

A Beautiful Community, But a Troubled City: Flint's Water Crisis

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Introduction

I moved to the city of Flint, Michigan in the summer of 2014. It was, by all media accounts, a distressed city, struggling under a weight of public troubles.² This essay is personal. It is about how the crisis unfolded for me. I was drafted into the black community (which is my community), however, whiteness continues to shape both our reality and the outcomes of our lives! The irony is that I moved from Eau Claire, Wisconsin a city reported as the safest city in the United States because of its whiteness. However, I had no community in this safe city; now, in troubled Flint, I do. Nonetheless, this is not the gist of this essay. My discussion relates to the impact of racialization, neoliberal politics and its incapacity to resolve society's racialized inequalities. The Flint Water Crisis is a microcosm of these larger issues.

Historically, in the United States, racialization (the process by which certain population groups are singled out for negative treatment on the basis of real or imagined characteristics) has shaped and continues to reshape cities' landscapes, people's lives, and well-being outcomes, including physical and mental health, education, gainful employment, housing, financial security and so forth. One major area of this reshaping is the politics surrounding the curtailment of investment in black neighborhoods and the government's assistance for companies to move out of predominately black neighborhoods (which were created by government through segregation policies in the first place). Currently, with increased globalization and businesses seeking comparative advantage by relocating their enterprises to areas of cheap labor, as well

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² See Bosman and Davey 2016

as cheaper production costs, the Michigan government enabled this move of industry out of predominately black cities, thereby imposing economic famine accompanied by violence, fear and related public troubles.³ It is no accident that cities like Flint and Greenville Michigan became ‘ghost’ towns with deindustrialization. The disturbing part is that government (at various levels) and business leaders knew that in the presumed new knowledge/technology economy employment opportunities would flow away from cities like Flint to the suburbs, pitting Flint with its dwindling resources, against suburbia, with no plans to mitigate the devastating impact of the divestment. The shifting economic structure was borne by the most vulnerable – always people of color in places like Flint. At a personal level, I know my white colleagues who moved from Flint to neighboring suburbs did so because the city was no longer looking like them. When the city was white it offered cultural identity and a sense of belonging. White flight, coupled with the loss of manufacturing industry in Flint meant the loss of a tax base to keep up with the maintenance of the entire infrastructure.

Currently, Flint, like other cities in the United States experiencing deindustrialization, suffers from high unemployment, particularly for its young adults. Those who experience disproportionate unemployment are predominately black.⁴ Today, a racialized black city is seen as an obstacle to attracting business. In this regard, my relocation to Flint was mixed but it brought to the fore the realization that whiteness and neoliberal politics were a problem for black populations, who find their efforts to construct community and attempt to live their lives obstructed by institutional racism and neoliberal politics.

In my experience, Flint is by and large a city inhabited by individuals who labor seven days a week in more than two jobs just to

³ See the documentary *Unnatural Causes, Is Inequality Making Us Sick (Episode 7, Not Just a Pay Check)* describing the deindustrialization of Greenville, Michigan. A similar story with the auto industry’s movement away from Flint, Michigan.

⁴ See Labor Statistics highlighted in Highsmith 2015

obtain basic necessities. These workers and their families are reduced to a life of bare subsistence. Flint's water crisis – lead in its tap water – is linked to a deindustrialized city now reeling in poverty, facing a mass exodus of its affluent tax base, which accentuates the existing social inequities and on-going environmental injustice (Gostin, 2016). In addition, the Flint water crisis is linked to the neoliberal politicking at the state government level. The state assured residents that its takeover of local municipalities would cure all local government ills. In reality, less taxation, more stringent tax policies for municipalities, and cuts in revenue sharing have all contributed to the troubles facing the city of Flint today (see Michigan Municipal League 2014).

To give another discursive lens to Flint's woes, Engel, Sterbenz and Erin Fuchs (2016), writing for the *Business Insider* show how Flint became one of the most dangerous cities in the United States. Citing homicide numbers based on FBI crime statistics as the major factor associated with the ranking of Flint as the United States' most dangerous cities. Flint with a population of 99,000 people had 30 homicides and 1,694 violent crimes in 2014 (Engel, Sterbenz & Fuchs 2016 quoting MLive media). If Flint is a dangerous city, it is particularly so for women. Usually I walk to work. I remember my first fall in Flint. One evening I was coming from one of my night classes, it was already dark at 9pm. As I walked home, a car pulled up close to me. Startled, the person in the car called me out: "Professor Moyo don't you know that you cannot walk alone at night in Flint as a woman?" Peering through the dark I realized it was one of my students. I remember making a light comment about a situation that still terrifies me to this day – being caught up in gun crossfire. I lightly responded to the student that I was alright, getting closer to home, as I pointed towards my building and jokingly said, "I am taking back the night!" Still concerned, the student drove slowly and watched me until I got home. Refusing to live with fear, I still walk to work and I notice more and more people are walking my Flint streets too. Again, this is another lens of the troubles of Flint.

Flint Water Crisis Unfolds Within Neoliberal Politics

The Flint Water Crisis unfolds within a political economic landscape dominated by neoliberalism, an ideology that drives our lives, yet is rarely named as the root of our city's problem. I use Elizabeth Martinez and Arnaldo Garcia's (1993) definition of neoliberalism to refer to a set of economic and political policies based on the strong faith in the beneficent effect of free markets. It is an ideology in which the existence and operations of the market are valued in themselves and where the operation of a market-like structures is seen as the only way of doing things. It is also an ethic, presently used as a guide for all human action, and substituting for all other existing ethical beliefs.

According to Martinez and Garcia (1993), the rule of the market is supposed to liberate private enterprises from any bonds imposed by the government/state no matter how much social and environmental damage it causes. Attempts to regulate and limit the damage of market competition are treated as inimical to liberty. In this mantra, neoliberalism has advanced policies that cut public expenditure for social services, reducing spending in education, and public assistance to people who are poor, and spending on infrastructure (including water), in the name of reducing government's role. The only increased spending is on law enforcement and the military. However, with exceptions of racialized places like Flint, law enforcement officers' numbers are usually lower.

On the community side, neoliberalism is presumed to undermine the concept of public good or community, replacing it with individual responsibility (Martinez & Garcia 1993). Monbiot (2016) asserts that under neoliberalism inequality is recast as virtue, a reward for its social utility as a presumed a generator of wealth. However, the most disturbing part of neoliberalism is the racialization of political decisions, actions that are tantamount to illiberal democracy and contributing to continued harms to communities that have historically suffered cumulative harms. If neoliberalism relates to policies that undermine citizenship, community and overall wellbeing, a discussion of the role of neoliberal politics in the Flint Water Crisis is essential. The Flint Water

Crisis is a microcosm of the impact of racialization, neoliberal politicking, and structural inequalities on people's lives. Before we address these factors, let us consider briefly the details of the Flint Water Crisis.

Flint Water Crisis: A Synopsis. I got to learn about the Flint Water Issue on October 13th, 2014 when Ron Fonger wrote that General Motors (GM) Flint Engine Plant on Bristol Road was shutting off access to the Flint River over corrosion worries. The plant was moving away from contracting Flint City for its water. According to Lederman, the city of Flint had purchased treated water from Detroit since 1967, but in 2014, in an effort to save money, emergency manager Darnell Earley made the decision to switch Flint city's water supply from Detroit to the Flint River. Claims remain that the decision to switch the water supply was approved by city council members. However, city council officials deny this claim and argue that the city was already under the emergency manager and they as city officials held no power on this decision. Nonetheless, the decision to switch to the Flint River water led to disastrous outcomes for the city's residents, setting off a chain of health problems including lead poisoning particularly for children who drank the water (Lederman 2016).

Prior to this, residents had complained about the foul smelling and horrid taste of Flint City water. Over the summer of my move to Flint there were three boil water advisories. In the coming months I would receive my water bill and statements from the city that the Flint River Water was healthy. These assurances were confirmed by the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality: they insisted that the Flint River water was within public health guidelines. I would attend several meetings where residents would talk with city officials about the water issue, but city officials would assure the public that the water was safe and/or dismiss the residents' experiences. These experiences led to further distrust of city and state government. I personally had to buy drinking water, while I engaged a personal protest "not to make payments of my water bill". I debated shutting the water off and

installing a water bowser but would ultimately cave in to threats from non-bill payment. In terms of claims-making, it would take an outsider to the city of Flint, researcher and professor of Engineering from Virginia Tech taking water samples from various homes in the city to confirm high levels of lead in many city homes. It would take a local physician reporting high levels of lead in children's blood and the national media spotlighting the water crisis in Flint before the issue would receive both state and federal attention. For a city that is predominately black, claims of the Flint water crisis would be ignored until these outside experts intervened.

Flint Water Crisis and Neoliberal Politicking

Loss of State-local Government Revenue Sharing: The Deeper Problem in Flint. Lederman (2016), quoting Anthony Minghine (2014), highlights the loss of revenue sharing from state to local authorities as the major contributor to the decimation of Flint City's revenue and consequently, problems with infrastructure maintenance, including provision of healthy water. The table below highlights the revenue sharing dollars diverted by the state away from municipalities and/or local authorities in the State of Michigan (Michigan Municipality League 2014). The State of Michigan's revenue sharing policy consists of both constitutional and statutory payments. The constitutional portion consists of 15% of the gross collection from sales tax – 4% is distributed to cities, villages and townships based on population. The constitutional portion of the payments are set by the state constitution, and the legislature must appropriate whatever is calculated (Michigan Municipality League 2014). On the other hand, the statutory portion of the revenue sharing has been traditionally distributed by a formula. The governor and the legislator have the discretionary ability to adjust the formula, hence the amounts distributed. The table below shows the revenue sharing dollars diverted by the state from select Michigan cities, including Flint since 2003.

Figure 1.

REVENUE SHARING DIVERSION

Revenue sharing dollars diverted by the state from select Michigan cities since 2003.



Sources: Michigan Municipal League;
Michigan Department of Treasury

(Edward Riojas/MLive.com)

Commenting on the diverted revenue sharing dollars (Sapotichne, Scorsone & Henion 2016) assert that the Flint Water Crisis reveals a deeper problem in Michigan's fiscal policies. According to Minghine (2014), between 2003-2014 the city of Flint lost 60 million dollars in revenue sharing from the state. However, neoliberal politicking tends to hide the fact that the State of Michigan is using statutory revenue sharing funds to balance its own budgets and pay for cuts in business taxes. Lederman (2016) explains further that unlike constitutional revenue sharing, state authorities in Michigan can divert statutory revenue sharing resources at their discretion. Minghine (2014) writes about this phenomenon in this way: "The state is trumpeting its sound fiscal management and admonishing local governments for not being as

efficient. What the state fails to mention is that it balanced its own budget on the backs of local communities.”

The gimmicky nature of neoliberal politicking is reflected in the very fact that cuts in revenue sharing increased with the state’s political contribution to the Republicans after the defeat of Democrat Governor Jennifer Granholm (Lederman 2016). Austerity measures, claims about cities living beyond their means, and posturing about less taxes as sound government, ruled in tandem. With cities like Flint in financial crisis, state authorities required market-friendly reforms, including spending cuts in education and human services that were either consolidated or privatized. Under this neoliberal politics, Lederman notes that Flint, like other Michigan cities, were positioned as competitive businesses providing products to their citizen-consumers, except Flint City is seen as an obstacle to progress.

Neoliberalism, Racialization and the Rise of Consumer Citizens: Illiberal Democracy Pushed on Flint. Rachel Slocum (2004) notes that scholars of citizenship have noticed a shift in Western democratic nations whereby citizens are now addressed as consumers (2004:763). What has happened to the citizen turned consumer is crucial to an understanding of the situation of Flint. The distinction between the citizen and consumer might also point towards a way for other cities to address their social issues. Within a political economic environment where “cash is king,” the presumed “economic man” is one who sees himself as motivated by the desire to satisfy wants. This works for those who see themselves as privileged consumers and can manage the consumption. A consumer without “financial means” becomes an obstacle to progress where most relations are commoditized. Could these consumers without means have a voice in the polity?

Layered in this formula is a consumer without means who is Black, could they have voice? The Flint residents, because of unemployment and poverty became citizens without purchasing power. These citizens, in the context of neoliberal politicking, are relegated to the status of what Giorgio Agamben (1998) calls “*homo sacer*,” an

ostracized and excluded citizen without a voice, even when a basic need like water is contaminated with lead. The plea of citizens turned consumers were ignored. There is no use for the adage the consumer/customer is always right in this part of Michigan. In this case, the embedded messages were that “If you don’t like it in Flint just move elsewhere”, a strategy used by local elites to “shrink the city”.

In Flint, the notion of citizenship is turned on its head. The ideal exercise of citizenship is for one to exercise one’s rights and responsibilities to shape one’s life. Under neo-liberalism, citizens are stripped of their voice, government deceit fuels distrust. An example: my recent Flint Water Annual Quality Report (2015), states the following: “The Flint Water Treatment Plan is responsible for providing high quality drinking water but *cannot control the variety of materials used in plumbing components.*” The city is now distancing itself from the problem it helped create. Today the public problem of lead in the drinking water is turned to individual household water lines. The above line “*the city cannot control the variety of materials used in plumbing components*” taken from my bill, is a statement of denial of responsibility for the misdeeds that led to the water crisis. There is hardly any moral outrage about the problem in this statement. It is a perfect example of the neo-liberal tactic of making individuals responsible for social problems. As a consumer, such statements are meant to silence citizens, however, this has a negative effect as such statements continue to fuel citizen distrust of government.

Also, I understand the idea of citizenship as linked to people experiencing their freedoms as an exercise of participation in power for the common good: where the law protects the rights of individuals. As taxpayers, it is our right as residents of Flint to have clean and healthy water (a common good), and as consumers it is our right to have clean and healthy water. However, these rights are undermined today in Flint. Fareed Zakaria’s (1997) term illiberal democracy is useful to highlight the way in which neoliberalism is undermining these rights, which are the basis of liberal democracy.

Further, in an environment where corporations are turned to individual entities – corporations today have more rights than people – government officials today protect the interests of businesses at the expense of people’s well-being. Politicians out for votes deliver their sales pitches as if they were in the marketplace: “vote for me I promise no taxation!” so the mantra goes. This kind of politics has less goodwill for the definition and implementation of the common good. Moreover, this language is irresponsible – in states like Michigan with restrictive fiscal policies, where is the money going to come from to maintain deteriorating infrastructure? Yet, Hacker and Pierson (2016) reminds us that our well-being depends on effective public policy. Was the decision to switch the water from Detroit to the Flint River an effective public policy? Andrew R. Highsmith (2015) in his book *Demolition Means Progress: Flint, Michigan, and the Fate of the American Metropolis* articulates well Flint’s historical experience with ineffective public policy.

Bankruptcy in Ethical Decision Making: Appointment of Emergency Managers. In the prevailing environment of loss of statutory revenue sharing, citizens were turned into consumers without a voice. Flint city’s financial challenges resulted in the appointment of emergency city managers by the governor – basically emergency city managers were contracted to get the city out of financial troubles. State officials argued that the appointment of emergency managers was a means to rescue residents from failed local elective leadership. The assumption, according to Scorsone, was that “the state can do it better...the state can take over local government and run it better and provide the expertise.” Berman (1995) asserts that the general objective of state intervention has been to restore financial stability to the local authority. In the Flint case, the state failed to “do it better” but instead plunged the residents of Flint into a human-made environmental injustice. Today, many people in Flint have elevated lead levels in their bloodstream. City governance thus harmed the people they were meant to protect. On the negative impact of state takeovers, Berman writes that the appointment of emergency managers is itself not a bad thing. However, I find the lack of consultation about the

decision to do so illiberal. If we look at predominantly African-American communities, we see that the appointment of emergency managers has resulted in greater distress for those communities. The distress experienced in these neighborhoods speaks to the racialization of the political economy – the cumulative exclusion of the political interests of African-Americans. Since current neoliberal politics cause harms to Black citizens, a new ideology is required to encourage a politics that takes into account the differential impact of policies and decisions on population groups that have historically experienced harms and disadvantages.

Further, I do not believe that the emergency manager consulted residents or experts to understand and communicate the pros and cons of their decision to change Flint city's water supply from Detroit to the Flint River. In my view, there was not enough consultation with various stakeholders, including city engineers, to understand the impact of switching water systems. A city like Flint with a history of high socio-economic and racial differentiation, needs leaders that are attentive to the historically cumulative disadvantages suffered by African-American residents, rather than decision making that accentuates this differentiation. In its paternalistic role the state becomes a benevolent father presented as willing to help, yet silencing the very people it ought to be helping.

The state and its authorities failed to uphold their responsibility to the marginalized people of Flint and to recognize how their decision would impact everyday life in the community. I teach policy, and one of the important considerations in any ethical decision-making process has to be how the proposed policy will impact the most disadvantaged. It does not seem that this principle was considered in the state's decision to switch the water supply from the Detroit to the Flint River. No one challenged the state official's certainty about this crucial decision, and this lack of critical scrutiny reinforced the injustice imposed on the community. It was an outright refusal to listen to the voices of those who would be most harmed by the switch in the water supply. Since the

overwhelming majority of affected people were African-Americans, it is clear that racism played a role. The reality of racial inequality in Michigan – its embeddedness in the everyday working of government – reproduces the historical injustice long suffered by African-Americans.

Who Defines Revitalization of Flint Under Neoliberal Politics?

The revitalization of a neoliberal city does not mean that it is recreated in the interest of the majority of its citizens. Rather, as Doreen Massey argues, the neoliberal city is defined by elites, and its “revitalization” means that the city as a whole is claimed by a few (Miles 2012: 216). Neoliberalism expressed in the everyday life of Flint, as represented on my typical street, has meant threats to health and cut backs to public spending on such crucial community services as libraries. A new city emerges – a “corporate landscape” for leisure, streets turned into walking/running pavements, after every event plastic water bottles litter the environment and food places dot the main street for foodies looking for places to go. For the poor and racialized it means displacement and marginalization. Even my novice students understand that for any decision to be just it has to weigh the costs to its most vulnerable populations – this derives from Rawlsian ethics. Neoliberal ethics disregards justice in favour of cost saving and, as such, continues to undercut human needs.

Local non-profit organizations and foundations have been crucial in the rebuilding of Flint as well as filling in the gaps left by governmental agencies in terms of social service provisioning. However, their historic strategy of categorizing populations to receive assistance instead of a universal and/or institutional approach is likely to continue the socio-economic differentiation of the population. Recently, I received a letter from the department of health and human services outlining that if I was pregnant and had children who had ingested Flint water for a particular period I may be eligible for some public assistance. Whilst this is a crucial strategy in targeting interventions of the water crisis to those most at-risk, children and pregnant women in a city like Flint experiencing multiple complex problems requires a rethink in politics of

selective intervention, which is promoted by neoliberalism. Indeed, politics of selective intervention strategies are easier and more palatable but the question of reach remains.

Concluding Remarks

The issue of the Flint water crisis is complex and is inseparable from the history of racialization of the city. Although Flint is a largely Black city, the people who run the show and determine the outcomes for people's lives remain white. This leadership continues to use neoliberal politics to further its interest whilst undermining the value of citizenship of those who have historically experienced differential disadvantages. Some of the problems, like Michigan state fiscal policies, are not quite apparent as issues contributing to the lead problem in Flint's water. However, for effective policies and interventions that actually solve structural problems to be pursued, it is imperative that the voices of the whole community, but particularly its poor and racialized members, be heard. I personally came to live in Flint, a beautiful community but a troubled city, and my hopes have been to become part of the difference making. I remain optimistic and believe that people can make good things happen. The Flint water crisis is a paradigm case of the moral bankruptcy of current neoliberal politics as it systematically fails to address human well-being.

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