

**FROM PATERNALISM TO PATRONAGE TO PILLAGE:  
CHESTER, PA., A CHRONICLE OF THE EMBEDDED  
CONSCIOUSNESS OF PLACE IN THE SECOND MOST  
ECONOMICALLY DEPRESSED CITY IN THE U.S.**

**Elizabeth McLean Petras  
Department of Sociology  
Drexel University  
Philadelphia, PA 19104**

**NOTICE: THIS MATERIAL  
MAY BE PROTECTED BY  
COPYRIGHT LAW  
(TITLE 17, U.S. CODE).**

**Paper presented at the North Central Sociological Association  
Annual Meetings, Dearborn, Michigan, April 25-28, 1991.**

*Please do not quote without written permission from the author.*

**FROM PATERNALISM TO PATRONAGE TO PILLAGE:  
CHESTER, PA., A CHRONICLE OF THE EMBEDDED  
CONSCIOUSNESS OF PLACE IN THE SECOND MOST  
ECONOMICALLY DEPRESSED CITY IN THE U.S.**

**Elizabeth McLean Petras**

**INTRODUCTION**

This is a chronicle of the evolution of the embedded consciousness of place, how it originated, thrived and persisted. Chester, Pennsylvania embodies the panorama of social consequences of deindustrialization and urban disintegration which has been repeated in community after community throughout the old industrial Northeast and North Central regions. Our analytic framework traces the economic and political organization through three eras: paternalism, patronage and pillage. During each period, we examine the rise, consolidation and decline of the dominant economic and political structures and their impacts on the working class community. Finally, the narrative concludes with a chapter on poor people's current resistance and their struggle to regain control over their community. We contend that an important source of their will to resist the abuses of a crime-controlled municipal machine today derives from their experiences with political organizations and ideologies, and community structures from the past--what we have termed the embedded memory of place. Our information was obtained through ethnographic interviews and extensive review of documents from city and county offices, community publications and newspaper archives.<sup>1</sup>

Many of the pertinent details of the region's economic expansion and decline correspond to national patterns of structural change during the past two or three decades (Bensman and Lynch, 1987; Bluestone and Harrison, 1982; Perrucci, et.al., 1988; Portz, 1990; Pappas, 1989). While this evolution can be observed in several spheres, we have focused on two: the structure of social relations of production and corresponding changes in the socio-spatial structure of the local community. Structurally, the evolution of a region contains within it successive cycles or layers of economic activity (including investment decisions, organization of the labor process, product composition, and management strategies); labor market conditions; and labor force characteristics. However, the process of change in a community or a region is only partially understood through the

study of economic factors.<sup>2</sup> It also contains changing patterns of socio-cultural organization (including local institutions; relations and hierarchies of community power; class- and race-based organizations and activities); shifting and prevailing ideologies; and distribution of resources (including rewards, deprivation, rights and denials). Residual evidence of prior economic activities remains in the built environment and infrastructure, and the characteristics and organization of the workforce. Similarly, remnants of past social organization persist in the collective memory of a community. This historical recollection, embedded in the collective consciousness of a place, evolves, sometimes in tension with, occasionally in harmony with, the economic organization of the region. It can influence community behavior even after objective economic conditions have changed. Contact with, and participation in, social movements and ideologies often remain particularly vivid.<sup>3</sup>

### Geo-economic History of Chester

Chester's collective memories span three main geo-economic periods: 1) the stage of paternalism when factory owners played an integral personal role in the community ; 2) the era of patronage when the community was organized under an all-pervasive political machine linked to the private sector and to the Republican Party; and 3) the present period of pillage when the residual party organization is sustained through access to, and appropriation of, public funds designated for the community.

Located in what was once an industrial belt on the Delaware River, Chester is situated on some of the best riverfront land equidistant between Philadelphia and Wilmington, Delaware. In addition to its deep port which is about 50 miles from Baltimore and less than 75 miles from the Atlantic, it is transversed by a network of state and federal highways, and is bisected by North-South Interstate 95 and by a rail line linking it with points north, south and west (though trains seldom stop now). Philadelphia International Airport is 15 minutes away. Soon Chester will be on a major fiber optics line and will also be linked by the Blue Route to the PA Turnpike. The city boasts two hospitals, Sacred Heart, and Chester-Crozer, a modern and expanding facility in Upland Borough which specializes in trauma treatment for the region. There is one public high school, and each year, fewer and fewer elementary and middle schools; for those who can afford it there are two Catholic elementary schools and a boys' high school. On the small upper and more affluent side of I-95 is Widner University, a relatively dynamic, small technical and liberal arts school. For people who live in Chester, there are no jobs.

Every urban region is linked to and shaped by the succession of roles it has played in a wider national and international economic and spatial division of labor. But variations of history and geography are profound and persistent. Therefore we focus here on the uniqueness of place, keeping in mind that the shifts within this locality are bound up with

a wider scheme of capitalist production and social relations as well. The uneven patterns of Chester's economy have been both cyclical, especially linked to war production, and secular, especially related to the acceleration of industrialization during the early decades of the century and the deindustrialization of the 1970s and 1980s. Its plight diverges little from that of Detroit, Akron, South Bend, Johnstown or Pittsburgh, all nodes on the once robust industrial network which constituted the productive foundation of the American economy. Yet observers are struck by a paradox: why has a city with so many resources--locational, climatic and infrastructural--become so enmeshed in a morass of poverty, unemployment, corruption and despair. (One legal assistance professional reports that when she describes Chester's physical attributes to other professionals who are unfamiliar with the city, they nearly always assume that a city with so many assets would have few problems of poverty. (interview, A.T.)) Despite the professed will of many and varied individuals and organizations, and public moneys dedicated to alleviating these conditions, Chester remains a town where workers are condemned to idleness and their sons and daughters to poverty; where business people pay few if any taxes but contribute to the Republican National Committee; where corrupt officials steal from the poor and where the poor are discouraged from organizing. So outrageous are the tales of official incompetence, dishonesty and exploitation of poverty in Chester that one must ask if the city is an aberration or whether it is indeed isomorphic to trends observed at the highest levels of American government and society during the eighties.

## **STAGE 1: THE AGE OF PATERNALISM**

### **Differentiation of Roles in a Single-Firm Area**

Claimed as the spot where William Penn first landed on the continent, Chester's natural advantages attracted business and industrial investors in the 19th century. Paternalism and single-firm manufacturing was consolidated during the period of competitive capitalism in the early 1900s and thrived into a mid-century turning point.

Chester gained a national reputation from a half century of uninterrupted growth of heavy and light industry: steel and heavy metals output, ship building, textiles, forges, oil refining, paper, brick, gypsum and aluminum fabrication, auto and locomotive production, plus a multitude of smaller manufacturing plants. Its geographic form influenced the kind of production which was built up. Its location permitted raw materials to be delivered to factories at the edge of the river, and finished products to be back-loaded for shipment all over the world. For the better part of the century, Chester was dominated by autonomous, single-region firms in which the entire process of production of a commodity was concentrated in the community. Most were small in both in employment and financial terms; they were generally family owned and did not represent economies of scale.

The was little differentiation in the hierarchy of management; investment, supervision and control over the production process all rested with the factory owner. Thus for any particular factory, *economic ownership*, the power to allocate investment capital, and *economic possession*, the power of control over labor and the physical means of production through supervision and direction were typically concentrated in the hands of an individual or a single family (Massey, 1984:26). By the same token, the local workforce (including Chester and its immediate environs) exercised a degree of influence, or even monopoly, over the labor market. Consequently, in the polarization or antagonism between capital and labor, there was also a regional or spatial interdependence.

The underpinning of this apparent harmony rested on the abundance of, and the need for, jobs. Workers were in demand for skilled and unskilled positions in plants such as Seaboard Steel Casting, The Baldwin Locomotive works, Wetherill Steel and Boilermakers, Congoleum-Nairn, Aberfoyles Textiles, Eddystone Print Works, Scott Paper Company, Belmont Iron Works, Fahey Tobacco Co., American Steel Foundries, Crew Levick Oil, Crown Smelting, Fields Brick, The American Viscose Company, Hetzel Woolens, or Sun Shipbuilding Co. (Scott, 1914: 39-73). By the middle of the second decade of the century, Chester employed approximately 10,000 people, or 62% of the labor force in manufacturing. They were a mix of American born, Southern and Eastern European immigrant and African American workers. Many were unskilled manual workers; others were skilled craftworkers whose jobs were specialized and who therefore held some control over the organization and conditions of their work.

Relations of paternalism generally dominated the management style in Chester firms. Ultimately, control of local economic resources rested in the hands of industry owners, but nearly all started out with the idea that "if you treated workers well, you'd get more work from them." (interview, R.M.). They provided personalistic benefits--sponsoring sports teams, dances and community fairs, offering prizes and bonuses to workers, providing turkey dinners and extra checks at Christmas. Some maintained a sincere sense of *noblesse oblige*, accepting the responsibility of honorable or charitable conduct as a moral obligation. Others, such as the Pews, owners of Sun Oil and Sun Ship (described as avaricious), and McCabe of Scott Paper (remembered as decent) treated workers just well enough to keep them out of unions. Reflecting the lack of distinction between ownership and management, "a (paternalistic) owner would walk through the factory every day. He'd speak to the workers and check out the machinery. (He used) the product often to test what he sold." (Interview with R.M. who worked in some of the larger factories). Many older folks still speak of individual employers as "having really excellent relations with workers" (Tom McCabe of Scott Paper), or "behaving with decency toward employees."

At the peak of this era, the class structure of Chester was not spatially differentiated

such as exists when working class families are concentrated in one town and owners in another. Factory owners lived in the city and were all forced to interact at some level with the working class. Their children attended Chester public schools; their wives shopped at the local department stores. This face-to-face relation served to remind them that they owed something to the community because they made their wealth from the community (or at least made it more difficult to forget that without the workers, the factories could not produce). Locally accumulated profits were generally reinvested in local enterprises.

### Chester Was a Wonderful Town

Chester was spatially and socially integrated into the surrounding regional system. It served as a regional commercial center known for cheap and good quality food markets, clothing, furniture and department stores, and banks. As the county seat, it was the locale for political, legal and business transactions among officials and citizens. Churches, clubs and social and political organizations, restaurants, bars and movie theaters provided entertainment. To the thousands who worked and lived in the city and adjacent areas, Chester provided all the basic amenities they needed.

In the recollections of persons who resided in, labored in or frequented Chester, the town was distinguished by its quality of life and a broad sense of social cohesion. Informants speak of networks of personal contacts and community support systems. One life-long resident put it this way, "When I was growing up. . . I had 600 parents. And they all looked out after me and made sure I behaved." (Villanova, 1986:5). Neighborhood and community organizations thrived. The YWCA and YMCA (since closed) provided meeting places for clubs and sports. "There was good shopping, fine theatre, good movies and a feeling of safety. I remember often coming home from events at 2 or 3 in the morning without a concern. Chester was a jazz center. Third Street was full of flourishing black night clubs where people like Dizzy Gillespie played--there was so much demand for good jazz that they even had matinees." (R.M., 70 year-old woman ex-journalist from the Chester Daily Times) Everybody turned out for annual affairs like the Mothers' Day Celebration Parade.

The impact of paternalism brought civic benefits. Chester's local leaders and planners sought to provide institutional protection and create an environment attractive to the various constituencies of the community. In the latter half of the 19th and first part of the 20th centuries, for example, targets for development included good government responsive to the citizens and sensitive city planning to include "adequate working class housing, quality education, health facilities, museums, parks and playgrounds, YMCA and YWCA, and local transportation." (Scott, 1914; Ashmead, 1883). Some local factory owners are remembered as making generous personal contributions as well. There was general consensus that Chester was a great hometown. Well beyond mid-century, in a poll of the community, 94 percent of the community leaders and 80 percent of the total

public agreed that "everyone should give some of his time for the good of the Community" (Bissell, 1970:37). The spirit which apparently guided city leaders until the late 1950s is captured in the following statement. It stressed the corporatist notion in its better sense, subscribed to by many urban planners of this era, which emphasized the common good and translated into investment in social infrastructure and popular welfare for workers as well as the wealthy. (See Panitch, for a discussion of corporatism, 1980).

A city is just what its citizens make it. If a spirit of selfishness, jealousy, and envy permeates the very atmosphere of a community, then may we expect little advancement. On the other hand, a community that is progressive; where its people are filled with civic pride; . . . where there is a "live and let live" compact, in which old and young have joined, there will you find the greatest success, the greatest contentment, the greatest happiness.

Every municipality should be conducted as one big family, and every member of the family be entitled to share benefits in accordance with his or her helpfulness and value to the community. The social, political and industrial forces should never clash. . . . No city holds out more and better inducements to the captain of industry, the merchant, or the wage earner, than does Chester. (Smith, 1914: 3)

Wistful memories were elicited in interviews with residents (both black and white), of Chester and nearby towns. Independent of class or race, Chester's past was often recalled with a mixture of pride and nostalgia.

L., black ex-beverage factory worker who now drives a van for a Chester literacy program: "Third street was a nice residential and business center. Now look at all these houses going to waste. Saturday afternoon this street would be jammed. Saturday night people had a lot of places to go. Most of those places have been torn down. We had a pro-baseball team. In the heart of town there were four movies. The Strand was a big theater. There were big department stores--Sears, Melmans, McCoys, Spears, Weinbergs. The trolley came out from Philly and the ferry crossed to New Jersey." Indicating a large parking lot near the river, "That parking lot used to be full of cars of the Ford workers. Scott (Paper Corp.) uses it now as a depot to store their container trucks and for dumping waste.

"I came here from Louisiana when I was a baby. When I was in the army, people'd ask me where I was from. They all knew Chester. (W)hen I got out of the service, I wanted to settle in Chester and get a job." (Shaking his head) "Today I just make this here my home. It's the only one I know."

Professor from a nearby college (white male): "Chester had everything. We used to go there on Saturday afternoon for our shopping or Saturday night for a movie. People used to come from all over to get hoagies at Stackys. People had a sense of community. There was work. People had money, and they had a sense of self esteem. Chesterites did not feel like outcasts."

Director of a job training program for welfare clients (black female): "I lived here all my life. Chester was a wonderful town."

From the early part of the century, blacks and whites worked together in the industrial labor force. Approximately twenty percent of the total population were African American at that time, and in the great northward migrations of the 1920s they were joined by many more. During the years of WWII, workers were recruited from North and South Carolina to work in the shipyards. Hostilities between black and white workers were not prominent in the remembrances of Chester's early history. Community leaders, some of whom were Quakers, "pledged themselves to alleviate the lower living conditions of black residents of Chester" long before such social consciousness was observed elsewhere (Smith, 1914). Black residents participated in the city's recreational and holiday affairs, and the black community also had their own network of clubs and organizations, church activities and social events (interview, G.B.).

Of course, class extremes of wealth and power existed in Chester, and working conditions could be harsh. But the working class enjoyed full employment, a satisfying sense of community, and a perception that hard work could have real benefits. Older Chesterites remember this period of many employers and greater interaction between owners and the working class community with more satisfaction than the period of large industry which followed when there were jobs but few reciprocal relations between owner and worker at the community level.

## **STAGE 2: THE ERA OF PATRONAGE**

The shift from the politics of paternalism to the politics of patronage overlapped with the decline of the small competitive firms of the first half of the century and the establishment of large corporations toward mid-century. Since this shift did not result in a significant decline in industrial employment, the political impact on the community was experienced as benign. On the other hand, the adversarial character of the employer-worker relationship became more formalized and unions became imperative to mediate the conflicts of class. Faceless corporate owners did not interact personally at the community level as before, and the role of community benefactor previously played by factory owners was subsumed in the client-patron relationship of machine politics.

### **Changes in the Social and Spatial Relations in the Region**

Pressures of competition over time led to increases in the size of individual firms. Single-factory, family owned firms, previously dominant in the regional economy, began



to relinquish their standing to modern corporations. These were industries characterized by mass production of a wide variety of products, advanced technology, a division of labor among the workforce, and differentiation of responsibilities between management and ownership. They employed more workers, produced more goods and represented far greater amounts of capital. Both labor processes and management functions became highly differentiated. Economic ownership and economic possession were separated. Investment decisions, before mainly the prerogative of the owner, now resided with the chairman and the corporate board of directors as well. Economic possession, the direct control of the physical means of production and of labor, passed out of the hands of the owner, and into the realm of an elaborate system of management. Most of all, the differentiation of the firm structure was characterized by spatial separation.

Shipbuilding, always important in the city, became the dominant industry, and Sun Shipbuilding, by now, Sun Ship and Oil Corporation, was the largest employer. Scott had grown into a giant corporation, producing a wide variety of specialized paper and related products. Wartime production, in addition to shipbuilding, also included Boeing Airplane Corporation. Ford Motor set up an assembly plant. Demand for steel output increased. Among large-scale, mass production units, paternalism had long since given way to "labor-management" relations; unions assumed a mandate to protect the interests of labor against the whimsy or abuse of capital.

In addition to organization of management and labor processes internal to the firm, industrial differentiation also had a locational dimension which ultimately contributed to the uneven and lagged development of Chester. Besides producing a wide array of products, large corporations are multi-locational. In modern markets, profits earned by large corporations operating plants in any one place have little probability of remaining in that site. (Although Chesterites were loyal to the city, place was of relatively little importance to owners of capital. Locations of headquarters and branches are situated at different sites. With mass production and the decomposition of the labor process, entire components of production for a single product line may take place in different regions.) Differentiation between ownership and investment, from supervision and control of production, increases and is likely to be executed in separate geographic areas. It is this differentiation process which permits geographic flexibility, and releases the corporation from dependence on, or loyalty to, place. The old interdependence of capital and labor, which served both as a potential advantage and a disadvantage to the workers in the area, was now altered. (Geographic mobility, and intra-firm differentiation freed capital from dependence on labor in the region, but it deepened the dependence of labor on investment and management decisions made by owners of capital who had scant interest in Chester beyond its immediate use value.)

In the boom years following World War I, when lots of wealth was to be made on

the stock market, many of the larger local elite began to "switch from making things to making money (on the market)." With this came a change in their self image as capitalists. Wealth seemed increasingly abstract and remote from work. "They began to believe that they were making money because they were bright and competent, rather than that their wealth was the product of the labor which they knew how to organize." (Interview, R.M. ex-journalist and political reporter for The Chester Daily Times). They justified their privileges thus. This distinction corresponded roughly to the separation of production from the sphere of circulation. Interestingly, this cleavage between the two dominant economic spheres also paralleled the growing spatial division occurring between workers and owners.

The decisions of factory owners to begin moving their families from Chester, where workers and factories were located, into upper class enclaves in the Philadelphia Mainline, may have been a foreboding of what lay ahead for the city. Class distinctions were generally becoming more clearly demarked by spatial distinctions in urban America. In Chester, the wealthiest began to abandon the city for more exclusive addresses in the prestigious Philadelphia suburbs. No longer residing *in* the community, they were no longer *of* the community. Families, especially the wives who had urged the move, shifted their attention to class interests, consolidating their own social status, entering the Social Register and Country Club; enjoying the benefits of wealth they believed were their right (interview, R.M.). Their social lives were reorganized around rewarding themselves for their wealth rather than returning some portion to the workers.

No longer residents of the city, they owed no personal loyalty to the community. No longer concentrating their ownership of capital in a single firm in the area, they were free to diversify their investments to whatever sector or site would yield the highest profits. No longer directly concerned with the possession of production, they relinquished control to a hierarchy of managers. The reciprocity of paternalism, when owners were intimately involved with the social organization of Chester, had passed. In the space created by its demise, a new, more manipulative and coercive form emerged--the era of machine politics.

Following the lead of the upper class, families with more education in the higher income and occupation groups, especially whites, began to leave the city for nearby residential suburbs where housing stock was newer. Later, in the 1960s, many of the community's black families who had achieved middle class status, also began to relocate in nearby communities such as Yeadon. They were seeking upward mobility, not fleeing urban decay; Chester was still a viable community. "They (black families) had been very active in community and cultural life and the schools. Their departure was one of the reasons things began to slide for Chester blacks." (Interview, R.M.). Census tracts with the most blighted housing, which also contained the highest unemployment rates, became more prominent--and more permanent (City of Chester Planning Commission, 1964: 3-4).

In 1960, the total population was 63,658 ; in 1970 it was 56,331; by 1980, it had dropped to 45,794, of which 57% were minorities. Data from the 1990 Census disclose only 40,941 persons remaining, of which 62% are minorities. Between 1950 and 1980, the actual number of African Americans residing in the city doubled, although the percentage of the population they constituted almost tripled because of a decline in the white population during the same time (PA Crime Commission, 1990: 311-12).

In 1986, the federal office of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) bestowed on Chester the title of "the most economically depressed city of its size in the entire United States," a classification calculated by the per capita ratio of deteriorated housing stock. Much of the housing is more than 60 years of age and many units were abused by constant redivisions to accommodate overcrowding during the boom years (Bissell, 1970:17). Recently, by demolishing several blocks of residential and commercial building, the city administration has been able to reduce the per capita ratio and thus graduate to the status of "Second Most Depressed."

Blacks, who entered the labor market at the lowest rungs of skill and pay, also occupied enclaves of the oldest and poorest housing, often that which had been abandoned by white families who could afford something better. Of the four run-down public housing units built for the burgeoning population during World War II, three, Lamokin Village, Ruth Bennett and William Penn, have had nearly one hundred percent Black occupancy for the past 25 years. Awareness sharpened that despite generalized conditions of working class well being in the past, they still resided in the lower tier of jobs, housing, education and status in the community.

During the Civil Rights movement Black residents had been politically energized. Mobilized around local leaders like Stanley Branch or Norman Watts, and encouraged by links with civil rights organizations such as SNCC and CORE, and political groups such as SDS based outside the city, Chester's movement attracted national attention because of its militant working class base. Thousands were organized; hundreds were jailed for demonstrating. Residents were infused with a higher consciousness of their situation, and a spirit of combativeness and commitment to change prevailed. The movement was rooted in community neighborhoods and family networks. Participants recall occasions where entire families were among the 700 to 800 jailed for protesting lack of opportunities and deepening poverty (interview, M.P.). Political demands heard elsewhere resonated in Chester; ideologically, views ranged from those of gradualists seeking modest goals of upward mobility, to a smaller group of militants committed to more radical political and economic change. Later we will suggest that the participation in this popular social movement and the associated ideology of class and race became a part of the memory of place which has been reproduced in recent struggles. Political and class consciousness is as much a part of the social legacy of a region as the industrial infrastructure is a relic of

domain of a political machine as powerful as any in the country. John McClure, the Republican boss who controlled the county political pyramid, familiarly known as the War Board, personally directed an elaborate chain of command down to the block wardens. For thirty years, McClure's War Board handed out patronage, collected votes and kickbacks, skimmed off public moneys and intimidated opposition. Though no longer the formal county seat, Chester was the organizational center. Every transaction in the city from the repair of a street to the installation of a stop sign was negotiated through the machine. A bag of coal or a food basket for a working class family during rough times was returned in votes. Granting of public insurance contracts was repaid with a kickback to the Republican Party. "If you wanted to buy a car, you went to your committeeman. If you wanted to buy property, you went to your committeeman." (Interview, R.M.) Even receipt of a public assistance check was credited to the recipient's committeeman and recorded as a "favor granted!" McClure personally kept "a voluminous card file on every voter under his jurisdiction. Everything was on the cards -- age, sex, color, nationality, registration, voting record, favors granted." Since the machine lavished benefits, its legal infractions or corruption did not weaken public veneration. For example, support for the War Board actually grew stronger in 1940, the year when McClure, the mayor of Chester and four councilmen made a profit of a quarter million dollars buying stock of the Chester Water Company and selling it back to the city some months later at a higher price (Malone, 1963).

Most important, the machine controlled employment, not only patronage appointments in the political network, but access to jobs in the private sector as well. Every job had its price, from a monetary contribution to the Republican Party for a judgeship to registration as a Republican to become a teacher. The network for factory jobs went through the ward healers.<sup>3</sup> Employers didn't advertise openly for workers, but through the machine. Ethnic and racial networks functioned. Black leaders, brought along by McClure, also had networks. Unions had networks. But all the networks were linked to the machine since the job network and the political network overlapped. (Interview, R.M.) Patronage had been substituted for paternalism.

How and why were African Americans accommodated by and integrated into the McClure machine? The workforce and community were relatively mixed; Blacks made up a substantial portion of the labor force, and maintained a significant network of community organizations and leaders. Consequently, they were recognized as a stable and important segment of the community. McClure's machine, discerning this, translated patronage for Blacks into votes from Blacks. So long as they delivered a solid block of votes to McClure, the machine delivered favors and patronage to Blacks the same as to any of the white ethnic groups. Patronage meant jobs in the private sector as well as employment in the public sector, mainly in local municipal positions. As their part of this arrangement,

Blacks delivered Republican votes at the local level. To this day, Chester blacks vote Republican at the local, county and state level, although at the national level, they vote solidly for Democratic candidates. (In 1989, the ratio of registered Republicans to Democrats was about three to one. PA Crime Cmsn, 1991: 314) As Chester's black population increased as a percentage of the city's total population, the imperative for the machine to continue patronage to blacks deepened. Their failure to deliver favors could have resulted in a potential loss of a block of votes and hence the potential weakening or even ouster of the machine in favor of Democratic party candidates.

Local machine government concentrated on wheeling and dealing at the county level, awarding contracts and pulling in kickbacks, doling out jobs and racking up votes. Their networks of power and exchange were regionally based and functioned within internal local structures. Rewards and payments led into and out of the party machine: in return for having his brother's tavern license reinstated by a party-appointee in the license bureau, the floor manager or the shop steward reciprocated with a couple of jobs for a committeeman to hand out. The job-holders, in turn, helped round up the party vote on election day. The employment structure of Chester was heavily dependent on the efficiency of networks controlled by the political machine<sup>6</sup>.

The geography of dominance and subordination which had characterized the economic network of single-region plants, applied to the political organization of the regional political machine as well. The demands and rewards of the War Board, then judged by most Chesterites to be benign, became part of the community experience and hence, its collective memory. Its span encompassed the judge's bench, the shop floor, the county dump, and the award of every contract. Outstretched, its roots and branches reached to the State House in Harrisburg. It was a regional node on the Republican Party network run by local facilitators and in-fighters. Its functions were concentrated in a bundle of resources which could be manipulated in Chester. However, when a decision was made in corporate headquarters in Detroit to shift operations of the Chester Ford Motor Corporation assembly plant abroad, or in New York that Reynolds would close its Chester operations, the War Board had no contingency plans. Small-fry, their connections with the national Republic organization offered them neither clout nor resources to use against multi-locational, now multinational, corporations. Organizing popular mobilizations among the community to search for alternatives to stop, delay, or compensate for the demise of the remaining industrial jobs was not in their repertoire. The machine was dedicated to controlling people, not energizing them. The role of the unions in this process remains ambiguous. Based on the ineffectuality of the international leadership of most unions, which had long since traded in their independence, stamina, and dedication to involve and defend their local membership, for a social contract with industry and the Democratic Party, one would not expect a dynamic response.

Industrial jobs could still be obtained however, and by the mid-1960s, Chester remained a community seriously changed, but still intact. The labor force was approximately 25,600 and there were an estimated 25,200 jobs in manufacturing, retail and wholesale; services; utilities; government and construction in the city and the extended area termed the Delaware River Industrial Belt. (See Figure 1.) About half of the City's employed labor force worked adjacent to, but technically outside, the actual City limits, and more than half of the jobs in Chester were filled by workers who live in surrounding communities. Industry alone provided over 10,000 jobs (Chester City Planning Cmsn,1965). Four establishments employed over 1,000; two employed between 500-1000; and four employed 250-500 each. Contiguous with the City were six more plants employing 1000 or more; two employing 500-1000; and five employing 250-500 (Chester City Planning Cmsn, 1964:13-15).

Similar to industrial patterns in other regions, peak employment clearly coincided with WWII and the Korean War. Although the labor force as a percent of the population fell slightly after WWII, in absolute numbers, employment rates were steady. It evolved into a balanced labor force: women and blacks as proportions as of the labor force each constituted about one-third of the total by 1960 (U.S. Census, cited in Chester City Planning Commission, 1964: 1-2). Manufacturing employment in both durable and non-durable goods was by far the largest category of work (42% of the labor force in 1960), followed by wholesale and retail trade (17%) and professional and related services (10.5%) (Chester Planning Cmsn., 1964:6-9). Among the larger industries, average weekly earnings were above those earned by production workers in smaller plants (Chester Planning Cmsn.,1965: 75).

Table I. Population and Labor Force, City of Chester

<u>Year</u>	<u>Population</u>	<u>Number</u>	<u>Labor Force</u>	
			<u>% of Population</u>	<u>% in Industry</u>
1920	58,000	26,900	46	62
1930	59,200	25,000	42	
1940	59,300	25,900	44	
1950	66,000	26,500	40	50
1960	63,700	25,600	40	42
1970	56,200	23,350*	41	

\*1968

Source: U.S. Census; numbers rounded.

### Two Decades of Industrial Collapse

In the 1960s the downside of life and work in Chester became more evident, associated, for one thing, with the diminution of strength of the small, family-owned firm sector. For example, Chester textile factories, which had employed a large group of workers, bolted along with the general exodus of runaway plants to non-union sites in the South, and between 1958 and 1962, textile production dropped by two-thirds. Baldwin Locomotive Works, a popular employer, ceased production; Penn Steel Casting, a producer of acid open hearth steel, banked its furnaces for the last time in the 1970s. The Ford Motor Plant, which had employed about 5000 assembly workers, closed in 1961. Reynolds Metal Company subsequently occupied a portion of the total capacity of the Ford plant employing 500 to 600 in production of electrical wire and cable, but it too closed eventually. Structurally, Chester's corporate subsidiaries were remote from the locally based factories of their predecessors.

Among larger firms such as Scott Paper Co. and Boeing Air, trends were detected that employment was decreasing and value added was rising, indicating that the technological base was being rationalized (Chester Master Plan, 1964:81-85). In paper and related products at Scott, for example, output increased by 73% between 1947 and 1961, but total employment increased by less than 25%. Petroleum refining output at B.P. Oil Company increased by the same rate, while the number of workers decreased by 8% (Meli, 1971:) The implications were not only that the general demand for labor was in decline, but also that the demand for higher skills and education among new hires was on the increase.

While nearly all of the adult labor force in Chester worked, the networks through which they found jobs led to different sites. Despite the surface appearance of equality, a cultural division of labor did exist in which different ethnic groups were located in particular occupations, even within the same industry (interview, President, Union Local). The cultural division of labor refers to two types of economic definitions which evolve in the general culture. The first defines the features of various occupations; the second concerns the ethnic, sexual, educational and other attributes used to channel people into those occupations in accordance with the prevailing stratification, crowding, discrimination and competition associated with a particular labor market. Definitions such as these provide rationalizations for how and why different and unequal treatment is accorded different groups in employment patterns. In circular fashion, the cultural division of labor reinforces stereotypes of ethnic groups because of their labor market status.<sup>7</sup> Complaints were made, for example, that the State Employment Service directed applicants to jobs on the basis of "stereotypes" independent of skill or education level. Although they were more likely to be employed in the large-scale firms where average wages were higher, industrial employment for African American men was concentrated in the less skilled, lower-paying jobs (Meli, 1971: 164; 172-3). With regard to Chester's labor force

characteristics, the cultural division of labor had a circular and cumulative effect. Since African American men had fewer opportunities to develop specialized skills and strong work histories, when white workers began to move out of Chester as access to jobs waned, the working class remaining was less attractive to potential investors because of its weaker skills and work experience. This phenomenon is typical of regional out-migration in many instances.

Moreover, the location of African Americans among a few large firms made them especially susceptible when unexpected corporate decisions to close plants occurred. They were also disproportionately represented in service employment (39% of total), transportation, communication and utilities (32% of total), and construction (31% of total) (Chester Planning Cmsn, 1964:9). As unemployment grew, it rose for Blacks more rapidly than for Whites. Non-whites made up 33 percent of the population of the City, but 47 percent of the unemployed in the mid-sixties. Among black men the rate was higher than for black women although the opposite was true for white men and women.

Not surprisingly, then, black families were concentrated at the lowest income levels and had the highest numbers classified as living in poverty (Chester Planning Cmsn, 1964: 12). Yet when asked about relations between Blacks and Whites, most black respondents did not recall problems. Such recollections belie the disparate economic conditions which actually existed by race considering the fact that about half of the non-white population had been living near or under the poverty line at least since as 1950 (Chester City Planning Cmsn, 1964: 12). This selective perception suggests that deprivation was experienced as relative. Compared to the South from which many had migrated, especially to work in the shipyards during the Second World War, Chester offered African Americans more opportunities and a more integrated community. While not at the same wage and occupational levels as those for white workers, work was available and in most of the same unions and firms where Whites were employed.

L., former brewery truck driver:

K., ex-teacher and literacy program director: *(fill in quotes)*

M., white union president and ex-Sun Ship worker: "No, there were no problems between Blacks and Whites at work. Sure, people tended to have their own smaller groups they interacted with socially, but this was usually along lines of occupations."

There were few strong unions in Chester in the early half of the century with some exceptions such as the very powerful printers union. Under paternalistic managerial practices, promotions and pay raises were given on a personal basis by management--for company loyalty, a worker might be rewarded as much as \$10 a week or more than the man working beside him. Unions began to form as a means for workers to protect themselves against this arbitrary treatment, but where they did gain strength, owners would often successfully buy out the leaders. When owners began to abdicate their paternal



practices, and work became organized along more traditional lines of industrial employment, more unions were formed.

The impact of shifting population was felt by local merchants in Chester's central business district which had traditionally dominated as a regional shopping center. The irreversible geographic shift in regional shopping patterns was actually traceable to a real estate development scam which resulted in the construction of a shopping mall about ten miles from Chester. This mall, which housed two large national department chain stores and several dozen smaller retail chains, was soon flanked by two additional malls located a few miles in either direction. For long established hometown merchants, the competition was severe, and inevitably, Chester's shops began to close; between 1955 and 1965, the number of retail establishments dropped from around a thousand to about seven hundred (Census Reports ).

Education levels among younger people seemed to be improving up through the sixties. (The proportion of the population over 25 which had not completed high school, while high--70% for Whites; 83% for Blacks--reflected norms among older immigrant and migrant workers.) Professional assessments warned, however, that Chester's educational system was not preparing future workers with the upgraded education and skills they needed to meet requirements for future employment in business and industry (Chester City Planning Cmsn, 1965).

After the Korean War, manufacturing jobs had declined slightly, but they peaked again during the Vietnam War. Then one by one, the smaller firms still remaining ceased operations, gradually leaving the remaining labor force concentrated in two large industrial groups. Chester workers were thus particularly vulnerable to individual corporate decisions made by the large employers when the giant enterprises made plans to leave the area.

In 1967 there were 83 industrial establishments with employment of 12,000 workers. By 1978 this had dropped to 50 establishments and employment in industry had dipped to 8,111. (City Dept. of Planning, unpublished doc.) Then in 1981 and 1982, massive layoffs by Sun Ship and Scott Paper Company caused further reduced employment alternatives. In a decade, total employment including all sectors fell 27 percent from about 20,000 in 1972 to 14,500 in 1982. While ordinary citizens were minding their daily affairs, working and enjoying their families and community, decisions which would affect them intimately were being made behind their backs and over their heads. Plant closings, technological displacement and structural dislocation caught them unaware. From one decade to the next, Chester changed from an interdependent community system of standing duration with a feeling of common interests and goals and a certain amount of mutual cooperation, to a weak and fragmented population, where many more were prone to pessimism about their future as individuals, let alone as a community.

Three factors--access to jobs; responsiveness of government (local and federal) in providing social programs; and contact with sympathetic social movements and ideologies--had shaped popular aspirations and behavior. General public behavior and opinions became more dispirited with the disappearance of the first two factors, but influence of the third may have carried over to the present .

No advance indication appeared of the socially pathological or self-destructive behavior culture of poverty theorists ascribe to the poor. Although the working class was far from affluent, and in the case of Blacks, even poor, none of our informants describes popular behavior in Chester as demoralized, lacking initiative or unwilling to take on responsibilities for improving one's own lot. On the contrary, the images are consistently of enthusiasm, organization and energy up through the sixties. For example, the pages of the (now defunct) Chester Daily Times were filled with accounts of church and civic meetings, sports events and community club activities. When perception that their goals and aspirations were recognized as legitimate by those with formal power, and that effort and hard work could result in social or economic rewards, or improved life chances, Chesterites engaged in activities to take advantage of these perceived and real opportunities. But when potential rewards for hard work were gradually withdrawn and the harsh impact of elite decisions outside their control increased, the work ethic began to disappear and symptoms associated with the culture of poverty began to appear. There was a differential response according to age however. Several informants expressed concern over an apparent disjuncture between older folks, many of them grandparents who still maintained personal integrity and the will to contend with, and struggle against, adversities, and young people who have "opted out" or who have very unrealistic view of the world (interviews, RB; AT; Chester Living Black History). Older cohorts, for whom memories of work, community and personal worth and/or experience in community activism were strong seemed less susceptible despair. Youngsters, whose life experiences have not encompassed the days when jobs, community organization and family networks made Chester "a wonderful town", were more vulnerable to behavior associated with pessimism and self-defeat. The source of their emerging pathology, however, was likely influenced by a pragmatic assessment of their existing and future opportunity structure, whereas many older Chesterites retained energy grounded in past experiences.<sup>4</sup>

The culture of poverty thesis assumes that the poor reinforce their own conditions through their failure to execute a series of decisions and acts dedicated to "improving their lot." Decision-making does not occur in a structural vacuum. Parameters imposed by decisions and non-decisions made by economic and political elites circumscribe the options available to the poor and structurally displaced, especially the young. It is counter-intuitive to question the inadequacy of decision making strategies of the poor without first identifying and analyzing the constraints they face. (To do otherwise is to impose a

*numerous clauses.* It poses the wrong social question since it takes as a given a condition in which the number of rewards available are only for a very small minority and then attempts to identify the source of failure of the others in their behavior, rather than in the scarcity of the awards themselves.)

### STAGE 3: THE PERIOD OF PILLAGE After the Industrial Collapse

What the McClure machine had been able to deliver was jobs. What they couldn't deliver were factories. Thus, when the plants began to close, the machine had to turn increasingly to skimming off funds from the public sector to remain financially viable and stay alive.

Over an arch in the center of the city is inscribed the community's motto: "What Makes Chester Is What Chester Makes." Unfortunately, this slogan still obtains. Important phenomena began taking shape during the 1960s, perhaps earlier than they appeared in many larger industrial cities. After the slight rise in industrial employment linked to the Vietnam War, a steady decline in industrial operations set in, and with it a waning of networks which led to local factory jobs. At the federal level, domestic priorities would shift away from the liberal War on Poverty at the end of the Kennedy and Johnson eras, toward the drastic cutbacks in health, education and welfare spending of later administrations. New labels began to be attached to the process of development in Chester: "deteriorating"; "decaying"; "depressed". As the rest of the plants and the remaining affluent families moved out, the tax base shrank further, and local institutions began to break down.

Today, Chester's economy and society represent barely a skeleton of what existed so recently. Family income rose from an average of \$16,000 in 1950 to \$18,000 in 1960 and \$22,000 in 1970; but dropped to \$17,250 by the 1980 census when twenty-two percent of all families reported incomes at or below the family poverty level of \$7,412 (PA Crime Cmsn, 1991:312). An estimated 30% of the labor force is unemployed and many more are underemployed. No new industries have replaced those that closed; there is a shortage of jobs, but especially good jobs. Chester welfare recipients see "current employment and training programs as leading to a dead-end, minimum-wage jobs that provide few alternatives to welfare," according to a 1986 survey of attitudes (Villanova, 1986:5). For men, the problem is perceived as a lack of employment opportunities altogether; for women, the problem is more often perceived as underemployment. "The jobs are there, but they are just not good enough to make working worthwhile." Unemployed single mother: You can get jobs for \$3.35. . . . in a nursing home or you can make money cleaning some white woman's house. But by the time you get transportation and find somebody to take care of your kids you can't live on that. You'd be better off on welfare."

(Villanova, 1986: 5)

Informants further explain that when they have been able to find work, transportation problems often seem insurmountable: Unemployed man: "I had a job at the Marriott in center city. But I had to catch two buses to make it there on time. I couldn't keep that job." (Villanova, 1986:4).

Politically the entrenched party machine is dedicated to picking the carcass clean. It no longer is able to deliver patronage via channels which weave through industry and commerce. Many contend that the machine has organized the poverty of Chester itself as source of power and funds to be exploited like a cash cow. There is ample evidence to support this claim. Three-fifths of the public polled in the early seventies declared that most people in government are not really interested in the problems of the average person and even more felt that the common person had little real voice in influencing local affairs. To illustrate, 48 percent of the black residents perceived racial discrimination as a serious problem, while 66 percent of the community leaders, the majority of whom were white, felt it was not a problem, or a minor problem at best (Bissell, 1970:3740). Community leaders actually denied the existence of any serious problems in nearly every other category of concern to the public. About the only issue on which "community" and "leaders" did agree was that crimes against property and street crimes and juvenile delinquency were too high. Being marginalized from the benefits and opportunities offered by the mainstream society and economy spawns alienation and feelings of powerlessness. Denial of their daily experiences by those who controlled power was reason enough for the deepening mood of futility and demoralization among Chesterites.

A dynamic social movement, political parties or trade unions dedicated to social protest and political combat on the part of the working class and the poor would seem to have been the surest antidote to the growing cynicism and frustration. While notions of popular trade union and racial consciousness still existed, without collective action, popular consciousness alone were not sufficient to effect change.

A comprehensive report funded by Bell Telephone Company concluded that "Due to educational and economic factors, citizens of the city have little political power, and, therefore, are relatively incapable of improving their overall position (Bissell, 1970:11). Moreover, there was an awareness that agents of change were not only failing to defend public needs, but in many cases, had actually betrayed that role. Neither parties nor planners had exerted energy to alter the steady pattern of plant closings. Despite growing poverty, Chester residents paid, and pay, proportionately higher real estate taxes to help run the Republican county government than do the richer Republican suburbs, yet receive fewer services because of public corruption. For example, although health problems were monumental, and the tuberculosis rate was the second highest in the state, Chester's county commissioners refused to establish a countywide public health service. One of the most

fiery spokesmen of the local civil rights movement was now in jail on charges of corruption. Elected representatives (and, some informants say, union officials) were accused of illegally conspiring with industry owners to facilitate plant closures. Virtually everyone we interviewed concurred that the local government had pilfered money and resources which were designated for the poor. The perception of city officials as corrupt speaks for itself, since J.H. Nacrelli, Mayor from the late 1960s to the late 1970s, actually ran municipal affairs for several years from jail while he served a term for conviction of public corruption. During his office, 1968-1979, Nacrelli was found guilty of bribe-taking from a local racketeer. In return he protected the racketeer's workers from police and shared in monthly protection payments of \$4,000; after serving only two years, he resumed his powerful behind-the-scenes position in Chester politics. In 1986, Nacrelli's receptionist was hand-picked to become mayor. "Government in Chester is Jack Nacrelli." (PA Crime Cmsn, 1991: 311-18).

In their 1991 Report on Organized Crime, the Pennsylvania Crime Commission concluded that government programs and services have been drained by a tradition of corruption and abuse of public office dating back to the 1960s. "Public trust was negotiated for private advantage. This triad of criminals, corrupt politicians, and rogue law enforcement officers produced an alliance which fed off one another and which entrenched itself in the governmental system. In fact, it became the governmental system (PA Crime Cmsn, 1991:311). The physical face of Chester today is scared like a burned-out battle zone as a result.

The view that none of the public institutions functioned for the good of the community and local government is generalized. Vague references to conspiracies are often expressed: "The government doesn't do anything for people. They turn businesses away. Who owns the waterfront? Lawyers from New York and Philadelphia are buying it up. They're just concerned with property value; they don't want factories." (interview with F., white policeman in his mid-20s). "The city owns much of the vacant property. Private realtors (speculators) are looking for prime ground." (interview, B.S., University professor). Corporation president: "Chester . . . is run by a bunch of thieves." Employment counselor: "I used to be a teacher before I moved to Chester. When I got here I was told. . . I would have to register to vote, and get the application form from my political committeeman. . . I decided I didn't want to be a teacher in this kind of system. (Villanova, 1986:8)

Planners and persons familiar with Chester's development recount a litany of projects proposed, often funded, but which never materialized. "Fitzgerald, the 1967 Director of Redevelopment, was given free reign to do what he saw fit with very little political help (interference). He laid out five large urban renewal projects. . . residential. . . Central Business District. . . (and) industrial waterfront. . . Prior to this the feds would

commit money to complete a whole project. . . We were just about to undertake the CBD project but the feds said no. . . Twenty years later we are still waiting." (interview with L.M., retired Director of City Planning).

"The east side of Chester was targeted for economic development activities (which were never carried out). . . There've been a dozen startup operations; maybe half are still operating. . . The city has a small business office and at one time they included a community group to evaluate business plans. Nobody knows what happened to the money. . . So much money has come into Chester, but it's had little effect on the poor" (interview with B.S., University professor working to place Chester unemployed).

### Municipal Government: Picking over the Carcass

With the disappearance of industry, the local machine no longer had a private economic base to exploit. They turned, therefore, to the only other viable economic game in town: looting the public sector.

Because of the poverty of Chester residents, the city has been eligible for a variety of public grants and loans. Despite millions which have been earmarked for city residents, there is no evidence of any constructive use of these funds. When asked what happened to these moneys, respondent after respondent shrugged and replied, "Nobody knows." For illustration, what follows is a random list of funding described in unpublished materials from the Department of Planning, which falls into this category.

In 1987-88, the city received three federal Urban Development Action Grants totaling about \$7.5 million. The money was "loaned to three businesses," which were to pay the city back with interest "in a year or so." It was *then* to be used for economic development activities eligible under the Housing and Community Development Act. What happened to it? *Nobody knows*.

NASILCO (Phila. Quartz and De Gussa, a West German company) planned a plant to produce a precipitated silicate product. The new operation was to cost \$30 million. Around 1984-5, five million was provided by a Urban Development Action Grant to the City which then loaned it to NASILCO. (Chester Planning Department, 1985). A Trinet review of businesses operating in Chester in 1991 discloses no current business activity for NASILCO.

The state has designated an area of the city as an Economic Development Area (EDA) including all of the major industrial and commercial areas of the City. Funding of \$250,000 per year from the state for "economic development activities" was anticipated to begin in 1985-6 (Chester Planning Department 1985). No new or reorganized industrial or commercial projects had been established in the Chester EDA as of 1990.

Over a period of eleven years, Chester received \$2,300,000 from the federal government for programs of housing rehabilitation, removal of dangerous buildings, park

construction. While many buildings have indeed been pulled, down, housing rehab is being conducted by community volunteers and organizations mainly located outside the city, and park space has been sold off rather than developed. However, *about \$1,000,000 of the money was used to pay the salaries of about twenty policemen and twenty firemen.* In 1983 when the government proposed to eliminate this item from the federal budget, city planners worried that the city *would have to raise money some other way to keep paying those men.* (Chester City Planning Department, 1985. Ital. mine)

Increasingly Chesterites accuse the institutions of the city, specifically the school system and the local political system, of working openly against, instead of toward, potential solutions to the unemployment and poverty of the residents. Both institutions were traditionally associated with the county-based Republican Party and marked by patronage and corruption. Now they are being linked as well to local crime families that became pivotal in city government after McClure's death. Investigations of the municipal government are underway by Federal inspectors over misuse of HUD funds, by the FBI over connections with organized crime, by the Internal Revenue Service over taxes owed for a million dollar scam in the sales of municipal bonds for a trash-to-steam plant, and by the Pennsylvania State Crime Commission over the activities of organized crime.

City contracts are vehicles for siphoning off public funds and kickbacks. For example, one five-year maintenance contract, awarded to an owner of an illegal gambling racket after a lower bid was rejected, ran an average overrun per year of over 92% of the contracted price (PA Crime Cmsn., 1991: 320-21). For another, the underwriters for the trash recycling project obtained a \$335,000,000 bond issue for which they received a fee of \$14,600,000, which was nearly triple the industry average. The city special counsel, who had urged the use of this firm, received a fee of \$355,000 although he had no prior experience of bond counseling (PA Crime Cmsn. 1991:317).

Interviews with persons living in Chester reiterate a common theme. Because of the extremes of poverty of the city, residents qualify for nearly every source of national or state funds designated for institutions and citizens in low-income, economically depressed regions. Chester has been eligible for a variety of grants targeting the educational system, block grants for urban renewal and grants ticketed to upgrade and renovate the miserable housing stock. "When the population of Chester dropped below 50,000, it was no longer eligible to receive block grants directly; the money had to come through the county. When it (money designated for Chester) comes into the county, it gets siphoned off. Municipal service pay gets sucked off to patronage and then there's no money for municipal services" (interview, A.T.). "Grants are always available for poverty, so (the local government-- county and city) began to look for poverty as a source of money " (interview, L.M., past director of planning). Despite millions of dollars earmarked for Chester's now reduced working class, conditions continue to spiral further and further downward.

Headlines taken from information released in the Philadelphia Inquirer from September 22, 1990 to April 22, 1991, confirm community suspicions. "Mayor before his racketeering conviction, Nacrelli still rules 'feudal system'." "Chester official accused of bribe-taking." "HUD questions city of Chester's use of grant." "HUD finds 'deficiencies' in Chester agency." "FBI probe is said to target major Chester landlord." "7 charged with graft in Chester." "Chester fails to pay IRS \$23 million" "Grand jury accusations of executive director of Chester Resource Recovery Authority of bribery, theft, extortion and racketeering." "Audit finds 70% default rate in Chester Redevelopment Authority loans." "Anger in Chester-Upland district focuses on assistant superintendent." "He (executive director of Chester Resource Recovery Authority) went north to Alaska--in a Chester agency's car."

### An Education in Chester

The institutional infrastructure, which once supported life and work in the community, has been dismantled. The school system, which figured prominently in the organization and cohesion of the community, began to openly collapse in the early 1970s. "Thirty years ago, Chester was an outstanding school (district). It had excellent, excellent schools. The teachers were very good. It was educationally excellent." (interview, J.H., school psychologist). Today it is run by what most describe as a school board hand-picked by the local Republican machine. "In violation of state Sundown laws, policy is decided before Board meetings and the agenda and decisions are presented in a low, mumbling voice that the audience can't hear or understand." (interview, A.T., legal counsel). A parent leader demanded to know why service contracts don't go out on bid--board members don't even know what they're signing. For example, the vice president of the county Republican party makes \$30-40,000 a month on security contracts awarded as patronage. "One individual, Donald T., really makes the decisions. (His credential) is loyalty to Nacrelli. He raised the money for Nacrelli's jail bond." (interview, J.H., school psychologist).

In the mid-1980s, Chester had the highest dropout rates and course failures in the state; truancy was high; and Chester led the state in teen pregnancies born out of wedlock. In 1990 Chester-Upland District was ranked 499 among five hundred school districts in Pennsylvania by standardized TELS scores. "Low scores mean that money comes into the district. . . which Donald T. then used to stage a big patronage affair." (interview, J.H.). With a budget of \$4.6 million, Chester's school system is not short of money, but most of it is diverted into administration and not into educational programs. Last year, \$500,000 was spent for junkets for the school board, for example." (interview, T.B., college professor). The school system is the tenth largest employer in the county, so its a source of jobs, payoffs, and patronage for vendors, architects, consultant firms. Meanwhile, for the child in the schools, there's a 50/50 chance the teacher will not be certified; classes are



overloaded (42 kids); the teacher is overworked; and parents are afraid to complain for fear of a loss of a job (their own or someone close to them). How do kids perceive their objective reality? "At an early age, and even in high school, they have very high expectations for themselves--unrealistic." The kids fall further and further behind. . .by middle school, kids don't go to school. They've been turned off by the school. There is no attendance policy; no supervision or truant officer tries to bring them back." (interview, J.H. school psychologist).

Teenagers in front of Chester High School during a break look much like teens anywhere--laughing and talking, carefully attired in the latest teen fashions. What distinguishes them from teens elsewhere becomes apparent at the close of school. As they leave in various directions, none carried books or backpacks bulging with notebooks and homework papers. If homework is neither expected nor required of high school, the standards are patently out of touch with the training and education necessary for today's jobs, let alone preparation for higher education. The message to the youngsters and to the community is that the schools do not exist for this purpose, or that the kinds of jobs to which these young people can aspire are low-skill, low paying jobs for which schooling is not essential. There are no more well-paid industrial jobs which can absorb an unschooled workforce. "The school is short of books--this year the Assistant Superintendent forgot to order books. . . .When the kids graduate, they're not prepared to do anything--they can't even fill out job forms. . . . They have no idea of stepping stones. They want goals, but they have no idea of how to get to the goal." (interview, J.H.). "Youngsters pass through the system, receiving good grades, being nominated for National Honor Society, and thinking they're learning something. Young kids have no idea of the culture of work."(interview, A.T., attorney).

T.J., Director of a job training and placement program linked to the State Department of Health and Human Services, observed the changes: "Ninety percent of the teachers live outside Chester today. In the fifties and sixties, ninety percent of the teachers, black and white, lived in Chester. The kids are bused all over the city so the Board can consolidate the schools and cut costs. The Board is trying to prove the schools are unused and unnecessary so they can sell them to (local university) which wants to buy them. Based on an evaluation made by an architect, Sixth graders are now being sent to the high school so they can close down an elementary school and save money."

B.S., University professor: "In the 40s and 50s we had progressive schools and up-to-date vocational system which provided workers with skills." The school system has deteriorated. The first college graduate in her family, K. D. taught in Chester schools and now directs a community literacy program. She reiterated similar themes: "You were made to learn. Teachers were concerned. Those teachers are gone today -- retired, moved out, burned out. Today all the teachers live outside the city." K. noted that since they leave at

3:30, they're not around to be role models or to "keep an eye on the kids in the neighborhood." This further contributes a message to the youngsters that they are "cast offs", that their teachers want to leave them and their community as quickly as possible. "The models for these kids are entertainment and sports figures and the glamour of drugs. About fifty percent drop out today. About thirty percent of my class of 1971 went on to college and about ten percent of them finished." In the words of some of today's teens, ". . . I want to do my mother a favor and be someone. . . The teachers don't want to teach us. . . They have a whole room full of expensive computer equipment, but they won't even let us use it. . . when I graduate where can I go to college?" and, "My first year of college was Hell. You don't learn anything at the High." (Villanova, 1986: 8).

### **CHESTER: WHAT HOPES FOR RECLAIMING THE COMMUNITY?**

Two issues bear on our concept of embedded community consciousness. First, confronted by such a leviathan of hardships, have those who recall the wonderful past of Chester abandoned hope for its future? Second, what is the potential for organization of people in Chester not singly or even as families on behalf of individual solutions, but collectively in the quest for community and class alternatives? Our interviews cannot purport to speak for all who reside in Chester, but they do suggest trends among many who are determined to reclaim resources they feel are rightly theirs.

#### **The Popular Movement in Chester Today**

Is this simply another tale of apparently passive peoples acted upon by powerful forces which they cannot resist? Happily, this case is not so unidimensional. Today the regional legacy of popular consciousness is being played out among community leaders, grass roots participants and professional volunteers. The Office of the Legal Defender is run by a dynamic and savvy woman lawyer who has provided the professional skills necessary for confronting corruption in Chester today. Working with community leaders, in the past two years they have sued the Department of Education and the Chester Housing Authority which oversees HUD funds. They alerted the IRS to investigate a multi-million dollar fraud in the selling of municipal bonds for a trash-to-steam plant. Recently their efforts have been aided by a two-year investigation by the Pennsylvania State Crime Commission which has turned over their findings to the FBI and the Attorney General's office.

Confronting the miserable performance and corruption in the school system has been a major effort, since better education is absolutely essential if Chester youngsters are to compete for jobs today. The first suit organized against the state did not bring the desired response since there was no precedent of direct intervention in a local school system in the state of Pennsylvania, so the suit was redirected to the federal level. Buses

of local parents went to Washington to put pressure on the Federal Department of Education and at every other point they could contact in Washington. Only 24 such suits had been recognized before: Chester is now number 25. This protest, led by C.M., a community parent with tireless organizational energies, represents a grass roots mobilization of hundreds of parents. For the first time, they forced the school board to open their elections rather than filling the posts with patronage appointments. Five of the nine positions were opened, and the machine faced the potential loss of majority control. In addition to the federal investigation, a state oversight committee has now been appointed for the school district.

The Chester Housing Authority, which has failed to answer for the use of millions of dollars has been investigated by the FBI. Every member of the Redevelopment Authority is now under indictment. Hundreds of poor families living in the housing projects who had all but given up hope of being able to do anything about their housing conditions were personally canvassed and organized by C.S., a local leader. Loading up buses, they took their case to federal court. When the first judge, who was from Delaware County, refused to hear their case, they persisted. The second judge took on the case that led to the indictments.

Public hearings forced local officials to give up their plans to sell the DeShong Park. Federal laws requiring a five-year plan are now being enforced. They have fought against the proposal to turn Chester into the site for a major new prison construction (in which, incidentally, there are no plans for hiring local workers either in construction or as employees). The secretly negotiated million dollar trash-to-steam plant intended to handle Philadelphia's garbage has been halted. Poor mothers are insisting they want recreation and education for their children, not pollution and prisons.

A key person in the fight to take back their community is J.H. a woman in her mid-to late-40s who has been struggling in Chester since she was a teen. Smart and energetic, she is able to mobilize the community and demystify the opposition at the same time. Her dedication to community organizing and fighting back is rooted in a solid foundation in political ideologies and organization. She is representative of the social conscience of place.

While different economic activities and forms of social organization have come and gone the social and historical process which occurs in a locale persists in the legacies embedded in the consciousness of the area. This is a key element in the the construction of locality. "The social changes in an area, the shifts in prevailing ideology and community temperament, are not bound up only with economic changes within that locality. They reflect also broader shifts and in other aspects of society. The layers of history. . . over time are . . . also cultural, political and ideological strata, layers which also have their local specificities (Massey, 1984: 120)." But part of the history of this community is also the

remaining patronage. The major employer in Chester is now the Republican Party, and there are those, including many Blacks, who will try to retain the few perks to which they have access by helping to buy off opposition or stuffing the ballot box.

This brings us back to one of the original questions posed here. Is the long and varied history of Chester idiosyncratic, unique to this particular locale? We think not. The structure of a locality is a product of the combination of layers of successive rounds of economic investment plus new forms of social activities over the years. "Spatial structures can be viewed historically. . . as emerging in a succession in which each is superimposed upon and combined with, the effects of the spatial structures which came before (Massey, 1984: 118)." Chester was a proletarian city. It was productive because of its united character, and it was united because of industrial production (Gramsci, in Massey, 1984: 117). The inherited political experience and understanding of class structures and a reserve of optimism and determination are also part of Chester's collective resources. How the poor reorient their position within the region today will be influenced to how they relate to the other side of the same coin of earlier spatial and social forms of the community. Will it be productive in its united character--and united in its collective movement?

New forms of local activities are each related to a wider setting however. The narrative of Chester's political organization today parallels the looting of the public sector at the highest levels in the U.S.. The city's experience is isomorphic to what has gone on and continues in federal offices and corporate boardrooms, from the three trillion to be paid for the S&L theft, to the giveaway of public lands and offshore areas for oil drilling, to the gangsterism involved in the Iran hostage scheme, to Irangate. Take, as an illustration, HUD which was marked by graft and theft during the Reagan-Bush era. HUD contracts became a plum to pass on to real estate speculators rather than a means of subsidizing housing for the poor. Officials in Washington, as in Chester, having facilitated the gutting of the productive industrial sector, then turned to feed from public funds. The concept of culture of poverty fails to explain this behavior at the national level any more than it describes the behavior of Chesterites today.

### The Imbedded Memory of Place

The recollection of prior social organization has been an important source of energy which diverts apathy and discouragement into anger and action among a significant number in the community. What were the accumulated memories or legacies of this community?

First, longtime residents were infused with a sense of community structure in which all sectors contributed and shared. Chester had an array of amenities--something for everyone. Entertainment and recreational facilities were abundant, and in the case of African American jazz and music spots, outstanding. Residual groups, membership or participation in church and community organizations, recollection of community traditions, persist. Community rituals such as the Mother's Day Parade have been intertwined with

family traditions. Chester was a workingman's town, and as a working class the disparate segments were all more or less well off. Although African Americans had been somewhat less well off than other working class ethnics, they had always been employed and integrated into community activities (including the patronage machine). The schools were a focal point for public activities, and parents were relatively satisfied that the standards of the schools could prepare their youngsters for productive lives.

Secondly, in the past, distribution of perks, favors and benefits from the power structure did not exclude any groups. During the paternalistic and patronage eras, those controlling power shared important rewards with the community at large. At present, authorities still hand out limited city jobs as patronage among members of the community at large. These are drastically limited in number however, because of the loss of the private sector, because the local machine now has weaker ties with the county Republican machine, and most of all, because the parasitic municipal machine itself is now appropriating most of the perks internally. The community memory, of the first and second eras, is of a community power structure or machine which distributed benefits. Their anger with the machine today stems not only from the fact that it no longer distributes jobs and favors, but that it is now appropriating nearly the entire share of what most members of the community perceive as rightfully belonging to them.

Third, class and race-based organizations and consciousness provided cohesion. Pride in living in Chester overlapped with satisfaction with being working class and living in working class neighborhoods. Factory owners in the era of paternalism cultivated a social contract based on cooperation and cooptation rather than strife. Oddly enough, the era of the McClure machine furthered an awareness of entitlement among working class people. The civil rights movement imbued African Americans with a sense of racial pride; community bonds developed under militant working class leadership.

Fourth, Chester was a family-oriented community. African American families had family ties north and south, and Chester was often the location of gatherings for family events. Families seeking to get out of Philadelphia moved to Chester and Chester then became a place where other family members came to visit because there was "so much to do." For Blacks traveling from the south to points north, Chester was a central stopping off point.

Finally, people who lived in Chester felt the community "belonged to them." The rejoinders of respondent after respondent describe a sense of commonality and cooperation which permeated the city. For them, their recollections of the story of an American neighborhood, community and city are impregnated with the memory and rights of participation. While some may claim this is a American myth which perhaps never was, and certainly can never be, in Chester it remains fixed in the public consciousness of activists trying still to reclaim their community.

## Conclusion

From an historical perspective of social planning, the problem-solving strategies of the poor in the face of economic adversities seem less relevant than the process which began when owners of capital were first allowed to so easily discard a world view which, by reputation, included some sense of responsibilities to labor, and to assume behavior based on inviolable rights of class. Were there more than economic considerations at stake? The move of elites out of the community and into upper class enclaves where they no longer needed to view or confront the social consequences of their decisions signaled fundamental attitude changes. Some informants pinpoint the moment when the wives of local elites, eager to enhance their social status, insisted on moving from the unfashionable Chester address to an address which would convey eligibility to the social register, as the beginning of this change. But it was the concentration of ever greater amounts of capital in the hands of corporate owners which surely heightened their elite class perspective. Since then, those who remained in the city have had little recourse over the withdrawal or shift of profits made from Chester investments despite their past productive contributions.

Nevertheless, the residents of Chester are far from defeated. In November, 1991, a community-based network won the mayoralty race, making this the first time in nearly a century that a non-Republican would hold this office. Perhaps an equally promising victory occurred within the same week when a legal decision was handed down that HUD should be placed in receivership, and indictments would be brought against those who had been diverting HUD funds into their own pockets while public housing was sinking beneath conditions fit for human habitation. Like the determination to investigate local crime and corruption at the expense of the poor, the electoral victory and the legal victory were pursued by persons with experience in social and political movements and parties which dates back to the civil rights period and before. Their contact with class-race-based ideologies provided analytic abilities they needed to understand power structures, unravel networks and track down consequences. Their experience as leaders furnished them with the organizational skills to lead popular protest, and their political savvy allowed them to enlist professional and student assistance without losing control of their own community struggles. This is a contrast to the shrug, "Nobody knows." If there is any hope for Chester and cities like it, it will have to come from the energy and talent of such local people. Unlike corporations, individuals cannot live in many places at the same time. Neoclassical economic planners can relegate people like those who remain in Chester to "factors of production" in their equations. As "labor," a factor of production, they are then assumed to be as mobile as capital, the second factor of production. Lost a job? Move to another site where capital has shifted. This belief in the "mobility of factors" ignores the third factor, land. Land translates into place and all the social and physical attributes associated with it. In this case, community. Chester and Chesterites, once described as

"having gone so far down that there's nowhere else to go but up," (Villanova, 1986), still have worth as people and place, too good to be consigned to the trash heap of history; their image of their past reinforces this knowledge.

### Footnotes

1. This study is derived from a larger project initiated with my colleague, Douglas Porpora. Many of the interviews were carried out jointly. Although this paper has been shaped by our discussions, any errors of interpretation herein remain my own.
2. Elements of the concept of *Gemeinschaft*, the face-to-face association where members know and interact with one another personally, is relevant to this aspect of community.-- Markusen notes in the study of regions, the necessity of demonstrating how the present is shaped by the past in the evolution of social forms. Economic forces do not necessarily determine all aspects of social life, but, a good *starting point* for an analysis of social phenomena is the economic relationships among people and the dynamics of the evolving economy in question. (Markusen, 1987:11).
3. Regions, or communities possess cultures in which traditional values and meanings, contemporary passions, and future visions are stubbornly arrayed against exterior forces that would erode, undermine or thwart them. Communities do change as a result of both external and internal initiatives, but it is important to recognize that their inhabitants the process of transformation is actively influenced by their inhabitants (Markusen, 1987: 12).
4. Markusen, in her analysis of the way in regions and regional political movements develop, offers useful theoretical observations in which the past influences the present, and, potentially, the future (1987:151-155).
5. (See discussion of organizational networks Johnsen and Mintz; Galaskiewicz; and Whitt, in Perrucci and Potter, eds. 1989).
6. The role and importance of networks or lines of contacts and information in securing employment was pointed out to me by Douglas Porpora.
7. See Arthur Stinchcombe for discussion of this concept in Erickson, 1990:106-110.
8. For an insightful journalistic treatment of this phenomenon among poor urban youth, see Finnegan's account, "A Street Kid in the Drug Trade," in the New Yorker, (Two-part series) September 10 and 17, 1990.

### Bibliography

Bensman, David and Roberta Lynch, Rusted Dreams: Hard Times in a Steel Community. New York: McGraw - Hill, 1987.

Beauregard, Robert A., ed. Economic Restructuring and Political Response. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, 1989.

\* Bissell, E.P., "Chester: A Community Profile." University of Pittsburgh: The Graduate

School of Business, September 1970. (mimeo).

Bluestone, Barry and Harrison, Bennett Harrison., The Deindustrialization of America: Plant Closings, Community Abandonment and the Dismantling of Basic Industry. New York: Basic Books, 1982.

Castells, Manuel, The Economic Crisis and American Society. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980.

Chester, City of, Department of Planning. Documents, various, 1964-1986.

Delaware County Daily Times, April 24, 1991.

Delaware County Daily Times, April 24, 1991.  
Finnegan, William, "A Street Kid in the Drug Trade," Two-part series. The New Yorker, September 10 and 17, 1990).

Galaskiewicz, Joseph, Exchange Networks and Community Politics. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications, 1979.

\_\_\_\_\_, "Interorganizational Networks Mobilizing Action at the Metropolitan Level," in Perrucci and Potter, eds., New York: Aldine de Gruyter, 1989.

Harvey, David, The Limits to Capital. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982.

\_\_\_\_\_, The Urbanization of Capital. Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985.

\_\_\_\_\_, Consciousness and the Urban Experience: Studies in the History and Theory of Capitalist Urbanization. Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1985.

Holland, Stuart, Capital versus the Regions. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1976.

Johnsen, Eugene and Beth Mintz, "Organizational versus Class Components of Director Networks," in Perrucci and Potters, eds., New York: Aldine de Gruyter, 1989.

Markusen, Ann, Regions: The Economics and Politics of Territory. Totowa, N.J.: Rowman and Littlefield, 1987.

\_\_\_\_\_. Profit Cycles, Oligopoly, and Regional Development. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1985.

Malone, Ruth, "The Everlasting Hurrah," Philadelphia (June 1963).

Massey, Doreen, Spatial Divisions of Labor: Social Structures and the Geography of Production. New York: Methuen (1984).

Meli, John Thomas, "Barriers to Employment Growth in a Distressed Area: A Case Study of Chester, Pennsylvania" Ph.D. Dissertation in Business and Applied Economics, University of Pennsylvania, 1971.

Pahl, R.E., On Work: Historical, Comparative and Theoretical Approaches. London:



Basil Blackwell, 1988.

Panitch, Leo, "Recent Theorizations of Corporatism," British Journal of Sociology, vol. 31 (1980) 159-87.

Pappas, Gregory, The Magic City: Unemployment in a Working-Class Community, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989.

Pennsylvania Crime Commission, 1990 Report on Organized Crime in Pennsylvania: A Decade of Change, Conshohocken, PA: Pennsylvania Crime Commission.

Pennsylvania Guardian, "Keystone Government: The Biggest Spoils System in the Country." (January 4, 1963).

Perrucci, Carolyn, Robert Perrucci, Dena Targ and Harry Targ, Plant Closings: International Context and Social Costs, New York: Aldine de Gruyter, 1988

Perrucci, Robert and Harry R. Potter, eds., Networks of Power: Organizational Actors at the National, Corporate, and Community Levels, New York: Aldine de Gruyter, 1989.

Petras, Elizabeth McLean and Douglas Porpora, Personal Interviews. Chester, PA, September 1990 - April, 1991.

Portz, John, The Politics of Plant Closings. Lawrence, Kansas: University of Kansas Press, 1990.

Raines, John, Lenora Berson and David Gracie, eds., Community and Capital in Conflict: Plant Closings and Job Loss. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1982.

Rothstein, Lawrence, Plant Closings: Power, Politics, and Workers. Dover, MA: Auburn House, 1986.

<sup>Sara</sup>  
Sölovich, Sara, "What Makes a School Go Bad?," Philadelphia Inquirer, June 16, 1985.

Stinchcombe, Arthur, "An Outsider's View of Network Analyses of Power," in Perrucci and Potter, eds., Networks of Power: Organizational Actors at the National, Corporate and Community Levels. New York: Aldine de Gruyter, 1989.

The Philadelphia Inquirer, various issues, September 22, 1990 - April 22, 1991.

Trinet and Company Database Reports, "Chester Pennsylvania." (1990)

Villanova, Human Organization Science Institute. "Listening to Chester: A Survey of Attitudes About Chester." Villanova University, 1986. (mimeo)

Whitt, J. Allen, "Organizational Ties and Urban Growth," in Perrucci and Potter, eds., Networks of Power: Organizational Actors at the National, Corporate and Community Levels. New York: Aldine de Gruyter, 1989.