DISCOURSE IN THE ABANDONED SMALL TOWN: TOWARD A CRITICAL GEOGRAPHY OF DECLINE

A thesis submitted to the faculty of
San Francisco State University
In partial fulfillment of
The Requirements for
The Degree

Master of Arts
in
Geography

by

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San Francisco, California

November, 2011

CERTIFICATION OF APPROVAL

I certify that I have read Discourse in the Abandoned Small Town: Toward a Critical Geography of Decline by Chad Newbrough Steacy, and that in my opinion this works meets the criteria for approving a thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree: Master of Arts in Geography at San Francisco State University.

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Abstract: This study investigates the local response to place-based economic and social decline in a small working-class town in central Pennsylvania. Critical analytic attention is given to the meeting point between global economic structure and local context as embodied in community discourse. A classification scheme is developed herein in which prominent narratives are categorized according to their response to the hegemonic account that all places can be successful if the people composing them are willing to work hard enough; identified are narratives that comply, narratives that deny, and narratives that defy. It is proposed that within the latter group lies a budding "discourse of local resistance" to the destructive spatial outcomes produced by capitalism, and that revitalization efforts in this declining town should focus more on developing the community that exists and less on uncertain attempts to attract outside attention and investment.

I certify that the Abstract is a correct representation of the content of this thesis.

Associate Professor Jason Henderson
Chair, Thesis Committee

11/02/2011
Date

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

Thank you to the people of Sunbury for choosing to be so open with me. While at times I have been critical of their community's response to the decline it has suffered, this study was motivated by a continuous appreciation for their love of their town. Sunburians' willingness to lay bare their history and hopes for the future made this study possible in the first place.

Thank you, too, to Christine Arnold, my fiancée. Not only did she introduce me to Sunbury, but she also provided an invaluable filter through which my ideas about this community could be checked. Without her constant willingness to edit drafts and to discuss data, this study would lack a great deal of insight that – thanks in large part to her – it provides.

Special thanks to the Conrad family who housed me for the duration of this research. Thanks also to my advisor by directing me to the critical works of Harvey and Smith.

Thank you, perhaps most importantly, to my father who despite his failing health put a great deal of effort into encouraging me in this endeavor. I will miss you, dad.

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Chapter I

Defining the Study

AN INTRODUCTION

This study concerns the town of Sunbury, Pennsylvania. Sunbury, a settlement along the Susquehanna River in the central part of the state, has seen both economic and social decline. The city has been transformed from a generally pleasurable place to live in the 1960s and 70s (Marsh 1987a) to a community that today suffers from a distinct relative lack of employment, quality education, culture and entertainment, and public social life. Yet nearly 10,000 people still call it home and attempt daily to make it their "place." These remaining residents, business owners, and other community members manage to resist Sunbury's decline by choosing to stay put rather than leave home and go elsewhere.

Some of Sunbury's residents are also involved in a more active resistance of decline. A redevelopment of the town's riverfront is currently taking place, as well as the drafting of a new comprehensive city plan, now in its "visioning" stage. Others simply resist through a preservation – both formal and informal, conscious and unconscious – of their community's history. Preservation is crucial, for as Agger (1991) puts it, capitalism – the force responsible for Sunbury's material decline – relies upon the disposability of memory in order to secure public consent. Of particular interest to academic geography,

this conservation of a collective memory is also an attempt preserve "place", as community must exist *somewhere* (Harvey 1996, 304).

The central objective of this study is to assemble a critical exposition of Sunbury's decline and hoped-for revitalization, as experienced by its residents. This is a necessary step in the development of a critical scholarship of place-based decline. Exposition includes presentation of a number of prominent narratives – assembled through discursive research and analysis – regarding the town's decline as well as a critical evaluation of their revolutionary and regressive natures and hence their practical usefulness toward the preservation of this community. The theoretical basis for such assembly and evaluation is an understanding of place-based decline utilizing Harvey (1996, 2006) and Smith's (2008) historical-geographical materialism. In particular, this involves the former's insights into the spatial moments of capitalism and the latter's "Seesaw" Theory of uneven development. Generally speaking, these concepts maintain that under capitalism not all places can thrive at the same time; to create success in certain locations as well as in the system as a whole, some places must be savagely devalued (Schoenberger 2004). Narratives of decline can be classified into three categories: those that rationalize it, essentialize capitalist spatial relations, and confine revitalization hopes to finding a "niche in the marketplace"; those that tolerate it and deny that decline is occurring or if it is, deny that it matters; and finally, those that resist it, whether progressive or regressively, by looking for extra-capitalist alternatives. It is in the latter where what I'm choosing to call a "discourse of resistance" potentially lies.

The introduction of a Marxist (or "materialist") framework is not to suggest that this research is merely a case study of Marxist theory. I cannot agree more with geographer Andrew Jonas' (1988, 102) criticism of locality studies that are merely "designed for the empirical interrogation of prior theoretical propositions". For good or for ill, this project began a-theoretically. Its intent was to be democratic, so to speak, and let the discourse provided by Sunbury's residents dictate the theoretical direction to be taken, *a posteriori*. Capitalism's dominant geographical narrative is that all places can be successful if only the people in them work hard enough (Hudson 2004) or alternatively that unsuccessful places fail as an exclusive result of their residents' lack of involvement or commitment (Loyd 2011). The incongruity between this narrative and the local discourse of struggle and commitment to place led to this project's adoption of a more critical theoretical stance. To not do so would require the conclusion that the people of Sunbury are simply failures. Such a proposition is both morally unacceptable as well as simply inaccurate, given the temporal arbitrariness of past success despite a continuous commitment by community residents.

The main import of this study to the field of geography is, I believe, two-fold. The first aim is to add a qualitative account of decline and resistance of small working-class communities to the Marxist-geographic body of knowledge. Contemporary Marxist urban geography has generally suffered from a lack of attention to community-wide class struggle on the small town scale; for instance, recent critical perspectives on place-based decline have favored the examination of large cities (Zukin 1987; Harvey 2000; Rae

2003; Sugrue 1996, to name just a few). The inattention to small, post-industrial towns has left a 'critical' vacuum in place scholarship – all too often filled by regional or community studies (for examples, see Lewis 1972; Marsh 1987b; Stranahan 1993; Luloff, et al. 2002) that are culturally interesting but theoretically unhelpful in the struggle to maintain the integrity of these unique settlements against capital's 'creative destruction' (Schumpeter 1942). In an abstract political sense, given the symbolic importance of the small town in American lore (Smith 1970; Francaviglia 1996), Marxist scholarship should not cede this rhetorical ground to dominant narratives of community decline; in terms of concrete human rights, small town residents must be included in the wider liberatory project of establishing a "right to place" (Imbroscio 2004, see also Lefebvre 1996).

Secondly, decline and the response to it are herein explored in a particularly geographic manner. By down-scaling the investigation into decline as it occurs in a specific place this study goes "below" typical deindustrialization narratives that focus more on spatial shifts in general than upon the changes wrought in discrete territories. For instance, Bluestone and Harrison (1982) have helped to set this standard by analyzing the movements – mainly within the U.S. as a whole – of manufacturing investment. Smith (2008) likewise shows how uneven geographical development occurs globally, but leaves the local effects to the imagination. Anthropological projects (such as Dandaneau 1996 and Perry 1987) have certainly recounted the situation "on the ground" in deindustrialized communities, but without the sensitive eye to "place" that, as will be

discussed in Chapter 2, has been developed in the geographic discipline. This study aims to both appeal to the wider process of uneven spatial development and to bring these insights down to the community scale to show how resistance, acquiescence, and denial are all formed into material discourse.

Additionally, and perhaps tangentially, it is hoped that the "discourses of resistance" identified in this project will in part refute the all too pervasive idea that communities are "helpless" in the face of systemic capital abandonment. The theme of helplessness appears throughout much of the "decline" literature (Perry 1987; Dandaneau 1996; High 2003). By simply remaining in place – certainly a struggle as capital simultaneously abandons it for 'greener pastures' and disciplines it for future accumulation – Sunbury's residents are resisting capital's systemic rationalization (Agger 1991, 134). Their collective refusal to accept capital's deeming of their town as superfluous represents an act of resistance that continues to reproduce itself. Further, the willingness by some residents to reject the neoliberal prescription to try to commodify their place is a first step toward a true discourse of resistance wherein a measure of independence from capitalist spatial relations can begin to take shape. If an alternative to the destructive geography of capitalism is to be envisioned, points of resistance must be recognized and embraced rather than written off as futile.

Economist Paul Samuelson presciently observed, "people want to improve their community, not abdicate it" (Bluestone & Harrison 1982, 20). This is certainly in evidence in much of Sunbury's discourse of resistance. By highlighting this aspect of

Sunbury's slow physical and social decay, this study intends to give voice to those who have given so much of themselves to maintaining it. It is hoped by doing so in conjunction with a critical theoretical exploration of place-based decline a new, post-capitalist way forward for small towns like Sunbury can begin to take shape.

A NOTE ON REFLEXIVITY

Throughout this study, there will be occasions where I, the author, will use an autobiographical or "reflexive" voice. The use of this voice begins immediately in this chapter, necessitating the placement of this discussion prior to Chapter 3's methodology. While most of the discussions herein are written in an "omnipotent", or "academic" fashion, I have decided to reveal many of my direct interactions with Sunbury in the first person. In recent years, there has been a greater emphasis in academia in general and geography in particular to "render transparent" the researcher in the same way he or she does the researched – to reveal his or her "position". This strategy is based on a greater awareness that knowledge produced by research is not independent and objective; it is composed by a researcher who, rather than a detached, impartial viewer, is actually an active participant in the research process itself (England 1994).

Recognition of the subjectivity of research has been around for some time in geography (Meinig 1979; Porteous 1986). However, a reflexive voice in research presentation has been too often confined to the extreme humanistic end of the discipline such as landscape studies (*ibid*) or to particular projects such as feminist geography (Rose

1997). Besides a recent movement to study the academy itself (Sidaway 2000; Nairn 2003), a broad employment of reflexive tactics in the presentation of critical (particularly Marxist) research has yet to materialize.

My decision to utilize the "first person" pronoun during the presentation of certain parts of this research – particularly those dealing with my experiences of Sunbury – is motivated by a concern for accuracy. As in all research, the research presented herein was conducted and assembled with the utmost concern for objectivity, I – the researcher – am constituted by experiences based on my gender, ethnicity, age, and occupation, and thus occupy a social position. This position has unavoidably affected the research process from beginning to end: from my outsider status, which certainly affected the way in which I interpreted life in the community, to personal interviews where others' perceptions of me likely affected the way in which they answered questions. My job as a researcher is to recognize the true nature of knowledge – that it is subjective, as well as highly dependant on positionality – and try to present my conclusions in such a way that they are open to the criticism of the reader. This study is about the people of Sunbury and not me (unlike Rose 1997), but I have decided in parts to include my actions and thoughts herein in order to allow for as much transparency as possible.

SUNBURY CONTEXTUALIZED

Sunbury is a central Pennsylvania town on the eastern shore of the Susquehanna River Valley (See Figures 1 and 2, below). At an elevation of 450 feet, it lies in a plain

carved by the river through the surrounding "ridge and valley" region of the Appalachian Mountains (Stevens 1963). The river itself is wide, flat, and prone to flooding. For this reason there is no current development on the riverfront – industrial or otherwise – as the town is walled in by a flood control system built by the Army Corps of Engineers following the 1936 flood. (City of Sunbury 2005).[1] Although technically cut off from the river, geographer Ben Marsh argues Sunbury should be classified as a Pennsylvania "river town," its growth stemming from transportation and trade of rural surplus and its decline due to a geographic shift in same (1987a, 3).

Immediately to the north of Sunbury the West and North Branches of the river meet, a junction Marsh (*ibid*) partially attributes the town's settlement. Laid out by Richard Penn in 1772 in a grid fashion after Philadelphia and incorporated 25 years later (Godcharles, 1944), it shortly became the northern terminus of the Susquehanna Canal after a series of steamer accidents due to the river's shallow bottom (Snyder 1972). The situation along the canal established Sunbury as a trading center early on. This tradition was continued with the advent of railroads, first constructed to "feed" the canal then gradually to replace it (Marsh 1987a). Trade has historically consisted primarily of coal from the fields to the north and east, and lumber from the west (Stranahan 1993). Due in

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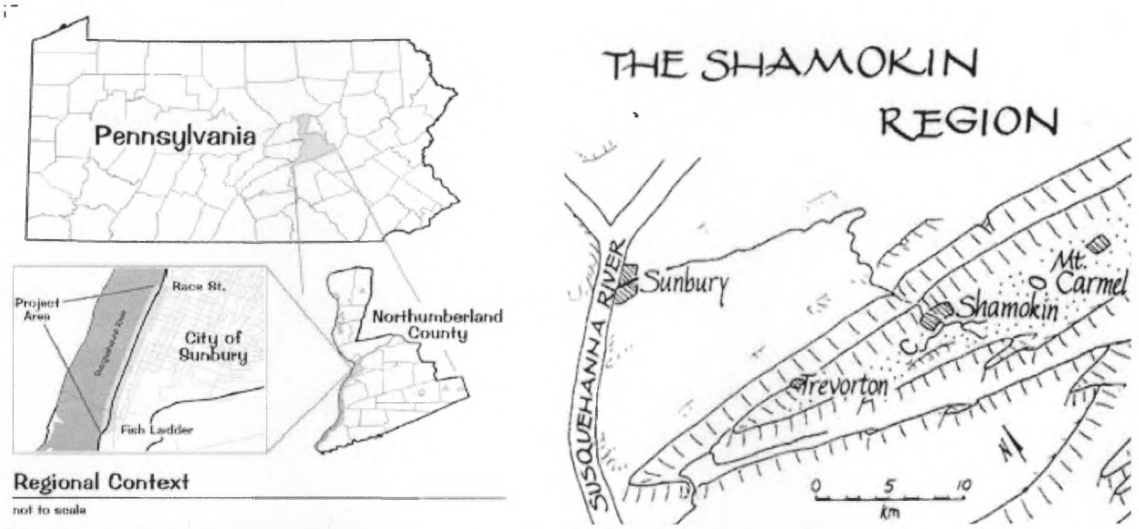
[1] This system saved Sunbury from flooding associated with tropical storm Agnes in 1972, an event many residents remember. As testified to in photographs, the river reached the very brim of the floodwall on this date, and was only saved from inundation by the failure of a levee upstream in Wilkes-Barre (Warnagiris & Rygiel 1973; Marsh 1987a) As will be discussed further in Chapter IV, this event and the continued danger of flooding prominently contributes to local revitalization debates.

part to the decline of both "extractive" industries (Deasy & Griess 1965, Powell 1980) this section of the state historically vacillates between population growth and population decline (Alter, et al. 2007; Frey & Teixeira 2008).



Figures 1 & 2: Regional maps depicting Sunbury's location in Pennsylvania and Northumberland County (City of Sunbury 2005, p. v) and in topographic relation to the anthracite coal region (Marsh 1987b, 339).

The cultural background of Sunbury is one that defies easy description. In one sense, it is an "old Pennsylvania city" (Stevens 1963, 40) at the northern boundary of the Pennsylvania Dutch region (Klees 1950), settled in part by these German immigrant farmers referred to locally by the misnomer "Dutch". This heritage – both ethnic and vocational – distinguished Sunbury from the nearby coal region towns which were historically settled by a "melting pot of Irish, Welsh, Hungarian, Slav, [and] Pole" (*ibid*, 240). These differing ethnic backgrounds have allegedly led to a political dissimilarity as well, with Sunbury's governance tending to be dominated by Republicans, the coal

region's by Democrats.[2] "Dutch" social influence can seen in both the long-standing farmers market downtown as well as the organization of community fire protection utilizing small volunteer social clubs that more closely resemble pubs than firehouses (*ibid*, 329).

In another sense, however, Sunbury has a lot in common with the coal region. Many people note at least one ancestor from this area, often one from a mining family; hence Slavic names are not uncommon. Additionally, the historic isolation provided by the high surrounding ridges between the two has been reduced by modern mobility and expanding commutes (Marsh 1987b), and previous social barriers between the regions have diminished. A fair amount of residents have social ties that span "the ridge," and the so-called "Shamokin Accent" (a mixture of Philadelphian-Italian and "Appalachian" idioms and pronunciations locally associated with the nearby coal town of Shamokin) can be regularly heard in Sunbury shops and bars. Though Sunbury's physical layout is also associated with the German-Pennsylvanian tradition (its "grid" [Zelinsky 1977]) of the long, seemingly oversized downtown filled with tiny eateries more closely resembles the predominant urban form of the coal region (Marsh 1987b).

Politically, Sunbury is the seat of Northumberland County, which had a 2010 population of just over 94,500, static from year 2000 and down 2.3% from 1990. It is in the middle of a five town conglomeration with contiguous borders, including

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[2] This impression was provided by a highly-placed interviewee from *The Daily Item* newspaper.

Northumberland Borough, Shamokin Dam, Hummels Wharf, and Selinsgrove; the latter three lie across the river to the west. The population of all five settlements totals approximately 20,000, but as a result of their geographic isolation are considered distinct from Pennsylvania's 16 metropolitan areas (Frey & Teixeira 2008). In many contexts this would cause an area to be considered rural. However, there are a few ways in which Sunbury is considered at least semi-urban by area residents. First, with a population above 10,000 it is considered a third class city by the state;[3] I was informed of this classification by more than one interviewee as it serves as a local point of pride. Second, it is the only "city" up or down the Susquehanna River for 40 miles; as such, it is the largest settlement in the area. Third is the role Sunbury has historically played as the regional center for industry, transportation, culture, and social life.

Sunbury's role as a regional center – and its recent loss of such status – is hard to quantify; it's even harder to account for briefly. One justification for such a view is the past development of regional infrastructure and institutions in Sunbury to the exclusion of the surrounding towns. Beginning in the mid-1800s, Sunbury became the junction between the Pennsylvania and Reading railroads. This cemented the city's centrality in terms of trade (Marsh 1987a) and industry (Stevens 1963), particularly of coal, lumber, hats and textiles – the latter manufactured locally (Miller 1986, 111). This economic activity, in turn, spurred the establishment of three multi-story hotels (the Edison, Neff

[3] The 2010 Census has just confirmed that in accordance with estimates made over the past few years, the population has dropped below this number to 9,905. Whether this will cause the state to reclassify it as a "borough" is unknown.

House, and City Hotel), two movie theatres (the Strand and the Rialto), an opera house, a few downtown department stores, a minor league baseball team and stadium (the Sunbury "Reds"), a hilltop resort ("Susquehanna Heights"), as well as a small amusement park (Snyder 1972). A system of trolleys, associated in part with the amusement park, radiated out of Sunbury until 1939, when it was replaced by a regional bus, now also defunct (Rohrbeck & Gordon 1986).

An additional justification for considering Sunbury the center of area settlement comes from the memories of long-time residents interviewed for this study. Several cited a time – prior to the late 1970s – when Friday nights meant crowded streets in downtown Sunbury as people "from all over" came to town to cruise in their automobiles or walk the streets. A similar happening was described as to Saturday mornings, which were big shopping days – the veracity of which is supported by the big "market house" which still stands on the main street, but clearly now operates well below its original capacity. The frequency with which I encountered such stories, and their concurrence with the historical development enumerated above, I believe rules out their possibility of being mere wishful, idyllic fabrications.

If Sunbury was indeed once the center of regional life, it certainly is not any longer. The contrast between its lively past and its current existence cannot be overstated (Please see Figures 3 and 4, below, for a visual contrast between downtown in 1950 and today). Two of the three hotels are gone, leaving only the Edison which now primarily serves as an SRO (single-room occupancy) residential hotel. There is no baseball team,

opera house, or amusement park. The department stores have long since moved, and both movie houses closed by 1982 after one served a short stint as an "adult" theater (Neal 1982). Downtown on both weekend and weekday nights is characterized by a near total void of people or activity. The situation doesn't differ much during daytime since the majority of storefronts are empty or serve only as decorative displays of historic pictures and items arranged by civic beautification groups.

Figure 3: A picture of "thriving" downtown Sunbury sometime during the 1950s along Market Street between Fourth and Second Street (upper left), and three scenes from the same stretch of Market Street in July 2011. (Sources: "Sunbury, PA" Facebook Page; study author, respectively)

An indication of the economic change that has affected Sunbury is the large amount of abandoned industrial space woven into the town's landscape. Gone are Champ Hats, Wilhold hair accessories; more recently closed are the Celotex fiberboard

plant (Moore 2009), Runnerless Knits, Jeld-Wen windows, and a small Coca-Cola facility (O'Rourke 2009e). However, their former buildings still stand. Though difficult to obtain precise employment statistics, Sunbury has anecdotally lost a large number of manufacturing jobs since the 1960s. This is supported by county-level statistics showing a steady loss of these jobs from 1987 to 2006 (SEDA-COG 1996; 2006), and further reinforced by the large amount of empty industrial space in town and as well as the stories of several residents who in interviews for this study attested to such a loss. The shift in employment away from manufacturing and toward service positions is mirrored in the state as a whole; despite an overall gain in jobs, Pennsylvania continues to hemorrhage manufacturing employment as well (Frey & Teixeira 2008).

The industrial flight that is afflicting Sunbury – as well as the concurrent shift to poorly paid service jobs – is generically known as deindustrialization. Deindustrialization is defined as the systematic divestment from productive economic activities in what was the global manufacturing core (Bluestone & Harrison 1982). The North American center of this divestment is sometimes referred to as the Rust Belt, a vernacular region informally defined as stretching east-west from Chicago to Philadelphia and north-south from New York to West Virginia; it is characterized by its former manufacturing strength (Garreau 1981). According to this definition Sunbury is located in the Rust Belt, but many of its residents do not identify with the term – the reason given most often that manufacturing here was not "heavy," i.e. associated with steel. The accuracy of such a distinction aside, the industrial flight that Sunbury has

endured, particularly since the 1970s, is not a unique occurrence. As will be discussed next chapter, this flight has underwritten the economic decline of many places in the developed world.

In Sunbury, lost manufacturing jobs haven't been entirely replaced, and what they have been replaced by is not equal in pay or status. With the exception of a few law firms and banks (and of course schools), employment in town is strongly oriented toward low-skill service (Dandes 2008). Top employers include the local grocery chain, county and state governments, the school district, and the seasonal amusement park and resort (Knoebels) a few miles to the northeast (Penn State Data Center 2001, hereinafter "PSDC"). Current manufacturing is largely limited to American Home Foods (a cheese factory), the Sara Lee Bakery,[4] and Sunbury Textile Mills, the latter running at an historically reduced volume adapted to fill a niche market (PSDC 1997; 2001). Service employment is concentrated along US Highway 11/15 – the region's so-called "Golden Strip" (Daily Item Staff 2007) – which runs north-south across the river in a neighboring county, where opportunities are limited to several fast food restaurants, "big-box" stores, as well as the area mall. There are no noticeable high-tech or "creative class" firms (Florida 2002) in the area – particularly not in town; however, the attraction of such jobs (as well as workers to fill them) are an object – one might even say obsession – of official revitalization efforts (City of Sunbury 2005).

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[4] In the process of being purchased by Bimbo Bakeries USA (Dandes 2011).

The reason attracting highly educated residents – rather than just jobs – is so important to officials is the declining state of education in Sunbury. The 2000 U.S. Census shows that while Sunbury's number of high school graduates is increasing (by 5% since 1990), it is not keeping up with national gains. Further, college graduates are few and decreasing in number, from 7.6% in 1990 to 6.1% in 2000.[5] This may in part be related to the fact that nearby post-secondary educational opportunities are limited to two exclusively-priced private colleges[6] and a for-profit vocational institution whose credits do not transfer to state schools. The nearest public university is accessible by car, but only if one is able to drive 60 miles round-trip to the town of Bloomsburg.

Sunbury's school district is also ailing. Once "one of the best in the state"[7] it now ranks well below average: 434 out of 500 (Blackledge 2007; Pennsylvania Department of Education 2010). The high school in particular suffers from high relative drop-out rate (Scarcella 2011a). The worsening state of education in Sunbury has been repeatedly reported in the local newspaper. This seems to be an element of decline that upsets many

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[5] This rate of bachelor's degree attainment is hardly one-fourth the national average which was 24.4% for the same year.

[6] These are Susquehanna University in Selinsgrove and Bucknell University in Lewisburg. 2011-2012 school-year tuition is $35,960 and $43,628, respectively, and only 21.7% of the latter's class of 2014 came from Pennsylvania (Bucknell 2011). These institutions are not considered options by most of Sunbury's residents, a perception bolstered by the fact that during my formal and informal interviews, I failed to encounter a single person who had attended either school. I was also informed by a senior geography faculty member at Bucknell that he has had very few students from Sunbury over his several years of teaching at the institution (Marsh 2010b).

[7] This is a repeated claim heard from older residents who attended Sunbury schools from the 1940s through the 1970s. I have been unable to verify or refute this claim.

residents, as evidenced by the frequency with which it came up in interviews. Whether it results from social or an economic causes, the effect of educational decline is clear: Sunbury is increasingly becoming a *place of labor*, not in the sense as a location where people go only to work (Ziegler 2007, 438), but rather as a place where labor – abandoned by capital – exclusively resides.

The cause of Sunbury's loss of regional cultural centrality is harder to pin down than the economic. There are two phenomena with which it is popularly associated. First, the commercial development across the river along US 11/15 – particularly the Susquehanna Valley Mall – led to a move by some retailers out of Sunbury beginning in the late 1970s. According to the discourse of residents (and shared by Marsh 1987a), this began a harmful cycle in which fewer people visiting Sunbury led to more business closures, leading to fewer visitors still. A less-cited, but still widespread view is that the ceasing of trolley and passenger rail service led to business contraction which began a similar downward trend. These explanations appeal to the idea that Sunbury – once the center of regional activity – was "bypassed" by auto-oriented development. There is likely some truth to this, as the national popularity of strip mall development over traditional downtown investment during the second half of the 20th Century has been well documented (Baerwald 1978). However, these explanations suffer from the fact that the catalyzing event at the core of each occurred nearly 40 years apart (trolleys and trains ceased in 1939 and 1950 [Rohrbeck & Gordon 1986; Snyder 1972]; the mall was constructed in 1978). Further, the evacuation of industry from the entire region

beginning around the same time may have more to do with Sunbury's decline. Productive activity tends to anchor ancillary economic and social activities. As in the cases of Flint (Dandaneau 1996) or Detroit (Sugrue 1996, 127), Michigan it's more likely that any "bypassing" of Sunbury's centrality was precipitated by industry's slow withdrawal, both from Sunbury proper as from the nearby coal region whose product, as was noted above, had to be transported through, and handled in the town itself.

STUDY ORIGIN AND DIRECTION

The declining status of Sunbury became of interest to me during a trip there several years ago with my fiancée. Having been where she grew up, I naturally came into informal contact with several people who had been a part of the community for a long time and were happy to offer to an outsider various vernacular histories of it. Many of these histories centered on the decline of the town, of its public as well as economic life. Many of those to whom I spoke personally remembered not only the changes Sunbury had undergone during the generally accepted period of perceptible decline – since sometime around the 1970s – but also the municipal achievements of earlier decades. Further, many of those too young to remember first-hand recalled these changes and achievements as though the memories were their own. All kinds of residents offered me stories with pride about a community that Sunbury had been and would be again if the right decisions could be made. One thing that was not agreed upon on was what these

decisions were, and in part this was based on a lack of clarity as to what the cause(s) of decline had been.

My interest in Sunbury's decline and its accompanying narrative was two-fold. My arrival into town was coincidently late at night. As we drove in through the downtown, I was struck by the size and architectural grandiosity of it. Centered on a block-long town green, continuous brick buildings with large windows spanned for a half-mile, their parking situated on-street or behind on an alley. Even many of the surrounding streets were relatively narrow, arranged in a grid with mainly two-storey houses with porches fronting the sidewalk on both sides – a form typical, I later discovered, of the "Pennsylvania Small Town" (Zelinsky 1977). Although there were no formal bike lanes, the streets themselves looked amenable to both bike riders and pedestrians, and the whole city form was so compact, it seemed like a model landscape for a New Urbanist re-creation. It looked like several "historical" gentrifying neighborhoods[8] I was aware of in Chicago, New York, and San Francisco – except that this was a small town, the supposed American ideal (Lewis 1972; also Smith 1970).

This pleasant impression was in direct conflict with what had been conveyed to me by my fiancée whose tales of a declining town at this point seemed less realistic, more a jaundiced disdain developed from having spent the first 20 years of her life here.

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[8] A good deal of place-based scholarship has dealt with the postmodern aesthetic desirability of historic urban forms to middle and upper class residents (Zukin 1982; Knox 1991; Roberts & Schein 1993; and Ley 2003). My initial visual impression of Sunbury was colored by an awareness of this general connection, yet had to be contrasted with the knowledge that this landscape was a failing one, socially and economically.

Having grown up in a small town myself, I was familiar with such contempt; so I held on to my rosy interpretation of the landscape until I could experience it myself. Sure enough, come morning very few of the buildings – many still with historic signs dating mainly from the 1960s and 70s – came alive and opened their doors for business. A drive around town revealed the continued existence of some clearly treasured businesses – a homemade ice cream parlor, a hot dog joint, a couple of "hoagie" shops, for example – but the streets were pretty empty of people, which I later learned was in part due to an perception of rising crime not actually supported by official statistics (Federal Bureau of Investigations 2009). Automobile traffic was heavy in some areas, but this was primarily along through-routes and near the limited strip development on the town's north side. From my point of view Sunbury, though clearly in much worse shape than my initial impression perceived, was clearly underappreciated and underutilized – a perfect template for a New-Urbanist dream community, the antithesis of the modern-day suburb – and I really wanted to know why. After my return to academia – geography in particular – I began searching for ways in which Sunbury's decline could be better understood in light of its seemingly favorable physical characteristics. The theoretical framework which best accounted for such place-based decline amidst the sea of general national prosperity was historical-geographical materialism.

The second reason for my interest was in the narrative of decline itself. Some of this discourse, from both inside and outside Sunbury, seemed to dwell on decline in such as way to repeat it. The obsession with "crime" fits in this category, as it keeps

especially older residents from walking the streets or going out at night. So too are explanations which blame decline on the relatively few residents of a subsidized housing project located on Sunbury's outskirts. However, other discourse seems literally to keep the community together.[9] Collective remembrance of better times seems to hold out hope that they can once again produce a "thriving"[10] community here. There is admittedly a regressive element to this type of discourse in that it makes it hard for people to envision new ways to move forward. An extreme example of this is the unwillingness by some to include newer residents – particularly those belonging to ethnic minorities – in their definition of community.[11] Overall, however, the unwillingness amongst residents to let go of their place's unique history encourages staying put despite capital's systematic disciplinary abandonment of it. As argued above, staying in place is an important tactic of resistance to economic rationalization (Agger 1991). Since the discourse is what supports staying in place, it deserves academic attention.

The next chapter begins with a review of the geographic concept of place; it concludes with an elucidation of the principal of uneven development that the Marxist geographic tradition argues is behind the localized deindustrialization places like Sunbury

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[9] The case of a community weathering economic decay through a shared history is not unique. Marsh (1987b) asserts a similar occurrence in Pennsylvania's Anthracite coal region to Sunbury's east.

[10] "Thriving" was used by several interviewees to describe the pre-decline Sunbury.

[11] At a 2010 meeting for the new city plan, a woman from a neighboring borough who had grown up in Sunbury advocated reaching out to new Hispanic residents and including them in community events. The suggestion provoked several audible groans from the audience, including one man who interrupted her to suggest that "they" all be sent over to her town. The Hispanic portion of Sunbury is 6.7% according to the 2010 U.S. Census.

have endured. Chapter 3 discusses the methodology of and the data used for this study, including a brief review of discourse analysis in critical urban studies in general. Presentation and classification of Sunbury's discourse of decline will occur in Chapter 4 according to the categories enunciated above: those that rationalize decline, those that tolerate it, and those that actively resist it. This study will then conclude in Chapter 5 with a discussion of the applicability of its findings to a critical geography of decline. The limitations of this study will be assessed in the final chapter as well, in the hopes of better directing future discursive place-based research.

Chapter II

Theoretical Framework & Literature Review

This study of Sunbury's discourse of decline is based upon the Marxist-geographic principal of uneven development, particularly Neil Smith's "Seesaw" Theory (2008). David Harvey's work on uneven development in time and space allows for an accounting of decline that is locationally specific in a context of greater prosperity. Smith's Seesaw theory expands upon this work to argue that capital intentionally invests in certain places at the expense of others; capital is then theorized to reverse course, taking advantage of locations less-developed to the detriment of the previously-developed place.

First and foremost Sunbury, Pennsylvania is a place – a geographic concept which will be addressed in this chapter. Sunbury's "place" is situated in a state and country that are both expanding demographically and growing economically (Census 2000; Frey & Teixeira 2008). In contrast, Sunbury's place is one in systemic decline. As outlined in the previous chapter, the town has lost nearly 1,000 people, or between 5% and 10% of its population a decade since the 1960s. Though harder to quantify, the employment situation – particularly for manufacturing workers – is clearly deteriorating. This effect is

particularly devastating to Sunbury's historical status as a *place of labor*, a location where labor – abandoned by capital – exclusively resides.[1]

Because the focus herein is on the human experience of and resistance to decline, this study puts a greater emphasis on theory and interpretation in lieu of positing and testing a hypothesis. This chapter is therefore designed to give a background on the two concepts most-heavily employed in Chapter Four's discourse analysis: "place" and structural geographic decline. These concepts can be woven together to provide a theoretical framework for a material understanding of place-based decline under capitalism; it is from this that Sunbury's narratives of decline can be interpreted and classified as enunciated in Chapter One. This chapter is therefore an attempt to build such a framework and does so through a selective literary review of both concepts – first "place", then uneven development – as they appear in geographic literature.

'PLACE' IN GEOGRAPHY

This study's employment of the concept of place in studying Sunbury's decline situates it firmly in the geographic tradition. A discipline primarily concerned with the spatial aspects of social and natural processes, geography affords "place" a central role in many of its areas of inquiry (Cutter, Golledge, and Graf 2002). As this study investigates how decline is experienced by Sunbury's inhabitants, it does so through the conceptual lens of place.

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[1] Please see Chapter One's Introduction.

The concept of place can generally be understood as one which enables the articulation of space as a whole (Holmen 1995); in other words, space is made up of places. The non-uniformity of space ultimately necessitates employing some idea of locality in order to discuss why things are where they are, and how they interact with each other. This definition is too abstract, however, and the human tradition of geography has produced many more specific conceptions of place. While there are a multitude of such conceptions, there are two themes that are particularly useful to this investigation of Sunbury's decline: the humanistic and the Marxist. Although the former's emphasis on individual agency and the latter's on structure provides plenty of room for potential conflict, properly balanced both contribute to an understanding of the nexus of forces that have produced Sunbury's "slow-burn" pattern of decline (Marsh 1987a). Further, because this study contains a dual focus on place-based decline as experienced on the personal scale and the causal role of global capitalism in the process, it is appropriate to consider both theoretical viewpoints in the assembly of a suitable basis upon which Sunbury's decline may be understood.

A common theme running through both Marxist and humanistic geography is that place can be considered a product of human activity, both structural *and* individual (Pred 1984). While a particular location may be described in part by its physical landscape or plant and animal life, place is a term that implies human action and meaning. Place cannot be understood absent its social context (Duncan & Savage 1989).

In this regard, the basis of a humanistic conception of place is as a home. Using a dialectical, if somewhat circular logic, Porteous (1976) notes that because all homes are by necessity in a place, place's central significance is as someone's home. This is based in the view that places receive their meaning from human activity. Porteous' observation echoes the work of Tuan (1974), who long argued that the meaning of space for humankind was that it provided places to *dwell.* In his later work, Tuan argued that particular dwellings were at the core of each individual's existence, spatially anchoring him or her to a sense of self (1991). Born from this humanistic strain is scholarship depicting the trauma resulting from the loss of home, for example the loss suffered by victims of post-war urban renewal who were often forcibly resettled while their neighborhoods were razed (Fried 1963). Such work emphasizes the role place plays as a constitutor of individual identity; while created by human hands, place in turn comes to signify home, shaping in return those who produced it (Porteous 1976).

Place may embody the social standing or economic activity of its inhabitants. Research on Hamilton, Ontario has shown how a particular neighborhood – the North End – has come to embody a sense of unhealthiness because of its history as a location of heavy industry (Wakefield & McMullan 2005). The authors of this study emphasize how past economic activity created a place, the experience of which shifted from thriving to derelict due to the changing view of industrialization in western society as a whole. However, the class-based subtext of the way in which the North End is deemed unhealthy is especially relevant to a humanistic conceptualization of place. The inhabitants of

Hamilton's North End are predominantly poor or working-class. In an age of contemporary urbanism, where the wealthy can increasingly expect to reside in districts or whole towns that exclude people outside of their income bracket, places of concentrated poverty or even of relatively lower economic class are marked by a social stigma.[2] Recognition of stigmatized places enriches the concept of place-as-home by showing that the place can be given meaning not only by those who reside there, but for outsiders as well.

The recognition of spatialized stigma also demonstrates how place can in turn define its inhabitants. In her study of the public perception of San Francisco's early Chinese population, Craddock observes that spatial concentration of smallpox and syphilis in Chinatown led to the labeling of its residents as "diseased" (1999). In this case, the perception of a particular place as unhealthy enabled the stigmatization of all its residents. Further, because of the racialized nature of this location, all Chinese – Chinatown residents or not – were subject to condemnation by the European-American majority because Chinatown's place was perceived as a locus of ill-health.[3] The way in which place plays a mediating role in the formation of identities is particularly important to the discussion of place-based decline. From Porteous' conception of place-as-home, to

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[2] Tools used in class-based segregation range from exclusionary zoning (Babcock & Bosselman 1973), market- or state-driven gentrification (Quastel 2009; Smith 2002, respectively), to the criminalization of homelessness through sit-lie ordinances, laws against charitable food distribution, and the proliferation of closed-circuit TV surveillance of public space (Mitchell & Heynen 2009).

[3] For a theorization of place as a locus of "health," see Gesler 1996.

Wakefield, McMullan, and Craddock's linking of place and privilege (Squires & Kubrin 2005), place and inhabitant dialectically give each other meaning in such a way as to render "who" and "where" inseparable research questions. Again, this renders place conceptually distinct from location from its reliance on social activity to achieve meaning.

The Marxist tradition in geography similarly begins by linking place with human activity. However, Marxist geography tends to emphasize the structural dominance of material relations under capitalism in its conceptions of place. A good example of this body of work can be found in the theorizations of Henri Lefebvre, particularly as interpreted by Andrew Merrifield (1993). Lefebvre considers space to have a tri-fold existence: physical, social, and mental (1991). Physical space is what is often called "natural" space; it is the physical landscape of earth, "air," and nature's material. Social space is created by humans, and consists not only of our own bodily movements, but also of our interactions with each other in daily life. Creative human works – our "things" – also fit in this category, provided that the person whose labor created them retains control of them throughout the production process.[4] Like social space, mental space is created by humans. What makes it distinctive is that its structure is ideological rather than authentic. Space that is "mental" is designed with a particular view toward arranging society around a governing principal or idea; it is space organized to administer life and it enables the

[4] For more on the distinction between alienated and non-alienated labor, see Marcuse 1956, especially pp. 21-105, 221-222.

domination of certain people over others. Today mental space is synonymous with capitalism, its circulation as well as its mode of production[5] (Merrifield 1993).

Lefebrve's "Unity Theory of Space" (*ibid*) argues that mental space dominates modern social relations. By its ideological nature, mental space is abstract. Place, on the other hand, is concrete and can be understood in two ways: first, in relation to the 'mental' space, place can be understood as "the locus and a sort of stopping of [capitalism's] flows, a specific moment in the dynamics of space-relations under capital. Place is shaped by the grounding of these material flows" (*ibid*, 525). In other words, flows of capital through space are solidified into things in place. Capitalism creates places because production cannot be liberated from place – it must have somewhere to occur. Place can therefore be understood as the location of specific productive operations which contribute, *in toto*, to the space of capitalistic exchange. Indeed, Smith's "Seesaw" Theory of uneven development is predicated on a similar understanding of space as "an active moment in the overall circulation and accumulation of capital" from which the operation of capitalism can be decoded (Smith 2008, 177). Second, place is where social space is lived and produced. Aside from its integration with capitalist relations, place is a potential source of liberation because of its roots in authentic human action and history (Lefebvre 1991; Massey 1991).

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[5] At its most simple, the "capitalist mode" is the organizing of productive labor around privately-held means of production and wage-remuneration. This mode is by necessity exploitative, as will be discussed in more detail in the final chapter.

Place as a citadel of uniqueness against the homogenizing space of capital is a theme running through many Marxist-geographic works. Massey observes the role "local place" plays in the discourse of globalization's victims (2004), noting that much "defense of place" literature "has come from, or been about, either the Third World or, for instance, deindustrializing places in the First" (*ibid*, 12). While recognizing the danger faced by some localities in this process, Massey ultimately argues that place and space are mutually constitutive and that some locations are enriched – both monetarily and culturally – by globalization. These include but are not limited to "headquarter" or "global" cities such as London, Tokyo, or New York, who benefit from the movement of globally acquired profits to their locales.

Marxist geography also views place as a political concept. Barnes calls for a more spatially contextualized understanding of political and economic values in geography, while still appealing to general meta-theories such as Marx's Theory of Value (1989). Similarly Conway (2004) notes the effect diversity of place has on festivals of cultural consumption; her work shows how the local political context of India changed the Brazilian-created World Social Forum from an elite, to a more inclusive, though still neoliberal cultural showpiece. Reflecting on the Love Canal toxic waste incident, Harvey posits that the lack of follow-up concern had to do with the event's location in a relatively working-class area (1996, 387-8). Had Love Canal been situated in a more "valuable" landscape than Buffalo, New York – say, The Hamptons or California's Silicon Valley –

Harvey suggests that the political response would have been more active and democratic than it turned out.

What these latter views have in common is that they assert some degree of uniqueness of place while maintaining the strength of social structure at the global scale. Aside from each strain's more radical spatial formulations – for instance, Marston, Jones, and Woodward's (2005) argument for eliminating scale because it is hierarchical and socially produced; that space can only be a "reflective expression" of production, not an active constituent (Soja 1989; Walker 1978); or that geography cannot be Marxist because Marxism is antithetical to place (Eyles 1981) – the conflict between the Humanistic and Marxist strains is mostly a matter of emphasis, whether on human agency or the primacy of structure. Forging ahead with a study of decline that recognizes its exceptional as well as subservient relationship to social structure is not only possible but perhaps a desirable methodological starting point; Sunbury is comprised of individuals with some degree of free will but whose actions are surely restricted by economic and social constraints. A Marxist analysis concerned with accuracy should therefore be envisioned in the spirit of a more spatially dialectical, less rigidly "Althusserian", flexible Marxism (see Cochrane 1987).

Such amalgamated treatments of place are not unheard of: Tim Brown's (2003) study of community resistance to UK hospital closures he situates the unique relationship between Worcestershire's residents' and their place within a larger political-economic structure. By doing so he is able to joins a concern for political context with a respect for

the individual actors within this context. In the spirit of such thoughtful ecumenicalism, this study of Sunbury chooses to conceptualize place both as a particularity within an economically and culturally capitalist network as well as a unique location whose residents find meaning in it and who therefore have the potential to resist the destructive effects of capital abandonment of it. In other words, Sunbury's *place* is herein conceptualized as a dialectic between greater economic processes and the individual social relationships developed locally. A change in one – the greater economic context, for instance – cannot help but affect the other. However, the local aspect of place allows Sunbury to respond flexibly to structure, and in this case allows it to defy the economic condemnation by capital. As will be discussed in the following chapter, the study of discourse provides a window into the local response to the systemic capital abandonment.

PLACE-BASED DECLINE

Historical-geographic materialism – or "Marxist geography" – links the geographic tradition with that of political analysis (Smith 2008, 207) to produce a critique of the spatial implications of capitalism. This style of geographic scholarship is opposed to earlier non-critical, positivist analyses of the post-World War II "Quantitative Revolution" (Berry & Horton 1970, Berry 1972, and more recently, Vicino, et al. 2007). To broaden the latter's positivist and therefore atheoretical stance, Marxist geography looks to the dominant social structure of our time – capitalism – as an explanatory framework for the spatial diversity of human production/reproduction. The strength of

Marxist geography's critical approach is its willingness to recognize, then challenge, an economic system that is rarely questioned and often seen as natural rather than as a product of human creation (Marx 1973, 169; Smith 2008, 29). Capitalism's dominant geographical narrative is that all places can be successful if only the people in them work hard enough (Hudson 2004), or alternatively that unsuccessful places fail as a result of their residents' lack of involvement or commitment (Loyd 2011). This claim is contradicted by global developmental realities, of which the otherwise inexplicable decline of places like Sunbury may attest.

The Marxist-geographic framework accounting for place-based decline is the principal of uneven development. This principal maintains that under capitalism not all places can thrive at the same time; to develop certain locations as well as to ensure the economic success of the system as a whole, certain locations must be neglected. Developmental neglect can be pursued passively – as in non-development – or actively, as in the destruction of places previously developed. Harvey's principal of uneven development (2006) and Smith's "Seesaw" Theory (2008) are theoretical tools that elucidate the way in which the active destruction of place occurs, and they persuasively account for the otherwise inexplicable decline of Sunbury.

The Seesaw Theory in particular maintains that capitalism intentionally alternates development between places in order to accumulate profit from them. This results in a global space composed of economically developing and declining places, each propelled

by market forces rather than local development strategies.[6] Before discussing Smith's Seesaw Theory further, a background exploration of uneven development under capitalism would be helpful. What follows therefore, is a brief summary of uneven development theory – primarily as constructed by Harvey and Smith – and the spatial critique it levels upon capitalism in general.

Capitalism is an arrangement of production, a human necessity. A particular type of trading economy (Weber 1981), capitalism emphasizes exchange over use value, and is based upon the unequal distribution of both the means of production and the finished product itself. The origin of inequality in capitalism is the "surplus value" generated during the production process. To accumulate profit, the owner of the means of production necessarily pays laborers (the actual producers of value) less than what his or her projects can be exchanged for. This value is "surplus" in that it exceeds the cost (in raw materials and labor) that went into the commodity's production (Harvey 2006, 23), and its appropriation by capital is enabled by the unequal class relationship between it and labor. The possibility of creating surplus value then becomes the incentive to engage in economic activity.

Traditional economics portrays the arrangement between capital and labor as beneficial for workers: they are free to sell their labor power to employers, who must competitively bid for it. Wage remuneration theoretically liberates the worker from any

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[6] In particular, those strategies associated with local 'growth machine' politics which attempt to develop place by commoditizing it (Logan & Molotch 1987).

confining tie to a particular employer or place (Smith 2008, 154). In a typical example of this principal, economic life in pre-capitalist Europe restricted a peasant to a particular place through his or her relationship with a landowner. Additionally, wages allow the worker choice in how he or she may consume labor's products. This "choice in consumption" is frequently trumpeted as the central benefit to living in a capitalist society.

Marx argues that the liberations of the wage relationship exists only in principle. "Between equal rights force decides" (Marx, in Harvey 2006, 30). Of geographical import, capitalism's promise of free labor mobility is in actuality capital's freedom alone (*ibid*). Capital's exclusive ownership of the means of production creates a situation where "in search of employment and a living wage, the laborer is forced to follow capital wherever it flows" (*ibid,* 381). Labor may then said to possess a freedom *from* place as investment may be pulled from any community at any given time. Thus, as investment has been taken out of Sunbury, its residents may either follow capital to where it invests next, or they may remain in place and try to make do.

Profit under capitalism is more complicated than the simple reaping surplus value: competition between producers renders value relative with only those who can accumulate *above the social average* able to realize a profit. The details behind such a mechanism are beyond the scope of this study. It is sufficient to note that through the mechanism of competition, products and capital are constantly overaccumulated and through their abundance become devalued (Harvey 2006). With a similar process

occurring in all industries, devaluation becomes a universal issue propelling a constant "falling rate of profit" (*ibid*, 180, 239; historical illustration in Harvey 1990, 141-172). The central achievement of Marxist geography is the observation that this devaluation must always occur *somewhere* and at *some time* (*ibid*, 378); this is what animates the principal of uneven development.

Temporally, capitalism develops unevenly both cyclically and over an historical trajectory. Like overproduction and the falling rate of profit, the forward direction of development is propelled by economic competition between producers to stay ahead of general devaluation. This competition propels technological advancement to decrease production time or increase output (Harvey 2006, 121-2)[7]. Thus under capitalism, "now" is always more developed than "yesterday." In this sense, capitalism is "transitory" (*ibid*, 192), constantly changing itself as well as the world it creates.

With no mechanism ensuring equilibrium between production and demand, development under capitalism is simultaneously cyclical (Marx, in Harvey 2006, 92-7). Capital's reoccurring tendency to overproduce leads to an oscillation pattern of growth and crises termed by Harvey "The Accumulation Cycle" (*ibid*, 300-305). The gist of Harvey's observations is that capitalist economies tend to repeatedly progress from states of stagnation to recovery, invariably ending in speculative fever and collapse. Generally,

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[7] For an insightful literary portrayal of the perpetual drive to decrease the turnover time of capital, see Zola (1995).

the cycle is driven by unrealistic expectations first in production then in consumption as both are ultimately underwritten by the institutional motive to accumulate wealth.

Between an advancing historical trajectory and a cycle of accumulation, capitalism produces a material state that is unevenly developed from one point in time to another. To be discussed in the following section, a similar operation occurs in space as well. Space was admittedly paid little overt attention by Marx, but the "spatial implications" of his work are undeniable (Smith 2008, 111). Harvey and Smith have expanded these implications (particularly from Marx's Theories of Surplus Value [*ibid*, 112]) to produce a spatialized version of what was originally an exclusively historical theory of uneven development.

Marxist geography posits that the uneven development produced by capitalism is uniquely "structural" (*ibid*, 4) – that is, capitalism works with a systematic coherence to produce a variable environment that serves the bourgeoisie's imperative of accumulating surplus value through production and trade. To illustrate this claim, it would be helpful to begin a brief discussion of the natural and pre-capitalist origins of uneven development, and how these relate to the capitalist patterns that have produced and are now destroying communities like Sunbury.

Pre-Capitalist to Capitalist Development

Marxist geography concedes that the world in its "natural" state is in many respects uneven, consisting of assorted landscapes and climates, each endowed with

various physical resources of varying amounts. In this sense, "capitalism does not develop upon a flat plain surface endowed with ubiquitous raw materials and homogenous labor supply … It is inserted, grows and spreads within a richly variegated [natural and human] geographical environment" (Harvey 2006, 415-6). By this, Harvey suggests that the origin of human material existence has been dependent upon an uneven distribution of nature's largesse, making settlement in some places easier than in others. It also implies a potential initial natural advantage to certain productive activities – and thus development – performed in particular places over others.

However, the "potential" aspect of such natural advantages must be emphasized. In its analysis of development both prior to and under capitalism, the Marxian tradition depicts a trajectory of increasing independence of natural constraints (Engles 1902, 35-101), where human activity has dialectically altered nature as well as our relationship to it (Smith 2008, 87). To illustrate this point in terms of Sunbury's settlement, consider the geographical distribution of fuel. Prior to the development of coal, settlement was generally restricted to areas providing wood, peat or support animals whose dung could be burned. The possibility of coal usage – and the choice to use it – thus changed the geography of human activity, encouraging the settlement of coal mining communities like those to Sunbury's east, as well as enabling the town's initial growth (Marsh 1987a).

Between the expansion of utilizable resources and the technological advancement of transporting them, the Marxist tradition argues for a contingent human relationship to natural diversity. Thus the seeming gifts of nature cannot be considered in isolation from

the development of technology and social relations which distribute them. The social relations of capitalism have so fundamentally altered previous patterns of production and distribution that no contemporary settlement patterns can be attributed to nature alone (Smith 2008, 87-89); appeal to nature's causal role in development – or "un-development" in Sunbury's case – should be regarded as an indulgence in "crass environmental determinism" (*ibid*, 136).[8]

To explain the forces behind Sunbury's material decline, Marxist geography exhorts us to look at capitalism. By either endowing "useful" things with exchangeability, or by creating new uses for items already exchangeable, capitalism works to endow place itself with exchange value (Lefebvre 1991, 336-7). The spatial goal of capitalism is to rendered places tradable amongst both producers and consumers so that like other commodities, they may "be bought and sold." (*ibid*, 10). Geographers have been instrumental in the development of this idea, particularly in regards to environmentalism (While, et al. 2004; Brand 2007), tourism (Rushbrook 2002, Meletis & Campbell 2007), governance (Fainstein 2001; Hackworth 2007), gentrification (Smith 1979; Bridge 2003; Ley 2003), and urbanization in general (Harvey 1987; Henderson, et al. 2007). However, it was Harvey (2006) and Smith (2008) who originally transformed this observation into a specific theory of uneven development.

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[8] Environmental determinism, while generally viewed as a passé concept throughout human geography, is directly antagonistic to the critical stance of Marxist geography because of its historical legacy of "scientifically" justifying racism, domination, and imperialism by essentializing capitalist social relations (Peet 1985).

CAPITALISM'S FOUR SPATIAL MOMENTS [9]

The conflict between use and exchange value that occurs under capitalism (Smith 2008, 6) manifests itself in four spatial "moments": equalization, differentiation, dispersal, and concentration. While equalization and dispersal are in direct opposition to differentiation and concentration, respectively, each spatial moment is a potential source of conflict or symbiosis with the others. The result of these four spatial moments is the production of a unitary uneven geography of capitalist development.

Equalization

Capitalism's moment of equalization is a product of two distinct, yet related tendencies; these are toward the expansion into and homogenization of the landscape. As discussed, expansion is necessary to avoid general devaluation. One way in which this may be achieved is by universalizing of the commodity form. The commodity is distinct from other goods in that it is produced principally for its monetary exchange value.[10]

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[9] The term "moment" is Harvey's (1996, 78). Much of Harvey's scholarship is based upon dialectical reasoning as well as presentation. Dialectics differ from analytics in that the relationships and dynamism of "flows" are emphasized over the isolation and deconstruction of "things". Things are viewed as permanences of varying durability coming from praxis, their parts and wholes recognized as "mutually constitutive of each other." (*ibid*, 53). Characterizing the spatial outcomes of capitalism as "moments" – rather than as tendencies or forces – emphasizes their unitary origin in a single, yet contradictory totality. Dialectics are discussed in detail in Harvey 1996, particularly pp. 46-68.

[10] While Marxist theories on the role of money are beyond the scope of this study, it is essential to recognize that money functions in the capitalist marketplace as a medium of

Commodity relations can be spread to new cultures in the form of economic imperialism (Sikor & Vi 2005), but they may also be "created" through the intensifying relationships in the capitalist world. An example of the latter can be seen in the growing commodification of childcare (Smith 2008, 75). Children's activities in Sunbury are to some extent still organized around social relationships such as family, neighbors, and friends. However, community discourse collected for this study indicates an increasing use of for-profit organizations such as competitive cheerleading companies in exchange for money to occupy young children's time rather than informally supervised neighborhood play, once a common feature of Sunbury childhood.

Homogenization of the landscape, on the other hand, is mainly a matter of technological proliferation (Smith 2008, 156). Again, searching for ways to produce more surplus value, individual capitalists invest in technology to improve productivity; the development of competitive advantage lowers commodity prices, thus devaluing similar commodities produced with now-antiquated methods. Other producers are in effect forced to adopt similar technology. As "innovation in one [economic] sphere is likely to find applicability in another" (*ibid*, 155), technology tends to extend from one industry to the economy generally. Competition then effectively disallows diversity in production, forcing a uniform level of technology, method, and therefore consumption throughout.

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exchange that is unique in that it allows for the instant re-investment – something other exchange mediums do not (Harvey 2006, 72; 241-51).

The geographical implication of capitalist expansion is clear: "The prospects of high profits lure capitalists to search and explore in all directions … spatial barriers and regional distinctions must be broken down" (Harvey 2006, 417-8), space must be annihilated through improved commodity transportation (Harvey 1990, 240-1), and all labor must be reduced to a generator of surplus value for capital (Smith 2008, 154). Capitalism expands into, changes social relationships within, and erodes the diversity of *places*; it simply cannot allow for the full self-determination of localities – politically, culturally, or materially – and it does so globally (Lefebvre 1991, 335). In its moment of equalization, difference is eliminated and "absorbed into capital." (Marx 1973, 694).

Differentiation

Directly opposed to the moment of equalization is that of differentiation. Differentiation is a matter of the need to establish immovable fixed capital as well as the economic division of labor. Both an outlet for and an investment in future accumulation (Harvey 2006, 219), immovable fixed capital includes items such as buildings, utilities, and transportation infrastructure (roads, rails, ports, etc), all of which enable the production and distribution of commodities. It may also include the social infrastructure of labor reproduction – such as schools, churches, and governmental institutions (*ibid*, 398-9).

Especially pertinent to geography is fixed capital's 'physicality' (*ibid*, 224); it necessarily must exist in a place, produce a "built environment". Because it is generally

expensive and aggregated slowly over time, fixed capital is often consumed slowly and collectively, the spatial effects of immoveable fixed capital are clear: it cumulatively endows certain places with greater *value*. As capital invests in particular places and not others, it weaves value into the landscape.[11]

On the matter of capital's division of labor, Smith identifies four scales on which these are made (2008, 146). The scale with the most influence on the landscape is the sectoral (*ibid*, 152), that between different types of industries (coal v. entertainment, for instance). The division of labor sectorally allows for speculative investment to be moved amongst industries depending on which is the most profitable at the moment. Currently, under what Harvey (1990) terms the "regime of flexible accumulation", corporations' diversified investments can be shifted from one sector to another in a matter of minutes.[12] As industries of different types are concentrated in various locales (for example, anthracite in eastern Pennsylvania or ethanol in the Midwest), investment shifts result in the development of some places at the expense of others. Further, a shift in investment by one firm affects the terrain of profit rates for others, often magnifying the incentive for them to move their investment as well. In this way, capitalism becomes a system that produces and destroys places according to the profit motive.

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[11] Technological innovation – which devalues 'obsolete' forms of fixed capital – further complicates matters, simultaneously expanding value in some places at the expense of others (Harvey 2006, 222).

[12] This diversified or "horizontal" form of corporation is termed a "conglomerate," and is specifically arranged to take advantage of the flexibility of contemporary capitalism (Bluestone & Harrison, 1982).

Concentration

As with the moment of differentiation, the spatial concentration of capital is influenced by the establishment of fixed capital and its efficient use; however, it begins with capital's social concentration into fewer and fewer hands over time (Smith 2008, 162). Smith theorizes that on a global scale spatial concentration follows social concentration. General monopolization concentrates accumulated wealth as well as market control into privileged nodes; this takes place on a global scale under contemporary capitalism, producing a hierarchy of urbanities topped by what have been termed as global cities (Sassen 1991). Essentially, global cities can be said to 'feed' off of the rest of the globe economically (Massey 2004), as the corporations headquartered there expropriate profits made elsewhere.

On the local scale, fixed capital investments and competition between political entities and sectors produce concentration. While both of these factors were named in the previous discussion on spatial differentiation, they tend to concentrate value on the landscape as well. Fixed capital – particularly that associated with transportation – cannot be built everywhere. Its high capacity and cost both attracts and requires a lot of investment by many and/or large firms (or shifted "onto the shoulders of the state" [Marx 1973, 531]). Competition between political entities further concentrates development as any prolonged phase of accumulation will develop the locations where favored sectors operate. For example, the U.S. "Rust Belt", of which Sunbury is a part, underwent a long

period of development during the time that its main products – steel and coal – were more profitable than other investments (Crandell 1981, 1-45).[13]

A ready labor force centered in a particular place also encourages investment there not unlike fixed capital. "Where workers are concentrated in one location, the cost of reproduction of labor power is reduced because a number of necessities can be consumed in common" (Smith 2008, 166). Related is the concept of the industrial reserve army, "a pool of poor people who can be used and discarded" by capital according to its production needs of the moment (Peet 1975, 565). Due to capitalism's inherent instability, a variably sized labor force is essential. Thus from capital's point of view, centralization of social inequality is paradoxically Thus the impoverishment of places like Sunbury can paradoxically be seen as a strategy of development, as Smith's Seesaw theory will shortly show.[14]

Dispersal

Dispersal originally occurred on the regional scale between the proverbial 'town and country'. In contrast to the attraction of shared fixed capital and labor pools of cities, capital is "pulled" outward to the 'country' by a set of incentives such as cheap undeveloped land, less congestion (Smith 2008), or even the more relaxed regulatory

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[13] Of course, when profit margins became greater in other industries and places, investment was systematically withdrawn (Friedmann 1988, 103; High 2003).

[14] For an interesting, though tangential discussion of how concentrated industrial reserve armies are intentionally maintained by the modern welfare state, see Harvey 2006, p. 91.

climate more typically found under county or suburban governments (Perry 1987, 113-5). Unlike the more separate relationship between equalization and differentiation, capital's moment of dispersal on the regional scale in particular can be conceptualized as a reaction to the landscape created by concentration. It is precisely the concentrated investments in a place that increase cost and congestion, thus making dispersal into 'new' places attractive.

To understand the workings of a Marxist theory of uneven development one must envision a multifaceted process of conflicting spatial moments wrapped in a single container. In no way does differentiation cancel out equalization, or dispersal replace concentration. Rather, capitalism's moments are viewed to both coexist and conflict with one another, producing a dynamic, yet always uneven landscape. The various scales on which development is uneven produces a pattern that can best be described as a spatial "mosaic" (Walker 1981).

As will be discussed below, uneven development is not just a product of the geography of capitalism, but also feeds accumulation by the landscape it creates. Capitalism's inherent instability cannot create an equalized landscape (Harvey 2006, 418; Smith 2008, 176); there must be an ever shifting terrain of geographical winners and losers. "The closer production equals some spatial equilibrium [of profit rates] … the greater the competitive incentive for individual capitalists to disrupt the basis of that equilibrium through technological change." (Smith 2008, 176-7). This dialectical relationship between geography and capitalism is the insight at the heart of Marxist

geography, and is the driving force behind Smith's 'Seesaw Theory' of uneven development.

'SEESAW THEORY': UNEVEN DEVELOPMENT AS GROWTH STRATEGY

Smith's 'Seesaw Theory' is distinguished from previous Marxist spatial theories in that it asserts that rather than an accidental outcome, uneven development is a objective pursued by capital because it is a source of profit. Multiple levels of development juxtaposed in space enable profit-making through uneven exchange between markets with differing value compositions. Often, these market disparities are seen at the nation-state level where certain commodities are cheaper to produce and buy in one country versus another. However, such uneven relationships can be observed locally in the price differentials that often occur between urban and rural markets. Profit can then be realized through trade, for example, by producing a commodity cheaply in a 'less-developed' place and selling it for a higher price in a 'more-developed' one.

As with general uneven development theory, technology plays a key role in expanding such opportunities to the global level. "With the development of the productive forces … and the steady emancipation of industry from natural constraints, it is wage-rate differentials and to a lesser extent the extant pattern of labor skills which determine the actual locale toward which capital flows and concentrates." (Smith 2008, 194). Additionally, the development of advancements in transportation technology – particularly containerized shipping (Levinson 2006) – facilitate capital's triumph over the

'friction' of long distances (Harvey 1990), enabling transfers of value on the global scale. Seeking to escape the rigidity and high costs associated with concentration in "developed" countries, capital can now reverse course and develop the global periphery (Smith 2006, 193).

The 'Seesaw' terminology comes from the way in which investment, once moved the first time, can be switched back and forth between regions according to where profit is highest. Smith asks us to envision the globe as a profit surface (2008, 197). Capital's initial move from the developed region to the periphery was first driven by the latter's draw of lower wage rates and fewer worker protections. But the relative abandonment of the former region causes it to deteriorate to a lower level of development, or "underdevelopment," an economic state consisting of "high unemployment rates, low wages, and reduced levels of workers' organization." (*ibid*, 198) Conversely, development of the former periphery contradictorily produces better labor conditions there, squeezing capital's profit margins. Thus the stage is set for a return of investment, from which point the process can begin again.

A similar theory comes from Smith's earlier work on movements in investment at the urban scale. This work culminated in what is referred to as the Rent Gap thesis (1979, 1982). In this earlier work, Smith argues that North American urban development had been shaped by repeated oscillations of investment between inner cities and suburbs. Beginning with capital's initial abandonment of the city after World War II, the Rent Gap posits that successive waves of urban flight and gentrification were in fact two sides of

the same coin. During each phase, capital flowed to one place to the detriment of the other, enabling "scavenger capital" to wring the remaining value from the built environment of the latter. Such devalorization lowered its exchange value enough to make reinvestment profitable, and valorization began in this place again.[15]

It is important to note the central role of economic crisis in the 'seesaw' scenario. Being abandoned for another region, the "underdeveloping" place is thrown into a "switching crisis" as its economy is forcibly shrunk (Harvey 2006, 428). It is likely that the decline being experienced in Sunbury part of such a crisis; this is a systematic type of crisis rather than one precipitated by any kind of municipal or social failure controllable by the community itself. Alternatively, the traditional economy of the new center of development is disrupted as it's integrated into the capitalist sphere, to say nothing of the extraction of its labor's surplus value to locations elsewhere. Capital itself must also experience crisis: moving to exploit higher profit levels elsewhere occurs simultaneously with a profit squeeze at home.

Fortunately for capital, however, is its superior technological command of space. In a localized switching crisis, its spatial flexibility allows it to "shop" the globe in order to find (or create) a new, more exploitable labor force. However labor, stuck in the abandoned place, is "disciplined" into accepting non-unionized jobs with successively lower wages (High 2003). Thus capital skillfully employed can accumulate surplus value in both phases of the cycle and in both places: by developing the production apparatus in

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[15] This process is graphically depicted in Eisner (2006).

the new locale and by disciplining the laborer and "wringing out" use value of the existing (and deteriorating) fixed capital in the abandoned one. Hence Harvey's observation that capital has spatially outmaneuvered labor, both organizationally and on the individual level (1990, 228-37).

The applicability of the Seesaw Theory for places like Sunbury is unfortunate and clear. Capital's wielding of flexible, and hence superior mobility leaves Sunbury – a *place of labor* – in a vulnerable state. In decline, the use value of its physical plant is being "wrung out" – used up more quickly than it is being replaced (as evidenced particularly by building abandonment and dereliction). Simultaneously, this devalorization could be preparing Sunbury for a new round of investment, this time in line with capital's profit margins now achievable in the developing world. The degree to which workers in Sunbury are acquiescing to this process can be seen in the reluctance I repeatedly encountered amongst interviewees to discuss unionization (with the exception of a former teacher[16]).

This study intends to leave open the possibility of other factors working in tandem with the economic in order produce Sunbury's particular decline. However, the facts of manufacturing flight, educational erosion, and downtown abandonment described in the first chapter indicate that the valueless and despotic functioning of capital (Huber 2011) lie behind a great deal of Sunbury's sufferings. By appealing to the principal of uneven

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[16] Education, generally overseen by the state rather than private firms, remains an arena where worker organization remains strong (Belfield 2005).

development in general and Smith's Seesaw Theory in particular, the decline of Sunbury can be demystified and moved beyond the capitalist myth that all places can be successful if only the people in them work hard enough. With it, we encounter the first explanation for decline that so far is not built upon such an unrealistic outlook. The force of this framework is further strengthened by its coincidence with the trope of the "run-away shop" repeated in the local discourse. It also hopefully puts to bed the tired clichés of blaming the poor or ethnic minorities unfortunately encountered during the course of this research as well. Together with a geographic conceptualization of place as a location constituted by human activity – economic and social – the principal of uneven development enables the discursive investigation of place-based decline this study has set out to achieve.

Chapter III

Methodology

This study is centered on the analysis of individual and group discourse in reference to Sunbury's decline and hoped-for revitalization. As described in the first chapter, such an investigation allows for a clearer understanding of the experience of and resistance to place-based decline. More specifically, the way in which the people of Sunbury deal with the material disintegration of their place can be deciphered through the identification and classification of prominent narratives contained in Sunbury's discourse of decline. In order to contextualize this study's conceptualization of discourse analysis method, this chapter begins with an outline of discourse analysis as it has been applied in critical urban studies generally. Following this discussion, the discursive data collected for this study will be enumerated and evaluated as to the reasoning behind its inclusion. As will be seen, the diversity of the data in terms of its sources and the techniques by which it was collected represents a well-rounded basis upon which Sunbury's discourse of decline may be assembled and analyzed.

At its most basic, discourse analysis is the collection and deciphering of texts about a particular event, process, or thing. The object of this method, according to linguist James Gee (1999, 4-5; 11), is to analyze language "as it is used to enact activities, perspectives, and identities" – or alternatively, to use language to understand

how activities and institutions are built. By deconstructing (and reconstructing) the way in which people talk about their world, discourse analysis is envisioned to reveal the "whys" and "hows" behind social practice – and as was discussed last chapter, place is in many ways constituted by practice; the declining urban "place" is no different. From its basis in the systemic material deprivation of capital, decline is lived daily by Sunbury's residents; as such, exploration of this process by way of discourse analysis is not only appropriate, but overdue in the effort to critically understand place-based decline generally.

Though more often identified with humanistic urban studies, discourse analysis has been utilized in Marxist-informed geographic research for at least two decades (Lees 2004). This work has been largely focused upon identifying and critiquing power-coalitions, or "regimes" (Elkin 1987) whose rhetorical hegemony is posited to direct urban politics though gaining the cooperation of those whom it dominates (Van Dijk 1997). As Lees outlines in her summary of urban-discursive studies, "methodologically this involves the close semantic scrutiny of rhetoric and turns of phrase to discover particular narrative structures, issue framings and how storylines close off certain lines of thought and action at the expense of others" (2004, 102). Research in this vein typically focuses on the discourse produced by, or in service of, cultural, economic, or governmental elites; it takes for granted their superior ability to shape public narrative through hegemony (*ibid*; also, see Beauregard 1993). The strength of this method is its

ability to lay bare the sources and motives behind ideology, thus demystifying dominant narratives and disputing their pretensions to objectivity.

In contrast, humanistic usage of discourse analysis tends to be concerned with the assembly of what Foucault terms "regimes of truth" (1980; in Lees 2004). Rather than looking at narratives as "reflections or (mis)representations of 'reality'" (Lees 2004, 102) – as does Marxist scholarship – this methodology views language and its use as constitutive of people and places. Ironically, even though this usage of discourse analysis is more aligned with humanistic work, it implies the existence of a fairly rigid structural determinant of individual behavior in language, contrary to the usually strong commitment to agency generally emphasized by the humanistic tradition (*ibid*). This study originates from the theoretical position that Sunbury's residents, though not necessarily *responsible* for their town's disintegration, care deeply for their place and can hypothetically reverse the process of decline given an accurately critical assessment as to its cause. The more determinant perspective of discourse analysis associated with humanistic urban studies contradicts such a research objective.

A further weakness of the humanistic strain of discourse analysis is its failure to fully correct its principal excess: the diminution of things and processes to "texts." This position – originating in the extreme application of internal relations theory (Harvey 1996, 80-81) – erroneously elevates language as a singular expression for all moments of social activity; simultaneously, it treats reality in all its diversity to a violent reduction. This is not to suggest that all, or even most, humanistic employments of discourse

analysis fall prey to such an extreme. For instance, there is a world of difference between choosing to conceive of a place as a text (as does Boogaart 2001, 39) and analyzing it as such, and asserting, to paraphrase Derrida, that place does not exist outside of text. However, the continued life of such a position within the humanistic tradition illustrates another way in which this study's concern for the experience and agency of the individual puts it at odds with scholarship ostensibly developed with a concern for the individual. By using discourse analysis to evaluate the experience of place-based decline, this study certainly accepts some degree of language's ability to internalize motivations for social activity. However Sunbury, its residents, and their experience and/or performance of decline are intended to be the focus of attention rather than any abstraction about "text".

The ways in which this study's use of discourse analysis coincides with that used in Marxist urban studies begins with its recognition that Sunbury is itself a tangible product of human labor (Lefebvre 1991, 84; 1996). Unless one is willing to define labor in a very narrow sense, the practice of "living" in a city must be recognized as a creative activity which renews the material relationships that produced and continue to produce it. Any seeming obscurity of the link between Sunbury's existence and its residents' practices rests in capitalism's ability to remove "all traces of productive activity" from the product in order to separate the worker from the product of his or her labor (Lefebvre 1991, 212). Sunbury's constitution – lately, its decline – is not only perceived and dealt with through discourse, but also *performed* (Chouliaraki & Fairclough 1999, 21). The

study of Sunbury's discourse, then, is a tactic designed to reveal how and why these hidden productive practices are developed.

Additionally, this study accepts a Marxian understanding of social influence through the concept of ideological hegemony. Hegemony, as developed by Gramsci, refers to power relations exercised through "consent rather than coercion" (*ibid*, 24). Hence, the three-fold classification system developed herein for conceptualizing decline-related narratives. Again, these categories consist of narratives that accept and essentialize capitalism's rhetoric of decline (that it represents a personal or community failing), those that deny that decline is occurring, and those that resist it – recognizing in Sunbury's decline a cause external to the community. The organizing principle of this system is discourse's response to capitalist hegemony.

One way in which this study's method differs from the Marxist tradition as identified by Lees is its disinterest in engaging with any form of regime theory. The various criticisms of regime theory notwithstanding (Lauria 1999), research on the small town scale calls for a different theoretical approach in regard to community elites. While Sunbury certainly has a few governmental, business, and/or cultural elites, their position *vis-à-vis* "regular" residents are much closer than is found in larger cities. Whether this is because the town's government consists of very few professionals,[1] its businesses

[1] Sunbury's mayor and council positions are part-time, and like most small towns, are only minimally paid positions. With the exception of the heads of a few city departments (such as the housing authority and the code office), administration is handled by clerical

community overwhelmingly of local rather than corporate owners,[2] or because its news media – established during Sunbury's more-powerful days – is local,[3] is unclear. However, this closeness creates more of an "all-in-the-same-boat" situation than is found in larger-scale contexts. Because the relatively limited gap between Sunbury's elite and 'regular folks,' the experience of community decline is remarkably universal. For instance, in interviews, people from all groups express a remarkably personal sense of loss. One gets the clear feeling when talking to governmental, business, or cultural elites that their hopes for Sunbury's revitalization (and the methods by which they imagine this being achieved) are not so much for personal or ideological gain, but for the survival of their cherished way of life. It is therefore that much more necessary to conceptualize hegemony in Sunbury as flowing from outside rather than from any community 'regime'.

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employees or volunteers (City of Sunbury 2011). Sunbury's governance is hardly an elite affair.

[2] Sunbury has only one corporate food establishment (Burger King), and with the exception of gas stations and a couple of "dollar" or low-profit stores, is populated by mainly locally-owned business establishments – even the grocery store. However, future research will need to keep an eye on the recent Bimbo Bakery Corporation. Bimbo – the largest global bread manufacturer (Dandes 2011) – is in the process of buying Sunbury's bread factory. Owned by local interests until its sale to the Sara Lee Corporation in 2007, the factory employs approximately 200 people (*ibid*) and according to interviews with both employees of the bakery and government officials it offers some of the best paid jobs in town. (To paraphrase one interviewee, Sunbury would be "in serious trouble" if the factory were ever to close). Considering this kind of leverage, it is foreseeable that Bimbo could attempt to drive town policy beyond the typical requests for tax breaks or favorable permitting decisions (for example, Laepple 2007). I have found no evidence, anecdotal or otherwise, that Sara Lee involved itself in substantive policy decisions during its brief tenure.

[3] Both the daily paper and a prominent radio station remain based in, and are focused on Sunbury.

DATA

Discourse included in this study was collected from town residents (both long- and short-term), merchants, government officials, as well as locally-based reporters. The forms through which this discourse takes is just as diverse, ranging from personal interviews to public statements, official planning documents to extra-governmental publications, and from speeches made at community meetings to newspaper articles and opinion-editorial pieces. Specifically, data includes the following, organized by type:

1. Personal, anonymous interviews with Sunbury community members,[4] conducted between June and August, 2010:
    a. Thirty in-depth, anonymous interviews lasting 20 to 80 minutes in length. (Please refer to Appendix 1 for the list of questions guiding these interviews.)
    b. One interview via email with a participant unable to meet in person. (Questions were drawn from interview questions listed in Appendix 1).
2. Documents published by or in conjunction with Sunbury governing officials:
    a. The Riverfront Master Site Plan (City of Sunbury 2005) detailing the technical as well as economic objectives of the current riverfront redevelopment project.

[4] "Community member" was defined for the purposes of this research as one who resides or works in the city limits of Sunbury.

b. "Message from the Mayor" (Persing 2010), an 'open letter' published on Sunbury's website addressed to non-Sunburian businesses, visitors, and potential residents.

3. Published newspaper documents from Sunbury's *The Daily Item*:
    a. 40 news articles and staff editorials dating from July 29, 2007 to June 7, 2011 discussing matters relevant to the economic or "social" decline and revitalization of Sunbury. Topics include but are not limited to factory closings, crime, public events, riverfront redevelopment, the new city plan, and individual revitalization efforts. (See Appendix 2 for a separate bibliography of these items; only articles directly quoted will appear in the main bibliography).
4. Research notes made *in situ* from June to August, 2010 and January to June 2011:
    a. Notes taken while attending a handful of community meetings associated with the "visioning" phase in the preparation of a new Sunbury City Plan.
    b. A limited number of notes made from informal communications between the researcher and area residents regarding community decline and/or revitalization.
5. Miscellaneous discursive materials concerning Sunbury:
    a. "Does anybody know anything about Sunbury, PA?" (City-Data Forum 2009-2011) an online discussion forum on the topic of Sunbury's current state of development involving 28 anonymous posters and consisting of 52

relevant posts over 20 months from September 23, 2009 to May 27, 2011. (Found at http://www.city-data.com/forum/pennsylvania/770582-does-anyone-know-anything-about-sunbury.html#ixzz100V4N1fp).

DISCUSSION OF INTERVIEW DATA

The central source of data for this study is a collection of personal, anonymous interviews with 30 community members, identified via a 'snowball' method of selection (i.e. beginning with select contacts and sought referrals from them regarding further potential participants). Interviews consisted of 30 core questions, and were recorded with an audio device for later transcription. They were designed to last less than one half hour, and in a couple of instances were as short as 15 minutes. However, most lasted 50 to 60 minutes – never at the behest of the researcher – with a few extending past the hour mark. There were fewer than ten individuals who, when asked, declined involvement; however, most accepted the request. Each interview was held at a location of the participant's choosing, most often at a restaurant or at his or her home or workplace. No remuneration was offered for participation.

Interviews were anonymous in that participants were promised that their names or any obvious reference to their identity would not be used in the publication of this study. This offer was made in order to elicit less-guarded responses from them, as well as to encourage participation in the first place. As such, interviews with participants have been numbered from 1 to 30. When reference to a particular interview becomes necessary, a

participant number will be used. Where pertinent, reference will be made to the participant's profession, age, or other socio-economic characteristic as long as this does not carry the risk of identifying him or her to others in the community.

The reason for beginning this study with resident interviews was an effort to be accurate as well as inclusive. As previously discussed, Sunbury is a dominantly working-class town and this status has tended to marginalize its story. As Harvey (1996, 387-8) notes, a place's disadvantaged class position often leads to the concerns of the place itself being sidelined. Additionally, when the stories of such places are told it is too often exclusively from a political or historical perspective, thus privileging the discourse of elites over 'regular' residents. Not only does this skew our knowledge about the experience of place-based decline, it also reinforces the prejudice that working-class people have nothing meaningful to say – to academics or to anyone else. The existing research – both on decline (for example Jackson 1972; Beauregard 1993; Wyckoff 1995) and the places of central Pennsylvania (Deasy & Griess 1965; Cochran 1977; Alter, et al. 2007) – seems to suffers from such exclusivity.[5] By beginning with an attempt to collect working-class narratives, this study hopes to in-part correct previous researchers' omissions as well as to allow the residents of this particular place to tell their story themselves. It is also hoped that this study can provides some much-needed "dialogue

[5] Recent geographic research on deindustrialization has made an effort to be more inclusive (High 2003; Wakefield & McMullan 2005; Haalboom, et al. 2006), and in this regard has acted as a methodological model for this study.

across difference" (Agger 1991), between the experiences of 'regular folks' and a still relatively elite academia.

To select interview participants, the snowball method was chosen for its appropriateness to the subject and style of research. Entering a small community as an outsider and asking strangers to participate in a lengthy one-on-one interview was a situation that required either utilizing the local contacts I was given through my fiancée's family and friends or spending an unknown length of time ingratiating myself to randomly chosen strangers. While I was able to return to Sunbury to continue research in January 2011, there was a strong possibility that my time in the community was limited to the summer months of 2010. Given these time constraints, the former was a more practical approach.

Three additional issues solidified the choice to sample via a snowball rather than a random method. The first of these involved a concern for eliciting honest and open answers from study participants. Prior to my residence, I was advised by several contacts in the area that while it was a friendly community, it could also be socially insular and that an outsider like myself might face considerable suspicion from people. I reasoned that approaching community members as a stranger with a lot of questions, no less as a *researcher* from *"liberal" San Francisco*, would likely be particularly problematic, if not in terms of encouraging participation then at least in soliciting candid responses. While I cannot say for certain how successful this endeavor would have been, I do know that many interview participants for this study seemed to be put at ease when I could identify

acquaintanceship with local, long-time residents of whom they knew. Development of the snowball method has its origin in the desire to facilitate accurate research involving "sensitive" populations or topics (Browne 2005); I would argue that its application be extended to situations where there may be a perceived social disconnect between researcher and subject such as that described here.

The second issue was a desire to ensure diversity among participants along several socio-economic, ethnic, and gender lines. Through using selectively referrals, I was able to identify traits about potential participants – especially as to the first category – prior to meeting with them. What is ultimately meant by this is that I wanted to ensure the inclusion of 'ordinary' working-class people in the identification of community discourses. As stated in the introduction, my interest in Sunbury's decline began with the immediacy of a more-gloried past coupled with regret for the doubtful present expressed so frequently by the 'regular folks' I just happened to meet by chance. I wanted to capture this aspect in the participant population, as well as to allow Sunbury's working-class people to speak for themselves about their home (Hitchcock 2000, 21). The views of political, economic, or cultural elites tend to be overrepresented in public discourse, whether directly or through hegemonic influence. This appears to be particularly the case among the printed sources used for this study such as newspaper articles and other published materials. Therefore a selective interview strategy was warranted on these grounds.

Selective snowball sampling also allowed me to include representative numbers of ethnic minorities in the interview group.[6] It was admittedly less successful in ensuring a balance between male and female respondents.[7] Females were more likely to decline participation or to refer me to their partner for an interview. However, this method ensured the inclusion of small yet essential populations in understanding place-based decline such as two downtown merchants (one long-term and one recent) and a prominent religious figure.

Finally, the concern for "representation" leads to the third reason for utilizing a snowball sampling method. The object of this study was to identify and critique prominent narratives regarding the decline of Sunbury; it was not to statistically assess which explanations or understandings were most popular. Therefore random sampling was unnecessary; rather, it was essential to sample from as wide a group of people as possible. Participants were chosen in a manner most likely to produce a body of discourse representing a diverse range of experiences. Narratives discussed in Chapter Four may be linked to certain social groups if I noticed strong association; however, there will be no accompanying statistical analysis as to the popularity of any viewpoint.

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[6] According to the 2010 U.S. Census, Sunbury's population was 91% Caucasian alone, 2.8% African American alone, 0.3% Asian-American alone, and 6.7% Hispanic "of any race". Individuals interviewed for this study self identified as 90% non-Hispanic Caucasian, 3.3% African American, 3.3% Asian American, and 3.3% Hispanic.

[7] Sunbury is 48% / 52% male/female (*ibid*) while participants were 67% / 33% male/female. Failure to achieve a balanced gender composition was a shortcoming of the execution of my sampling method, though its impact is minimized by the study's non-statistical methodology, discussed in further detail below.

Interview questions were designed to touch upon a variety of community experiences (please refer to Appendix 1). Recognizing that participants possessed different interests as well as areas of knowledge, answers regarding downtown, town history, the labor market, and educational services were sought. Further, participants were asked to evaluate the past and present state of social and economic life in the town and its surrounding region. Participants were also encouraged to characterize the town in terms of its scale, scope, and wider regional membership. Most participants were asked all of the questions listed in Appendix 1, and all participants were asked most them. Questions were designed to be open-ended, to elicit several-sentence responses when possible. To some extent, all interviews went "beyond the script" in that I attempted to follow up on topics that interested each participant.

There was one important limitation to the application of a personal interview method. Having had substantial informal experience socializing in Sunbury both before and during the study gave some perspective on this matter. In informal discourse with residents, they were often forceful, emotional, and sometimes 'politically incorrect' in their opinions as to the declining state of their town. Despite attempts to make participants comfortable expressing their opinions honestly, it was difficult to replicate this kind of "openness" in the formal atmosphere of the interviews. Participants were seemingly more guarded than I found residents to be generally (for instance, as in the community meeting described in Chapter One, footnote 11, p. 21). The explicitness of my 'otherness' – particularly as embodied in my pad of paper, tape recorder, and

interview release form – seemed to cause participants to become more filtered than normal.

Because of these limitations, supplemental sources of discourse were sought rather than relying on interviews alone. While I believe this data provides a set of especially personal accounts of life in a declining place at the hands of capital, the addition of official and informally published materials captures discourse that is not tailored to the ears of the researcher alone. An explanation of these sources commences below.

DISCUSSION OF ADDITIONAL DATA

The first supplemental source of data is that gathered from official Sunbury documents. If conducting personal interviews with residents represents this study's attempt to 'democratically' sample the local discourse of decline and give voice to a group of people not often heard from, then the inclusion of materials by Sunbury governing officials is a recognition that some community members tend to have more discursive influence than others. The greater sway of elites in the process of shaping public discourse, particularly when it involves defining political problems and their policy solutions is consistent with both methodological strains of urban discourse analysis (Lees 2004). Therefore, in addition to the two ex-elected officials interviewed as part of the above category of data collection, the city's riverfront revitalization plan as well as the current Mayor's online "message" have been evaluated.

The riverfront plan (City of Sunbury 2005) is a 119 page publication oriented toward state and federal government officials as well as Sunbury residents. It can be read both as an appeal for outside funding and an essay summoning local political support, respectively. Toward the latter aim especially, the plan contains illustrations and descriptions of what the project hopes to achieve for the riverfront and the adjacent downtown. Additionally, the way in which it discusses riverfront redevelopment "gives away" how officials conceptualize their town's decline and its possibilities for revitalization. As such, it can be analyzed discursively in the same way as personal interviews, albeit ones that reflect the conceptualizing of decline in the opinion of Sunbury's governing officials.

The 'mayor's statement' (Persing 2010), on the other hand, is clearly directed at people and companies located outside Sunbury. It contains a list of community assets, including a couple of misleading statements about Sunbury's three professional schools (which are, in fact, all vocational programs offered by the same for-profit institution) as well as Sunbury's "outstanding" public school district (see Blackledge 2007 and Pennsylvania Department of Education 2010). It also portrays Sunbury as a "stable" community, ready "to meet additional employer needs". Its discourse is useful as an example of how Sunbury officials would like others to see their town.

The inclusion of 40 local newspaper articles related to decline and revitalization recognizes the influence of media "elites" in the framing of public understandings of issues (again, see Appendix 2 for a separate bibliography of these items). Particularly in

the editorial pieces, but in the news items as well, is a presentation of community decline from the dual perspectives of reporter and editor – both essentially local figures. These articles also serve the purpose of encapsulating community discourse by quoting residents. Their incorporation therefore supplements the aim of the research to include of the dialogue of 'regular folks'. The articles themselves were identified through regular reading of *The Daily Item* from June 2010 to June 2011 and utilization of the newspaper's online search engine located at www.dailyitem.com. An age restriction of five years (to 2007) on articles was placed by the researcher in order to limit analysis to "current" discourse.

The 'democratic' or 'mass' discourse sought in the interview process is further augmented by discourse captured in a unique online discussion I chanced upon while researching Sunbury history (City-Data Forum 2009-2011). Initiated in September 2009 by a person from Connecticut seeking information on Sunbury, the discussion involves 28 anonymous individuals who made 52 posts relevant to the issue of the town's decline. (This forum can be found at http://www.city-data.com/forum/pennsylvania/770582-does-anyone-know-anything-about-sunbury.html#ixzz100V4N1fp). With the exception of the initial poster, participants are self-identified as former and current residents of Sunbury or the surrounding area. While inclusion of discussion from this forum could be seen as problematic due to its anonymity, I believe it deserves to be incorporated as an addendum to interview data for its unfiltered treatment of Sunbury's history and present state.

Additionally and lastly, I have decided to open to analysis a set of miscellaneous notes I informally made during my stay in Sunbury. This method of data collection can be classified loosely as "participant observation." As part of the research process, I spent approximately seven months living in the community prior to completing a final draft of this thesis. This residence occurred from June to mid-August 2010, and January through June 2011. During this time I met and spent time with several individuals whose experiences it would be inappropriate to include in this study. However, there were a few occasions on which I was at a public forum or engaged in an informal activity where I recorded my observations of them. Like the online discussion, inclusion of these notes serves only as a supplement to the interview and published data, and is a minor part of this study.

In conclusion, the data used for this study represents a wide range of community discourse on Sunbury's decline and hoped-for revitalization. This discourse will be analyzed and woven together to identify and critique the particularly prominent themes of place-based decline and its perceived sources. As will be seen in the following chapter, these discourses can be arranged into three categories: those that rationalize decline as the community's fault (when in fact, it is forced from outside), those that deny its reality, and those that meaningfully resist it in a progressive and/or regressive defense of home.

Chapter IV

Findings & Discussion

How is Sunbury's material decline experienced and conceptualized by its residents? To answer this question, this chapter presents and classifies several prominent narratives which have been assembled through discursive research and analysis completed in the Sunbury community. Discourse has been sampled from a diversity of sources, the details of which are outlined in Chapter 3. This chapter sets out to distill from this discourse a set of prominent narratives revealing the conceptualization of place-based decline by Sunbury's community members; thereby, the discourse of place-based decline may be better generally understood.

As discussed in Chapter 2, the Marxist-geographic tradition posits that the uneven development that occurs under capitalism is responsible for the place-based decline Sunbury current suffers. To create economic success in certain locations as well as in the system as a whole, some places must be savagely devalued (Schoenberger 2004, Harvey 2006). Smith's (2008) "Seesaw Theory" goes further in arguing that this pattern of uneven development is regularly "switched" back and forth in order to reproduce profit once one phase of accumulation reaches an end. The reality for Sunbury during this particular phase is that its once productive relationship with capitalism has become destructive.

Sunbury's narratives of decline express not only how its community members deal with their town's deterioration, but ultimately how they come to terms with an economic system that once invested in their home but has now largely abandoned it. Hidden in the discourse is the meeting point between an impersonal and despotic economic system (Huber 2011) and the people who must live with the creative and/or destructive consequences of this system.

In an attempt to understand the experience of people at this "meeting point", as well as to aid in the development of a discourse of resistance to capitalism, this study has conceptualized a categorization scheme for Sunbury's narratives of decline. Decline narratives can be understood as originating from three types of relationships to capital-induced decline: those that essentialize the workings of capital – and thus Sunbury's decline – as natural and necessary; those that deny the material decline of Sunbury that is evident to most observers; and finally, those that recognize decline but resist it as an intruder coming from outside the community. More conveniently, these categories may be referred to as narratives that comply, narratives that deny, and narratives that defy.

In terms of a post-decline future, narratives that comply view Sunbury's relationship with capitalism as one that while first fruitful, has now become a point of community failure that needs to be put back on track through what are sometimes referred to as "pro-growth" policies (Logan & Molotch 1987). In general, these policies strive to commodify specific places in order to market them to both capital and people. Narratives that deny tend to look with skepticism upon any revitalization strategy as

unnecessary; Sunbury, if experiencing any problems, is just going through the regular ups and downs of any similar town, a situation that will fix itself. Narratives that defy share with those in the first group a dissatisfaction with what has become of Sunbury. However, they differ in that they do not blame community members for an inability to keep up with changes in capitalism, and further do not look to capitalism for the solution to community problems. These narratives see the way out of decline consisting of an assortment of strategies that, while lacking any unifying characteristic, envision alternatives beyond the hegemonic prescription to "market" Sunbury to outsiders. By recognizing the possibility of an extra-capitalistic alternative, these narratives produce the grounds from which a "discourse of resistance" may potentially be developed.

In the following section, Sunbury's decline narratives will be discussed in the ordering which the categories are presented above; however, two organizational issues arise. First, few of the narratives identified fit discretely into this classification system. Often, a narrative may partially fit into two or perhaps three categories, depending upon the ways in which it is employed. Therefore, some narratives – or even specific sources – may be revisited under more than one category. Second, in light of this study's theoretical basis in Marxist geography, the first and third narrative categories – those that comply and those that defy – will be emphasized. This does not mean that there is any shortage of discursive denial of decline in the Sunbury community; indeed, some degree of denial may be a requirement to maintaining life there. However, narratives interacting

directly with the capitalist ideology of space and place – by complying with or defying it – are of more immediate importance to this study.

One further caveat is that this list of narratives is by no means exhaustive. A community's discourse should be assumed to be more diverse than one study can collect and present. However, this collection of discourse as well as the narratives it embodies serves to *represent* Sunbury's self-understanding of its material and social decay. It also serves to provide a template by which the experience of place-based decline may be conceptualized in general.

NARRATIVES THAT COMPLY

The first of these categories are those that essentialize capitalism, whose understanding of decline and revitalization are limited to promoting Sunbury and its residents as commodities. Such narratives do harm to the community by assigning exchange values to people and places, reducing their "worth" to the whims of the marketplace. Further they obscure the larger economic powers at work in the destruction of the town, deflecting blame onto the residents themselves. In practice, these narratives deepen Sunbury's dependence on capital rather than work to liberate it. By envisioning the route to revitalization as one which develops stronger ties to capitalist commodification – finding "a niche" in the global marketplace (Petryk 2010b) – they solidify the community's relationship with the economic system responsible for its decline in the first place. These narratives ultimately evince a willingness to establish

capitalism as the only alternative, these discourses "foreshorten people's imagination[s] of what is really possible" for Sunbury (Agger 1991, 23); their harm lies in diverting residents from a developing revitalization strategy that is authentic to place and the people that make it unique.

Old Age

A good place to start is Sunbury reputation as an "old" place. Classified as an "Old City" by Stevens (1963, 40), Sunbury was founded during the colonial phase of settlement of Pennsylvania. On a more concrete level, the median age of structures is over 70 years old in 10 of 13 Sunbury block groups, according to the 2000 Census. Typical of other Pennsylvanian Appalachian communities (Watkins, et al. 2004), Sunbury's senior population is much larger than the U.S. average.[1] In the latter two regards especially, local discourse tends to understand Sunbury as "old" in and of itself.

As though it were a person, an anonymous online poster comments that "time has not been kind to Sunbury" (City-Data Forum 2010, February 10). While the age of Sunbury is sometimes used to promote an extra-capitalistic point of community pride, the narrative disparagingly linking the town's age with decline presents both as a single condition in need of mitigation. This narrative promotes capitalistic understandings of decline and strategies of revitalization in a couple of ways. First, it presents the problem

[1] According to the U.S. Census Bureau, Sunbury's share of residents 60 years or older is 22%, 32% above the U.S. average.

in a consumerist ethic: "old" is equated with outdated and derelict, while "youth" comes to embody all the positive attributes of "newness". Old things and people are robbed of their value – or more concretely, they are *devalued* – and are presented as in need of replacement. A "new" place, just like a new car or toaster, is hoped to supersede the old whose time has been spent, its youth consumed. Second, this narrative holds the Sunbury community accountable for the decline it has suffered. This serves to obscure the real cause decline – the fickle investment decisions made from outside to devalue places like Sunbury in favor of higher profits elsewhere.

No where is this link more obvious than in official discourse on the physical landscape. During a town meeting on the topic in 2010, two speakers were reported by the local newspaper to present decline as a result of the age of Sunbury as embodied in its structures (Scarcella 2010). The best thing the city can do with old buildings, says the current mayor, is to demolish them to provide empty land to developers. In this view, not only are outside investors kept away because of the outdated structures themselves, but also ostensibly by the appearance of old age – hence the city policy to present "dilapidated" neighborhoods as requiring demolition first (Petryk 2010c). In the same meeting, the current police chief notes with disapproval that the typical age of homes in Sunbury prevents their sale, and that it's an economic burden to the city in general to be such an old place (Scarcella 2010). Thus the age of the "sagging" landscape (City-Data Forum 2010, April 17) is cast in this official line of discourse as a direct impediment to economic success; Sunbury's existent history is seen as a roadblock to revitalization.

Once this understanding is established, the only reasonable solution is to bulldoze the past to make way for the future. Sunbury is encouraged by this discourse to purge itself of all relics that do not conform to contemporary investment standards.

Printed upon the landscape is an "old" economy of industry. Industrial landscapes – once a sign of strength and economic vitality – have come to symbolize not only environmental and human degradation, but also economic stagnation (Wakefield & McMullan 2005). As discussed in Chapter 1, Sunbury has several former-industrial sites, as well as currently operating ones. Interviewee 27 makes the derogative connection in Sunbury's discourse between age and the town's industrial past when he characterizes local industry as "old". Interviewees 23 and 25 go as far as to author industry's epitaph in their discourse, both averring that Sunbury's industry is gone and not coming back. While many residents still see a future in industry (e.g. interviewees 11, 12, 31, and Daily Item Staff 2010a), there remains some degree of a problematic association in the local discourse between old age and industrial activity.

The aged aspect of the town's physical fabric serves another purpose. It is discursively cast as a psychological barrier to economic success: the role that old, abandoned or run-down structures play in recalling painful community memories. One example is discourse that associates the continued existence of buildings where past successes occurred with present failure. Such memories juxtapose the town's past vitality with its current moribund condition, and seek to erase signs of both. Several discussants on the online discussion forum qualify buildings that once housed memorable

locations as "old", such as the *old* Grandway and Super Saver buildings (City-Data Forum 2010, March 10), the *old* Banana Mart (*ibid*, 2010, April 26) and Strand Theater (*ibid*, 2011, May 19), and the *old* human resources building (*ibid*, 2011, May 22). One discussant sums up the significance of characterizing these lost locations as old by his description of commercial heart of Sunbury as a place where "there's not much left anymore" (*ibid*, 2010, March 10). Lacking the opportunity to relive community memories or create new experiences in these once-important locations becomes all the more painful in light of the fact that the physical shells still stand, enduring as a physical testament to residents that their vital past is definitively over.

Locations with bad memories attached to them play a role in this discourse as well. There is a need in Sunbury to sanitize the history of these places (Zukin 1982) in order to render them harmless to the present and useful to the future. When a house where a 2008 domestic murder took place was bulldozed two years later, the structure itself was referred to by its neighbors as both "junk" and a "blight" (Petryk 2010a). In the absence of pictures, it's hard to validate or refute these aesthetic judgments. However, the city's desire and ability to take such an unusual remediating action in relation to home where a domestic crime took place, to say nothing of the choice of words used by neighbors in support of such an action, reveal a collective unease with the old when it fails to make one feel better about the present. This unease also explains the curious omission of Sunbury's industrial heyday from the Riverfront Plan's otherwise detailed accounting of town history. It would seem as though the doubt which

characterizes the present hopes for the future requires official discourse and action to cleanse the past for community members as well as for outside investors.

It's easy to understand why ridding the landscape of such physical reminders would be especially important in Sunbury. If the present isn't satisfying, then at least residents have the past. If such structures testify that perhaps the past wasn't as rosy – or if they testify to too great a past than the community feels it can live up to – they represent an emotional danger most residents don't want to face. These old structures must be selectively eliminated in order that the past will give unqualified support to the revitalization of the future. Such strategies of symbolic reappropriation of the past are encouraged by capitalism where they can aid in accumulation (Roberts & Schein 1993).

Local discourse's denigration of Sunbury's "old age" is not isolated to objects and structures. It can be observed in narratives that view older residents and their preferences with a subtle resentment. Again, not unlike the way commodities are viewed by capitalism, old age and decline are associated in this discourse as twin forces holding Sunbury back. However, this resentment is likely historically contingent as well. In the late 1960s and early 70s, the City of Sunbury attempted to "develop" this population by demolishing three large tracts of houses and businesses in the central portion of town (Sanborn Map Company 1930) in order to construct tall elder-housing projects, Chestnut, Scott, and River Front Towers. Slowly losing population since 1930, Sunbury may have seen expanding amenities for seniors as a way to arrest this loss. But as regional elder migration scholars Rowles and Watkins (1993) note, communities absorbing more than

an average share of elderly residents have often faced rising service costs, as well as political conflict between older and younger residents.

Between local circumstances and the internalization of a consumerist attitude that values newness over age, older people are in-part devalued in Sunbury's discourse as an undesirably large demographic that in some way must be transcended. Several examples of this type of discourse occurred during participant interviews. Interviewee 11, when I asked him if he thought Sunbury was part of the Rustbelt, replied that while he had never heard the term, he

> "…knew it had to do with something, but I didn't know if it was rust as in declining, which is true, like when things get old they get rusty. I guess that's kind of what it does mean. <laughs> I would say [Sunbury is] like that then … unfortunately."

Other interviewees associated older people with Sunbury's failing economic ties to industry. Governing and developing according to the needs of older residents, say these residents – will continue the decay of the community itself.

> "There are the older people who have seen [the town] decline and see that as a problem. …The younger people, they don't see Sunbury as a bad place. They think it's great and don't mind the fact that there isn't a manufacturing job in Sunbury." (Interviewee 3)

> "I'll tell you what this region is. This region is – I'm trying to say this nicely – is old and uneducated. When I say uneducated, I don't mean dumb; I mean they didn't go to college. [But] those are the demographics of this area: it's very, very old." (Interviewee 30)

The age of Sunbury's people hinders growth because they are "stuck" in the old way of doing things.

Interviewee number 3 continues to state the problem more directly: old and current residents need manufacturing jobs, but these aren't the jobs that younger people want; young people want white-collar jobs, and they are who Sunbury needs to attract to become vital. Relatively young and a white-collar worker herself, one could interpret this as a simple affinity to people of her own age and class. However, in light of other individuals' attitudes, such an interpretation fails to grasp the way in which local discourse understands Sunbury's old age – physically and demographically – as a source of stagnation, as a hindrance to progress.

The Touring Outsider

Another prominent narrative in Sunbury's discourse of decline concerns itself with the character of the "outsider". People who are perceived as outside the Sunbury community play discursive roles that range from threatening intruder to desired partner, and each imaginary is employed toward various means. However, there is a way in which the 'essentializing' discourses of revitalization idealize a certain kind of outsider as a solution to decline. Specifically, this hypothetical savior is either a well-off or highly educated person whom the local community must induce to move to Sunbury, or alternatively to visit as a tourist. Both serve to focus attention outside the community, and as such distract from the possibilities that may be developed locally to revitalize

Sunbury. In this section, the narrative of local tourism will be discussed, particularly how this discourse frames the outsider-as-tourist as a kind of rescuer of Sunbury and as such tailors revitalization projects to fit the outsider's imagined needs.

There is nothing unusual for a formerly industrial city in decline to look toward expanding its tourism sector. Dandaneau (1996) chronicles Flint, Michigan's attempts to turn a failing automobile industry into "AutoWorld" (also, Fonger 2009). Likewise, High (2003) notes the celebration by Pittsburgh's civic elites of later factory closures because it would improve the city's tourist image. However, in Pittsburgh the turn toward tourism ended up becoming no economic substitute for manufacturing decline, and in Flint, tourist development became a money pit for the city that eventually failed and arguably distracted citizens from alternative economic development strategies. Even in Baltimore, where tourism-related harbor-front development has been on a grander scale than in Pittsburgh or Flint, service employment produced lower paying jobs, and the physical development itself has literally turned its back on the surrounding working-class neighborhoods (Harvey 2000).

Tourism is arguably the main focus of Sunbury's riverfront redevelopment. This is not unprecedented, as tourism is already promoted as the central benefit of nearby Shikellamy State Park (Morton & Laepple 2009). While objectives such as creating new recreational opportunities for existing residents and reconnecting everyday town life with the river are stated, the overall focus is to attract visitors from elsewhere. A typical passage reads:

> "Visitors should be encouraged to walk from parking areas through the Market Street business district as a means to introduce them to the shops and restaurants that are in the downtown" (City of Sunbury 2005, 30).

While the term "visitor" by itself is ambiguous as to whether it refers to a resident or tourist, clearly in a town of under 10,000 residents do not need to be "introduced" to the contents of their downtown. Further, where many planning documents tend toward the term "user," the Riverfront Master Plan opts for "visitor" when discussing issues such as public events (including community fairs) as well as facilities wear and tear, and syntactically juxtaposes visitors and residents several times (*ibid*, 41, 42, 44, and 81). The economic development that the city hopes will be catalyzed by riverfront redevelopment is also focused upon the desires of visitors rather than those of residents; in a discussion of new hoped-for downtown stores and restaurants, the plan mentions residents in only one sentence in which their needs are characterized as "in addition" to what potential visitors may desire (*ibid*, 42).

The hope in economic development through tourism pervaded the discourse of some interviewees. "We don't have anything to draw people here" laments interviewee 4. Interviewee 6, a retired resident, places nearly all of his hope in economic revitalization in creating what he calls a "tourist trap" of Sunbury. Citing the examples of other Pennsylvania towns he exhorts Sunbury to do something dramatic:

> "Jim Thorpe was a great Indian athlete – an Olympic athlete … These people in this little town over in Eastern Pennsylvania called Bok Chunk – and

> Indian name, obviously – dreamed up this idea that if they could bring his body there, inter it, bury it, and rename the town for him it would be come a tourist attraction, and it worked! That's all they had. It's called Jim Thorpe. Oh, it's a neat little town. … Lots of ideas have gone across the table [for Sunbury]; I've had some of them myself. … I said, wouldn't it be neat if we had a cable car from Sunbury across the river to the heights over there? Would that attract tourists? I think it would. What if we had a steam locomotive pulling a passenger train such as they have at the Strasburg railroad? … They built this museum in Strasburg and … they're now running a steam train from that town to a neighboring town… This steam locomotive brings town of people in there every weekend. So, you know, I don't know what we've got to do but we've got to do something to bring [tourists in]."

I've include such a long quote from this interview because it exemplifies in dramatic fashion the narrative that the revitalization of Sunbury will occur by pleasing and attracting "others". If they can be induced to come and spend money, Sunbury will be revitalized for its residents. Interviewee 6's statement that "something" must be done is not too far in tone from a suggestion that anything will do. Whether this "something" will in any sense be an authentic expression of the Sunbury community is beside the point. The local discourse of tourist promotion only requires that Sunbury attract visitors; it de facto excludes the desires of community members, particularly how they envision their home.

In effect, this narrative discounts the transformative potential of current residents. It represents a capitalist understanding of place-based decline by emphasizing the commodity-appeal of Sunbury to outsiders rather than what can be done by and for residents for their community. The proponents of this idea discount that the vital Sunbury of the past was a place that was constituted by its residents, not tourists. While

activity in the transportation sector as well as the self-reinforcing centrality of a thriving downtown certainly reinforced the past economic success of the town, Sunbury was primarily sustained by the place-making activity of its residents themselves.

'Youth' Culture and the Cult of Newness

The role "old age" plays in Sunbury's discourse is complimented by the dominant narrative toward the concept of youth. The large amount of positive attention paid to the concept of youth betrays a similar valuation of newness over age as seen in the examples above. The belief that youthfulness in and of itself revitalizes is perhaps more common than the derogatory attitude toward old age, and can be seen in nearly all of the local sources used for this study. Interviewees of all ages held this type of view:

> "The whole idea [of revitalization] is to attract … young professionals to live downtown, so then those people would then live and shop downtown. The whole process would be to … make the downtown more attractive, more appealing … new businesses … young children … a bustling downtown." (Interviewee 14, in her 50s)

> "I wish we could get some of those young folks to come in, but young folks want amenities: they want it nicer." (Interviewee 3, in her late 20s)

> "If [a community college] located in the downtown or near the downtown it would bring activity, young people … Too many of the bright young people [don't] stay here." (Interviewee 6, in his 70s)

Interviewee 23, repeatedly peppered her interview with the twin terms "active" and "young," when talking about communities Sunbury should be trying to emulate, as well as local positive changes that she perceived were already taking place.

Several newspaper articles evince views to the same effect:

> "Another need? Keep Students in the area, [Diane Sarafin] said. 'We have to encourage young people to stay.'" (Dandes 2008)

> "Building loft apartments in downtown Sunbury could attract young professionals … a great way to draw a younger crowd into the area." – Kristen McLaughlin, member of Sunbury Revitalization Inc. (Scarcella 2010)

> "The presence of two younger candidates in the race is a positive thing, according to [candidate] Johnson, because 'it means younger people want to stay in this community.'" (Scott 2009)

The reactive tone of many of these quotes is notable. That's because there has been a perceived "brain-drain" from the area in the minds of many locals (e.g. City-Data Forum 2010, February 6; also Interviewee 6). In fact, college graduates did make up a diminishing proportion of Sunbury residents between 1990 and 2000.[2] However, there is a discursive importance attached to attracting and/or retaining young people that goes beyond just halting any brain-drain. "Youth" in local discourse comes to embody and symbolize community revitalization; the acquisition of it promises renewal, and as can be

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[2] 6.1% of Sunbury residents 25 years or older were college graduates in 2000 compared with 7.6% in 1990. U.S. rates were 24.4% and 20.3% respectively. (1990 and 2000 U.S. Census)

seen, many of Sunbury's downtown revitalization efforts in particular focus upon the attraction and retention of young residents.

The role "newness" plays in local discourse is similar to that played by youth; however, it is employed more broadly. Newness is positioned in the discourse opposite decay, as a concept that appears to cancel out decline. In accordance with a capitalist understanding of consumption, it's almost as if enough new things can be acquired by the community, economic and cultural decline will necessarily end. Above all what is striking is the way in which the valuing of newness is employed in local discourse to connote the need for replacement not only of individual structures, but of people and the town as a whole.

In a way, Sunbury revitalization projects appear to be designed around replacing the town, bit by bit, with new things. The 'Elm Street' program, a state-run revitalization project in which the City of Sunbury partakes, is built entirely around funding new sidewalks and trees for the streetscape (Scarcella 2011b) and new siding, windows and roofs (O'Rourke 2009d). What is particularly significant is not so much the objective of the program – helping communities and individuals make improvements to their physical assets – but rather the way in which the these objectives are articulated in Sunbury. Rather than use terms like repair, restore, or fix, local officials as well as the newspaper itself characterize the Elm Street as providing "new" things. The discursive framing of revitalization as a process of replacing old things with new coincides with the

conceptualization of place-based decline as a matter of old age discussed in the previous section.

The repeated characterization of newness is hardly limited to the Elm Street program. Community pride manifests itself around new acquisitions all over the town. Interviewees 2, 16, and 22 in particular used the adjective a combined 16 times in conjunction with Sunbury's recent or planned urban improvements. It is frequently used by discussants in the online forum as well (City of Sunbury 2010, March 20; April 17; 2011, May 17; May 22), and the mayor chooses to highlight what is (relatively) new for potential investors: "We offer … a *new* modern library … A *new* water and sewer system support our municipal services…" (Persing 2010, emphasis added). Organizers of the annual – and popular – River Festival want the community to know that they are always "try[ing] to bring new things" to the event (Brubaker 2010), and even though the Sunbury park system already installed a "*new* water park [and] *new* play equipment and a *state-of-the-art* playground surface," Sunbury officials would like everyone to know that riverfront redevelopment will install "*new*, beautiful plants" and "*new* facilities" including a "*new* amphitheater;" it will "host *new* waterfront activities" creating "*new*… economic activities" and thus "*new* jobs" in conjunction with possible "*new* restaurants" and "a *new* hotel" (City of Sunbury 2005, 32; 44; 65; 66; 81).

The discourse's valuation of new things over those existing extends to people as well. As discussed, one of the hopes behind revitalization is to attract new residents to Sunbury, preferably those who are young and/or educated, and therefore ostensibly

"creative" in the capitalist sense of the word (Florida 2002). Hence, the languages of material acquisition and neoliberal economics combine into a local discourse that assigns a high worth to "new" people:

> "Sunburians would also like to see the establishment of a community college within the city to bring new residents … to the city" (Todd Grbenick, local planning official in Petryck 2010d).

> They're making a lot of cosmetic changes downtown that will hopefully make it look better and help attract businesses and new residents, but there's a long way to go (City-Data Forum 2010, March 20)

> "The place will never improve if people keep calling in [sic] 'Scumbury' … It's really mostly safe, and needs decent people to move in and give a 5hit [sic] rather than the local negative vibe (so common to the locals around here) … The new economy says get off you [sic] butts and make stuff happen … Sunbury really needs to attract creative, energetic, positive people" (City-Data Forum 2011, May 22)

In a similar vein, the Message from the Mayor (Persing 2010) shows a desire on the part of Sunbury officials to attract new people. Noticeably addressed to outsiders, this open letter characterizes Sunbury as the "City of Opportunity" for potential new residents. Persing lists the educational and institutional assets the municipality offers as well as its many services in such a way that reads like a literal plea to move there. As discussed in Chapter 3, it also contains a couple of blatant exaggerations as to the quantity and quality of local education. Clearly a third party to the message, Sunbury

residents are referred to by Persing as "a labor force to meet additional employer needs". Notably, there is no comparable mayoral statement directed toward community members.

The Mayor's message positions the outsider as a kind of redeemer who, if he or she can be encouraged to move to Sunbury, will breathe new life into the community. The implication, of course, is that Sunbury's current residents have allowed the community and themselves to become stagnant and lifeless. Abstracted as a "labor force," current residents are viewed by the mayor's discourse as in need of a revitalizing other. Rather than seeing revitalization as a process that occurs within the community itself, these narratives posit that arresting decline involves acquiring new residents who will aid Sunbury in attracting capital. By emphasizing revitalization from without, this viewpoint fails to develop any kind of community pride or solidarity which is something town officials and residents have repeatedly attested a commitment to (*ibid*; O'Rourke 2009a, 2009b, 2009c, 2009e).

To illustrate the degree to which newness has been discursively developed as a value in and of itself, one need only look at the strangely optimistically ways in which some Sunburians argue that decline is really an opportunity for acquiring a new community. For instance, devastating economic losses, such as the closing of the Celotex fiberboard manufacturing plant and the consequent loss of over 100 jobs (Dandes 2009), was cast by one resident as in reality, a good thing for the town: "We lost the Celotex operation, [but] now there's a potential for a new business to move in over there" says Interviewee 22, as if several vacant spaces zoned for industrial development didn't

already exist within city limits. Irritated by residents' dissatisfaction with the deteriorating state of the community Cory Fasold, president of Sunbury Revitalization, Inc., declared, "If you don't like Sunbury then leave it. Make room for somebody who wants to be here" (Scott 2008). In a community that has been hemorrhaging people since 1940 (see Figure 4, below), and with a housing-unit vacancy rate over 10% (Census 2000) this statement strikes one as bizarre. However, taking into account the way in which the spatial operations of capital pose as natural laws rather than the systematic exercises of power by those with wealth (Marx 1973, 169; Smith 2008, 29), it becomes possible to understand the mix of optimistic boosterism and self-destructive sentiment evinced in both examples.

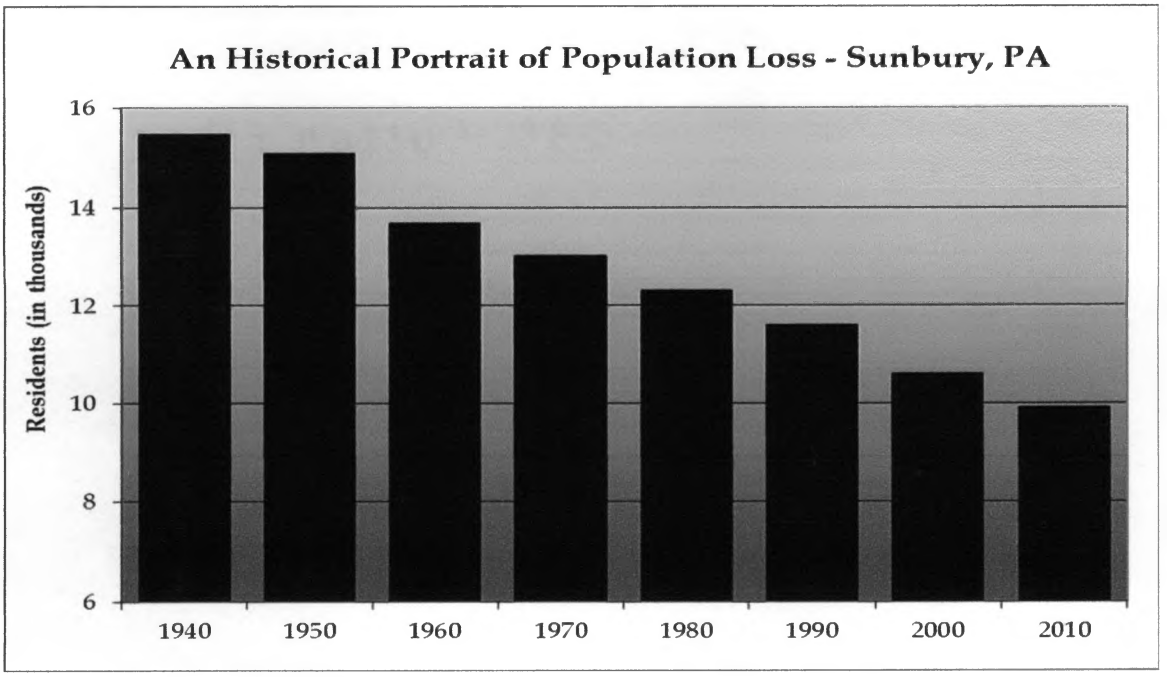

Figure 4: Bar graph depicting Sunbury's population loss since 1940, by decade. (U.S. Census 2010, 2000, 1950; Pennsylvania State Data Center 1997; Godcharles 1944)

What these examples have in common is a devaluation of the Sunbury that exists and, rather than a desire to improve or fix it, both want to some degree to replace it. It is no surprise, then, that a new concept has developed in local discourse: "The New Sunbury". Originally known simply as an updated city plan, the redrafting of the master plan has been named "Coming Together – Sunbury's plan for the New City" (Daily Item Staff 2010a). Aside from the curious grammatical distancing of the "new city" from the community ostensibly creating it, the conceptualization of a revitalized Sunbury as 'new' shows a valuation of replacement over introspective development of the community itself. If proof is needed that a distaste for what exists is indeed implied by the "new" Sunbury, then one need look no further than the redevelopment of a southeast-side neighborhood near the town's high school. Here, the privileging of newness over the community that exists is no longer conceptual. Despite the fact that most of the homes are inhabited, structures not up to code will face demolition. Tellingly, officials hope this redevelopment will serve as a "model for the Sunbury of the future … the new Sunbury" (Petryk 2010c).

The elevation of what is new in Sunbury displays an attitude that disparages of the community as it exists today: rather than emphasizing the elements that have kept many long-time residents anchored here for decades, this narrative portrays a town that is only old, outdated, and in need of replacement. This is not to suggest that there aren't individuals who communicate an appreciation for Sunbury past and present, or who don't directly challenge discourses privileging newness. In particular, Interviewee 4 stated

several times she wishes town officials would focus on creating jobs rather than replacing everything with new "stuff". However, there is a pervasive local narrative that appears to have internalized the values of commoditization – that all things, including people and places, are consumed, and that the natural order dictates the new must replace old when the latter is all used up.

The discursive emphasis of replacement serves to revere youth at the cost of Sunbury as it exists. The frequency in which newness is invoked in revitalization discourse belies a belief in consumerist ideology that change comes from without and can (only) be bought. It further indicates that the experience of decline in conjunction with the capitalist narrative of personal responsibility for failure (Loyd 2011) has created a self-deprecating view in which the community sees itself as the creator of its own demise. Finally, Sunbury's essentializing discourses of old age, youth, newness and the outsider-as-tourist associates revitalization with the twin concepts of growth and expansion, which according to Harvey (2006) are a requirement for economic relevancy under capitalism.[3] These discourses serve to internalize capitalist values and apply them to local relationships amongst Sunbury residents as well as between Sunburians and others.

Because of the constitutive nature of discourse (Chouliaraki & Fairclough 1999), these combined narratives of newness and old age, youth and the outsider, combine to promote capitalist understandings of decline amongst community members who may not

[3] Please see Chapter 2 for more discussion of the falling rate of profit as well as the spatial "moment" of expansion under capitalism.

have understood decline as such previously. However, these essentializing narratives are not the only local understandings of decline. As will be seen in the next section, not all people agree that Sunbury is in decline, at least not relative to any other place. Further, some residents are satisfied with many aspects of life in Sunbury and see no reason to change it. These "narratives that deny" will be explored more fully next.

NARRATIVES THAT DENY

Many residents express at least some degree of optimism about the declining state of Sunbury, whose active revitalization is certainly in doubt. Sunbury, according to the 2010 census, continued to lose population at a rate of over 5% per decade and had a housing vacancy rate of 13.2%, several points above the year 2000. In spite of these statistics as well as a visibly deteriorating business situation over the duration of this study,[4] very few residents provide an entirely gloomy assessment of Sunbury's economic viability. (Exceptions include Interviewees 17 and 26, a few online discussants, as well as a gentleman while refusing to be interviewed described Sunbury as a town "going down the shitter".) One can assume that in addition to focusing on the positive aspects one's home – and there are facets of life in Sunbury that certainly are pleasant in spite of

[4] In-residence research on Sunbury was completed between June 2010 and June 2011. During this time, many high-profile businesses closed in Sunbury including a downtown bed-and-breakfast, two relatively up-scale dining establishments, two bars, a donut shop, a hobby store, a hair styling studio – incidentally owned by one interviewee – and Modern Business Machines, Sunbury's only office supply retailer.

the town's decline – it would be tempting to residents to try to see revitalization even where its existence is unlikely.

As mentioned above, minimal attention will be paid to this category of discourse because of its lack of interaction with the material forces behind place-based decline. However, some attention is warranted due to its prevalence in the local response to decline. Further, narratives denying the existence of decline are useful in this discussion because of their ability to be employed politically in order to muffle non-essentializing strategies of revitalization that resist capitalist spatial hegemony. Therefore this section will attempt to briefly summarize Sunbury's discourse of denial regarding the decline that is explicitly recognized by most community members encountered by this study.

The Universality of Decline

One way in which community members are able to deny the existence of decline is through a fictional or hypothetical comparison with other towns. Many residents encountered by this study discursively projected the negative events Sunbury has endured during the past few decades as a universal experience of regional or even American life. Doing so seems to alleviate the sting of hometown decline by characterizing it as normal, as something all places have gone through. Undoubtedly serving a few emotional purposes, defining decline as "nothing special" allows community members to ignore an unpleasant material state they may feel they have little control over. It certainly also

serves to mitigate the stigma of place-based decline as well as the blame some residents may feel for the declining state of their town.

A handful of interviewees equated the experience of decline in Sunbury with what they imagined were the experiences of other towns. Typical were statements made by Interviewees 6 and 30. When asked about the condition of Sunbury's job market, their replies were:

> "Well, I think it [downtown decline] is typical of most towns this size – a little smaller or a little larger – across the country. I haven't been in every state, but … all the retail, or almost all of it, is in the malls." (Interviewee 6)

> "I'm reading every day that we're losing jobs. But the jobs we're losing are in other towns which affects us all … Every town is losing jobs and struggling." (Interviewee 30)

Both individuals noted they regularly consumed local and national news, and both mentioned traveling to other areas in their lives and were ostensibly making their comparisons based upon this knowledge. However, typical of similar comparisons made by other residents, neither offered any specific reason for their judgment that Sunbury's experience was not unique. In the same vein, participants in online discussion forum made many statements characterizing Sunbury as ordinary, isolated from any specific evidence or support:

> "Having lived in Sunbury for most of my life I can tell you the drug and crime element is all over, not just here. Sunbury, not unlike other towns, has it's

> [sic] better sections and any realtor can assist you on that info. … Times have changed all over." (City-Data Forum 2010, April 5)

> "This town is beautiful, everytown [sic] has the same, maybe not as bad, it's everywhere" (*ibid* 2009, October 21)

This kind of denial is prevalent to the degree that it finds its way into academic discourse on the area as well. While overtly maintaining the uniqueness of Sunbury's decline elsewhere, Marsh (1987a, 13) typifies the town's deterioration experience as a matter of population, implying that all similarly-sized settlements have faced a comparable experience. Again, this allegation is made without recourse to any specific proof, and one is left to wonder whether there may be something more emotional behind it than an attempt at rational comparison. In any event, universalizing the experience of decline is certainly part of the local discourse of denial. If decline is everywhere it is relative; such discursive tactics essentially posit that what has happened in Sunbury is unfortunate, but since there is no alternative it is nothing to worry about.

Compartmentalization

Similar to the denial of decline through comparison, some residents have expressed a desire to compartmentalize Sunbury's decline to a single, tangible cause. One of the most popular targets of blame is the development of a shopping mall and other

auto-oriented strip development across the river.[5] Considering the frequency with which many Sunbury residents shop across the river to the exclusion of stores in their own town, there is likely some relation between the ascendance of "the mall" and the decline of downtown. However, this relationship is surely more nuanced than a simple zero-sum competition in which Sunbury lost. Regional statistics of demographic stagnation[6] as well as the loss of manufacturing investment from the central Susquehanna Valley region (SEDA-COG 1996; 2006) and the state at large (Frey & Teixeira 2008) point away from a simple suburbanization model of decline. Nevertheless, the Riverfront Plan characterizes Sunbury's recent history as

> "…typical of other areas in the country where an exodus from city living to a more suburban lifestyle occurred. Many former downtown Sunbury businesses followed residents to the suburbs and to malls across the river." (City of Sunbury 2005, 2)

With Sunbury's share of regional population relatively stable since 1990 (please see footnote 5 below), it's inaccurate to speak of residents being "followed" to the suburbs. Further, it's more likely that the mall's growth to the detriment of Sunbury's

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[5] Development across the Susquehanna River from Sunbury includes many "chain" retailers such as Walmart, Target, and Lowes that are not directly connected to the shopping mall proper. However, when interviewees spoke about this development and its effect on the economic health of Sunbury, they generally used the term "the mall" to refer generally to the entire commercial strip, including the retailers mentioned above.

[6] Outlined in Chapter 1, Sunbury's immediate neighbors are Northumberland, Hummels Wharf, Shamokin Dam, and Selinsgrove. According to Census statistics, population growth occurred in only two of four of Sunbury's contiguous "suburbs" between 1990 and 2010. Additionally, "rural" Northumberland County's population remained relatively stable.

downtown reflected an investment shift first from individual to chain enterprises (White, et al. 1996) and second from a pedestrian to an auto-oriented retail environment (Baerwald 1978). However, what is significant to note is to assign the decline of Sunbury to a single, tangible cause seems to make it easier for residents to make sense of what is complicated and obscure economic process. For example, the simplification of the cause of decline singularly to the effect of the mall was employed by interviewees as well. The clearest example of this comes, again, from Interviewee 30:

> "Decline? The decline is very simple again. It's the mall. As soon as the mall came in in the late '70s that's when the downtown started to deteriorate. I think historically you'll see that everywhere. Selinsgrove's downtown is not near what it used to be, and they're a college town. Lewisburg seems to be hanging on … but you're starting to see more and more empty storefronts there also."

Blaming decline entirely on the opening of a mall and similar "big-box" development can be critically read as a sophisticated way to deny the significance of decline without explicitly denying that decline has occurred.[7] Such issue framings serve to compartmentalize decline in one location, and thus minimize it. While no one this study encountered was advocating a boycott of the mall, simplifying the cause of

[7] Interestingly, discourse blaming Sunbury's economic hardship on the commercial development across the river focused on the Susquehanna Valley Mall itself; this may reflect the mall's advent as a memorable historical moment for the community. Retailers such as Wal-Mart, Target, or Lowe's – all of which have established a presence on the same highway – were rarely mentioned by community members who attributed decline to economic development outside city limits.

Sunbury's economic woes as the result of one nearby event also serves to render the problem less confounding.

Outright Denial

This study would be remiss were it not to point out that in the local discourse, there is outright denial that decline is continuing. Not everyone shares the impression that Sunbury continues to face a problem of decline. While it appears to the researcher that Sunbury is continuing to deteriorate (in part, due to the observations enunciated above), hindsight will likely provide the only conclusive judgment.

Mostly, local discourse denying decline took the form of asserting that revitalization had begun to occur, which of course, is different from an assertion that no decline ever took place. A typical example reads:

> "Really there aren't that many vacant buildings in the downtown and you see some activity going on, people trying to better / improve the storefronts, improve the curbing. You know the [downtown] park has been rehabbed. There are just things that kind of are giving us an opportunity to change the way the whole place is perceived." (Interviewee 14)

Aside from what seems to me to be a questionably rosy assessment of downtown building vacancies, this participant centers her optimism about Sunbury on aesthetic improvements. Many residents see in Sunbury's public beautification projects not just improvements themselves, but promises of future revitalization. "They're making a lot of cosmetic changes downtown that will hopefully make it look better and help attract

businesses and new residents," says one online discussant (City-Data Forum 2010, March 20). The former mayor made the beautification strategy the hallmark revitalization strategy of his administration:

> "[Mayor] Woodring does believe he's made some progress during the past four years, and immediately points to the aesthetic changes that are taking place in Cameron Park, the Edison Plaza, Stroh Alley and on North Front Street. More than $500,000 has been put toward the projects – money Woodring believes was well spent. 'I think people should take pride in how their city looks,' he said." (O'Rourke 2009e)

If the measurement of revitalization is limited to aesthetics, then yes, decline has been arrested. However, as current census statistics show, beautification isn't keeping people in Sunbury. Neither are continuing housing sales (as claimed by Interviewee 30) or seemingly increasing participation in neighborhood groups (as asserted by Interviewee 2). This isn't to suggest that there aren't positive or effective ways to resist decline; these will be considered in the following section. However, to deny the real material and social devastation that place-based decline has brought upon Sunbury is not helpful or accurate. Additionally, to an outside researcher it becomes an unfortunate component of what Marsh (2010a) calls Sunbury's particularly "sad" story. As will be seen, defying narratives, whether politically progressive or regressive, begin in a recognition that Sunbury has been dealt a terrible blow and work by trying to build local community from the ashes of the last one.

NARRATIVES THAT DEFY

So far this study has identified a number of themes within Sunbury's discourse of decline that fit under two general narrative categories: those that comply and those that deny. The first group, understanding decline as a "natural" outcome of aging economic change seeks to revitalize Sunbury through greater acceptance of and closer ties to the capitalist spatial strategy of commodifying place. The second group denies the extent and continuing advance of decline through the assertion that the changes Sunbury has undergone have occurred everywhere or by compartmentalizing decline to one cause when in fact it is a pervasive part of everyday life.

The third category of narratives – those that defy – covers a mix of discursive themes that recognize decline's extent and seek solutions that are outside the neoliberal prescription to convert Sunbury into a sellable commodity. Testifying to the strength of capitalist discursive hegemony, nowhere in the course of research did anyone offer a direct, overt criticism of capitalism. However, the willingness for many to look beyond capitalism to improve life in Sunbury shows a tacit recognition that something has gone wrong in what was previously a profitable relationship with international capital. It also shows an understanding that decline is at least partially systemic and that Sunbury will have to forge a path toward revitalization that is in some ways solitary and in some ways unique.

As stated earlier, there is little in the way of specific subject matter that cohesively binds this category of narratives together. However, since all assign value to

the "place" of Sunbury, it is inescapable that many make use of the concept of community. A potentially liberating concept, community is generally utilized in Sunbury's discourses of resistance to promote social cohesion and pride, and therefore a mass commitment to improving everyday life. Many of these employments of "community" are progressive in the sense that they produce alternatives to the commodification of place inherent in the capitalist revitalization model. But as Defilippis, Fisher, and Shragge (2006) have noted, promotion of "community" can also have a regressive side. In this matter, Sunbury is no exception. Often, ideas of community are built upon racist and classist ground, despite the inclusive efforts of some more socially liberal residents. A great deal of resentment is held by many Sunbury residents for what has happened to their town; suffice it to say this has bred a great deal of misplaced blame.

Racism and race-based classism in Sunbury also fits – albeit uncomfortably – into the category of narratives which defy capitalism. This is not because prejudice cannot work to the benefit of accumulation. Harvey (1985, 132) notes the willingness of capital to exploit pre-existing bigotries to subvert worker solidarity. However, overt racism is certainly antithetical to the establishment of post-industrial urban spaces of consumption. Such spaces are in part predicated upon consumption of cultural spectacle requiring at least the illusion of harmonious ethnic diversity (Zukin 1998). While in no way can the very real bigotry in Sunbury be celebrated as a conscious "resistance" to capital's abandonment and re-disciplining of the community, it does represent a viscerally reactive

unwillingness by many residents to accept social changes being brought by transformations in the marketplace. Of course, such racism will not only serve to defend Sunbury from becoming commoditized (particularly from the emergent "cultural-historical industries"), but it will also unfortunately produce a landscape hostile to future investment of any kind. Nevertheless, it can be cautiously argued that racist and racially-based classist discourses constitute a place-based defiance of the transition from an industrial to a post-industrial accumulation regime more than they are a compliance with or a denial of it. The narrative of anger and reaction they produce confirms a recognition that decline is both real and coming from a force outside Sunbury; however, the racist narrative is clearly regressive in that it both fails to recognize potential community allies in new "minority" residents and reproduces the hierarchy of power relations being inflicted on the town by capital.

As in the discussion of the previous categories, this study will try to highlight the prominent themes of those narratives that defy. Admittedly, a great deal of detail will have to be sacrificed in order to make such a survey possible. However, it is hoped that through the discursive themes I have titled "Remaining in Place," "Community Solidarity" and "Exclusion, Isolation, and other Myths" will do justice to the potential the community of Sunbury has at revitalizing their town.

Remaining in Place

Economist Paul Samuelson presciently observed, "people want to improve their community, not abdicate it." (Bluestone & Harrison 1982, 20). This is certainly in evidence in much of Sunbury's discourse. Long-term residents are not difficult to locate, and the majority of those interviewed for this study have been part of the Sunbury community for most or all of their lives. The commitment of residents to remain in Sunbury and their attempts to make it a livable place despite its abandonment by capital can be interpreted as an act of resistance in and of itself (Agger 1991). In this section, I would like to explore the discourse referring to this commitment to see if a few generalities can be made of it.

Curious about the commitment Sunbury residents had to living in their town, this study asked interview participants if they would or have considered moving away (please see Appendix 1). While many said they would entertain the idea, most respondents assumed I was asking about moving locally (within the Northumberland-Montour-Snyder-Union county area) and only five said that they had ever considered moving with any seriousness, suggesting a local vision of residential choice that is perhaps a bit myopic. Of these five (Interviewees 15, 16, 17, 21, and 27), three had moved to Sunbury from outside the area within the past 12 years.

On the face of it, a good deal of the commitment to the Sunbury area seems to be a matter of inertia; only five (Interviewees 2, 5, 17, 22, and 28) moved to Sunbury after their childhoods. However, the majority of residents spent at least one year in a distant

community, including a few who worked overseas either as part of naval service or a professional career. While there is certainly a limitation in vision, it would be a mistake to stereotype residents' commitment to Sunbury as due to a lack of knowledge about other places to live. Rather, there are three major types of attachments that residents have that have nothing to do with an insular view of place. The first of these is family:

> "I don't mind [Sunbury]. I've lived here all but 6 years. My kids live here and my grandkids are here." (Interviewee 19)

Similarly, Interviewees 29 and 12 cite children, siblings and parents as the reason they would never consider moving or would move, but "not very far", respectively. In all three cases, close physical proximity to family is judged as very important, and notably all three grew up in Sunbury themselves.

The second attachment interviewees said they have to Sunbury is that it is the location of their friends and/or acquaintances. For instance, 11 years after moving to Sunbury Interviewee 22's job was relocated to Williamsport, approximately 45 miles away. He kept the job but

> "… chose to stay here in Sunbury … I'm glad I did. All my friends were here, people I associated with socially and through our church; it just became home base."

Interviewee 2 – also from another place – stayed in Sunbury because of the personal relationships he formed in the area, and now doesn't consider leaving an option:

> "I actually met [my wife] in 1991 … and started dating in 96/97 and then got married in 99. I decided after I finished undergrad in 97 to just stay here in the area rather than move back down to [state deleted]. By then I was in my mid-20s. I'm 38 now. But I just decided to make this my home, and I like it. It's a very nice town … we live in the Hill section and I think it's a relatively decent part of town … There are a lot of nice things [for kids]. They have a skate park, they have a lot of community things; they're just very community oriented … It's not too bad. In the 19/20 years ago [sic] I've lived here it hasn't been that bad."

With two children, Interviewee 2 cares how good the community continues to be for his family; but what solidified his commitment to Sunbury was the social relationship he made with his girlfriend, now wife. The bonds of friendship – which in this case turned into something familial – are regularly given as a reason for many residents to remain, despite decline. Rationalizing the place as "not that bad" is discursively revealed to be an afterthought. Interviewee 5, similarly born in another state, through a marriage decided to remain in the area despite a forced change in career. Though the town may decline, close personal relationships – like family – have tended to anchor many residents to Sunbury.

However, for many others Sunbury itself appears to be a good place to live despite their complaints. Much of this is surely the social connections residents make with one another – the informal relationships made in daily life that the discourse implies has something to do with the relatively small size of the town. A few examples of this discourse appeared in the interviews as well as the online discussion forum (City-Data Forum 2009-2011):

> "By today's standards it doesn't much matter where you are, you know with the communications today. I'm registered in 14 states as a [deleted] and I've worked overseas, and I still stay in little-bittie Sunbury. It's [the politics are] a hell of a lot more fun here than I think in the big cities." (Interviewee 23)

> "When I was in the Navy I lived away and I found out this was where I'd rather stay … I'm a little prejudiced about my neighborhood. This neighborhood … is absolutely the best; everybody here kind of watches out. Like when I drive don't the street I'm always looking in the alleys of making sure – looking. And everybody does that, everybody … [Sunbury] reminds me of a real miniaturized Brooklyn neighborhood – an old Italian neighborhood – where they all stay together. That's what this reminds me of. As a matter of fact, one of my friends moved across the street when he got married, and when his mom passed away, him and his wife moved in … they just stayed in the house. So he's actually living in the same house he was raised in." (Interviewee 11)

> "I had lived in Sunbury all my life and had only recently moved last year and I regret that decision every moment of my life … Having moved to a city with a much higher population I really miss the small community of Sunbury, one which had many events for its townspeople [like] Riverfest." (City-Data Forum 2010, February 6)

> "We liked it pretty much the way it was. We had talked about moving some place where it's quieter … across the river in Shamokin Dam there's a new development … where our friends live … but I think we'll just stay here." (Interviewees 4 [speaking] and 5)

Interviewee 11 was introduced to other places and never found one quite like Sunbury in terms of social cohesion (except, perhaps his musings on Brooklyn neighborhoods). While complaining about the decline Sunbury has suffered, what is most important to him about the town still exists: the community and its familiarity. Interviewee 23 and the discussant from February 6, 2010 clearly value the perceived

social "size" of Sunbury. Even Interviewees 8 and 9, both wealthy individuals from a family that has resided in Sunbury for several generations, seemed to enjoy the extra prominence that a smaller social world promised them.

Interviewee 23's professional status is unique in largely working-class Sunbury, and deserves further comment. His occupation has allowed him to straddle the lines between remaining in Sunbury and pursuing labor options beyond what is available there. But rather than just an issue of expanding available opportunities, reaching out to distant places for work – a product of a shifting landscape of uneven development (Smith 2008) – exemplifies the inability for people in his profession (and certainly many other white-collar professions) to find work locally at all. Interviewee 23 set up his firm several decades prior when there was a local economic justification to do so; the fact that he is able to remain in place is a luxury afforded only by his profession's niche status – and certainly its profitability.[8] His choice to stay put in spite of the costs associated with being far from work centers reflects an attachment to a social and physical context that is familiar and valuable to him. In this latter respect the discursive framing of his choice to stay is similarly indicative of the same bond to Sunbury's place held by the other, working-class residents discussed in this section.

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[8] Interviewee 23 added that he is able to live in Sunbury and work abroad because of Sunbury's investment in "wonderful high-speed internet" and "tremendous [current] capability as far as telephone and data transmission". He sees this as an issue that *should be* attracting high-tech business.

Whether an issue of familiarity, physical security, or of social opportunity, what Sunbury seems to offer its remaining residents is a manageably-sized world in which daily life has become comfortable. Despite the disappearing public life,[9] many individuals are able to maintain their established social connections – in part it seems, because of Sunbury's size. In the face of deteriorating material conditions, many individuals are largely able to keep some kind of employment – even if they may have to travel further or be paid less to do it.[10] What is important to a substantial portion of Sunbury's residents are the ties they have to family, friends, and other community members in this place. To give up this place for another – however more pleasant it could be – is not a desirable option. Therefore, many of these residents remain despite the material deprivations that are brought by the desertion by capital.

Community Solidarity

The promotion of community involvement is a strategy that is prominent in local revitalization discourse. While often geared toward identifying and accomplishing concrete achievements, the discourse surrounding this strategy reveals a desire to create community "solidarity" or "pride" that in itself is a hopeful attempt to revitalize Sunbury. A prime example of this discourse comes from Interviewee 2. For him, the most

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[9] Such as the closed theaters, the defunct baseball team, the vanished amusement park, and the lively downtown activity – all described in Chapter 1.

[10] In response to the question, "How would you characterize wages in and around Sunbury?" (See Appendix 1), not a single interviewee responded that pay was "good," and very few answered that remuneration was any better than adequate.

important town improvements were being effected through formal community groups. After listing off some of the newer recreational and aesthetic additions to the town and noting how they've been good for area kids, he talks about the positive role of "community solidarity":

> "I think they're slowly working toward some positive changes. I think people that aren't really involved with the different community programs don't see it. But I'm involved with different programs through a volunteer capacity and I see some positive things. I see more unity. So some people might feel that it's not changing for the better but I do see some positive things."

In this discourse, the role of community involvement and "unity" is seen as a value in itself. What is interesting is that involvement itself rather than the outcome is stressed. Of course, such groups must achieve something tangible (i.e. the above-mentioned "positive changes"), but revitalization is centered in the process rather than the results.

It would be a mistake, however, to conceptualize this discourse as only dealing with formally-organized groups. Many residents advocate revitalization strategies that consist of encouraging strong informal relationships between community members or the creation of locations where these relationships may be made. Interviewee 18, while happy about the recently built skate park, would like to see its hours extended after dark. She highlights the ability of such places to "give kids something to do." More accurately, her wish might be said to give kids a *place* to do things with each other. What is clear from the discourse in general is that when there was more of an informal public life in Sunbury – built around an active downtown – providing places for social interaction was

not really an issue. However, recalling her own childhood and considering the needs of her children, Interviewee 18 sees revitalization as coming from the development of places where social cohesion may be established.

Valuing "unity" in Sunbury's time of crisis was not a unique attitude. Reflecting on the exodus of people from Sunbury, one discussant in the online forum wondered:

> "Maybe places just keep going downhill because too many people think the solution is "pull the blinds" and complain? Isn't it just the ultimate solution to move somewhere that's better? What place just magically keeps getting better if, when the going gets tough, good people just up and leave? … Sunbury needs more people willing to stay and move in who can do things to make it a better place." (City-Data Forum 2011, May 27)

Such discourse leaves out explicit reference to the significant material decline that has necessitated the emigration of many from Sunbury. However, it touches on something that ordinary residents can do to make living in their town better: increasing their involvement. In the absence of any ability to create employment individually, working and meeting together as a community is envisioned as something one person can do to begin to effect change.

Following upon a series of unidentified "negative recent incidents in the city" in the Spring of 2008 (Scott 2008), the Greater Susquehanna Valley United Way organized a panel-led open forum to discuss the future of Sunbury. While the panel was asked to address such issues as crime, police protection, the riverfront redevelopment project, and growing ethnic diversity, advancement of community "pride" was highlighted most

prominently by local newspaper coverage. Hence, the headline chosen for the article on the meeting was, "City's Future Built on Pride: Get Involved, Panelists Tell Crowd of 100".

While there is no way to compare the coverage with what really was emphasized at this meeting, it is interesting the way in which community involvement and pride became a discursive focus for panelists, media, and other participants. After an allegation by one speaker that Sunbury had become "a laughingstock to some in other communities" (*ibid*), several panelists felt what was obviously a strong need to assert their pride in and commitment to Sunbury:

> "I'm proud of Sunbury. I live here because I choose to live here. If you're not proud of the city you live in, how can anybody else be proud [of it]?" (*ibid*, John Shipman)

> "If you don't like Sunbury, 'then leave it. Make room for somebody who wants to be here.'" (*ibid*, Cory Fasold)

> "We have a lot of people here who really, really care about Sunbury. What it does, it fortifies my own thoughts and feelings." (*ibid*, Jesse Woodring)

> "Their comments were met with the strongest applause of the evening from the audience of more than 100." (*ibid*)

Though officially called to discuss specific topics, the meeting's focus enthusiastically shifts toward a discussion of community pride. One way to read this shift is that Sunbury's decline has left its residents feeling hurt, in need of reassuring

support from fellow community members more than the addressing of particular practical issues. Or perhaps, in the words of Interviewee 2, a sense of "unity" is felt to be the most important casualty of several decades of decline. If so, this would coincide with Interviewees' joy in recounting for me how "lively" Sunbury used to be and how many stores and institutions it used to have. While the institutions are gone, the stores are located nearby in and around the mall; while the pedestrian crowds are gone from Sunbury, downtown's Market Street is congested daily with truck traffic leaving the coal region and cars headed across the river to shop. But this does not make up for the feeling of pride that was once an inherent part of living in the Sunbury community. What this discourse expresses is a longing for this community which is now felt to be missing, at least in part.

Pride was once the result of living in a thriving Sunbury and for decades the town has unsuccessfully attempted to recreate the investments and events that inspired this pride: for instance the trolleys, the walkable neighborhoods, the informal connections with neighbors, the commercial vitality, and the theater or sporting entertainment – in general the lively public life and the private prosperity that was able to sustain it. Now that the prosperity has greatly diminished, the public life relying upon it necessarily becomes more meager. Through community solidarity and the pride created from a shared effort put into what improvements can be made utilizing local resources, this discourse evinces an ultimate goal of circumventing the economic deprivation that capital has left in its wake.

Exclusion, Isolation, and Reaction

If one thing about local discourse on decline makes itself apparent before anything else, it is that there is a great deal of mystification surrounding how Sunbury got to this point. Though often a term used by Marxist geographers to describe capitalism's ability to falsify its effects as natural, I intend mystification in this case to refer to belief in a set of myths that while plainly erroneous, are echoed back and forth in Sunbury's discourse to such an extent that they have taken on a degree of verisimilitude. The mendacious nature of these myths is perhaps more obvious to the outsider having not spent his or her life subject to their repetition as "the real causes" of the decline of Sunbury. However, what is clear from this study's discursive research there is a great deal of belief in them.

The most prominent of these myths posit decline to be the result of growing ethnic diversity and/or a perceived influx of people living in poverty. Sunbury, despite losing residents overall, has experienced a moderate increase in ethnic diversity as a small number of non-white residents have moved to the town over the past two decades (see Figure 5, below). What is causing this demographic change was unfortunately beyond the scope of this research, but deserves further study. Possible "pull-factors" for some socioeconomic groups of immigrants may include the area's relatively low cost of living, proximity to the urban regions of New York City and Philadelphia, and the nearby low-skill service employment in the communities across the Susquehanna River.

However, without a targeted study it would be impossible to pinpoint why new residents move to Sunbury and why they ethnically differ from historical population.

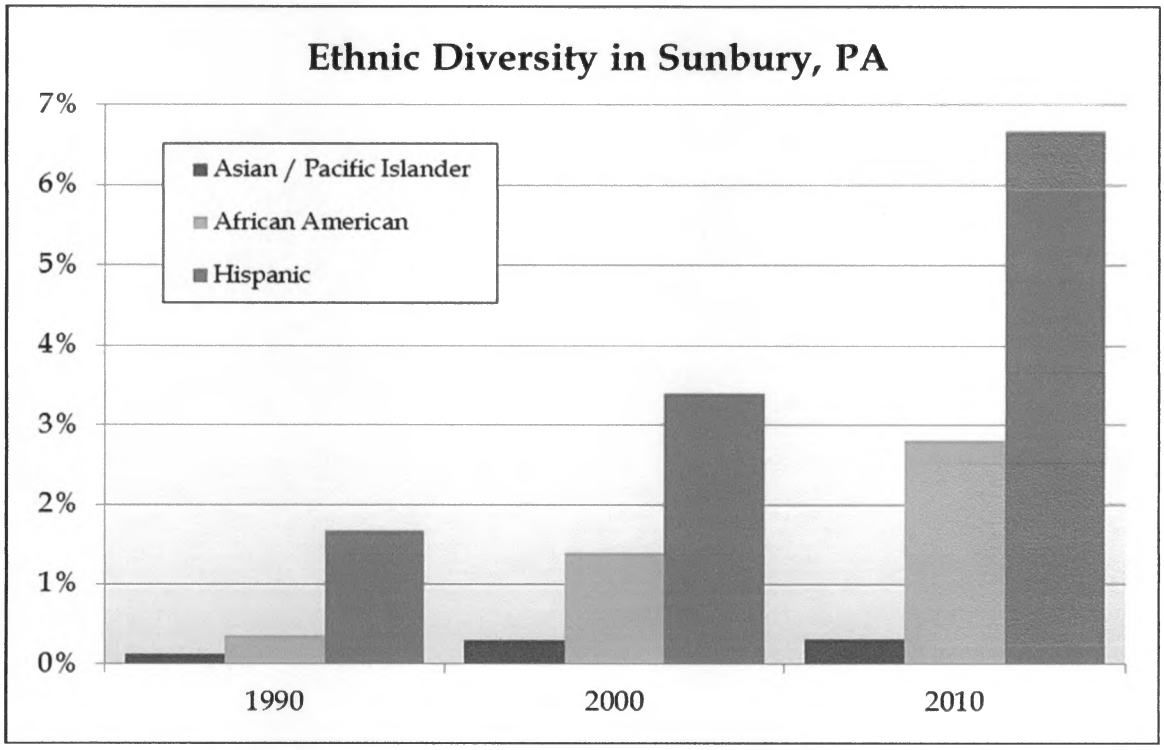

Figure 5: Bar graph depicting Sunbury's growing ethnic diversity since 1990. Note that despite this growth, Sunbury remains over 90% "white". (U.S. Census 2010, 2000, 1990)

Common throughout these myths is a scapegoating of people who are felt by some to be outside the "real" Sunbury community. In this way, the negative side of employments of "community" – as outlined by Defilippis, Fisher, and Shragge 2006 – make themselves apparent as an exclusionary force that does nothing to revitalize Sunbury, and in fact feeds into negative stereotypes of the small working-class town as racist, insular, and ignorant.

More common than any specific blaming of ethnic minorities for decline was a general uneasiness with their increasing numbers. Most interviewees went out of their way to show some degree of acceptance of the increasing diversity in Sunbury, but would often in the next breath betray a mistrustful attitude of what they had brought to the community. Typical of participants whose childhood was spent there, Interviewee 22 expressed what he characterized as a moment of shock when he realized that the school district was no longer almost exclusively white:

> "My grandson [name deleted] was graduating from middle school [and] I went down to the middle school for the program … it was like a 2-by-4 had hit me right square in the head. I went to the program and I was looking around at all the young people there and I realized that my community was changing in the composition of the individuals who were in town. I noticed there were a lot of black students, a lot of Hispanic students, and as I looked down at the crowd I realized whoa, that was unusual."

Here and elsewhere in the interview, this older participant tried to show an accepting attitude, the sincerity of which there is no reason to doubt. However, despite this attitude, it was clear he harbored negative perceptions of increasing diversity:

> "And even before that … I happened to talk to coach Minotie up in Mifflinburg and he was telling me what security problems they had. Apparently it was the issue of having single parents – a lot of single parents – showing up, where before that it was pretty much a husband and wife family type thing."

In this case, the local rise in single parenting was quickly and clearly associated with the increasing numbers of minority families. While Interviewee 22 held no grudge against

any particular person, the growth of a social problem in Sunbury is discursively connected to "new" minorities.

Similarly, after averring that he didn't think the decline of Sunbury had anything to do with the demographic growth of minorities, Interviewee 1 proceeded to explain how the entrance of vast majority of "good" minorities opened the door to a destructive urban element:

> "You see, what happens with minority cultures – and I'll say this with safety because my wife's a Hispanic [sic] – the Hispanic culture as well as the black culture, just like any other city that has ever found itself having a Little Italy or a Chinatown or something like that – cultures draw more and more people, and Hispanic culture and Black culture like so many others where all you need is a small couple families of them to then start saying, "well, you know what? I think it would do well if my brother or my uncle would just come out here and get away from the city because it's so nice out here. They need a fresh start or a fresh chance." And so the Hispanic population … brought their troubled teens or others here, saying "I want to get my kids away from what's going on in Philly," Only to have what their kids insisted upon being a part of in Philly brought here. You see what I'm saying? One thing has lead to another to another, but I'm not going to say … that that's the reason why Sunbury has demographically changed – maybe for worse in some people's opinions, maybe not … But because the way cultures thrive and pull from one another, it had to start somewhere."

Not only does Interviewee 1 make a series of questionable assumptions about Sunbury's minority and "white" communities (that all minority individuals were originally urban, that there is no criminal element in the "white" population, etc.), he places decline squarely in their court, and does so with an air of impartiality ("my wife's a Hispanic") and specialist knowledge ("You see, what happens with minority cultures…").

Intentional or not, the subtext of this mitigating language furthers the effort to blame decline on minority immigrants.

Classifying himself as "a white male – the minority now," Interviewee 19 states clearly his belief that "all the new minorities … have caused a lot of fights in town". Using "the influx of people" as an obvious euphemism for new minority residents, Interviewee 16 states that their

> "…mentality, that is moving here [with them] is 'I don't want to work'. Sunbury gives them hand-outs, you know what I mean? I pay a lot of money in taxes … I believe in welfare and stuff like that 100% if you need it [but] I don't believe in third generation welfare."

This viewpoint overlooks the fact that "welfare" benefit periods are limited by federal rules and that cities such as Sunbury do not regulate or disburse aid payments because this isn't its objective. In this discourse the new, minority, urban transplants to Sunbury have the wrong values and are thus responsible for the community decay.

It bears repeating that according to the 2010 U.S. Census, Sunbury's population was 91% Caucasian alone, 2.8% African American alone, and 6.7% Hispanic "of any race" (See Figure 5, p. 115). In light of this fact and the inherent ignorance behind the issue, such "understandings" of decline need not be seriously considered. But they do show the emotional need of some residents to create myths in order to make sense of what is surely a mystifying process.

The issue of class is brought into the decline debate as well, as one can see from the ethnic stereotypes above. There exists a separate local narrative that increasing poverty has had a deteriorating effect on Sunbury. Generally this seems a reasonable assumption to make, as manufacturing investment has been systematically withdrawn from the region. However, this particular narrative scapegoats poverty by only focusing on the poverty of new residents who by moving to Sunbury, have presumably dragged the town down. At the same time, the poverty suffered by long-term residents who are accepted members of the community is ignored as a possible cause of decline.

The first way in which this narrative is evidenced is in a selective contempt of welfare recipients. Sunbury, a working-class place in decline has numerous families who are receiving some form of public assistance. As can be seen in Interviewee 16's comments above, the predominant discourse portrays "welfare" as a necessary relief measure when it is being consumed by people who "belong" in Sunbury, and as a corrupting and unfair force when it is utilized by community outsiders. An additional example of this comes from Interviewee 18's story during her interview that Sunbury "is now full of" people like the woman who "took forever" using food stamps, then paid for cigarettes with a $20 bill and drove away in a Cadillac Escalade. Through these stories, people who are judged *a priori* to be morally-questionable outsiders, are thus demonstrated to in fact be the cause of social decline by making use of seemingly scarce resources. Again, the fact that welfare is not funded by the municipality of Sunbury is

beside the point of these discourses which are looking for cause of decline that is immediate and tangible.

The second tactic of this narrative is to attack the corrupting role of Sunbury's public housing. Though there are a few of these complexes in town, the best known is Memorial Acres. Prior to the recent growth in ethnic diversity, this property was looked upon as more respectable. A number of individuals encountered by this study once lived there or had relatives living there. However, the complex is now seen as an unmitigated nuisance, housing only apathetic residents of the community. Though I could find very little in the local paper reporting on specific disturbances, there is a belief among many Sunburians that "The Acres" is a source of crime.

Despite having extremely limited economic means himself, Interviewee 13 exemplified this attitude of cynicism regarding the housing complex. Asked if he thought something could be done to improve the community, his response was simple: "Yeah, blow up Memorial Acres"; asked what he liked about Sunbury, he answered that the YMCA was nice "if you were rich" or if you lived in

> "… low-income housing [because] you don't pay that much, which is bullshit because you got these people from Memorial Acres and stuff getting in there."

Helping to fuel this radical classism is a more moderate discourse which labels Sunbury's large amount of rental housing – and particularly its public housing as an

"affliction" (Daily Item Staff 2010b). Generally avoiding any kind of blame during her interview, Interviewee 14 conceded that:

> "The biggest issue that this city faces right now is the fact that there's so much Section 8 HUD housing and so many rentals – so many properties that are owned by landlords. There has to be some emphasis put on the ability for young people, young families, young couples just starting out to be able to acquire housing in our community."

While helping people to buy homes in Sunbury may be a way to address the deteriorating housing stock, the mere presence of renters (especially those utilizing Section 8 vouchers) portrayed by Interviewee 14 as a cause of decline is accompanied by classist undertones. It turn, judgments about who deserves help and who deserves scorn are based on prejudicial distinctions of who belongs in the community and who doesn't.

An additional aspect of these regressive myths is the local belief in an intentional campaign to attract poor people from New York City to move to Sunbury. Such a belief is remarkable in that it is both so widespread and without evidence by its adherents. The myth states there is or once was a billboard (or alternatively, signs in the subway) in Brooklyn (or alternatively, the Bronx, or according to Interviewee 11, Philadelphia too) saying something to the effect of:

> "For a cheap place to live and get easy welfare, move to Sunbury, Pennsylvania." (Interviewee 29)

Six separate interviewees (11, 15, 16, 18, 19, and 29) offered some version of this story – unsolicited – during their interviews. When questioned further, none were able to answer when this "advertising campaign" occurred, who or what was behind it, or why it might have been done.[11] Illustrating many residents' willingness to pass along the rumor despite the lack of proof or even likelihood, Interviewee 29 responded to follow-up questions with an emblematic "I don't know … That's what I've been told".

As can be seen, a great deal of discursive attention is paid to the poor and ethnic minorities – so much so, that in cases it verges on the obsessive. Several participants informed me that this was not always the case, and that it has grown in recent years with the simultaneous growth of the minority population and the deepening of economic decline. Surely there are many residents, like Interviewee 30, who are "driven crazy … [by the] racism in this area." However, the racist and classist discourse that heaps blame upon the shoulders of ethnic minorities and the very poor is an unfortunately prevalent counterpart to the otherwise progressive focus on community solidarity discussed in the section above. Such views defy the capitalist discourse of equivalence and exchangeability (between all things, people, and places), but at the cost of introducing arbitrary distinctions that are hateful rather than helpful.

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[11] A non-participating acquaintance informed me later that, believing that the sign did exist, he thought it was to attract residents because Sunbury was losing too many.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

This study began with a desire to understand and organize the discourse showing how Sunbury's material decline has been experienced and conceptualized by its residents. In order to answer this question, several prominent narratives were distilled from recent community discourse and were arranged in a scheme developed to highlight three relationships to place-based decline and the abstract economic system responsible for it. The three narrative categories are those that comply with capitalist spatial strategy to commodify Sunbury, those that deny decline by explaining it away, and those that defy capitalist understandings of decline by refusing to abandon their home and by turning inward toward community. It is hoped that from this latter category the beginnings of a fully-developed discourse of place-based resistance to capital may be identified.

While this study takes a position that is sympathetic to an inward-looking model of revitalization, it recognizes the shortcomings of the concept of community. Too narrowly drawn, "community" can be employed to exclude others who do not socially fit. In Sunbury, this has taken the form of a virulent racism and classism that defies reason but serves to ameliorate their feelings about what has happened to their town. However, community also has the potential of serving as a highly-visible alternative to the commodification of place that is being pursued mainly by town officials and supported tacitly by the popular discourse of consumption. This discourse – by devaluing all aspects of Sunbury seen as old and seeking to replace them with "new" things and people – fails to appreciate what is ultimately important to most residents: their town's role as a

place for established social relationships as well as its historical heritage as a place of meaningful labor.

It deserves repeating that the commitment of residents to remain in Sunbury despite its abandonment by capital is a dignifying act of resistance in itself (Agger 1991). By staying put and creating things the locals can do in the absence of capital, community members can retake control of their town and cultivate a prosperity less susceptible to the fickle whims of global finance. Capital has no use for Sunbury, but its residents still do. What remains to be created is a strategy that will allow Sunburians to control the destiny of their home. In the words of one interviewee, this project involves putting faith in the community itself:

> "We've got to pool our resources, get our minds together, do what we need to do to make sure something doesn't make this thing a total flush" (Interviewee 1).

Chapter V

Study Conclusion

> "The inner logic that governs the laws of motion of capitalism is cold, ruthless and inexorable, responsive only to the law of value. Yet value is a social relation, a product of a particular historical process. Human beings were organizers, creators and participants in that history. We have, Marx asserts, built a vast social enterprise which dominates us, delimits our freedoms and ultimately visits upon us the worst forms of degradation. The irrationality of such a system becomes most evident at times of crisis." (Harvey 2006, 203).

STUDY SUMMARY

This project has been a discursive study of the community response to place-based decline in the community of Sunbury, a small town located in central Pennsylvania. As described in Chapter One, decline has transformed Sunbury from a generally pleasurable place to live in the 1960s and 70s (Marsh 1987a) to a community that today suffers from a distinct lack of employment, quality education, culture and entertainment, as well as public social life. In spite of these changes, nearly 10,000 people remain and attempt daily to make it their home "place" (Porteous 1976). In so doing, they each contribute to a collective discourse of decline. From this discourse distinct narratives can be identified that, as this paper asserts, take three stances *vis-à-vis* capital's disinvestment of the community: expressing a desire to comply with it, simply denying it, or standing in opposition and denying it.

The first chapter of this study laid out objectives and situated these within the geographic discipline in two concrete ways. First, decline in Sunbury is herein theorized as occurring in a particular "place," a facet that non-geographic scholars of deindustrialization have tended to underemphasize. While connections can and should be drawn to other instances of localized decline, the case in Sunbury is unique, conditioned both by the history of the place in question as well as the agency of the people who reside there. This position – the "contingency of place" – is a distinctively geographic concern. This study in general has been interested in advancing the recognition of this issue.

Second, Sunbury's decline is worthy of critical academic scrutiny because of the Marxist-geographic relative inattention to the North American small town. As discussed, previous Marxian urban scholarship has tended to privilege the large city in research, creating a vacuum that has been too often filled by regional or community studies that, while culturally interesting, have created little in the way of theory as to how small towns or other "semi-urban" places might be preserved. Given the symbolic importance of the small town in American lore (Smith 1970; Francaviglia 1996), critical scholarship should not cede this rhetorical ground to mainstream accounts of place-based decline. Moreover, an understanding of the abandonment of entire small towns by capital can serve to enrich critical insight into the spatial dynamics of capitalism as a whole.

Chapter One additionally supplied a brief history of Sunbury. This history emphasized the town's 20th Century peak in terms of population and establishment of economic, governmental, and social institutions, then juxtaposed this peak with the de-

urbanizing condition of the town today. The chapter also narrated for the reader how I encountered the Sunbury community and the way in which I came to study it. This narration was given in order to make the research process as transparent as possible, opening to scrutiny not only the object of study but also the thought process and values of the researcher himself.

Chapter Two provided the theoretical "backbone" for this study. It first explored the conceptual development of "place" from within the geographic discipline. Particular attention was given to how this concept could be employed to recognize both the structural import of the economy in space and the intense personal attachment Sunbury's residents have to their place. This discussion arrived at an understanding of Sunbury's "place" as one that could be said to be dialectically produced by the interplay between greater economic processes and the individual social relationships developed locally. The chapter then went on to explore the Marxist-geographic principal of uneven development as developed by David Harvey (2006) and Neil Smith (2008). The latter's theory of "See-Saw" uneven development was found to be particularly useful in describing Sunbury's experience of decline as both an abandonment by capital and a re-disciplining of the community for future accumulation.

Chapter Three outlined the methods of data collection and analysis employed by this study to unravel the personal and community experience of place-based decline. Discursive data was collected by way of personal interviews with area residents about community life, social identity, and perceptions of local economic change. A "snowball"

method of selection was used in order to democratize the sample away from over-reliance on community elites. However, recognizing the greater sway elites have in forming public discourse (Lees 2004), interview data was supplemented by discourse sampled from municipal, media, and community publications, including planning and redevelopment documents as well as articles and op-ed pieces from the local newspaper. Participant-observations made over approximately 7 months of residence in Sunbury between 2010 and 2011 further augmented the data pulled from the above sources. In total, this data provided a body of what I have chosen to call a local 'discourse of decline' from which key narratives could be distilled and analyzed.

The distillation and analysis of key narratives performed in Chapter Four is the heart of this study. In an attempt to better understand the meeting point between capitalism and community life, analysis was constructed around a categorization scheme which classified narratives according to three relational positions with the global capitalist economy: those that essentialize the workings of capital – and thus Sunbury's decline – as natural and necessary; those that deny the material decline of Sunbury that was evident to most participants; and finally, those that recognize decline but resist it as something unnatural, extraneous to the community. More conveniently, these categories can be thought of as narratives that comply, narratives that deny, and narratives that defy.

Complying narratives were marked by an idealization of youth and youthfulness, particularly at the expense of devaluing anything in Sunbury symbolizing old age. These narratives embodied both the consumerist ethic elevating newness as well as capital's

branding of Sunbury and its people as obsolete. In the formal political sphere, these narratives were most often in support of the project to commodify Sunbury by replacing it, bit by bit, with new structures and infrastructures in support of public consumption. By no coincidence many of these projects served to mask the town's industrial past (Wakefield & McMullan 2005). Rather than looking to develop an economically viable community from within, complying narratives framed "revitalization" as an attempt to attract new residents and visitors to Sunbury whose mere presence would, ostensibly, ensure the town's success in the marketplace. In short, complying narratives essentialized capital's abandonment of Sunbury as natural and therefore strove to destroy the existing community in order to save the town.

Narratives that denied decline attempted to mitigate any awareness of community degradation by asserting either that the same thing was happening in every town or that Sunbury's decline was limited in scope and controllable through proper planning. Such narratives failed to recognize that a wholesale shift from skilled manufacturing employment to low-paying service jobs had been occurring locally for many decades, and that this shift coincided with the contemporary period of decline. Additionally, narratives asserting the normality of Sunbury's decline were typically presented as "common-sense" truths and as such, were rarely accompanied by comparison to any other specific town or region. Denial narratives often focused upon recent aesthetic changes made in Sunbury's physical plant in order to refute the existence of decline, but they also frequently ignored the tangible demographic and manufacturing exodus from the town.

Narratives defying capital's abandonment of Sunbury tended to take on either a progressive or a regressive character. More progressive defying discourse asserted commitment to remaining in Sunbury, and was fueled by a focus on social relationships established over time in that place. Both family ties and friendships were held out as reasons to continue investing oneself in the community, and seemed to give strength to those committed to stay. Belief in the goodness of Sunbury's community life itself countered the material discourse of decline asserting Sunbury's obsolescence. On the regressive side a virulently racist and racially-based classist understanding of decline divided Sunbury into "real" and "deserving" community members on one side, and racialized consumptive intruders on the other (Wilson 2007). In order to justify such a worldview, those espousing these beliefs relied upon a set of myths that portrayed ethnic minorities as "schemers" who were cheating "real" Sunburians out of economic success through their personal greed. These narratives proved to be quite popular, often diverting attention from revitalization strategies based upon development of the entire community.

Sunbury's narratives of decline express not only how its community members deal with their town's deterioration, but ultimately how they come to terms with what capitalism has brought to their home. This study was predicated upon an ontological belief that hidden in this discourse was a meeting point between an impersonal and despotic economic system (Huber 2011) and the lives of people who must simply suffer the "rationality" of this system. By parsing this discourse into concrete narratives and sorting these narratives into a classification system based upon their relationship to

capitalism's changing local landscape, this study has aimed to make legible the nexus of experiential place and systemic economic decline. This study also hopes to have broadened Marxist-geographic studies by stoking an interest in the effects of shifting uneven development on the small town scale.

Perhaps more than any academic concern, however, this project hopes to have opened to a new audience the depth of the struggle Sunbury and other towns like it face as capital moves away. As has been stated elsewhere in this study, "people want to improve their community, not abdicate it." (Paul Samuelson as quoted in Bluestone & Harrison 1982, 20). Sunburians' desire to stay in the place where they and their families and their friends have built their lives should be familiar to most. Despite an increasingly mobile culture, most of us have during at least one point in our lives had a place we called home; many of us have had several. If we have left home, it was likely because something led us away, not because our home was destroyed. There is a strong argument to be made that no institution or system, however powerful, has the right to take someone's home place, particularly as that place is a product of individual and community labor. Stated in reverse, the story told by this project should be added to the growing calls for the formal establishment of a "right to place" (Lefebvre 1996; Imbroscio 2004) or alternatively, a right to one's city (Mitchell & Heynen 2009).

It would be an understatement to say that the future of Sunbury is uncertain. A new wave of energy mining – natural gas 'fracking' – is emerging in central and eastern Pennsylvania. Currently, however, most activity is occurring at some distance from

Sunbury, and area residents have more to lose through water pollution than to gain through new jobs (Socha 2010b; Caruso 2011). The fact that as yet most fracking employment seems to have been filled by mobile and highly-skilled labor from other parts of the country only serves to cast further doubt upon this possibility (Socha 2010a).

The suggestion has also been made that small and historically compact towns like Sunbury may benefit from the likely approaching peak oil crisis (North 2010). The problem with this scenario for Sunbury at least is that with so much commerce and employment having been displaced to "suburbs" across the river, it is unclear what catalyzing event could bring business back to town. Local life can be accurately portrayed as one which in many ways centers itself several miles away on the Highway 11/15 strip – suggesting, of course, that Sunbury has as much to lose or gain by a future energy crisis as any other auto-centric community. On the other hand, much of Sunbury's rail infrastructure still stands. If American industry began to need a less energy-intensive method of goods distribution than the currently favored tractor-trailer, towns at the nexus of rail lines – like Sunbury – stand to gain from such a shift.

Whatever the possibility of future economic shifts that might bring investment or cultural interest back to North American small towns, it is clear that Sunbury's revitalization must begin with developing the community as it stands. Sunbury means a great deal the people who live there now. The money and attention that is being poured into the bulldozing of structures, expansive yet temporary "civic beautification", and attraction of outside investment could instead be focused into community development

such as small business loans and educational programs for current residents. Even funding the most basic public transportation system would re-center economic activity in town and relieve many local working-class families of at least some of the expenses of owning, maintaining, and using private automobiles.

Academically, it is hoped that this work can be followed up by a concrete discussion of the possible avenues for resistance (a call made generally by Harvey 1996, particularly p. 286). Simply staying put despite a powerful economic message that Sunbury has been declared "obsolete" is the beginning of such resistance (Agger 1991); identifying and nurturing a concrete "discourse of resistance" out of progressive defiance narratives is a productive next step. Because any true revitalization will have to come from the grass roots, resistance's origin must lie within existing understandings and valuations of "place", of home.

As is argued by quote opening this chapter, capitalism is a dehumanizing system that, valuing only profit for its own sake, "delimits our freedoms," (Harvey 2006, 203) and causes us to accept injustice as "natural". It is, however, a system of our own making and constant re-making. We have chosen to reduce material life to a series of compelled, narrowly prescribed, and exploitative activities on the side of capitalists and degrades the noble origin of productive labor to a state of alienation (*ibid*, 108). While benefitting a few in terms of great wealth and many in terms of a little, capitalism constrains all economic actors to continually pursue a maximization of profit that, rather than a result of natural processes is a socially produced requirement. A community, and the place it

creates, is no different than any other product – it owes its existence to human labor. The question of whether Sunbury should continue to exist is ultimately a question of who owns it: the community that built and continues to build it, or investors who, beholden to the law of value, have followed higher profits elsewhere? If it is the former, then it must be recognized that Sunburians – not investors – have a right to determine the future of their home. Academic geography can support their endeavor by continuing critical research on the plight of similarly afflicted communities.

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Appendix 1

Questions guiding personal interviews

Social Identity and Community Choice:

1. In what community do you live?

    Family? Friends?

2. How long have you lived in Sunbury?

3. Where did you live before moving to Sunbury?

4. Why did you move to Sunbury?

5. Do you consider Sunbury your hometown?

Characterizing Sunbury:

1. Is Sunbury a good place to live?

2. Is Sunbury a good place to grow up?

3. What do you like most about Sunbury?

    The least?

4. Do you think Sunbury is in decline? Why?

    Revitalizing? Why?

5. How has Sunbury changed since you've lived here?

6. What region would you say Sunbury belongs to?

Employment:

1. Do you have a job outside the home? (If unemployed, willingly or unwillingly?)

2. What do (or did) you do?

3. How far do you work from your home?

4. Are you a union member? Were you ever?

5. How would you characterize the job market in and around Sunbury? (i.e. easy, hard)

6. Would you say it's easier or harder to find a job today than

5 years ago? 10 years ago? in the 1990s? in the 1980s? in the 1970s?

7. What kind of jobs does Sunbury need most?

8. How would you characterize wages in and around Sunbury?

Public Education:

1. Did you go to school in Sunbury?

2. Do you have children/grandchildren who are in school in Sunbury?

3. How good do you feel Sunbury schools to be?

Community Definition & Concern:

1. Do you ever read the Daily Item?

2. Do you read other newspapers? Which ones?

3. Do you ever watch the news? Which?

4. Do you follow local politics? Do you vote in them?

5. What would you like local officials to work on most? What changes would make Sunbury a better place?

Demographics:

1. How old are you?

2. Do you have children? How many?

3. What ethnicity do you consider yourself?

Appendix 2

Articles and editorials used in discourse analysis

Brubaker, D. (2010, June 10). Does the Valley have talent? *The Daily Item*. Last accessed 6/10/11. www.dailyitem.com

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