Hazleton, Pennsylvania: Searching for Tomorrow
by
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In the Beginning

Once a boomtown in the early 1900s, the population of Hazleton, Pennsylvania now clings to the low twenty thousands. While the children raised here used to go and work in the mines as adults, fewer children than ever are raised here, and even fewer bother to stay in their hometown. Hazleton’s is a story that has been told dozens of times throughout the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, with countless (and similarly, nearly abandoned) coal mining towns dotting the Northeastern Pennsylvania landscape. When chartered as a city on December 4, 1891, Hazleton was no longer in its infancy and its surging population, clueless about the pitfalls that would inevitably present themselves in the somewhat distant future, could not come close to being prepared for what the next century had in store for its descendants. From the post-Civil War era through the early 1940s, Hazleton’s population grew tremendously, at the time graciously allowing many eastern European immigrants to fill jobs in the city’s main industry of coalmining.

Between 1900 and 1910, the census revealed the massive population growth in Hazleton from 14,230 people to 25,452. After this point, population growth in Hazleton slowed, but still rose to its peak in the 1940 census at 38,009. Since then, the coal mines have shut down, and with the precipitous drop in production, the population of the city has fallen similarly, now resting officially around 25,000, slightly below its 1910 total.

While the future of Hazleton and its democracy hang tenuously in the balance of time and prosperity, the community has lost nearly one-sixth of its population in the last six months, according to the Mayor of Hazleton, Lou Barletta. Nearly 5,000 Hispanic

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residents have left since the passage of a city ordinance last July called the Illegal Immigrant Relief Act of 2006. While originally targeting illegal immigrants, the ordinance has put at risk nearly fifty Hispanic-owned businesses and placed a burden of proof upon legal Hispanics who now feel as though they’re being targeted by the law, which also establishes English as the official city language of Hazleton. Some local farmers have already complained that when it came time to harvest, they didn’t have enough labor to get the job done. So in reality, while the ordinance has put the city into a potential legal bind, it also places the city of Hazleton itself at a crossroads with regard to its population, its economy, and its democratic future.

Coal Mining Past

The period extending from 1820 to 1870 witnessed a great growth in the demand for anthracite. Before 1820 there was little demand for anthracite in Philadelphia, but by 1865 it cost nearly eight dollars a ton, and the city depended on the fuel source to heat row houses and to make commercial steam. English and Welsh miners, experienced and disciplined, moved into the anthracite coalfields; the English settled in Upper Lehigh, the Welsh in what is now West Hazleton, among other places. English labor organizers followed and attempted – with mixed success – to organize the highly fragmented labor force so they could bargain for better working conditions and wages. The American West was opened by the railroads, and Hazleton was often merely a stepping stone for an immigrant’s move.

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elsewhere. Great mobility in and out, if not up within the coal industry, characterized the area.\textsuperscript{4}

While many stories exist about the discovery of coal exist, one primary one is most often told by the Greater Hazleton Historical Society. In 1810, coal was discovered about a half an hour south of Hazleton in Pottsville, Schuylkill County, and originally shipped to Philadelphia. At the time, the discovery was thought to be nothing more than black rocks, but soon thereafter chemists discovered anthracite’s great heating capacity, and a new industry was born in Hazleton, as well as in nearby Scranton and Wilkes Barre. While Scranton and Wilkes Barre were both valley cities located on riverfronts, Hazleton was without such an easy method of transportation. Railways opened Hazleton up to north, Scranton and Wilkes Barre as well as to the south, Philadelphia, where anthracite coal was needed more and more to heat homes.\textsuperscript{5} Dan Rose speaks of the tremendous opportunity presented to the coal miners, most of whom were immigrants to the United States. Land parcels were sold on the cheap, and immigrants assimilated relatively easily into Pennsylvanian culture, gaining acceptance for their hard work and toil. It is in this fact that the great modern irony of Hazleton lies: The 1800s were a time much more welcoming of immigrant labor for citizens of Hazleton, and for this generous nature the city was rewarded with great economic, infrastructural and population growth. More recently, immigrants have been shunned and turned away with a blind eye toward the economic problems such actions will have brought upon the city.

After the great expansions of the early and middle 1800s, Hazleton continued a modest growth through the 1880s, despite a worldwide economic depression. However,


\textsuperscript{5} Ibid., Pg. 66
the depression eventually took its toll. High supply and lower demand, as well as new waves of European immigrants pushed prices of coal through the floor. Beginning in 1896, after the depression lifted, the Hazleton Board of Trade made great (and successful) efforts to diversify Hazleton’s economy. By 1914, silk mills had made tremendous inroads into the Hazletonian economy and helped hold things together financially during coal strikes. While the anthracite area grew, so did crime. This was attributed to several factors, including the fact that single men were the largest demographic group as well as the fact that more than $10,800,000 a year was spent in over three thousand saloons in the area.\footnote{Rose, 73}

**The Modern Day**

Today, it seems as though Hazleton is caught in a deadlock of nothing. While Mayor Barletta proclaimed a desire to get “our children” to move back to Hazleton, it seems as though there may not be too terribly much to move back to. Younger generations are attracted to higher paying jobs than those found in relative abundance in Hazleton. Community Area New Development Organization (CAN DO) struggled but ultimately was successful in its push to bring a great number of manufacturing jobs to the area, which were then filled most often by Hispanic immigrants to the area. The highest hourly rate of pay in industrial parks that CAN DO helped create stood at $13.29 in the year 2002, while other workers took eight dollar-an hour pay cuts in order to stay in Hazleton.

While Hazleton's anthracite coal mines employed thousands of men through the first half of the 20th century, the wives of those miners staffed
giant textile factories like the Duplan mill, once the country's largest silk manufacturer. Duplan folded in 1953, and five decades later, the last of the textile mills are dying off. When a Sara Lee undergarment plant 10 miles south of Hazleton announced last month that it would close, 450 workers were sent packing. Annette Seliga, 31, worked for 15 years in area textile plants until the downtown factory she worked for folded last year. Now she makes $6 an hour cleaning motel rooms, 25 percent less than at her last textile job. This month, she posted a hand-drawn sign at a local bar advertising home-cleaning services. "I stay in Hazleton because my whole family's here," she says, sipping a beer at the Road's End Pub & Club with her brother and sister, two of 11 siblings who still live nearby. Like most Hazletonians, Seliga has roots here that date to the early 1900s.7

A similar problem involves the youth of Hazleton. Drug-related deaths shot up from 11 total in 1995 to 46 in 2002. These deaths may be attributed to the boredom incurred from living in Hazleton too long.

It's a nearly universal sentiment among teenagers here, hundreds of whom pass Friday nights in the wide corridors of the Laurel Mall, where security guards implore the throngs to keep moving. When the mall closes at 9 p.m., kids cross the parking lot and swamp the town's multiplex cinema--then spend Saturday nights at home. "There's nothing to do in Hazleton,"

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says Danielle Fulton, a ninth grader with a white puffy jacket and an
oversize black purse, "except come to the mall and walk in circles."⁸

Indeed, upon inspection of the city’s official website, it becomes clear that there is indeed
nothing to do in Hazleton. Putting aside the factual inaccuracy contained in reference to
the geographical location of Hazleton relative to State College, PA, nearly every one of
the things to do in Hazleton has nothing to do with the city itself. Making mention of
Dorney Park and Knobels, the site also notes repeatedly how close Hazleton is to
Philadelphia and New York City. The site even comes complete with a phonetic guide
for the pronunciation of the city of Reading. “Just over an hour's drive south of Hazleton
is the city of Reading (pronounced red-ding).” The page later goes on to extol the
virtues of Philadelphia.

Drive down to Philadelphia and you will enter one of the nation's most
historic cities and walk the same streets that Benjamin Franklin and
George Washington walked. You can also see the Liberty Bell that
announced the reading of the Declaration of Independence. Philadelphia's
other claim to fame is the Philadelphia cheese steak. Ask a local whether
they prefer Pat's or Geneo's cheese steaks -- then try one of each and
decide for yourself.⁹

When Hazleton has little more to claim other than a specialty sandwich in a city almost
100 miles away, let alone something good within its limits, its no wonder why the

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youngest generation of Hazleton is fleeing the city in a mass exodus, outpaced by only one other group: Hispanics.

"One of the toughest cities in America for illegal aliens."

In 2005, President Bush brought to the forefront of the American political psyche the topic of illegal immigration. With thousands of illegal aliens pouring into the United States over the U.S./Mexican border, the president delivered to Congress a politically moderate plan to tackle the problem, which has since been retro-fitted as a topic not at all about race or national origin, but instead about national security, a topic dominating public policy since September 11, 2001. The president’s plan was attacked from all sides in Congress; congressional Republicans claimed that the bill offered “amnesty” to people whose first act within the United States was to break the law by being there. Those on the left-leanings side of Congress complained that the bill provided penalties too stiff for the crime committed, and that the fines levied against the illegal immigrants were far too steep to be paid by illegal immigrants. So while Congress found itself deadlocked with the president on the issue of illegal immigration, Hazleton Mayor Lou Barletta, a Republican, took local action against illegal immigrants in the form of the Illegal Immigration Relief Act of 2006, which cracked down on the employment of illegal aliens. Also passed was the Landlord/Tenant Ordinance, which cracked down on landlords who rented to illegals, and the English Official Language Ordinance, which established the official language of Hazleton to be English, and restricted the language used in most city transactions to English. These reactionary acts were spurred on by a murder committed in Hazleton by illegal immigrants from the Dominican Republic, with Mayor Barletta declaring later in defense of the acts, "I have a right to defend my
Barletta claimed that the influx of illegal immigrants has brought crime, drug trade and gangs to Hazleton which have overwhelmed police budgets. Police Chief Robert Ferdinand also makes the same claim. “What I've seen goes far beyond police reports. The crime that I've seen in Hazleton over the past year is just the tip of the iceberg. I'm very fearful of the trends.” Since the 2000 census, when Hispanics counted for about 4.5% of the total population, both the low crime rate the jobs created by CAN DO brought Hispanics to Hazleton in droves, and by 2006 their share of the population had increased to nearly 30% of the current 31,000 residents there. Since the passage of the different ordinances last July, Mayor Barletta has also estimated that nearly 5,000 Hispanics have fled the city. While most of these are probably illegal immigrants, it is also certain that some Hispanics who came to Hazleton legally have also left due to what is considered to be an anti-Hispanic culture that has taken root in the city. Cesar Perales, president of the Puerto Rican Legal Defense and Education Fund, has declared the ordinances “These ordinances are nothing more than an officially sanctioned witch hunt,” while others living in the city have found conditions more difficult. Elvis Soto, the owner of a once-successful but now-failing variety store says, “Before, it was a nice place. Now, we have a war against us. I am legal but I feel the pressure also.” Soto, whose business lies in the Hispanic district, has dipped into his savings account to keep his business afloat for now, but such a situation cannot last. Other locals, such as

William Sernak, a farmer, has found the laws to be depressing to non-Hispanic businesses.

Sernak, who farms corn, hay and vegetables in the nearby town of Weatherly, ran into more concrete problems: The law prompted the Sernaks' usual crew of Mexican workers to leave the area.

Sernak advertised in the local newspaper, and recruited 15 young people. They were not "fit to work," he said. "We don't realize how hard it is to go out in 80-degree weather and try to pull weeds in the sun," said Sernak, 47. "Most people couldn't last one day. Most people didn't last till lunch."

Sernak sympathizes with Barletta's complaints: His Czech relatives all learned English, he said. But his troubles this season were so severe, he said that "we don't know if there will be a next season." His father, Henry, 79, rode by on a small tractor. He had a question: "What will this country do without those people?"

While the ordinances are currently mired in court cases and are still not in effect (they were supposed to take effect on November 1, 2006), they have nonetheless been undoubtedly effective in getting illegal immigrants to leave the city of Hazleton. Perhaps more importantly, more than 77 laws in 27 states have been passed, similarly usurping the federal government’s power to regulate immigration. While Hazleton leads the nation in attempting to curb illegal immigration, its own main proponent of the reforms understands the new problem accompanying the solution to the old problem. “Are we in a transition? Yes. I believe we are,” Mayor Barletta says. “We might be taking one step

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backward in population to move one step forward.” The most worrying aspect of the most recent decline in population in Hazleton, Pennsylvania, is the possibility that it may be the last.

The Theory of Performance Democracy in Hazleton, PA

From the point of view of a performance democrat, there are dueling futures involved for Hazleton. The theory of performance democracy states that modern voters are less and less interested in the community as a whole (the *us*) and more and more interested in the individual (the *me*).

The republican concern about the common good and citizens who are civically virtuous seems difficult to sustain in the modern world. Voters are asking less and less about how policies affect us and more how they affect me. According to the performance model of democracy, this move from the collective conception of politics to the individual one is the mark of modern democratic politics and realistically illustrates the way both voters and candidates understand themselves today.¹⁵

By electing the leaders that they have in Hazleton, are city voters focused on themselves or on the community? On the surface, it seems that the citizens of Hazleton, concerned about drug trafficking and crime (as well as the offense of being in this country illegally), are worried more as much, if not more, about the community as they are about themselves. In Hazleton, Police Chief Robert Ferdinand was quoted as saying, “Worst-case scenario, as crime continued to increase and violent criminal activity continued to increase, the remaining decent people would leave the city and leave it to the criminal

If this scenario were to take place, the democracy of Hazleton would surely crumble, as those who feel compelled to commit crimes are not typically the same type of people who feel compelled to cast votes and take a hand in the community. By taking the steps that it has, Hazleton has arguably preserved its democracy for a period of time, but whether or not this is accurate hinges partially on the motives of the mayor and the city council. Did Barletta propose these ordinances only to gain name recognition for a possible run for some higher office, or did he do it to honestly protect the citizens of Hazleton, as he boldly proclaimed he had the right to do? It is safe to say that while Barletta’s plan may have solved the problem of illegal immigrants in Hazleton (remember the 5,000 that have left so far), it also seems to have created a new economic problem, in which many jobs are left undone, causing a sort of trickle-up problem for farm owners in which a combination of lack of workers and the undesirability of the work left to be done will cause wages to rise very quickly to accommodate those Americans who previously refused the work. The alternative to that is that the farmers will simply pack up shop and move to a place where illegal immigrants are prosecuted with less fervor.

The imperfection of the performance model of democracy in Hazleton is that it is difficult to determine whether or not the voters support the ordinances due to a concern for the community or a personal concern. It is likely that the ordinances were supported for both reasons – that the individuals in the community were acting for both the “me” and for the “us.” It is hard to tell whether or not the public in Hazleton acted with “the common good” in mind or not. Furthermore, author Joseph Schumpeter offers this:

Unless there is a center, the common good, toward which, in the long run at least, all individual wills gravitate, we shall not get that particular type of ‘natural’ volente generale. The utilitarian center of gravity, on the one hand unifies individual wills, tends to weld them by means of rational discussion into the will of the people and, on the other hand, confers upon the latter the exclusive ethical dignity claimed by the classic democratic creed.¹⁷

Another criticism of the performance model of democracy in Hazleton is that it stands in direct opposition to the next model to be discussed, the participatory model of democracy. While the participatory model charges citizens with the utmost involvement in democratic affairs, the performance model would rather citizens simply vote and allow the elites to take over, giving voters feedback on their prior choices, and allowing the cycle to continue. Since groups like the American Civil Liberties Union have stepped in and challenged Hazleton’s laws, the performance model of democracy does not apply in this sense either. The people elected the city council and Mayor Barletta to do a job, and outside influences have interfered with the presumed will of the people. The main criticism of the performance theory of democracy here is that it disallows (or disapproves of) intervention other than voting, thus disallowing forces to keep those in power from acting unfairly or breaking the law, and encouraging citizens to sit on the sidelines until the next election. While it remains to be seen whether or not the outside groups’ influence will have changed anything in Hazleton or not, their actions have certainly gone against the grain of the wood presented by the performance theory of democracy.

The Theory of Participatory Democracy in Hazleton, PA

From the perspective of the theory of participatory democracy, there is a somewhat less evenhanded view of Hazleton, Pennsylvania. The participatory theory of democracy claims that, unlike the performance theory, to be true citizens of the community, much more is necessary than to simply vote on Election Day. The participatory model offers citizens the opportunity not only to vote in standardized elections, but also to take part in democracy through other means such as civic organizations and town halls, as well as pressure to attend meetings of various forms of localized government. Benjamin Barber argues against representative democracy as a whole in his 1984 work, *Strong Democracy*.

Yet even this act [casting one’s ballot] may be of dubious consequence in a system where citizens use the franchise only to select an executive or judicial or legislative elite that in turn exercises every other duty of civic importance. To exercise this franchise is unhappily to renounce it. The representative principle steals from individuals the ultimate responsibility for their values, beliefs and actions.18

A lack of civic organizations and a population on the wane but still coming of age spell doom for Hazleton in the eyes of participatory democrats. With wages eroding in the city, many men and women are working longer hours with less leisure time to spend with family, let alone on outside activities like community or church groups.

The Future

While it is indeed tempting to assume that cooler heads will prevail (as they often do), it is important to remember the words of John Dewey.

We cannot sit back in complacent optimism. History will not do our work for us. Neither is there any call for panic or pessimism…We must always remember that the dependence of ends upon means is such that the only ultimate result is the result that attained today, tomorrow, the next day, and day after day, in the succession of years and generations.\textsuperscript{19}

The future does not look pretty for Hazleton, Pennsylvania. The shrinking, aging population coupled with a lack of labor to do the work necessary to keep the economy up and running paint a bleak picture of the city ten years from now. Mayor Barletta’s plan to rid the city of the crime brought on by illegal immigrants is not an entirely bad one; it unfortunately accounts for an entire plan for Hazleton when it can only work as a part of something larger. Mayor Barletta’s aim to lower the crime in Hazleton has worked well according to police and residents, but the city ordinances have also brought about new problems. A lack of labor to accomplish the simple tasks that are now embedded in Hazleton’s economy (farming) will indeed hurt the economy, thus reducing the tax base of the city and the overall number of jobs there as well. Another major problem on the horizon for the city rests in the legal fees the city will have to pay whether or not it wins or loses the challenges to the new city laws. To pay for these fees, the money will

have to come from a tax hike or a reduction in city services, and either option will surely drive even more people away from the city.

Still, crime is down in Hazleton, and the low crime rate was one of the things that led to an influx of people in the late 1990s and early 2000s. While a similar boom is unlikely in the coming months and years, it does give Hazleton something to boast about when trying to fill the numerous empty homes that line many of its streets. While Mayor Barletta’s true motives for implementing the ordinances remain unknown, it is safe to say that voters like to see success when elevating someone to higher office, and if Mr. Barletta’s intention is to be elevated, it is in his best interests to finish the job he started in Hazleton. By carefully rebuilding the economy in Hazleton while fending off court cases, Mr. Barletta can use the performance theory of democracy to help himself in the future, whatever his plans may be. By sending a signal to the people of Hazleton (and arguably, the entire country), the mayor has staked his claim on a divisive issue like illegal immigration in order to cast himself as a conservative, law and order Republican, and in regions like Hazleton, that’s a brand that apparently sells rather well. If Mr. Barletta succeeds in formulating a “Part B” of sorts to his initial “Part A,” he will find himself ripe for a gubernatorial or congressional run, having developed tough solutions to tough problems. If he sends a message of failure to the voters (Hazleton’s economy crumbles further), his tenure as mayor will be the last office he holds.

Hazleton’s democracy rests mostly on the shoulders of the people there. If people come together on both sides of the issue and attempt to drum up support for
their side, the democracy will flourish. Early attempts at registering Hispanic voters by Hispanic action groups seem to have been unsuccessful, but that doesn’t mean that future efforts with similar ends will fail as well. Now, both the pro and con sides of this debate are armed with powerful argumentative ammunition to fire away at each other with – on the con side, the economy looks weak in Hazleton, and for the pro side, crime is down and Mayor Barletta has made the city safer than it was when he entered office. Hazleton is by no means doomed, and neither is its democracy; it is important to remember that none of us know what tomorrow will bring, and in Hazleton’s case, it may be something very bright.