



BOOK REVIEW

It's Hard to Save a Town

Helaine Olen*

In the opening of *The Fight to Save the Town: Reimagining Discarded America*, Michelle Wilde Anderson, a professor of housing law, local government law, and environmental justice at Stanford Law School, reminds us of Grover Norquist's famous quote from more than two decades ago: "I don't want to abolish government. I simply want to reduce it to the size where I can drag it into the bathroom and drown it in the bathtub."¹ The book is not simply about what happened in three cities and one rural county when decades of tax cuts and deindustrialization brought Norquist's wish to life. It's a look at the ways people fight back against the decline of their hometowns.

Anderson turns her eye on Stockton, California, Lawrence, Massachusetts, Detroit, Michigan, and rural Josephine County, Oregon. They are all areas that, if never exactly middle-class prosperous, managed to provide factory workers with a decent life in the immediate period following World War II.²

But then it all went into reverse.

It's not right to describe these towns (or, in the case of Josephine County, a region) as having pockets of poverty. It's middle-class comfort that feels like the exception. Many jobs, and certainly the low-level service sector ones predominantly open to the non-college-educated residents of these cities, rarely pay anything even resembling a living wage. Government and social services are chronically underfunded. Drug abuse and violent crime are common. Schools are overwhelmed by the learning and emotional needs of their students. It's all too easy for residents to fall prey to predators—illegal ones like drug

* Helaine Olen is a columnist for the *Washington Post* and a member of the advisory board of the Economic Hardship Reporting Project. She is the author of *Pound Foolish: Exposing the Dark Side of the Personal Finance Industry* and co-author of *The Index Card: Why Personal Finance Doesn't Have to Be Complicated*. Her work has appeared in *Slate*, *Pacific Standard*, the *Los Angeles Times*, and *The Atlantic*.

1. MICHELLE WILDE ANDERSON, *THE FIGHT TO SAVE THE TOWN: REIMAGINING DISCARDED AMERICA* at ix (2022) (citing Morning Edition, *Conservative Advocate*, NPR, at 07:30 (May 25, 2001, 12:00 AM ET), <http://perma.cc/V2JJ-2Q3A> (to locate, click "View the live page")).

2. *See id.* at 11.

pushers, or legal rackets like the subprime mortgage industry. (In Detroit, the homeownership rate fell by 25 percent between 2000 and 2010, in large part due to the Great Recession.)³ Desperate for opportunities, it can seem like anyone who can afford to move away does so.

It's not hard to realize why so many people living in these towns and places like them have lost faith in government and politicians of both parties. Government hasn't worked in a meaningful way for them for almost the entirety of their lives. As tax revenues dried up, the towns cut services to the bone—good luck to you if you need an ambulance or the assistance of police in Josephine County!⁴—while upping the fees and penalties for people, often poverty-stricken people, who fall afoul of various petty regulations.⁵ This has all combined to sow even further distrust in institutions.

Anderson focuses her attention on the hardy souls who attempt to push back against the ongoing neglect and destitution, the people who fight to keep the libraries open and the teens away from drugs and gangs. Spoiler: while this is often a moving and compelling tale, even the success stories carry more than a tinge of melancholy about them. Individual victories—when, that is, they occur—can't fully compensate for decades of neglect, which is, for the most part, still ongoing. Good intentions can only go so far.

Josephine County voters agree, after years of political groundwork, to raise their own taxes to hire more police (after voting down other proposals to do just that multiple times over the preceding decade),⁶ but money remains tight—the county sheriff told a 2022 community forum they continue to struggle to maintain 24/7 patrols and that a hiring freeze means between eight and ten open positions will go unfilled.⁷ Prior to the 2017 tax increase, the county at times relied on volunteer patrols⁸—a less than fully satisfactory solution, since unpaid workers tend to burn out over time.⁹

Detroit's downtown revival—the subject of much fawning press—leaves its poorest residents behind, so much that the residents of Motor City say, “downtown won't trickle down.”¹⁰ But that's still better than Stockton, where a fancy downtown redevelopment project financed with bond debt failed to

3. *Id.* at 189.

4. *See id.* at 101-02.

5. *Id.* at 8-9.

6. *Id.* at 109, 120-22, 127.

7. Roman Battaglia, *Josephine County Officials Seek New Funding Sources for Sheriff's Office*, OR. PUB. BROAD. (Apr. 4, 2022, 12:24 PM), <https://perma.cc/3Z55-NX3A>.

8. *See* ANDERSON, *supra* note 1, at 109-20.

9. *See id.* at 117.

10. *Id.* at 213-14.

appeal to almost anyone: too pricey for locals, but still unable to lure in apparently crime-wary suburbanites.¹¹

Only in Lawrence, Massachusetts, the site of the Bread and Roses strike a century ago, do things appear to be going a bit—but just a bit—better, likely, in part, because of the area’s proximity to Route 128’s prosperity.¹² Jobs in education and health care are replacing the manufacturing jobs of the past as a way for recent immigrants and their children and grandchildren to gain a financial toehold—that is, if someone can get enough of an education to qualify for them.¹³

It’s harder than it sounds.

One of the women Anderson features in her book is a single mom from Lawrence who gains a spot in a community college teacher’s aide program, and completes it, in part, because women in the program banded together to watch one another’s children while they both attended school and worked full-time to support their families.¹⁴ In her graduation speech, she talks about how they needed to overcome “disappointment, failure, and aggravation” on their path to receiving a degree.¹⁵ It doesn’t stop when they leave school. The same woman is ultimately offered a job in her field of study but can’t take it due to unspecified family problems.¹⁶ This reader wanted to weep.

If this excellent book has flaws, they are two. The first is that Anderson deliberately excludes similar towns located in so-called red states from her scrutiny. She does this, she says, because even though they face many of the same problems, a combination of state laws and hostile state governments leave local governments hamstrung, unable to pursue the same solutions open to blue state municipalities.¹⁷ It’s easy to understand her reasoning, but it ultimately leaves readers feeling more optimistic than warranted. No, not everyone can do this—even when they possess the will, they often don’t have the way.

The second issue is related to the first: by focusing on the people who possess the moxie to fight on against incredible odds, Anderson inadvertently makes it look easier than it actually is. Why doesn’t everyone show this much get-up-and-go? There are lots of reasons, and Anderson elaborates on them at length. But acknowledging the issue is not as powerful as actually profiling someone for whom victory isn’t in municipal governance or self-improvement, but in simply getting through the day in a system that’s stacked against them.

11. *Id.* at 46-47.

12. *See id.* at 16-17.

13. *See id.* at 174-82.

14. *Id.* at 131-33.

15. *Id.* at 133.

16. *Id.* at 184.

17. *See id.* at 13.

But these are minor quibbles. The issue of our faltering civic structure is a national one, and it impacts almost all of us in some way. “There can be no ‘recovery’ for a city or county without prioritizing the safety and flourishing of the people who live there now,” Anderson writes in her conclusion.¹⁸ “Good government and a strong civil society grow from people who make them that way.”¹⁹ In 2023, these words are as much an expression of faith as a warning.

18. *Id.* at 243.

19. *Id.* at 247.