

# Capital and Community Reconsidered: The Politics and Meaning of Deindustrialization

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# REVIEW ESSAYS / NOTES CRITIQUES

## Capital and Community Reconsidered: The Politics and Meaning of Deindustrialization

Steven High

Cedric Chatterley and Alicia J. Rouverol, *'I Was Content and Not Content': The Story of Linda Lord and the Closing of Penobscot Poultry* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press 2000)

Jefferson Cowie, *Capital Moves: RCA's 70-Year Quest for Cheap Labor* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press 1999)

Jefferson Cowie and Joseph Heathcott, eds., *Beyond the Ruins: The Meaning of Deindustrialization* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press 2003)

Sherry Lee Linkon and John Russo, *Steeltown U.S.A.: Work & Memory in Youngstown* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas 2002)

AT TIMES THE "EXPORTING" OF AMERICAN JOBS, or outsourcing, rivaled the war in Iraq as the number one issue in the 2004 US presidential election. Lou Dobbs, a conservative business journalist for CNN, denounced US companies for shifting work out of the country. In his mind, these companies are just plain unpatriotic. He is not alone; thirty-six states have tabled legislation to restrict capital mobility. Unlike the anti-imports campaigns of the 1980s, the struggle is now focused on the investment

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decisions of American corporations themselves. This is a remarkable development for it holds American companies accountable for their actions.

Somewhat surprisingly, the most recent scholarship on the politics and meaning of deindustrialization in the US has little to say about why plant closings have re-surfaced as a national political issue. Even *Beyond the Ruins*, published just six months before "Exporting America" which became a by-word of the election campaign, failed to predict this political revolt. To the contrary, the book's editors claim that the struggle to preserve basic industry is "all but gone."<sup>6</sup> How could Jefferson Cowie and Joseph Heathcott have been proven wrong so quickly?

Ever since the publication of Barry Bluestone and Bennett Harrison's seminal book *The Deindustrialization of America: Plant Closings, Community Abandonment, and the Dismantling of Basic Industry* in 1982, New Left academics and activists have conceived of the struggle over deindustrialization in the US as one pitting "capital" against "community."<sup>1</sup> In this formulation of the problem, local communities do battle with global capital with predictable results. In recent years, the scholarly focus has shifted from plant closings to the post-closure experience of deindustrialized towns and cities. By taking a closer look at four of the best studies in this burgeoning field, published between 1999 and 2003, this essay finds that local narratives of deindustrialization have left little or no room for larger trans-local modes of identification. There is a disjuncture between the localism of New Left academics and activists on the one hand, and the patriotism of many ordinary Americans on the other. Historian Christopher Lasch once noted that local associations have proliferated since the 1960s because leftist intellectuals and students were repulsed by the nationalism of the Vietnam War era. He termed this love affair the "cult of the little community."<sup>2</sup> It is for this reason, perhaps, that the fight against plant closures has been taken up by economic nationalists on the political right and only belatedly by the Democratic Party. This review essay examines the romance of community in the recent scholarship on deindustrialization.

Jefferson Cowie's *Capital Moves*, published in 1999, has been rightly praised for breaking out of the localism of the New Labour History. In Cowie's words, the book provides a "comparative social history of industrial relocation and explores community life, gender, and labor organization across time and space."<sup>2</sup> He follows the company as it shifts capital from one location to another in a relentless search for cheap and pliant labour. RCA moved work from Camden, New Jersey to Bloomington, Indiana in the 1940s and then, to Memphis, Tennessee in the 1960s and eventually to Ciudad Juarez, Mexico. In each instance, the company's decision to move production came as a result of a consistent pattern of rising labour mili-

<sup>1</sup>Barry Bluestone and Bennett Harrison, *The Deindustrialization of America: Plant Closings, Community Abandonment, and the Dismantling of Basic Industry* (New York 1982).

<sup>2</sup>Christopher Lasch, "The Communitarian Critique of Liberalism," in Charles H. Reynolds and Ralph V. Norman, eds., *Community in America* (Berkeley 1988), 177.

tancy. Once working people began to demand improved wages and working conditions, RCA moved to greener pastures. For RCA, as for many other footloose companies, the quest for cheap workers usually meant the employment of women. Capital flight served to tame trade unions and to control labour.

For the purposes of this review essay, the most interesting aspect of Cowie's outstanding book is his questioning of the effectiveness of place-bound studies in labour history. "One of the goals of this book," he writes, "is to encourage new approaches to labor history by reinvigorating the idea that the shared experience formed within the context of culture and community is often the source of agency and power — even today — while also arguing that community is one of the key limitations and weaknesses of working-class mobilizations."<sup>(7)</sup> This commentary represents a key insight, and is persuasively demonstrated throughout the book as one town's gain came at another's loss. Local solidarities in Camden, Bloomington, Memphis, and Ciudad Juarez, for all their motivating power, were poorly placed to take on RCA. Indeed, "command of spatial relations, therefore, becomes a crucial weapon in management's arsenal." (185)

Where I part company with Jefferson Cowie, perhaps, is in his suggestion that working people *only* had local solidarities. Noting the tension that exists between national or international trade unions and local communities for control over workers' hearts and minds, he tends to present working people as local people. For Sandy Anderson, a Bloomington employee, Cowie writes: "Her local history, sense of place, and immediate social relations formed the fundamental source of her strength; she was rooted in her culture, her community, and the geographic space that contained them." (182) This place-bound identity made it difficult for her (and other workers) to build solidarity across great distances, even as companies like RCA operated over ever wider transnational areas. Part of the problem, here, is that Cowie defines community too narrowly as social networks. This definition prevents him from including larger imagined solidarities based on race, class, gender, or nationality. While we get hints of a patriotic reaction among Bloomington workers to RCA's move to Mexico, Cowie quickly dismisses these comments. For him, the imagined community of the nation is not "a real community" and only serves to divide workers in different countries. (188) In effect, Cowie advocates a transnational solidarity of workers based on class, but its promise is undermined by the insistence that community be tied to place. Ultimately, Cowie is unable or unwilling to break with his own strong emotional attachment to local community.

To further explore the human cost of job loss, Cedric Chatterley and Alicia Rouverol take a semi-biographical approach in their book *'I Was Content and Not Content': The Story of Linda Lord and the Closing of Penobscot Poultry*. Linda Lord, then aged 39, was one of 400 workers who lost their jobs when Penobscot Poultry closed its Belfast, Maine broiler processing plant in 1988. It was Waldo County's largest employer. Lord had worked in the plant ever since leaving high

school twenty years earlier. She both liked and hated her job in the aptly-named “blood tunnel,” where she finished off the birds that had been missed by the automatic neck-cutting machine. The nature of her work explains her ambivalence. The book then tells how Linda Lord made sense of the plant closure, as well as her subsequent unemployment and re-incorporation into the work force. The interview transcript is rich in meaning.

Linda Lord’s memories are accompanied by the striking photographs taken by Cedric Chatterley. Chatterley, who presents us with a visual tour of the work process in the plant, is clearly repulsed by the bloody work that went on inside. These photographic images are followed by ones of the final shift and of Linda Lord’s personal struggle to find employment. The photographs, first put on public display in February 1989, resonate with the reader.

Despite its obvious strengths, this is an oddly constructed book. There are no fewer than six separate narrative voices: a foreword by Michael Frisch, an edited oral history transcript with Linda Lord, a personal essay by writer Carolyn Chute, an introduction and two academic essays by Alicia Rouverol, an epilogue by Steve Cole (the oral historian who initiated the project), and the documentary photographs of Cedric Chatterley. While the centerpiece is Linda Lord’s personal story of loss and resilience, the rest of the book is strangely disconnected. This polyphony originates, one suspects, in the book’s long period of development over twelve years and in the fact that it has multiple authors contributing parallel narratives. Some of this re-telling distracts from the central focus of the book: Linda Lord’s compelling life story and the haunting photography of Chatterley.

Returning to the review essay’s theme of community, we also find a disconnect between Linda Lord’s transcribed interview and Alicia Rouverol’s interpretation of those words. Interestingly, it is Rouverol who repeatedly invokes local community, not Lord. When asked if business owed “communities” anything, Lord said no. She suggests instead that the US government should intervene to protect the “American people.” This comment, however, does not prevent Rouverol from asserting that Linda’s local community was “absolutely central.” She then frames Linda Lord’s story, using Bluestone and Harrison’s formulation, as one pitting local community against global capital. Rouverol writes, for example, that “we are all faced with this dilemma: under what conditions does our economic system undermine our efforts to create healthy and stable communities? Is there a balance to be found between the ‘needs’ of capital and the needs of those of us who build and sustain communities?” (107-9) People are bound, yet again, to place.

Place and memory are likewise central to Sherry Lee Linkon and John Russo’s *Steeltown USA: Work & Memory in Youngstown*. Ever since the Campbell Works closed in 1977, Youngstown, Ohio has been at the centre of the deindustrialization debate in the US. Unlike the vast majority of plant closings which go largely unnoticed, the closing of five Youngstown steel mills in the 1970s and 1980s, as well as the energetic efforts to save these mills, was headline news. In recent years,

Youngstown has been the subject of a half-dozen monographs, numerous scholarly articles, a couple of film documentaries, extensive newspaper and television commentary, and even a song by Bruce Springsteen. This international attention helped make Youngstown the “poster child” of the Rust Belt.

Despite the familiarity of the Youngstown story, *Steeltown USA* is a highly original and thought-provoking book. Linkon and Russo, directors of the innovative Working Class Studies program at Youngstown State University, examine the conflict over the representation of Youngstown’s steel-making past and its deindustrialized present. The “local culture” — the physical landscape, written words, visual images, sculptures, film, song, and oral history interviews — is read for what it tells us about what people remember and why. The book contains a sophisticated analysis of the production and reception of these representations. Throughout, the authors pay close attention to class, gender, and race.

*Steeltown USA* is divided into four chapters and an epilogue. Chapter one examines the production of place and makes the case that place is central to individual and civic identity-construction. Landscapes are never static, but are constantly changing. The authors mine this changing landscape for meaning. Next, chapter two reveals the centrality of steel-making to daily life before the closures. Steel-making was much more than a source of wages and work. It represented an “important element of community life, a source of identity and solidarity, an activity that brought pride and fulfillment to individuals and the community.” (129) Indeed, Youngstown’s rise as a steel town “can be seen as the community’s ‘constitutive narrative,’ the story that provided a unifying image of the meaning of this place for most of the twentieth century.” (2) At the same time, the authors are careful not to allow this unifying tale to mask deep social divisions.

Chapter three explores the struggle over memory that accompanied and followed deindustrialization. The mill closings shattered Youngstown’s self-confident image of itself. In this chapter, Linkon and Russo examine the production of an image of Youngstown as a place of loss and of failure. The struggle pitted those who contended that Youngstown’s steel-making past had to be forgotten before people could look to the future against those who argued that Youngstown’s industrial past had to be acknowledged and accepted before people could move on. These two conflicting visions resulted in a series of public clashes, including a failed attempt to preserve the Jeannette blast furnace from demolition. Until residents take pride in their past, Linkon and Russo suggest, Youngstown has no future. The last chapter relates the story of crime, punishment, and the building of a maximum security prison in the heart of Youngstown.

Memory is thus presented as a significant arena of conflict in post-industrial Youngstown. Memory is important because “it helps to shape both personal and communal identity, and how individuals and communities see themselves influences their behavior and their sense of what is possible.”(3) Central to the discussion of memory is the communitarianism of Robert N. Bellah. In *Habits of the*

*Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*, Bellah argued that communities have a history and that they are constituted by their past. For Linkon and Russo, then, a "real community" is a "community of memory; one that does not forget its past." (3) Communities of memory thus "continually retell their stories, and this process creates a sense of shared history and identity, out of which develop vision and hope for the future." (3) The past thus provides a context of meaning for the present.

The "community of memory" idea is a promising one, but must community be local? It occurs to me that there is no reason to assume that the community of memory formed around the steel mill closures in Youngstown was confined to place. Unlike closings elsewhere, Youngstown's agony, as well as its resistance, was splashed onto the front pages of newspapers around the world. That a large number of "outsiders" have made their pilgrimage to Youngstown is indicative of a wider circle of memory than the authors appear willing to consider. There is a tendency, instead, to draw a line between a local "us" and a non-resident "them" (see my discussion below of Linkon and Russo's contribution to the fourth book reviewed in this essay). Despite the authors' recognition of a plurality of sometimes conflicting viewpoints in Youngstown, and the book's nationalizing title, there is ultimately only one community and it is a local one.

A similar localism runs through a recently published collection of essays edited by Jefferson Cowie and Joseph Heathcott. *Beyond the Ruins* contains thirteen original chapters that explore the varied meanings of deindustrialization in the US. The book is divided into five parts. The first, "Rust," looks at the stories of Yonkers, Atlantic City, and Lansing. The second, "Environment," explores the dire environmental legacy of industrialization in Anaconda and Love Canal. The next section, "Plans," examines politics and planning in Camden, Oakland, and in the US government's Federal Area Redevelopment schemes. The fourth, "Legacy," scrutinizes the shifting identities of deindustrialized places, in this instance, Youngstown, Gary, and Pittsburgh. The fifth part, "Memory," turns to the plant shutdown stories of displaced workers in Shelby, North Carolina, and Louisville, Kentucky. Significantly, all but two of these essays are local stories. Each story is peopled by "local citizens," (103, 135) "local people," (43) "locals," (217) and "local activists," (78) Rarely are people described as "Americans." And yet, the regional distribution of these local case studies makes clear the editors' desire to show that deindustrialization is a nationwide problem and not a regional problem restricted to the Rust Belt. The editors state that the story was bigger than any one "emblematic place," but involved "a much broader, more fundamental, historical transformation." (1-2)

There is much that is new and praiseworthy in *Beyond the Ruins*. First, Bryant Simon's essay on the demise of Atlantic City's movie houses widens our understanding of deindustrialization to include the tourist industry — not a connection that I would have made before reading the book. Second, the collection rethinks the

chronology of deindustrialization. Plant shutdowns did not begin in the 1970s, but have always existed alongside industrialization. Plants open in one place, only to close in another. Tami Friedman, for example, looks at the relocation of rug production from Yonkers, NY in 1954 to Greenville, Mississippi. Her analysis of the simultaneous plant closing and plant opening provides us with another opportunity to follow capital in its flight. The “golden age” of the 1950s was far less stable and not nearly as prosperous as has been commonly supposed.

The two fine essays by Kent Curtis and Richard Newman, in turn, force us to broaden our understanding of deindustrialization to include environmental pollution as well. In “Greening Anaconda,” Curtis presents us with a fascinating account of the efforts of one company, ARCO, to reduce its environmental cleanup costs by promoting a golf course on the contaminated site. For his part, Richard Newman examines the history of Love Canal: it is a story of industrial contamination and of local community mobilization. This “grassroots struggle” of working people “showed Americans of every class and color that, no matter the economic circumstances or lack of environmental precedents, a group of local citizens could rise up and be heard...” (112-3) The poisoned environmental legacy left behind by departed industries is of obvious importance to the study of deindustrialization.

The physical transformation of the urban environment is another important theme emerging from *Beyond the Ruins*. Closed mills and factories were sometimes commemorated with monuments, other times replaced by new development or left to crumble and rust. The “urge to reaffirm or celebrate the industrial past seems to grow stronger” (237) as industry disappears, Kirk Savage writes. These monuments are designed to create “a stable and coherent past.” Remnants of old mills or factories left standing, however, have proven more controversial. The massive Homestead steelworks is now gone, and replaced by new commercial development; yet twelve ghostly smokestacks — disembodied “sentries guarding access to an already forgotten past” — still stand testament to the city’s industrial history. While the book’s editors deride this vestige as “little more than a bit of nostalgia and character,” several contributors praise similar preservation efforts in Atlantic City, Youngstown, Anaconda, and Pittsburgh. The preservation of a façade of an Atlantic City movie palace is thus celebrated as “a hushed witness to Atlantic City’s industrial past, sad deindustrialization, and even sadder reindustrialization.” (86)

These contrasting readings of industrial ruins mirror the social tensions on the ground. In Anaconda, for example, retired smelter workers questioned the incorporation of the “weathered ruins” of a 19th century smelter in the “Old Works Golf Course,” but still took pride in the 585 foot tall stack that overlooks the town. For these retired workers, the replacement of their industrial workplace by a golf course, a recreational playground for the wealthy, seemed to confirm their new marginal position in the local community. The re-inscription of industrial places as post-industrial thus entailed the erasure of much of their former working-class identity.



Not every former industrial town or city, unfortunately, has been able to recover. In their own contribution to the collection, John Russo and Sherry Lee Linkon suggest that Youngstown residents internalized the negative image of the former steeltown — now associated with crime, corruption, and unemployment. For the authors, “the political project that remains after the mills are gone is to reclaim a positive civic identity by shunning the version of the town others thrust on it.” (11) Russo and Linkon are careful not to homogenize the local community. Yet they, too, rely heavily on a singular notion of “the community.” Thus, the loss of identity comes as a result of “outsiders” who “interpret the meanings of deindustrialization to serve their own purposes.” (217) The threatening “others” or “outsiders,” in this context, are not the faceless capitalists of old, but are rather the non-resident cultural producers who give Youngstown a bad name.

The marginalization of working people in formerly blue-collar towns and cities is mirrored, to some extent, in the scholarship itself. *Beyond the Ruins* represents a dramatic shift in focus away from workers and plant closings. As a result, the attention is now less on deindustrialization as a process and more on deindustrialization as a local struggle over memory and meaning. The two editors state that the new scholarship goes beyond the smokestack nostalgia of old: “we have to strip industrial work of its broad-shouldered, social realist patina and see it for what it was: tough work that people did because it paid well and it was located in their communities.” (14) While the central point is not without merit, there is a danger here of minimizing workers’ remembered attachments. Was it simply a matter of wages and happenstance as the editors seem to suggest or did workers derive something more from their work? I know from the last two essays in *Beyond the Ruins*, and from my own oral history research, that many workers were profoundly attached to former work sites. In my experience, workers frequently use metaphors of home and family to communicate their deep connection to the workplace and to each other.<sup>3</sup> The workers of Shelby and Louisville did likewise. Job loss was as much about the loss of pride and identity as it was the loss of wages.

In moving “beyond the ruins,” then, have the editors moved beyond the workers as well? Have they demystified work only to reify romantic notions of local community? It is worth noting that former workers and their unions are central to only a handful of the essays published in *Beyond the Ruins*. The protagonists, for the most part, are urban planners, municipal politicians, artists, community activists, environmentalists, and (even) company managers. While this re-orientation is mainly the result of the shifting focus away from plant closings and towards the deindustrialized aftermath, it is disconcerting to see displaced workers and their unions treated as peripheral to a story that centrally concerns them. *Beyond the*

<sup>3</sup>See chapter 2 in Steven High, *Industrial Sunset: The Making of North America’s Rust Belt, 1969–1984* (Toronto 2003). For a more focused discussion of the concept of community see John Walsh and Steven High, “Rethinking the Concept of Community,” *Histoire sociale/Social History* 17, 64 (1999), 255–74.

*Ruins* is an important addition to the literature, and is worth reading from cover to cover. Yet it raises some unsettling questions about where the study of deindustrialization is headed.

At the outset of this review essay, I asked why these four books have so little to tell us about why outsourcing emerged as a hot button political issue in the 2004 presidential election. Three factors may have contributed to this outcome. First, the concept of local community is of continuing importance to the study of deindustrialization in the US. The new scholarship, for the most part, accepts the old formulation of deindustrialization as a struggle that pits the needs of capital and the needs of communities. It is no coincidence that Barry Bluestone wrote the foreword to *Beyond the Ruins* and that the book's editors declare that it brings the deindustrialization debate "up to date." (xiii) Community now, as then, is frequently conceived of as a static category synonymous with place. In *Beyond the Ruins*, only Lisa Fine's study of the closure of the Reo Motor Company in Lansing, Michigan questions the "familiar script" of capital "leaving communities with withering infrastructures and bereft of tax revenues." (44) Indeed, Fine finds that "understanding the phenomenon of plant closing only as a scenario of remote, global, mobile capital inflicting pain and suffering on local workers and their communities overlooks the fullness of the stories." (46) The new scholarship explores the fullness of these stories, but almost exclusively on the community side of the capital-community divide.

This community focus is a reflection of the persistence and proliferation of the community discourse since the 1960s. Community is almost always invoked, as Miranda Joseph argues in her new book, *Against the Romance of Community* (2002), as an "unequivocal good, an indicator of a high quality of life, a life of human understanding, caring, selflessness, belonging."<sup>4</sup> Community is likewise presented as an "organic, natural, spontaneous" occurrence that emerges in times of crisis or tragedy. Indeed, Karl Marx's claim that capital destroyed traditional communities in order to turn independent commodity producers into labourers for hire has been interpreted by some as demonstrating a necessary opposition between local communities and global capital. The four books under review create a similar opposition. The romantic discourse of community implies that community is somehow autonomous of capitalist society. But, are community and capital truly the opposites?

Second, none of the books reviewed here seriously consider the patriotic reaction of Americans to the plant shutdown problem. The role of the federal government is likewise ignored in favour of local politics. Even when this patriotism is vocalized in oral history interviews, as was the case in several of Jefferson Cowie's Bloomington interviews, as well as in the interview with Linda Lord, these sentiments are submerged or dismissed. A national sense of community also surfaces

<sup>4</sup>Miranda Joseph, *Against the Romance of Community* (Minneapolis 2002), vii.

occasionally in the two oral history chapters ending *Beyond the Ruins*, mainly in the quoted oral history narratives themselves. The workers' "we" referred to the American people as much as to the fellow residents of Shelby, North Carolina, or Louisville, Tennessee. A former KEMET worker in Shelby, for example, said: "I am not proud of where I live anymore. I can't look at the American flag the same way." (278) This strong identification with the nation suggests that some workers, at least, expressed a dual allegiance to their town and to their country.

The third point that emerges from a close reading of these texts relates to the sidelining of corporate capital. It is noteworthy that, except for Jefferson Cowie's *Capital Moves*, these studies have very little to say about the companies that close plants. Unlike earlier studies that focused on plant closings themselves, the focus is increasingly placed on the local efforts to pick up the pieces. Throughout these works, then, there is an assumption that meaning is local and that community and memory are bound to place. Yet deindustrialization is a defining experience for millions of working people in towns and cities across North America. Does this shifting focus deflect attention away from corporations? Companies are, arguably, no longer being held to account for job loss. This scholarly trend reminds me of the narrowing scope of US labour law which once required companies to negotiate plant closing decisions with unionized employees, but which now only requires bargaining over the effects of these decisions. Just as "effects bargaining" is no replacement for the right to question managerial prerogative to close plants, the study of local meanings of deindustrialization need not lose sight of a corporate culture that treats workers and their communities (be they local, national, or international) as disposable.