Unemployment and Disposable Workers in Philadelphia: Just How Far Have The Bastards Gone?
Robert T. O’Brien

Abstract
Drawing on ethnographic research in Philadelphia, this article illustrates the ravages of a capitalism moving beyond worker alienation to worker disposability. Uneven geographic development within the context of neoliberalism is destroying marginal workers’ tools of social reproduction and creating ‘disposable workers.’ Workers in deindustrialized East Kensington are pushed out in a process of neighborhood imperialism, as the community they depended upon for survival is creatively destroyed by finance capitalists and gentrifiers.

As a surging trend of underemployment in the US suggests, worker ‘redundancy’ is reaching crisis proportions. Worse still, state retrenchment and gentrification are destroying workers’ means of social reproduction in new and troubling ways. This article approaches unemployment in light of a pattern of revanchist capitalism that destroys the social safety net, deregulates and transforms industry, and — as I describe in the case study below — is in the process of laying waste to the means of social reproduction for un-, under-, and informally-employed (hereafter ‘marginal’) workers.

Revanchism (from the French revanche, meaning ‘revenge’) is a term used since the 1870s to describe the reclamation of property, capital, and territory formerly held by an aggrieved (and usually capitalist or nationalist) party. At their worst, revanchist political campaigns have used nationalist, ethnocentric, classist, and racist ideologies to encourage property seizures, imprisonment, state repression, and war. Neil Smith used the term to refer to the US state’s ‘all-out attack’ on New Deal social policy throughout the 1990s (1996: 44 – 46).
Following this line of reasoning, I argue that the violent trends in global local capitalisms of the post-Soviet, neoliberal-cum-neoconservative era are deserving of the same nom de guerre.

Unemployment must be understood in light of this process of revanchism. In the developed states, workers are facing marginal employment; losing ground on unionization and collective bargaining (Kasmir 2004; Kingsolver 2001), health care and other aspects of social reproduction (Kingfisher 2002; Mullings & Wali 2001); and facing employer expectations of increased productivity and longer hours — all under reduced health and safety standards and job security (Harvey 1989).
As activist scholar Susan George has recently been telling audiences, a worldwide surge in anti-globalization movements can be partially explained by the fact that ‘the bastards have gone too far’ (2004). The bastards — or capitalist class (in crass Marxian terms) — have engaged in an open and brutal use of the market, the likes of which has not been seen in over a century. No longer held in check by cold war balances of power or alternative models of state socialism, capitalists have pursued practices of ‘primitive accumulation’ (Marx 1965: 713–16) characterized by Harvey as ‘accumulation by dispossession’ (2003).

Drawing on ethnographic research in East Kensington, a white, and historically working-class Philadelphia neighborhood, I analyze the effects of a particular aspect of revanchism on the subsistence strategies of marginal workers. I describe a form of uneven development — neighborhood imperialism — where capitalists realize profits from a mixture of land speculation and accumulation by dispossession. Specifically, I examine contestation over the use and exchange value of community space (Logan & Molotch 1987; Pérez 2002), paying particular attention to disruptions in social networks and spaces on the part of finance capitalists and gentrifying newcomers. In this scenario, revanchist capitalists (and their accomplices in the state and civil society) move beyond the alienation of workers to their very disposability, dispossessing residents of property with use value and pathologizing the place-based social networks that constitute marginal workers’ enfranchisement in economic, social, and political citizenship.

In order to explain the processes affecting marginal workers in Kensington, this article begins with a theoretical and historical background and a portrayal of uneven development, and the geographic and social spaces across which it operates. I discuss the ideological underpinnings of uneven development — its narrative ‘fit’ within free market development — and its role in creating new conditions for neighborhood imperialism. I then use ethnographic data to demonstrate the ways in which uneven development contributes to ongoing crises, creating the material and discursive conditions that disenfranchise marginally-employed residents. Analyzing recent transformations in Kensington, I describe how capital has created ‘disposable workers.’ No longer useful in the flexible economy, workers in deindustrialized Kensington are disposed of as the community they depended upon for survival is ‘creatively destroyed’ (Schumpeter 1975) by finance capitalists and gentrifiers. Throughout, my assumption is that such an analysis provides a necessary backdrop for understanding changing employment patterns in the US.

The field research this work is based on was conducted from September of 1999 to May 2004, in two East Kensington neighborhoods (Fishtown/New Kensington and Kensington South). It included participant observation at Community Development Corporations (cdcs) and other community-based organizations (cbos), schools, community health programs, and public meetings. I conducted interviews with community residents, with the staff, board members, and consumers of cbos and health programs, with private developers and realtors, and with city and state officials. In the summer of 2001, I supervised and conducted a door-to-door survey with a representative sample of approximately 750 people in the Fishtown/New Kensington neighborhood.

Capitalist Revanchism and Neighborhood Imperialism
A severe and steadily worsening pattern of unequal economic development since the 1970s has created the greatest wealth gap in the history of capitalism. Within this global context, marginal US workers struggle to survive in the face of cuts in social welfare, support for corporate ‘welfare,’ and the deregulation of industry. These changes, alongside new uses of an historic ideology that blames individuals for their poverty (Katz 1995; Maskovsky 2001), have allowed capitalists to ‘reclaim their estate’ at global and local levels. These changes have constituted a revanchist capitalism where wealth gaps within the US are boldly exploited for the further enrichment of the wealthiest, and where the poor are blamed both for their own poverty and for the failing economy — even in the face of scandals at the highest levels of corporate and state governance.

Over twenty years ago Bluestone and Harrison (1982) detailed the dismantling of US basic industry. They described the devastating process of the dispossession of workers from meaningful, living-wage work by companies seeking greater profits. Private and public disinvestment in workers and their communities underdeveloped vast expanses of the American landscape. This deindustrialization was not the result of market excess, but rather inherent to the postwar capitalist crisis. The ‘long downturn’ of the US postwar economy is the result of competition between the major capitalist economies (Brenner 1998). The competition reduced profitability for entire economic sectors, as uncompetitive firms drove profitability down. Attempts in the US to manage the postwar crisis with Keynesian debt expansion, monetarist intervention, and the manipulation of exchange rates have had mixed results. The social welfare state drove an internal market as it underwrote social mobility through the military’s GI Bill, and suburbanization through Federal Housing Authority (fha) guaranteed mortgages (Davis 1992; Patterson 1999; Brodkin Sacks 1994). However, it did so in a manner that privileged groups who were differentially recruited to ‘whiteness’ (Hartigan 1999; Smedley 1999). As Brenner demonstrates, this system was ultimately unsustainable. Fordist production in the US, with high rates of fixed capital and high labor costs, could not withstand either competition from abroad or the withdrawal of state commitments to social welfare Keynesianism under the Reagan, G.H.W. Bush, and Clinton administrations.

**On the one hand, the failure of Fordism and subsequent labor-market restructuring have meant a steady decline in full-time, permanent work with opportunities for advancement, job security, and benefits.** Two peripheral groups have filled out the labor force: relatively low-skilled, easily replaced full-time employees with decreased options for career advancement; and a rapidly increasing group of contingent workers with even less job security (Harvey 1989). Organized subcontracting has led to an increase in older systems of domestic, paternalistic, sweatshop, and informal production. On the other hand, the capitalist crisis of the long downturn has exacerbated another pattern of exploitation of the poor and working class. **Uneven geographic development provides a framework for understanding this process and the local particularities of class struggle as they have played out in Kensington. What it provides is a ‘spatial fix,’ where capital uses the advantage inherent in investing in un- or underdeveloped areas to seek higher profits** (and a temporary respite from crisis) (Harvey 1999, 2003; Smith 1982, 1984). Rather than utilizing a level playing field, capitalism develops in geographic, social, and historical contexts that begin fundamentally uneven.
At the heart of the processes I describe is a zero-sum conflict over the use and exchange values of urban space, between marginal workers trying to make ends meet in a deindustrialized community and capitalists seeking increased profits. People who are not speculators most often think of land in terms of use values, and household economies also depend on use values.

‘People . . . create supportive, place-based networks with neighbors, small business owners, schools, and other institutions that both provide material sustenance and engender emotional and sentimental attachments to a particular place’ (Pérez 2002: 39). The places and social ties within which people’s daily lives occur ‘have a certain preciousness for their users that is not part of the conventional concept of a commodity’ (Logan & Molotch cited in Pérez 2002:39, emphasis in original). But, as Logan and Molotch describe, space also has a potential commodity use and exchange value: entrepreneurs and speculators gain monopoly access to land and find profit by exchanging that land for a price higher than that which they paid (1987). Urban fortunes are made through the realization of exchange values, and the development of a ‘growth machine’ ideology over and above any notion of appreciating space for its use value and the public good. As land values and parcel sizes increase, smaller ‘serendipitous entrepreneurs’ tend to drop out, leaving land speculation to wealthy capitalists and capitalist firms. The pursuit of greater exchange values leads speculators and other capitalists to work in their common class interest, using the growth machine to ‘coordinate the needs of corporate elites with the behavior of local government and citizens’ groups’ (Ibid: 34).

In East Kensington, as I will illustrate, the good fortune of those who have survived marginal employment is to be found in a pattern of social reproduction based in use value. Anthropological research on social reproduction and social networks has demonstrated the importance of social networks and ‘transformative work’ in creating community despite racism, sexism, and class oppression (Mullings 1997; Stack 1996). Anthropologists have also interrogated the structural reproduction of inequality related to the disruption of social networks (Colen 1995; Pérez 2002). However, the different potentials found in the ‘conditions and levels of development’ of different geographic areas create advantages exploited by capitalists (Smith 1982). In the urban environment, fixed capital is sunk into the built environment in successive waves, and then valorized and devalorized in waves of land speculation and disinvestment. In the postwar period, these differentials in ground rent have set the stage for several waves of uneven development.

Philadelphia has provided sites for uneven development over the course of the past three centuries. Two recent episodes provide the backdrop for neighborhood imperialism in Kensington. First, federal ‘urban renewal’ programs created spaces of consumption and land speculation in the Society Hill section of Center City Philadelphia in the 1960s. Second, market-driven restructuring in the past 15 years has witnessed massive investment in the city’s central business and entertainment district, which has increased tenancy and tourism in the center, but drawn wide criticism from residents in the city’s neighborhoods. These two changes have created pressures that have pushed some capital out of the city’s center, finding advantageous conditions for investment in the neighborhoods on its borders. Increased ground rents from successive waves of
gentrification have priced out investors. Many of these investors note the profits
made by those who bought as gentrification crept north, from Society Hill to Old City
and from
there to Northern Liberties. Renters, artists, and craftspeople who crossed Girard
Avenue — the border between Northern Liberties and Kensington— seeking the
inexpensive spaces they had previously found in the southern neighborhoods were
followed by ‘pioneer’ investors. From the ‘marginal gentrifiers’ (Smith 1996)
who realized a profit from the sale of a single property, to the development
firms accumulating and building on multiple use properties, and from local
residents to investors from New York and Boston, speculators have flooded
into East Kensington seeking lower ground rents. It is this latest episode of
uneven development that I am referring to as
neighborhood imperialism.

Neighborhood imperialism is a process of uneven development where capitalists
bring to bear a form of ‘market imperialism’ (Harvey 2003) within the boundaries of
a(n) (over)developed country. The chickens of capitalist overproduction have come
home to roost in the urban US, in neighborhoods that are poor (and, usually —
although not in the present instance — black and/or Latino/a). On the one hand, I
am describing an elaboration of the capitalist search for profit at all cost, a process
that has been well documented
by anthropologists and other social scientists concerned with gentrification.5 On the
other, however, I am demonstrating that this process involves a restructuring of
both the means of dispossession and the subjectivities and social relations of
production, which ultimately suggest a reimagining of the impoverished that is so
destructive as to make the working-class residents of the Kensington neighborhood
of Philadelphia both discursively and practically disposable. I suggest, further, that
the ultimate ‘instrument effect’ (Ferguson 1994; Foucault 1982, 1991) of this
process is the elision of class struggle on the part of the capitalist class which
conceals the common class interests of the ‘middle class’ and the poor.

The City of Philadelphia’s market-driven development plan has produced local efforts
to ‘clean up’ the physical and social environments. Under this regime of neoliberal
‘development,’ many residents come to believe that community membership should
only be extended to those who are productive in the sense of contributing to the
exchange value embedded in the community. Others who do not meet this standard
are socially excluded — and physically excluded, if possible — through imprisonment,
removal through eminent domain, and development that prices residents out of their
own homes. Marginal workers become impediments to development when they cling
to the use value embedded in the community. As I demonstrate below, the state and
civil society provide support for those who prove themselves ‘deserving’ (by,
tautologically, having the capital to compete) while, like so many abandoned homes,
cars, and garbage, the ‘undeserving’6 become disposable. Those who cannot
maintain their homes (because of marginal employment) are seen as being similar to
drug users, the homeless, and sex workers (who are themselves pathologized and
blamed for their marginal positions).

The deepening crisis of historical capitalism has created the conditions for this
revanchist capitalism. In the process of neighborhood imperialism, the capitalist class
profits from this system in several ways. Development — as increased capital
investment in real estate — is constructed as an unqualified good. Marginally-

employed residents who depend on the use value in their community are constructed as impediments to development, and therefore as disposable. In the process, disposable workers become a discursive marker in the ideological policing of middle-class identity. Finally, speculation creates an outlet for unproductive capital, which can be maintained by the continued construction of new communities of disposable workers, and their continued dispossession.

**The Geography and Ethnography of Neighborhood Imperialism**

Several processes explain the barriers to investment in **Kensington** which created these conditions for uneven development. The neighborhood has been the site of deindustrialization since the 1950s (Seder 1990). Textiles, the mainstay of Philadelphia’s industrial economy, were hardest hit (due to a relatively portable technology and a lower relative skill level vis-à-vis other US industries). Brewing, electronics, and other industries followed suit. Ancillary service industries collapsed. Redlining (a process of denying home loans and insurance in black and poor neighborhoods) and subsequent racial and ethnic conflict contributed to the decline of the housing and economic infrastructure in the community since deindustrialization (Goode & Schneider 1994). Schools and public services declined as local political and economic power decreased. Finally, as relatives and friends left the neighborhood in search of opportunities elsewhere, both social networks and abandoned buildings crumbled.

(For More: [http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/content~content=a747996281~db=all~jumptype=rss](http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/content~content=a747996281~db=all~jumptype=rss))