

Disconnected in Detroit: Water shut-offs through the prism of African cities

LSE's Jonathan Silver looks at lessons Detroit can take from Johannesburg as authorities and activists deal with the city's water crisis.

You might have seen the images circulating out of Detroit over the last few weeks of the unfolding humanitarian crisis. Utility company vehicles, highly-armed police, distressed but resisting residents (often it seems from the African-American community), warnings and condemnations from civil society and from the UN and the act of disconnection to that most basic of human rights, water. We have certainly become familiar with such images for many years now but we have fixed these moments in the grand neoliberal experiment in the African cities of countries such as South Africa and Nigeria (and of course the wider global South). This time though, our maps of the cities of the world have been fractured, turned upside-down even. For we have to leave behind those African neighbourhoods and cities, from which we have become accustomed to seeing an ongoing war against the urban poor, through controlling access to urban infrastructure services. Instead we have to take a step back into the “heart of empire” to locate these moments of infrastructural conflict that challenge how we categorise and place cities across the globe.



Since last summer over 42,000 disconnections to Detroit's water system have taken place, concentrated in poor and African-American communities of the city's devastated neighbourhoods, with these actions being processed on debts as low as \$150 or two months non-payment. But despite the 15 day halt announced recently this might be only the start of what is viewed by the Detroit Water Brigade as a systemic campaign to stop water flowing to around 40% of the city's population over the coming months. The consequences of these disconnections are almost unimaginable for residents left without the ability to clean, to cook or to drink, with National Nurses United calling for an immediate halting of the shut-offs before a significant public health crisis develops. Sections of the local establishment have even turned against this mass shut-off, warning not just of the cost to historically disadvantaged parts of the city but the city's image in the wider world. Yet in the build-up to the privatisation of the water system in Detroit, maximising the value of this infrastructure has become the main driver of the actions of the authorities and has predicated a mass scale assault on water connections rarely seen in the global North. How can such an event take place in USA we might ask as we realise that on the streets of the world's superpower access to basic services seem to be as fraught and contested as in those cities at the other end of our developmental categories and rankings.

We live and work in a world in which knowledge about cities is categorised through rankings and via the vast web of international agencies, donors and corporations, academic institutions, experts and consultants that perpetuate particular ideas about certain places. Such narrow, developmentalist ways of understanding cities have of course been written about and criticised for many years by scholars such as **Jennifer Robinson**. Taking these debates into account, maybe as **Garth Myers** has posited, it is time to rethink our ideas about what makes North and South. Detroit has often been positioned as the poster child of post-industrial decay, as the **ruin porn** capital of the world and a vision from the margins of our agglomerated urban future. Yet perhaps it is time for Detroit to be disconnected from this singular view of cities and understood instead as part of many urban worlds. From such a standpoint it becomes possible to look at Detroit through the prism of African cities, rather than an embodiment of the logical endpoint of Fordism and the deindustrialisation of the late 20th century.

While there are many cities across Africa from which we could identify parallel situations in relation to the water disconnections taking place across Detroit, perhaps, the most pertinent are those of South Africa. With over 10 million people having had their utilities disconnected since the end of apartheid, hundreds of thousands are left vulnerable to death, disease and the struggle to sustain everyday life in cities such as Johannesburg. This may have much to offer those interested in what is happening in Detroit. Like the North American city, such programmes of large-scale disconnection have been predicated on the narrative of cost-recovery and the need to sustain utility companies and essential services for the metro region as authorities struggle to balance budgets and the needs of the poor. Yet behind such claims, both in cities such as Johannesburg and Detroit, lies a more complex web of profit and usage that implicates industrial and high wealth users, racialised provision of services, privatised or privatising utility companies driven not by concern for everyday survival but how to generate profit and municipalities that have tended to toe the neoliberal line.

The huge body of research over the last decade or so that has taken place in cities like Johannesburg can of course provide some important considerations for scholars and activists in shaping how to understand Detroit's predicament. Drawing attention to the multiple and overlapping ways in which infrastructure is governed and folded into wider neoliberalisation processes, how large scale disconnection is rationalised and legalised, the geographies of disconnection and the impact on the urban poor have all been long established in Johannesburg and may well provide not just important areas to investigate but knowledge that may help develop quick responses to the shut-off crisis.

But thinking Detroit through cities such as Johannesburg does not just need to be an exercise in futile resignation of the state of global urban infrastructure across North and South. It also asks us to think about how the South may help us to go beyond analysis of the political-economic forces at work to actively resisting ongoing and variegated forms of neoliberal infrastructure processes such as water disconnection. Thus if we are to turn the map upside down and place Detroit in the South then there are not just these similar spatial dynamics but inspiring and courageous experiences that suggest contestation and resistance can shift the situation, can stop the shut-offs and place the politics of survival at the centre of a city's focus.

As **Trevor Ngange**, **Patrick Bond** and **others** document across Soweto around the year 2000, a range of tactics and strategies were developed by activists against the ongoing war on water access perpetuated by Suez, the French water company that had taken control of the region's water supply in a privatisation deal that pushed the townships to revolt against such harsh actions. In Detroit the tactics being used by a quickly evolving social movement against water disconnection have included – resisting disconnection on a house by house basis, social media campaigns, blockades of water plants, mass rallies in the city's downtown – all hallmarks of the mobilisations in Johannesburg from a decade ago. Running parallel to this activism, a legal challenge to the shut-offs in South Africa went to the Constitutional Court using Section 27(1)(a) of the South African Constitution, that ensures everyone has the right of access to water. While this brought mixed success, the actions should certainly inspire Detroit residents to continue to use legal mechanisms alongside the street-based actions currently unfolding.

As the water shut-offs continue in Detroit, it is urgent that an adequate way is found to understand and intervene in these infrastructural politics. Turning South to similar processes in cities such as Johannesburg over the last decade may well help us to develop explanatory frameworks, ways of understanding the motivations of various social interests and finding successful strategies to turn the tide of privatisation and disconnection.

July 29th, 2014 | [Urbanisation](#) | [1 Comment](#)

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