the neighborhood of Riverwest for several events that serve as tourists attractions. The first of these arranged events started in 1979. Named 'Artwalk,' it takes place annually in the second weekend of October. Originally meant to support local artists by attracting people who live in the neighborhood and close by surrounding neighborhoods, it now attracts tourists from a several hundred mile radius, including Chicago which is 90 miles (145 Km) to the south. Somewhat similar, subsequent tourist events are two block parties, a pub crawl, and a 24 hour bicycle race. Artwalk was not only first, but reveals a fundamental characteristic of the neighborhood. Moreover, Artwalk is unusual, if not unique, in that it did not come from external interests and forces, but was and continues to serve indigenous interests and ends.

2. The Neighborhood

Riverwest is fairly centrally located in an upper Midwest former industrial city, Milwaukee, Wisconsin. The city comfortably fits the 'rustbelt' name. The city reached its population apex in the early 1960s, topping three quarters of a million. It has declined to slightly more than 600,000 in 2010. Before the post-WWII in-migration of African Americans, Milwaukee's ethnic composition reflected extraction from middle Europe--German, Polish, Italians mainly, who came in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. By the mid-twentieth century, the economy was mainly manufacturing, favoring heavy industry along with beer and dairy. The manufacturing base employed a relatively highly skilled workforce. Politically, the city was exceptional, having socialist mayors through 1960.

Riverwest is former industrial and residential neighborhood. Today the heavy industry

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that once interspersed housing, mainly duplexes and small tenements, has largely, although not entirely, disappeared. The neighborhood, like the city, and the entire upper Midwest went through deindustrialization since the 1970s. For most such neighborhoods, deindustrialization resulted in deterioration in the quality of life for their denizens. With the loss of the industrial economic base came a host of urban problems: a shrinking tax base, flight by long term residents to suburbs, depopulation, racial and ethnic segregation, concentrated poverty, increased interpersonal predatory crime, and so on. Riverwest did not experience these ills. Moreover, today it shows vigor and vitality without gentrification. It has remained a working class neighborhood, now more racially and ethnically integrated than ever. It has a thriving artistic community, and has attracted new migrants from around the world because of its character.

3. Situating Riverwest

Milwaukee fits with the other industrial cities in virtually every respect, with some slight variation on the timing of socioeconomic shifts. In late modernity, beginning in the 1970s, it ranked among the most residentially segregated by race (Massey and Denton 1993). More diversified than Detroit or Pittsburgh, its industrial base rested on various ferrous metal products: machine tools and dies, castings, forgings, and heavy equipment, most notably. Its workforce reflected a relatively high degree of skill, in part a heritage of the 'Forty-eighters,' German democrats who fled the failure of the 1848 rebellion. Unlike the contemporary wave of Irish immigrants fleeing the potato famine, Milwaukee German immigrants tended toward what today would be called middle class, at least in the United States. Literate, skilled in various technical occupations, they formed a template that would persist in Milwaukee and its central institutions, especially education and government (Ortlepp 2009).

Riverwest has reflected the ethnic makeup of Milwaukee, which by the 1920s had a German-Italian-Polish character. By the 1940s, a small Puerto Rican contingent along with a smattering of other ethnic heritages made the neighborhood one of the more diverse in the city. It remained ethnically stable until the 1970s, when Black residents began to populate its northwestern quadrant. The workforce also reflected Milwaukee's traditional composition: about one-third skilled workers, one-third semi-skilled, and the remainder clerical-sales, mana-

gerial, and a few professionals. Among working class neighborhoods, Riverwest also boasted of relatively high levels of educational attainment. About 20 percent were high school graduates in 1950 rising to 25 percent in 1960 and about one-third by 1970. Demographic characteristics began to change in the 1970s with more Black residents, out-migration of long term residents with an influx of households with more diverse backgrounds. Although losing population since 1940 when it had about 40 thousand residents to the present with approximately 30 thousand, the housing stock remained much the same.

Riverwest is a walkable neighborhood. It is about 20 blocks on its north-south axis and 12 to 15 blocks on its east-west axis. It has three parks, schools, churches, small stores, restaurants, and many taverns. Several bus and trolley buses have run through it, and some still do. Riverwest is the western part of the northeast quadrant of the city. Topographically, the neighborhood slopes downward toward the river. The Milwaukee River forms its eastern boundary and partially its southern boundary as the river makes a southwesterly bend. Its northern boundary is less physical than social, as the site had heavy industry in the earlier years and retail outlets since about 1980. The western boundary has shifted through time and has always been less well defined. The southwestern boundary has been problematic, as that part of Riverwest bordered the traditional Black neighborhood, Milwaukee's so-called Bronzeville (Greenen 2006, Trotter 1988). By the later 1960s Bronzeville ghettoized (O'Reilly et al. 1965). Since 1990 the area gentrified and became what today is called Brewer's Hill. The southwestern part of Riverwest has had disputable boundaries. The area has shifted back and forth over the years according to social changes, especially regarding race and the political economy. These changes and the reasons for them constitute one of the focuses of this study.

Other defining sites in and about Riverwest include industry, parks, schools, and churches. Heavy industry concentrated in the north and south parts of the neighborhood with medium and light industries such as dry cleaning plants, lumber yards, and food packing scattered throughout. Light and heavy industry has largely given way to retail space with a concomitant decrease in capital concentration and wage decline. Three municipal parks modestly sized but with attractive recreational facilities, are situated in the north east corner, the central eastern area along the river, and the central southern part of Riverwest. In the past, there

was a public indoor swimming pool, but that site is now a non-school educational center. Three public grade schools still operate. In the early part of the period four Roman Catholic and one Lutheran school served the neighborhood, but by 2010 that had diminished to one Catholic and one private non-denominational school. All the schools were associated with churches that still serve the neighborhood. Since the 1970s small Pentecostal churches have appeared in addition to a Society of Friends meeting house. Significantly, the pattern of industry, recreational facilities, schools, and churches does not differ from most neighborhoods in Milwaukee.

4. Social Change

Beginning in 1940, just before the United States entered the Second World War, Riverwest was dotted with machine shops along with a few large metal and electrical fabricators and assembly plants. The neighborhood economy began to thrive with the looming war's armament demand. It became a center of specialty machining and tool and die manufacture during and after the war. The post war period well into the 1960s was what Michael Johns (2003) called "a moment of grace." Many residents of the neighborhood walked to work at nearby factories and shops. After work, they repaired to neighborhood taverns, often accompanied by children, for leisure and recreation. They could shop at neighborhood groceries, bakeries, butcher shops, get their clothes and shoes repaired, buy hardware items, and so on, all within the neighborhood and through commerce with their neighbors.

Neighborhoods to the west and northwest of Riverwest had similar configurations of geography and demographics until the 1970s. The exception was the neighborhood to the southwest, Bronzeville, which contained most of Milwaukee's Black residents. The Black population expanded beginning after the Second World War but tended to remain geographically cohesive. It was an expanding circle. Due to deindustrialization and persistent discrimination, that Black core experienced ghettoization. The neighborhood to the southwest ghettoized, then gentrified; those to the west and northwest ghettoized. In a microcosm, the area of Milwaukee's central city north went through what Sugrue and others described for industrial cities (O'Reilly 1963, O'Reilly et al. 1965, Palay 1981). Nonetheless, with no physical boundary to the west, Riverwest defied the pattern: no ghettoization and no gentrification.

Thomas J. Sugrue's 1996 *The Origins of the Urban Crisis* offered a pivotal if not definitive account of urban decline in the United States. In his preface to the 2005 reissue of the book, he summarized his historical argument. Using Detroit as a model case study, Sugrue attributed the decline to three forces: deindustrialization, workplace racial and ethnic discrimination, and residential racial segregation. He argued that grassroots conservatism, especially regarding race, had been built into the "New Deal's 'rights revolution'" (Sugrue 2005: xix). His case for Detroit as exemplary rests on similar studies of Detroit (Farley et al. 2000) along with those of Baltimore, Brooklyn, Chicago, Los Angeles, Milwaukee, Philadelphia, and St. Louis, to name a few (Bauman et al. 2000, Bluestone and Stevenson 2002, Bobo 2002, Diamond 2009, Durr 2003, Jones 2009, Meyer 2000, Pritchett 2002, Rieder 1985, and Wolfinger 2007). Sugrue traced the origins of decline to several turning points. Capital mobility especially beginning in the 1970s made possible and potentiated deindustrialization of the centers of capital. The developing world became the global workshop. Urban devastation followed (Harvey 1973, 2005). Demographic changes exacerbated shifts in the political economy. Suburbanization reflected the obverse of urban depopulation. Sugrue also pointed to gentrification as an attempted solution to urban decline, but argued that it did not trickle down to older, industry dependent neighborhoods. The result for most working class neighborhoods, especially in the rust belt cities, but also in places like Los Angeles and Oakland, revealed a now familiar story of crumbling infrastructure, housing dilapidation and abandonment, rising street crime, racial segregation, concentrated poverty—in sum, ghettoization (Orfield 1985).

While generally cogent, the argument by Sugrue and similar arguments by other scholars have some cracks. It is in those cracks that the present research focuses. Cultural anthropology has an old saw about the Bongo tribe. For any generalization about the human condition at least one exception, the Bongoes, calls it into question. By doing so, the Bongoes render an important service to the science. They show the faults in an explanation and call forth more exacting thought and revealing research. The neighborhood of Riverwest in Milwaukee is the Bongo tribe of contemporary critical urban theory. One of the most important of those lacunae appeared as early as 1970 in Henri Lefebvre's *The Urban Revolution*. In Neil Smith's forward to the translation, he summarized one of Lefebvre's main points: "For Lefebvre, by con-

trast, space holds the promise of liberation... Space is radically open for Lefebvre" (Lefebvre 1970:xiii). Lefebvre implies the liberating potential of space comes from the power and promise of social force among people in their interactions. In the 1930s and 1940s the site for creative social change was on the shop floor, but late modern capitalism with its changing nature of work militated against that space. Neighborhoods, in contradistinction, might still resist and offer a site for resistance against the interpenetration of capital into social relations.

5. Frameworks and Explanations

Bongoism, however fascinating as a case study in exceptionalism, still cries out for explanation. Bongoes may be unique, but the student of society still must explain their way of life, even if it turns out to be *sui generis*. Several explanations follow. Drawing heavily on the Chicago School tradition of urban studies leads to an appreciation of Riverwest's exceptionalism. That tradition stretches from Jane Adams and Albion Small in the late nineteenth century, through Park, Burgess, and Louis Wirth ([1925] 1964) to the recent work of Robert J. Sampson, his collaborators and students (Sampson 2008a, b, Sampson and Wilson 1995, Sampson et al. 2005, Sampson 2011). Another explanatory framework derives from perspectives that link urbanism, culture, and developments of late capitalism such as Mark Gottdiener (1985), David Harvey (1985, 1989, 2005), Henri Lefebvre ([1970] 2003, [1974] 1991), Saskia Sassen (1994), Edward Soja (1989), and Sharon Zukin (1995). The third trajectory of the research explores the transformative potential for creative work among working class people. It builds on historical studies by, for example, George Lipsitz (1994) and Michael Denning (1996). As Karl Marx famously observed in his *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, "Man makes his history, but he does not make it out of the whole cloth; he does not make it out of conditions chosen by himself, but out of such things as he finds close at hand" (Marx [1885] 1963:5). The present research examines how people used their neighborhood and its close to hand materials to make a sustainable and resistant culture.

6. Enter Art

Art entered, and like the Dude in the movie, *The Big Lebowski*, the neighborhood abided. For

a while it looked shaky: declining population, declining home ownership, a shift in racial composition from Euroamerican to various minorities, closing small businesses. This was most noticeable in the 1980s into the early 1990s. But it stopped declining. Now there are a few new businesses: a large hardware store adjacent to an older lumber yard, a furniture manufacturer, a coffee roaster and café, and several new restaurants and bars. Population has not soared, but it stabilized. True, there are a few condominium units made from remodeled factories, but they fail to dominate the neighborhood. Art entails artists, of course, and there are many different kinds of them. There are painters and poets, sculptors, musicians, ceramicists, wood workers, and so on. Riverwest has them. In fact, Riverwest has always had them—working class artists, at least since 1940. They are artists who made and did their art in addition to their day jobs, or night jobs in the days when factories ran three shifts. They are not the Hemingways and Fitzgeralds, the Dalis and Picassos, the Josephine Bakers, and the like. Riverwest is not Paris in the 1920s, or Greenwich Village in the 1940s and 1950s, or Harlem in the 1920s, Chicago in the 1930s, or Weimar Berlin. Riverwest does not have the world famous artists, writers, and musicians. Like it always has, and along with the non-artists, it has the worker artists: the school secretary artists, the tofu factory poets, the house cleaning photographers, and so on.

The art and the artists are not important for Riverwest because of their renown, because they have very little of that. What they have is social form, to borrow an idea from Georg Simmel and applied to art by Howard Becker. Their effectiveness lies in making and sustaining the neighborhood for three or four generations, at least, depending on how one counts generations. It comes from an old Chicago School discovery—cultural transmission. Cultural transmission operates despite changes in populations, because the artistic cultural tradition is passed from one generation of residents to the next. The secret to Riverwest is art, workers' art. It is the art of people creating; something unique to our species, even in the face of humanity-robbing political and economic systems.

7. Work, Creativity, and Species Being

Karl Marx famously analyzed the nature of capitalism and described the capitalist system. In his early writings on the subject in his *Eco-*

nomic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844 (EPM) He distinguished work under capital to work before capitalism. He also distinguished human work from the labor of all other creatures. According to him, work under capital is estranged, alienated from the workers: “the worker is related to the *product of his labor* as to an *alien object* [sic]” (Marx 1844 EPM XXII). He argued that it is alienated because it is forced and forced by someone other than nature. In simple, non-capitalist societies, people have to work to sustain themselves—subsistence activities—but no one else forces them to work. In slave-based economies masters do the forcing. In capitalism the social system does it—nameless and faceless it appears as a natural condition, although it is anything but natural. Compared to other creatures, human labor is always mediated through culture, of which the time and place bound political economy is a part. For other creatures, work is not mediated. “The animal is immediately one with its life activity” (Marx 1844 EPM XXIV). Humans’ life activity consists not only of subsistence but also the production of consciousness and human culture, both unique to the species. That is what Marx meant by his reference to species-being. “Man is a species-being, not only because in practice and in theory he adopts the species... as his object, but... also because he treats himself as the actual, living species; because he treats himself as a *universal* and therefore free being” (ibid). That is, humans create; they create human culture—languages, political systems, economic systems, reproductive systems, and so on—and as each individual contributes to these creations, they create universal humanity.

“In creating a *world of objects* by his personal activity, in his *work upon* inorganic nature, man proves himself a conscious species-being, i.e., as a being that treats the species as his own essential being, or that treats itself as a species-being...” (ibid). It could not be otherwise. Basic human productions are things like language; essentially human; essentially social; therefore essential to humanity and humanness. In contrast, “An animal produces only itself, whilst man produces all of nature” (ibid.). Another way of saying this is to say that the ecological niche in which people live is culture—their own production. Marx goes on to argue that animals produce only in accordance with their animal needs, whereas humans produce according to social standards, which they themselves have set and continually re-invent. One of those standards is a Kantian judgment, a value, which by definition is a cultural product: “Man therefore

also forms objects in accordance with the laws of beauty” (ibid)—that is, people as species-beings produce art, defined according to their own standards of art and beauty.

Art shields against capital’s penetration by resisting commodification. It offers an imperfect shield. A moment’s reflection reveals its lacunae and aporias. Paintings and sculptures have become investments, for instance. Technologies allow mass production of artistic products from illuminated manuscripts to Gutenberg’s Bible, streamed music and videos, plastic replicas of the Venus de Milo. Walter Benjamin (1936) began his “The Work of Art in an Age of Mechanical Reproduction” by quoting Paul Valéry.

Our fine arts were developed, their types and uses were established, in times very different from the present, by men whose power of action upon things was insignificant in comparison with ours. But the amazing growth of our techniques, the adaptability and precision they have attained, the ideas and habits they are creating, make it a certainty that profound changes are impending in the ancient craft of the Beautiful. In all the arts there is a physical component which can no longer be considered or treated as it used to be, which cannot remain unaffected by our modern knowledge and power. For the last twenty years neither matter nor space nor time has been what it was from time immemorial. We must expect great innovations to transform the entire technique of the arts, thereby affecting artistic invention itself and perhaps even bringing about an amazing change in our very notion of art.” Paul Valéry, *Pièces sur L’Art*, 1931 *Le Conquete de l’ubiquite*.

Benjamin goes on to lay the foundation for Theodore Adorno’s invidious distinction between high and low art, the art of the connoisseurs versus that of the masses (1970). In popular art, according to Benjamin, the masses uncritically enjoy the conventional (11). Inevitably the popularization of art leads to fascism and war (Benjamin 1936:15). While Benjamin and later Adorno see popular art as a vehicle for fascism, they neglect the truly social aspect of art—art as social action and relation. Moreover, Adorno especially fails to see art works as texts in which each painting, song, performance, and so has its own integrity (Gendron 1986, 2002; Lefbvre 1974:70). Adorno’s, and his epigones’ vituperative comparison overlooks the point by Paul Magritte in his painting *La Trahison des Images* (The Treachery of Images) (1928-9) or *Ceci n’est pas une pipe* (This is not a pipe), or in another way by Marcel Duchamps notoriously signing urinals and similar common

objects, or painting a mustache on a reproduction of the *Mona Lisa*.. What makes a work of art is always already and thoroughly social. One finds a singular work of art no more than an idiosyncratic language. Neither can exist. Moreover, there is no art without technology, as the earliest examples of art, the cave paintings from the dawn of humanity, required and relied on the latest technology of 40 thousand years ago. Where Benjamin ascribes the artistic aura to the singular and original, its real origin is the socialization of what David Lewis-Williams (2002) calls the autistic end of the spectrum of consciousness.

Lewis-Williams argues that the cave paintings of the Upper Paleolithic found in France, Spain, and several other locations in western Europe represent images of altered states of consciousness, which when inscribed on the rock walls, became a socially circumscribed cultural product. He further argues that the emergence of higher level consciousness, the reflective and reflexive kind that relies on symbols, co-emerged with anatomically modern humans, social stratification, and symbolic representation. The latter most relevantly realized as art and language. Art's aura, to use Benjamin's trope, is that of the sacred, the socially sacred as opposed to the socially profane in Emile Durkheim's (1912) formulation. Lewis-Williams also proposes that the cave art objectified a basic if not defining characteristic of humanity: the conflict between the individual and the group. Such a conflict presupposes reflective consciousness, an awareness of the self as a distinct and autonomous entity.

8. Why Here and Not There?

Some of the explanations are simple and apparent with knowledge of social fundamentals in this city. The region of the city on the other side of Riverwest's eastern boundary, the Milwaukee River, known as the East Side, seemingly would offer more genial conditions for an artistic neighborhood. With its major university, and relatively upper bourgeois character, it had a historical claim to a bohemian, avant-garde pedigree, somewhat on the order of Paris' Montmartre. Several factors militated against it. First, it is and has been a high rent district which most artists and their studios could ill afford. Second, its bourgeois character had two consequences. The bourgeois subculture of Milwaukee partakes strongly of its German heritage, which remains culturally conserva-

tive, even when, as in its history of socialist city government, promises a more left leaning and liberal atmosphere. Also, the bourgeois character might encourage the consumption of art, but fails to permit much in the way of conditions for production. This is where it stops resembling Montmartre. The critical period of Riverwest's differentiation emerges from its period of crisis in the 1980s, most visibly with its deindustrialization. The other, surrounding neighborhoods largely succumbed to the expectable urban decline and decay; Riverwest did not. In its crisis years a number of civic organizations, with varying degrees of formality, fought against the decline in a variety of ways, ranging from political movements and pressure groups to attempts at cultural renaissance.

Some of these efforts promoted art. Significantly, the kind of art promoting movement that anticipates gentrification fell flat and its entrepreneurs gave up after a few years. The alderman who represented both the East Side and Riverwest, tried to convert a space formerly occupied by a co-op grocery and a co-op natural foods store—two separate establishments next to each other. On the contrary, some of what became institutions—the Riverwest Artists Association, Woodland Pattern Bookstore, most prominently—had no such gentrifying goals. Moreover and more importantly, they were indigenous efforts, not primarily aimed at enhancing real estate values. These and similar efforts earn the 'grass roots' sobriquet. They were indigenous, working class, and oriented toward production rather than consumption of art.

Identity and judgment emerge from art, but so does social space, a creation of social actors from whom it is concealed by a double illusion. "These two aspects are the illusion of transparency on the one hand and the illusion of opacity on the other" (Lefebvre [1974] 1991:27). The quotidian is the ordinary physical, social, and cultural surround within which neighbors live, work, play, and so on. The opaque presumes the barrier between as noted above, between those who think and those who work with their hands, because "the producers of space [thinkers] have always acted in accordance with a representation, while the 'users' passively experienced whatever was imposed upon them" (43). By creating symbolic representations through whatever medium—writings, music, paintings, sculptures, and so on—the 'users' become the producers. They then transcend the master servant dichotomy first articulated by Hegel, which forever separates a real view

of nature into a class perspective (Hegel [1807] 1977). Art works provide observation platforms by which we humans know ourselves as species-beings who create the world in which we live. Our primary ecological niche, after all, is culture. Also, it is through art that people produce space, including and especially neighborhoods.

The answer is: through the production of space, whereby living labour can produce something that is no longer a thing, nor simply a set of tools, nor simply a commodity. In space needs and desires can appear as such, informing both the act of producing and its producers.... In and by means of space, the work may shine through the product. (Lefebvre [1974] 1991:348)

And so it is that Riverwest became a created space by those who live and work in it. By their own productions, by their institutionalization of transcendent visions, they broke the barrier that sequesters users from producers. They broke out of the prison of the class barrier. They refused to allow ghettoization of their own space, their own creations. Because they were no longer passive users and recognized themselves and each other as creators.

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