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A recent article in the International Business Times boldly proclaimed that the City of Detroit, Michigan, was poised for a comeback (Magee 2011). For those familiar with the city, Magee’s words have a kind of familiarity that comes from Detroit’s position as ground zero for the neoliberal economic earthquake that has shifted manufacturing overseas, gutted workers’ rights, and had deleterious effects on former centers of U.S. manufacturing. Couple this economic reality with the urban uprising of 1967, White-flight, and entrenched racism in the State of Michigan and you get a sense that Detroit is a city on a perpetual comeback tour—always hoping that the city has seen the worst and can only get better from here. These social, political, and economic realities have made Detroit a tempting and rich story-field for academics from across the disciplinary spectrum.

Generally academic work on Detroit falls within two broad areas. The first, probably best exemplified by the work of Bungee (2011), Boggs (1998), and Georgakas and Surkin (1998), is squarely focused on radical politics and social change. These works draw from the rich traditions of union organizing and radical politics in the city and find strength through the collection of activists who have animated Detroit city politics for the last 100 years. The second kind of engagement with the city offers a more traditional approach to academic work and are grounded in detailed empirical analyses that attempt to understand the dizzying array of social changes that have devastated the city (e.g., Darden 1987; Orr and Stoker 1994). Todd Shaw’s Now Is the Time! occupies a kind of middle ground that engages with African-American politics in the city, especially politics focused around public housing, in a thoroughly grounded case study approach that is also concerned with the survival of everyday men and women who are struggling to make lives in the face of state-sanctioned neglect. As Shaw notes, the larger intellectual project of this book is to link conceptions of African-American politics and grassroots activism in an attempt to understand the institutionalization of African-American politics in the city (pp. 3-4). This effort is placed within a broader theoretical context that seeks to understand the “political imagination of black grassroots activists” in order to understand “their unique choices in tactics, timing, and places as they mobilize to hold public officials accountable to the needs of low
income citizens” (2). By tracing the growth of African-American political power in the city from the 1930s into the late twentieth century and paying particular attention to the ways in which formerly “radical” political engagements are incorporated into mainstream city politics, Shaw demonstrates the promises and perils of grassroots activists as they transition from a kind of outsider status bucking the status quo into the mainstream of city politics.

Now is the Time! progresses in three parts. Part one is an introduction that grounds the project in its particular literatures and outlines the model—“Effective Black Activism Model (EBAM)”—through which Shaw wants to engage grassroots activism in the city. EBAM is an attempt to foreground the agency of activists in his analysis to come to larger understandings of the way activists can “effectively apply pressure to black and other public officials, despite barriers of race, gender and regime” (p. 2). This model is placed within a larger framework that incorporates a mixed method approach to interrogating the EBAM model. Chapters two through four give context to activism in the city, especially through a discussion of the different currents—labor, Civil Rights, and housing protests—that drive the city’s grassroots politics. In many respects, I consider these to be the strongest and most effective chapters, particularly the long discussion on the Coleman Young Administration. Young, the city’s first African-American and longest-serving mayor, has long been a polarizing figure in Detroit. The description of the way Young juxtaposed his position against the backdrop of suburban racism and division to yield political power is quite excellent. In particular, Shaw’s treatment of Young quashing grassroots dissent around issues of housing and inequality in Detroit provides a much-needed perspective on Young’s mayoral administration. These chapters finish with a discussion of the renewed grassroots activism, the difficult struggle activists had in dealing with the Young administration’s top-down, hierarchal style and the onset of Reganomics and subsequent shifts in urban housing policy. Ultimately, Shaw argues the late 1980s was the right time and public protest was the right tool to bring renewed attention to the plight of the urban underserved.

Chapter five brings together both quantitative and qualitative data to understand the prism of the Save Our Spirit (SOS) coalition, a collection of White and progressive elements in the city that publically challenged then Mayor Young’s community development initiative, highlighting the kind of coalition building that is necessary for grassroots activists to achieve success. By building coalitions with specific city council members, SOS was able to effectively navigate city politics and work around Mayor Young’s administration. Chapter six extends the analysis of EBAM and discusses different aspects of the EBAM model. The final chapter presents a discussion of the
changing politics in the City of Detroit with the end of the Young era and the start of the Archer administration.

By providing an overview of grassroots coalition building and the changing nature of urban regime politics in the City of Detroit, this book makes a solid contribution to the literature. As an attempt at understanding the reasons behind the success and failures of grassroots housing politics in Detroit, the book also has potential to refocus attention on the kinds of intraracial politics that animate African-American urban communities. However, the book falls short in discussions around class and grassroots politics, most specifically treating each of these categories rather uncritically. Thus Shaw presents a model that seems too neat and tightly packaged and leaves out the intersectionality of politics in the City of Detroit—effectively deradicalizing the “right to the city” foundation of Detroit grassroots urban politics. For example, the discussion on the context of class division is short and does not adequately provide the proper context to fully engage with Black urban politics. This indeed is quite a challenge given the constraints imposed by trying to create a model of effective grassroots activism, but it stands in stark contrast to the rich and detailed discussion in recent scholarship on African-American politics (e.g., Dawson 2001; Harris-Lacewell 2004; Patillo 2007). Second, the very idea of grassroots political activism is treated as a given. Consequently so much of the city politics that gave rise to grassroots activism in the city, from the Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement (DRUM) and the efforts of Grace and James Boggs, to the work of the Black Power Movement at Wayne State University, is almost ignored by Shaw. While not all of these groups were focused on housing, many of these activists operated in the same networks and intersected in a variety of contexts and coalitions. There was a significant and continual exchange of ideas and tactics among these groups, and to understand the nature of grassroots politics in the city it is necessary to examine when, where, and how these groups came into conversation with each other. In other words, a deeper understanding of the grassroots politics in Detroit might arise if EBAM was put into conversation with these other grassroots organizations and campaigns.

In summary, this book makes positive contributions to the literature and understandings of grassroots politics. In particular, the overview sections of housing politics in Detroit and the engagement with the Coleman Young administration are a much-needed intervention in the literature. Where this book falls short is in overgeneralizing grassroots activism for the sake of fitting a model that seems applicable to only a small portion of the politics in a city as lively and diverse as Detroit. In so doing, Now Is the Time! largely deradicalizes grassroots politics in the city and presents a rather uncritical analysis of the politics that animate the city of Detroit.
References


Magee, D. Detroit’s comeback: The art of coming back from tough times. International Business Times, 7October.
