(Post-)Industrial Memories
Oral History and Structural Change

Introduction

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You cannot turn everything into a museum, that's for sure. In the beginning we joked with bitter irony: "Well, we can create new jobs if we travel the Ruhr region as museum miners. So we'll all be a museum ourselves. And people can visit us as a vanished reality" (Interview Gottfried Clever).[1]

This recent quote from an early-retired miner from Germany's former hub of coal extraction touches on a complex of important problems faced by regions undergoing the structural transformation of their industrial base. This concerns issues of memory and representation just as much as very concrete questions of re-positioning former workers and employees inside and outside the labour market. How can the gap left by a vanished industry be filled both in terms of employment and with regard to the wider meanings that industries developed in shaping local and regional societies, often over generations? How can value systems, structures, places and cultural practices that used to hold a community together be saved for the future without the economic centre that defined all these practices? And to what extent can museums – or other forms and spaces of historical representation – manage to bridge the gap between the levels of "authentic" experience and "professional" (industrial) heritage practice in order to come to terms with the transformation of industrial communities?

The study of deindustrialisation has been in the focus of scholarly interest for quite some time now and in a variety of disciplines. Most frequently the term is applied to economic change in Europe and North America since the 1970s (for overviews see: High 2013; Strangleman/Rhodes 2014). This geographic and temporal scope might well be broadened, given that developments of deindustrialisation did not just occur "after the boom" (Doering-Manteuffel/Raphael/Schlemmer 2016; Raphael 2019) following post-war reconstruction after 1945 and can even be observed in pre-modern contexts inside and outside Europe and thus rather be understood as an intrinsic part of capitalist production cycles. Thus, deindustrialisation is also always a global phenomenon, with industry and production moving between states and continents, just as the goods produced circulate (Johnson 2002; Schindler et al. 2020). Another instance of widening the perspective might be seen in research concerning the deindustrialisation processes in Central and Eastern Europe in the wake of integrating the post-

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1 Archiv im Haus der Geschichte des Ruhrgebiets (AHRG), Bochum, Sammlung Lebensgeschichtliche Interviews, LINT 81.

socialist economies into the broader capitalist market (Kideckel 1995; Morris 2016; Böick 2018; Wawrzyniak 2019).

At least two approaches to understanding deindustrialisation can be distinguished very broadly: one that describes the process of shrinkage first and foremost as an economic phenomenon and one approaching the "lived reality" in which deindustrialisation "becomes a phenomenon of human agency" (Johnson 2002: 33). It is particularly in this latter respect that researchers of varying disciplinary backgrounds – historians, sociologists, anthropologists, contemporary archaeologists, geographers – have looked at individual plant closures, industrial communities and regions, or industrial branches that have undergone what in the German context is frequently termed "structural change" or "structural transformation" (Goch 2018). As regions and communities have to process the various moments of loss, it is increasingly the modes of coming to terms with the deindustrial shift which are coming into focus. The "half-life" of deindustrialisation (Linkon 2013; Strangleman 2017; Linkon 2018) often reflects memory formations that continue to determine the present. This concerns both the memories of individuals and the wider post-industrial landscapes, either in the guise of thriving industrial heritage practices or – quite in contrast – in the very absence or the erasure of the material remains of a neglected past (Berger/Golombek/Wicke 2018; Berger/High 2019; Berger 2020). Individual memories and – often ambiguous – experiences of work and the loss of work that sent "people into the maelstrom" of unemployment or early retirement (Buss Notter 2006: 99; McIvor 2013: 240 ff.) might resonate with the wider public and form collective narratives or, by contrast, might be neglected and difficult to be voiced or heard and thus contribute to the traumatic aspects of loss.

Oral histories and the collection of life stories have played a major role almost from the start in approaching the experiences and legacies of deindustrialisation "from below" (amongst others Frisch/Rogovin 1993; High 2003). And while this has often implied a tendency to stick with a local and regional framework, there is today a stronger urge among deindustrialisation scholars to connect local, regional and national experiences on an international scale and bring them into conversation (Kirk/Contrepois/Jefferys 2012; Orange 2015; High/MacKinnon/Perchard 2017). This seems not only appropriate as industry itself moves between regions and borders but also because comparison highlights the differences and similarities in managing crisis, in the social and cultural politics of industrial closure or in shifting identity formations that go along with the erosion of the established industrial structures – be it work, class, gender or regional and national identities.

It was against this background that a working group dedicated to memory cultures of deindustrialisation was formed in 2015 as part of the newly established European Labour History Network (Eklund/Wicke 2016; Jaramillo/Harlov-Csortán/Moitra/ Garruccio 2020). The first thematic workshop organised by the working group, some results of which are presented in this special issue, aimed to facilitate cross-regional and cross-national comparisons by bringing together colleagues from Germany, Italy, Scotland, Spain, Hungary, Canada and Australia at the *Deutsches Bergbau-Museum Bochum* in December 2016. The workshop, entitled *(Post-)Industrial Narratives: Remembering Labour and Structural Change in Oral History*, initially focused on three industrial sectors: shipyards and harbour work, iron and steel production, and

the mining industry; furthermore, it looked at issues of representation and the "heritagisation" of the industrial past in various contexts.

The contributions selected here cover some of these branch particularities but, moreover, touch on a range of themes and approaches that go beyond narrow distinctions and instead address the underlying problems reflected in the particular cases. Most fundamentally, this concerns the memory narratives of (active) work and the significance such memories can take on in an environment in which the old contexts of industrial wage labour have vanished. While this is a motive that connects most of the contributions in this issue, a theme more specific addresses the ways in which industrial closures have been tackled by politicians, trade unions and companies and how these strategies are remembered and discussed by the people affected. This includes the problematisation of various models of crisis management, not only with regard to the consequences of market-liberal policies of deregulation and increased insecurities for workers and communities facing unemployment – as the Scottish example by Arthur McIvor illustrates – but also concerning measures that aimed at cushioning the hardships brought about by closures, e.g. by introducing early retirement schemes. As the cases from Spain and Germany imply, even such measures in the tradition of the post-war West European welfare state could be perceived as highly ambiguous both individually and in the wider communities concerned. A further theme addressed is the history of emotions linked to the deindustrialisation process and its half-life. This includes the emotions experienced in the very midst of struggle and job loss as well as the "residual structures of feeling" (Williams 1977) and "moral economies" (Thompson 1971) attached to the old worlds of labour that continue to have an impact in the deindustrialised present. On both levels, the deindustrialisation process can have traumatising effects, individually and collectively, even though, as the examples of a "socially responsible" downsizing indicate, such effects are not inevitable.

Finally, most articles in this issue explicitly or implicitly touch on aspects of representing the industrial past and the role oral history plays in this context. The question of agency and visibility, of who speaks and is heard and seen, is crucial and can be highly contentious. "History struggles" for the "right" interpretation of the past may start in the museum as a conflict between curators and their living subjects (as shown by Janine Schemmer). But they can also amount to exploitative structures when parts of the collective experience and the deindustrialised communities' material as well as immaterial heritage are neglected while more "usable" knowledge is reframed according to the hegemonic functions of capital. As Antoinette Holm and Erik Eklund show with regard to the Australian Latrobe Valley, old constellations of power between the industrial periphery and the urban centre continue to be important in defining what is recognised as heritage and what is rejected – which is a good reminder that rather than being confined merely to a local or regional frame, the half-life of deindustrialisation remains entangled with the broader social and economic power relations on the national as well as international levels.

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