The Super Bowl in Detroit: the manufacturing of a “national event”

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Detroit is the host city of this year’s Super Bowl, the championship game of American professional football. The annual contest, which will be played this Sunday between the Pittsburgh Steelers and the Seattle Seahawks, has in recent years become something of a national phenomenon, almost a national rite. Proper obeisance must be paid to it. The mass media, as it does every year, has been informing the population for weeks that it can hardly wait until “Super Sunday,” when “Super Parties” will break out everywhere.

Detroit is a particularly inappropriate locale for a celebration. Largely a barracks for the automobile industry, the city rose and fell in the twentieth century, epitomizing in the sharpest manner the decline of American industry. Detroit’s population has shrunk from some 2 million in 1954 to 900,000 today, although the greater metropolitan area remains one of the country’s largest. Flying into the city from the east, an airplane passenger sees mostly green, as so many city blocks have been reduced to one or two houses.

Census Bureau figures released last summer ranked Detroit as the poorest city in the US, with one third of its residents living below the federal poverty level, $19,157 for a household of four. Almost one half of the city’s children, 47.8 percent, live below the poverty line. In 2004, a study revealed that 39.1 percent of the residents of midtown Detroit earned *less than $10,000 a year*. Experts in the field estimate the real jobless rate in the city to be somewhere around 30 or 35 percent. Only a few blocks from Ford Field, where Sunday’s football game will be played, it would not be difficult to come on scenes of poverty and degradation out of the Third World.

General Motors has announced mass layoffs in recent months and just reported that it lost $8.6 billion in 2005; Ford last week announced that it was slashing at least 25,000 jobs. Some 1,400 Detroit city workers have had their jobs cut since last June. Only two days before the Super Bowl, Ford announced plans to eliminate several models, hastening layoffs at its suburban Wixom plant, already scheduled to shut down in 2007.

The Super Bowl preparations have provided the latest occasion for a spate of headlines asserting that “Detroit is coming back!” Under Mayor Kwame Kilpatrick—an unsavory political type around whom corruption scandals swirled last year—and his predecessors, taxpayer money has been funneled into the construction of three gambling casinos, a Major League Baseball park and a National Football League stadium. In the small pockets of Detroit targeted for gentrification, poor and homeless residents have been forced out to make way for luxury loft and condominium construction. Meanwhile, most of the city rots away.

The *Detroit Free Press* published a thoroughly predictable and banal op-ed piece by Kilpatrick on Friday, which claimed, “I have no idea who will win Sunday’s championship game between the Steelers and the Seahawks. But no matter who wins the football game, Detroit—Detroit the city and Detroit the region—is the clear winner of Super Bowl XL. The Super Bowl has helped serve as a catalyst for improvements that will be here after the game is a distant memory. They are improvements designed for the long term, not just cosmetic changes made for a single event.”

No doubt, even many impoverished and traumatized residents, hoping that Detroit’s “return” would make their lives or their families’ or neighbors’ lives more tolerable, might be willing once again to suspend disbelief and place their hopes in such claims.

Nonetheless, the Super Bowl will come and go, and reality will assert itself. The hundreds of millions of dollars supposedly pouring into Detroit will find their way primarily into a few large pockets—hotels, casinos, expensive restaurants, etc. For the working class population, the downward spiral will continue.

Social reality asserts itself even in the midst of the preparations. Numerous homeless people (out of an estimated population of 13,000 in Detroit) have been rounded up and taken to shelters or churches, in some cases told not to return to the streets until after the tourists have gone Sunday night. Because the city has laid off so many employees, the authorities are obliging men charged with being “deadbeat dads” (for nonpayment of child support) and unable to pay their court fines to clean streets and freeways. City bus routes have been changed, without their normal riders, lower-paid workers, being informed. As one told a WSWS reporter, “All they care about are the rich and famous.”

A columnist in the *Seattle Times* observed: “And the plush, loud parties—bejeweled with bling so bright you need sunglasses when you enter—are all for the out-of-towners, the corporate fat cats who are insulated from the pain this city feels.... This week, the city and the league will shield its visitors from the dark side of the city. Buses and limos, with police escorts, will race past the remaining homeless and past the decaying buildings and to the isolated safety of the Super Bowl parties.”

What an attractive picture! What a comment on contemporary American life!

It is possible to wax indignant about the roll call of generally undistinguished “celebrities” and the endless list of lavish parties, the shameless display of wealth in a city much of whose population teeters on the edge of destitution, but most of the events seem so grim and conventional that they may serve as their own punishment. Like almost every major social occasion in America today, the Super Bowl and its accompaniments are relentlessly scripted, for the most part lacking in spontaneity and genuine pleasure.

It’s all predictable: the vast press hoopla, with its stupid controversies (the “war of words” between Pittsburgh linebacker Joey Porter and Seattle tight end Jeramy Stevens) and its inevitable “human interest” story (this year it’s the story of “The Bus,” Pittsburgh’s running back Jerome Bettis—who seems like a decent man—returning to his hometown and perhaps playing his last game); the appearances by popular music stars who ought to have retired gracefully a few decades ago; the inevitable “infection” of the host city with “Super Bowl Fever”; and so forth.

A reporter noted with astonishment that the crowd for the half-time show, a 12-minute set by the Rolling Stones, “have to go to several rehearsals for the event.” Referring to the audience’s “pre-programmed”

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character, he asked, “Is there anybody on the planet who doesn’t know how to attend a concert?” The National Football League has apparently asked Mick Jagger not to sing *Sweet Neo Con*, viewed as an attack on George Bush, which includes such lines as, “You call yourself a Christian, I call you a hypocrite.” A NFL spokesman indicated, “We have certain songs we feel are inappropriate.”

The security preparations are of a piece with the rest of the rigid, forbidding qualities of the event. The Super Bowl is now classified, thanks to the Department of Homeland Security, as a “Level 1 National Security Event.” According to the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, preparations have involved “Two years of planning and $6 million and 3,000 private security personnel and 30 nationally recognized private security experts and 100 law enforcement agencies and 400 community volunteers and lots of secret stuff we can’t talk about.” Three thousand two hundred Detroit police are working 12-hour shifts all week. As for details of the operation, “I’m not going to provide you with numbers because that would compromise our security,” Detroit police chief Ella Bully-Cummings told reporters, sounding like the latest American commander in Baghdad.

More. A 300-foot perimeter will be cleared around Ford Field, “so tailgating or hanging around the stadium to soak up some atmosphere won’t be possible. The fortunate with tickets or game credentials will be forced to endure a significant security check, one that’s even more extensive than airports. No bags larger than a pocketbook will be allowed, and everyone will pass through a magnetometer screening and undergo a pat down. There will be a no-fly zone within a 30-mile radius around the stadium, which means security operations will be multinational, considering that includes Canadian airspace. Particular emphasis will be placed on monitoring the bridge and tunnel that cross the border into Windsor, Ontario.... The league has turned to the Coast Guard, SWAT teams, FBI, Homeland Security, Federal Aviation Administration, bomb-sniffing robots (according to the *Pittsburgh Tribune-Review*) and surely a few guys who share shaken martinis with 007,” the *Post-Intelligencer* notes.

An item on the official Super Bowl web site notes that “The North American Aerospace Defense Command on Jan. 26 practiced its plan to protect Detroit’s Ford Field from an air attack on Super Bowl Sunday.... Hundreds of people, including controllers, fighter pilots, an E-3 Airborne Early Warning and Control System aircraft, several civilian aircraft and air refueling tankers took part in the exercise.”

A reminder of the wealth involved—in the final analysis, at the heart of the need for the massive police and military presence—is provided by the *Post-Intelligencer*’s comment that the Seahawks’ security team “doesn’t have to worry about team owner [billionaire Microsoft co-founder] Paul Allen’s security because the world’s sixth-wealthiest man has his own army of bodyguards.”

The game itself has often disappointed, but occasionally it has not. Genuine skill and imagination, and the tension they create, still sometimes make themselves felt even in gladiatorial American football. But one feels that if this happens, it is more or less accidental. For the organizers of the Super event and those who make profits from the game, it is entirely beside the point.

Once upon a time, a football game was simply a football game. People played on Saturday (amateur) and Sunday (professional); other people watched for a couple of hours and then went home. Now, however, the Super Bowl has become such a manipulated, engineered occasion that an entire “tradition” (15 or 20 years old at most) has been invented, which the population, including children, feel they have to conform to on that “special Sunday.”

Super Bowl Week (not that anyone outside a privileged few gets a single day off) has risen in prominence as other holidays, once associated with outings in warm weather, popular amusement and patriotic displays, such as Memorial Day, the Fourth of July and Labor Day, have become more than anything else the occasions for overworked Americans to snatch a day of rest. It is somehow appropriate that the new day of national celebration take place on a Sunday (so no one loses a day of work) in mid-winter, with “participants” vicariously eating and drinking in front of their television sets.

Financial interests, of course, play a considerable role in the emergence of the Super Bowl as a Super-sized event, as they do in every aspect of modern American life. Increasingly unable to compete in the manufacture of automobiles or steel, with cities like Detroit, Buffalo, Cleveland and Pittsburgh decaying or partially gentrified beyond recognition, American capitalism has at least two “products”—violent sports and crude entertainment—that it still markets successfully to its own population and to much of the world.

The Super Bowl, regularly the most highly watched television program of the year, reportedly reaches 140 million US viewers and 1 billion global viewers in 220 countries. It will be televised in Australia (SBS), Austria (ORF and TW1), Brazil (SporTV/FX), Denmark (TV 2), Finland (MTV3), France (France 2), Germany (ARD), Iceland (SÝN), Japan (NHK BS-1), Mexico (TV Azteca), the Netherlands (SBS6), Spain (Canal +), Sweden (ZTV) and the UK (ITV/Sky Sports), among other countries.

The game will be a broadcast to American troops in Iraq, specially transmitted on a secure US military frequency. Militarism and flag-waving will no doubt be prominently on display at this year’s event. They have become inseparable from American sports, professional football in particular. F-14 flyovers are a regular feature of the Super Bowl, as well as fulsome, hypocritical tributes to “our men and women in uniform.” If Cindy Sheehan were to show up, would she be ejected here as well?

Money and violence dominate so much of American life at present. Advertisements during the Super Bowl will cost a great deal, some $2.5 million for a 30-second spot. Anheuser-Busch with 10 such spots leads the parade, followed by Ameriquest, CareerBuilder.com, Pepsi-Cola, Pizza Hut, Sprint, Procter & Gamble and Warner Brothers. Three companies will air 60-second advertisements: General Motors (for its Cadillac brand), Burger King and ESPN.

Gambling industry analysts estimate that close to $1 billion will be wagered online on Super Bowl XL, which would be approximately double the amount bet only one year ago.

Beyond the massive amounts of money involved, such a mind-numbing event as the Super Bowl serves to divert the population—reeling from economic blows and witness to the carryings-on of a ruling elite that has lost its head—from everyday life and all the unresolved problems in American society. The shrillness of the media hype about everything trivial increases as the list of major disasters lengthens—thousands of deaths in Iraq; an entire city destroyed in Hurricane Katrina; the mass destruction of decent jobs; the criminality and corruption of the political class. A bewildered population is urged to ignore all this and concentrate on the appropriate menu for three (or four!) hours of television viewing. It’s untenable and absurd.

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