

Detournement, or the Misguided Oppositional Ideology of the Postsuburban College-Educated Urban Elite

Stephen Zacks

According to the theory of *détournement*—the overly aglorified practice of aesthetic intervention through disturbances in normal patterns of life and calculated misreadings introduced by the French Marxist Guy Debord in the late 50s as a part of his Situationist movement—and its many contemporary quasi-countercultural manifestations in the U.S., somewhere out there is a power elite, a governing ideology, a dominant moneyed class, an institutional establishment, a big pot of investment capital controlled by oligarchs and the tax-breaks accruing to them, and the city planners and agencies serving their interests. These external forces are imposing themselves on the country, the city, and the world in opposition to the public interest as defined by the quasi-oppositional urban cultural elite. The public whose interests are being defended by this elite, theoretically, are artists, young people, and underrepresented groups.

It's an open question what underrepresented groups think about aesthetic *détournement*. They often regard avant-garde cultural activities with a mixture of hostility and indifference. When these cultural products extend beyond the art-and-architecture-world bubble to neighborhoods on the fringes of postsuburban redevelopment, they're often mistrusted as manifestations of the same oligarchical establishment that the oppositional elite is theoretically trying to counteract by their activities. They're right, in part, and the oppositional elite tends to agree in a guilty, half-blind way. But this self-hating reaction fails to acknowledge the positive role of capital reinvestment by the college-educated elite in bringing with it economic resources, mixed-income neighborhoods, increased commercial activity, attention from the media and city administrators, better schools and policing, and, ultimately, a better quality of life.

In the past, Marxists used the term “false consciousness” to denote an inability to recognize the economic forces that determine the conditions through which opinions are formed and activities are produced. The term fell into disfavor decades ago because it empowered experts supposed to have special knowledge—members of Central Committee of the Communist Party in the Soviet context—to assign meaning and provide solutions for people's lives rather than the people themselves. This did not supply the people with much satisfaction and required a lot of brutality on the part of experts.

In a consumer-democratic society, however, the customer is always right. In our politics, every two years, at a minimum, we want to make another oppositional gesture of defiance. In our patterns of consumption, we want to live in a constant state of revolt. We want to dress well and look cute, in contrast to the bland conformity out there, but still be able to decry the shopping mall the city has become. The dominant consumer-democrat of the city today, of course, is you and I, the urbanizing college-educated cultural elite.



Graffiti Art Opening at Ad Hoc Art, Bushwick, Brooklyn / Stephen Zacks

In our historical period, in which the urban idea has experienced resurgence in America following its postwar decline, the people who practice *détournement*, the college-educated urban cultural elite, are the primary instruments of the thing they are objecting to through their oppositional ideology. Their presence is at the root of what they oppose, and they are objectionable to themselves because of the accumulation and concentration of wealth and capital that is constantly produced around them. In every place college-educated cosmopolitans assemble and produce culture, they consume, and thereby inadvertently summon new economically productive activity. The byword of all of this commercial activity in the worldview of the urban elite is “gentrification,” a word that encompasses its regressive self-misunderstanding in its most unambiguous form.

According to the theory of gentrification, all of the

economic activity that happens as a result of the presence and cultural-production activities of the urban cultural elite in the city is external to the producers themselves and the cultural objects they produce. If anyone took the time to investigate, in the manner of the artist Hans Haacke, who now controls the preeminent cultural institutions of cities like New York, you would notice the ascension of a postsuburban elite—now many of the earliest postwar adherents already nearing their 60s—which still professes this oppositional ideology.

If the ideology-critique implicit in this self-misunderstanding were applied, reflexively, to these producers and their activities, the practice of *détournement* might be best understood as a public expression of the urban elite's consolidation of its political and economic control over space. As a socio-economic indicator, each instance of *détournement* represents a reinvestment of this class of college-educated urban elites into the re-cosmopolitanized city, which had previously been subject to relative neglect and disinvestment. Sociologically, *détournement* can be defined as the aesthetic principle of urban renewal though which the agents of capital accumulation are protected from consciousness of the commercial results of their activity.

But are processes of capital accumulation—the increase in wealth and value of property—a good or a bad thing for a city or a society? We know that wherever these processes have happened to cities on a large enough scale as a result of postsuburban migration and movement of new immigrant groups, they have reenergized urban economies and enabled them to compete with suburbs in attracting investment and producing economic growth. The latest reports on metropolitan growth patterns in the United States suggest that in a few major urban agglomerations, processes of sprawl and suburbanization have nearly reversed themselves and the cities have begun to grow at nearly the same rate as surrounding areas. It may be that the self-misunderstanding

of the urban elite is a necessary evil, enabling it to engage in a kind of economically productive activity that, if it were fully aware of its positive consequences for urban economic growth, it would no longer willingly participate in and would feel compelled to resist. But what are the alternatives: to go back to the suburbs after college, or move deeper into the countryside?

By contrast, it might also be helpful for the discourse of gentrification and the perceived need for resistance to it to be more widely understood as an ideological misinterpretation of economic processes in order for cultural activity to be more self-consciously focused in areas of severe neglect and social need. We know that the gradual re-infiltration of the college-educated classes into the city brings with it an economic shift. If this shift causes an undue concentration of capital in certain places, would it be possible to displace its negative effects? Through what practices can cultural producers more effectively share the benefits of re-urbanization with neglected places and actively engage communities on the edges of urban re-colonization? Can we turn these inadvertently useful economic activities into self-conscious tools of development in places we all agree are in desperate need of *détournement*: *détournement* of a willful state of neglect and abandonment; *détournement* of the loss of capital and revenue; *détournement* of *détournement* being applied in unproductive ways and unnecessary places?

Countless efforts of this kind have been ongoing for many years, undertaken by well-recognized groups like the Center for Urban Pedagogy (CUP), which has been producing small-scale community-based projects, educational workshops in public schools, pamphlets, and discussions since the late 1990s that teach underserved communities on the edges of postsuburban migration about the processes and tools of urban development, policy-making, and municipal governance. Less well-recognized community-based organizations have been doing this kind of work on



Saginaw St., Downtown Flint, Michigan / Lisa Zacks

a small scale since at least the 1970s all over the country, touching the lives of millions of children who lack adequate resources.

Another well-publicized example is in Braddock, PA, where Harvard education-and social-policy graduate John Fetterman has been applying the theory of creative capital accumulation to a nearly dead steel town on the edge of Pittsburgh, apparently with some moderate success. Urban interventions on the scale of the house and the city-block became a genuine cultural fad in Detroit during the latest recession, but they have been happening there with less publicity for decades without achieving the critical mass needed to attract large amounts of investment capital. Practices of aesthetic *détournement*, even if ideologically misconstrued, continue to have a minor economically productive effect there.

A proposal I have been circulating called the Flint Ecological Urbanism Project attempts to take these tools and practices, developed in the context of the re-cosmopolitanizing culture of postwar New York and critical interventions in other politically contested cities around the world, such as Panama City, Panama, ex-Yugoslavia, and the border of South Korea, and introduce them on a large-scale to another neglected place. The proposal sketches out a two-plus-year series of phased programs in which innovative and effective practices in public art, research architecture, urban design, photography, design, landscape architecture and urban development—among them, possibly, instances of *détournement*—are applied to a historically significant industrial town an hour north of Detroit.

The project's successful implementation will depend on the integral participation of the mayor, the city government, real-estate developers, local and international artists and



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designers, small community organizations, underserved communities, nonprofits, grant-makers, corporate sponsors, and investors, along with whatever interest it can stimulate in the press, among residents, and in outlying suburbs. The beginning of a renaissance of the downtown core has been buoyed by the University of Michigan-Flint and its efforts to build dormitories and draw young people into the city from the surrounding suburbs, along with the presence of Local 432, an all-ages teen music club. It's possible that a project like this cannot succeed without the economically productive migration of the oppositional college-educated postsuburban cultural elite.

Insidious is the state of neglect that places like this have endured for more than four decades. There's something confounding about the continued refusal of participants in the revival of cities in the U.S. to value the economic processes engendered by their own activity and to celebrate the extent to which it has been essential to a new culture of the city. What harm would consciousness of their economic role do? Having become aware of the positive commercial affect of their presence on the city, would they move to Phoenix or Bakersfield, in a radical detournement of detournement, to return value to recently foreclosed single-family homes, and refuse to assimilate into the quasi-oppositional culture of the college-educated cosmopolitan elite? ■



Architecture Opening at Museum of Modern Art, NYC / Stephen Zacks



Mural at La Casa De Don Pedro, Newark, NJ / Stephen Zacks