

REPORTS AND CORRESPONDENCE

Class, Space and Community: A Workshop Conference

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Class, Space and Community: A Workshop Conference was organized by the Sociology and Social Policy Department at the University of Durham on April 6–8th, 2001. Academics from a variety of disciplines were brought together to explore the social and cultural implications of deindustrialization on people and communities whose identities were once founded on industrialism and manufacturing. From the detailed accounts about individual lives, communities and regions, and the exact changes they have all been forced to undergo, a general story was told. That is, many areas have recently witnessed the rapid and *complete* elimination of their industrial bases with seemingly nothing left in their place. Today, the problems these areas face go beyond the matters of massive unemployment. There is also a sense of “folding in on oneself” as the community attempts to find new structures upon which to reinvent itself. “Soft outcomes” such as preserving a sense of pride, dignity and respectability were also shown to be significant to processes of social *and* economic regeneration. This story is true for places *throughout* the world. What was especially highlighted by this conference was the way in which an emergent *international* perspective on deindustrialization was reflected in the combination of very *local* descriptions of particular localities. Whether it be in Youngstown in Ohio, Consett, Sunderland, or South Shields in northeast England, Nowa Huta in southern Poland, Karhula in Finland, or in South Africa’s East Rand, the impacts of globalization and deindustrialization are both real and present for us all today.

In the opening Plenary Session about the impact of the destruction of the steelworks on the local community in Youngstown, Sherry Linkon (Youngstown State University) touched upon many interdependent issues that later reappeared in other presentations: the *local* social and physical landscape(s) implicated by local-regional-national-global dynamics of deindustrialization; notions of time interacting between past-present-future and the lifecourse; the (new) effects of change; and memory and identity. The problems of representation, and/or *re*-representation, were brought up in different ways by all participants. Moreover, within the theme of “representation,” and linking neatly with the title of the conference itself, three broad thematic clusters emerged. These guide the subsequent review of this conference and are delineated as follows: “space,” “community,” and “class.”

Representations of space: Most of the papers offered a historical description of a particular locality and the visibility of the changes therein. Caroline Dixon and Pat Allatt (University of Teeside) zoomed in on the reconfiguration of micro-landscapes of domestic interior space in relation to the daily experiences of young people (aged sixteen to nineteen years) in full-time education in northeastern England. In the UK, current post-sixteen educational policies emphasise “choice” and “self-steering.” However, Dixon and Allatt showed that students’ experiences described a very different reality. Their study illustrated the constant negotiation of time and place that young people increasingly face today. Here, a story was told of the competing demands of school and schoolwork, home and family, and especially the part-time workplace. In such scenarios, young people’s identities are wedged tightly between family, place, class and gender structures as they (struggle to) juggle their daily activities. This study also raised the issue of the very aggressive youth labour market and how it is being integrated into the exploited “normal market,” something that has implications for us all.

Charlotte Waldron (University of Nottingham) also pointed to the dynamics between capitalism, identity and space. She explored the processes of selection into informal social groups at work. Her study focused on the shop floor of a South Yorkshire food factory and revealed gendered differences in social network formation. Women’s identity and subsequent interactions, she found, centred on events outside the workplace, such as marriage and/or motherhood. For the men, however, work-skills and training were the driving force behind their social dynamics. Waldron noted that different relationships between capitalism, identity, and space imply different effects upon these things also at micro- and macro-levels; vice-versa, different effects imply different interrelationships.

Representations of “community”: Debates around the concept of “community” have existed for centuries. What this conference confirmed however, is that the debates need to continue given the changing world we live in. On the one hand, contributors noted that contemporary community identity emerges from new social networks situated within new workplaces, different labor processes, and changed (but still to some extent enforced) housing developments. Such a slant revealed a shift from collective to individual identity and of a return to familial connections, not as consumers but as *survivors*. On the other hand, the ways in which internal and external identities also provide important feedback and feedforward loops within the dynamics of community formation were also highlighted. For instance, Alison Stenning (University of Birmingham) described Nowa Huta’s difficulty in remaking itself despite the potential opportunities embedded within its current identity. Stenning argued that this difficulty is due in part to the (negative) images that are maintained in various ways and which depict a town of the past, the old, retired, excluded; in short, of decay. The questions raised in this second thematic cluster reiterated the need to examine the power dynamics that constitute place, identity and transformation, as well as those that organize the concepts of “empowerment” and “accountability.”

Representations of "class": Is it possible to accurately describe a community without making "objects" of the individuals we seek to empower? This was the underlying question raised throughout this last cluster about the problems of representation. Insofar as class is concerned, it was agreed that *misrepresentations* often result when the "in-betweenness" and "overlapping" of class is not fully appreciated. For instance, by taking these issues into account, Sue Parker (University of Durham) argued that contrary to the vast majority of literature about class and motherhood, communitarian values (as opposed to individualism) lie *not* with women from professional backgrounds but those "othered" women from more working-class backgrounds.

Ian Roberts (University of Durham) extended the issue of distorted representation by concentrating precisely on how authors convey class more generally. He argued that many accounts swing between romanticising and pathologizing working-class people and their communities. Importantly however, he did not believe that the situation would be remedied through a better "balance" between these two poles. Instead, Roberts suggested that attempts to situate oneself within the class process of academic and literary discourse itself are conducive to more accurate understanding of the *interacting* effects of both class identity and knowledge about class.

Tom Woodin (Federation of Worker Writers and Community Publishers, FWWCP) implied something something similar to the arguments raised by both Parker and Roberts. Woodin was one the many contributors who encouraged researchers to be more creative in their methodological approaches precisely as a means of better understanding the issue of class *at the same time as* trying to avoid objectifying those we seek to know more about. He encouraged support for organizations that (like the FWWCP) promote oral history projects, poetry, autobiographical writing, etc., which are developed and published by working-class and marginalized people. Woodin argued that such organizations directly empower their participants and he illustrated the richness that these "alternative" sources of knowledge offer to researchers. Woodin's argument is particularly significant given that one way of "giving people a voice" is to offer a time and place *in* which, and the resources *with* which, they can express their views. In turn, this allows those who want to *listen* with an opportunity to do so.

This workshop conference provided an excellent forum in which to raise interconnected issues related to understanding the impacts of deindustrialization upon local people and their communities. What was particularly poignant was just how much there is to be learnt from knowing more about like stories *internationally*. In this case, we concentrated on local stories about class, deindustrialization and globalization. What emerged was that the similarities and differences between local trajectories globally in fact generate a spatio-temporal image of the complex and multi-dimensional dynamics that are at play everywhere. The image is one of change, but patterns of change. Furthermore, the change takes on characteristics that are distinctly dependent upon contingent and local circumstances. In terms of policy implications therefore, the need is for in-depth *local* knowledge of communities and their localities *combined* with

broader *global* knowledge of the sorts of trajectories that are going on around the world.

A final point that the *Class, Space and Community* workshop conference raised is the reality of how “the past continues to shape the present as the present continues to erase the past.” The direction of some trends seems unavoidable. What was concluded however, was that it is nevertheless important to continue to ask questions that challenge the inevitability of these temporal stories of change. The consensus was that some of the answers may be found through more inter-disciplinary discussions. Reflexive dialogue between actors involved in the multiple structures that frame and fuel culture and politics was seen to be paramount to any solutions. The thought being that cross-disciplinary communication could reveal tools, languages, and materials that would benefit research methods as well as policy planning and implementation. It was certainly recognized that finding and implementing real alternatives to the impacts of deindustrialization was an extremely difficult task. However, for ethical reasons if not for personal ones, it was also agreed that efforts to do so must continue.