

Ewan Gibbs, *Coal Country: The Meaning and Memory of Deindustrialization in Postwar Scotland*, London: University of London Press, 2021. ISBN: 9781912702589 (ebook);¹ ISBN: 9781912702558 (paper); ISBN: 9781912702541 (cloth)

Coal Country: The Meaning and Memory of Deindustrialization in Postwar Scotland was enthusiastically anticipated by a community of scholars associated with “deindustrialization studies”. This loose grouping has sought to advance the study of deindustrialization from the economics of male industrial job loss toward broader readings of the cultural, social, and political effects wrought by industrial ruination. As the author states at the outset, “deindustrialization’s impact was as keenly felt in cultural and political terms as it was economically” (p.1). In many instances, Gibbs reflects and continues this academic endeavour in an expansive study of the deindustrialization of the nationalized coal mining industry in Scotland. The monograph, then, covers issues of gender, community, temporality, and nationhood, while also being firmly rooted in the traditions of Labour History, focussing heavily on the political economies of colliery closures and institutional relationships between the National Union of Mineworkers Scotland Area (NUMSA), the National Coal Board (NCB), and central government. As the work is so rich, this review highlights in turn only a few related topic salient to an *Antipode* audience: society and gender; temporalities; and political geographies. Before this, it is worthwhile to make some general comments on the mechanics of text.

The study moves back and forth across close to a century of histories and memories in multiple coalfields across Scotland, raising concerns of eliding important trajectories and disjunctions in what is clearly a complex and contested past. The task is complicated further by the evocative subject matter and methodologies: extensive archival research and oral history interviews with mining communities, supplemented by cultural, artistic

¹ The open access ebook can be downloaded at

<https://humanities-digital-library.org/index.php/hdl/catalog/book/coal-country>

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representations. Inheriting the stories, recollections, and narratives of lives that have been upended by the collective trauma of industrial ruination – a past that has not passed, and is often very present – comes with a moral imperative to treat and document them with care and rigour. Gibbs does just that in an attentive reconstruction, steering us through the story with concision and delivering dense material with deftness. Enriched by an appendix of participant biographies, plentiful space is notably given over to the mining communities themselves to articulate this often-times incensing story of injustice and resilience.

Illustrative are the narratives and voices of women from mining families and the coalfields, and, while also exploring masculinities, Gibbs advances coalfields research on gender identities, which has typically side-lined women’s experiences unless they are the explicit focus (Sutcliffe-Braithwaite and Thomlinson 2018). Women’s voices are woven throughout the first half of *Coal Country*, and women as workers, rather than wives, mothers, or daughters of miners, are firmly centred in Chapter Four. These sections are among the most enlightening and intriguing, precisely because focus on the deindustrialization of female industrial workplaces is an essential corrective (see Clarke 2015). Gibbs’ contribution is amplifying that deindustrialization impacted working lives and identities among women in mining families beyond coal industry closures, with attendant factory closures being replaced by service and care work that had less opportunity for accumulating cultural and social, as well as economic, capital. A nuanced and integrative account of women’s histories and experiences in the transforming Scottish coalfields adds necessary complexity to tropes of the maligned housewife politicised by the 1984-85 miners’ strike. Further complexity comes from discussions of religious sectarianism, which was a salient, and largely geographically-specific, feature of the Scottish coalfields and qualifies some of the Left mythology surrounding the unity of miners in more militant coalfields such as those of Scotland. As Gibbs notes, Protestant-Catholic factionalisms “were pivotal in shaping personal identities, communal affiliations, and the social and territorial borders of communities” (p.109) throughout the life of the coal industry and beyond.

These long-term, intergenerational transferences of identity bring us to the issue of temporalities, a central preoccupation of coalfield research examined further in *Coal Country*. It is posited that two predominant temporal forms have operated to condition labour experiences. The first being generational processes formative of successive cohorts constituted by shared experiences. Briefly, three distinct generations are identified: the “interwar veteran” generation that “stewarded the NUMSA during the early period of nationalization and placed extensive value on custom and institutional stability”; the “industrial citizen” generation “socialized during the early years of colliery contraction” and “less reverential towards the nationalized industry”; and the “flexible workers” who “matured during the growth of mass unemployment and the bitter final struggles against major industrial closures” in the 1980s and “were resistant to the conservatism and rules-based order of coalfield communities” (p.186). These cohorts, however, “were also strongly moulded by the intergenerational transmission of historical consciousness” (p.157). While it is unclear as to the rates of exchange between intergenerationality and contemporaneity in conditioning the processes of deindustrialisation, the critical role that inherited pasts played in subsequent political identities, strategies, and obligations is clear. The basis for proposing generational formulations is largely limited to union leadership, which can be a very narrow group of key individuals with arguably atypical formative experiences not always representative of the membership. Drawing overly deterministic conclusions risks homogenising diverse and sometimes fragmented social geographies (that Gibbs effectively elucidates) and delimiting the processual dynamics of lived history (perhaps a symptom of the episodic nature of oral history interviews, a point that Gibbs also signals to [p.252]). Rather than dismiss, it would be interesting to evaluate how widespread the three generational formations were/are.

No such concerns are apparent in insightful chapters on the workings of trade unionism under nationalisation. Perhaps the most useful conceptual innovation for geographers is the use of a Thompsonian “moral economy” framework, used to conceptualise deindustrialization, but the potential applications are myriad. For context, there is a long-

running “history war” concerning colliery closures in academic, popular, and political discourse in the UK. One position has sought to ameliorate the toxic legacy of Margaret Thatcher and the Conservative Party in the coalfields by highlighting that more closures took place under the Labour governments of the 1960s than in the 1980s. Situating the closures in Scotland within a moral economy framework, Gibbs deftly skewers this perspective by looking past sheer numbers to the more important issues of *how* workplace closures took place in different historical-geographical contexts and with different foreseen implications. Always as a process of formulation and transformation, the moral economy that emerged under nationalisation was largely a negotiatory process of, following Polanyi, “double movement” between the NCB at its national and regional levels and the NUMSA representing cultural and economic expectations. Respective post-war governments looking to deliver energy policies opted, or were co-opted, to work within established moral economy customs, whereby “closures could be legitimated through dialogue with trade union representatives and the provision of collective economic security: (p.88). Conversely, as Gibbs forcefully documents, the closures of the late-1970s and 1980s “were imposed without popular assent, ignoring establishing [*sic*] customs, and withdrawing the safeguarding of communal economic security” (p.54).

Such difficult pasts have resulted in complex landscapes of memory that are not straightforwardly nostalgic as some like to suggest of former industrial areas. Rather, the past is processed through a “critical nostalgia”, “noting the past’s detractions but nevertheless asserting positive comparisons with present circumstances” (p.104). Whereas memories and experiences of the hardships and animosities of the pre-1947 privatised industry informed the negotiated relations of the nationalised industry, the bitter evocations of the intentional erosion of the negotiatory moral economy informs contemporary Scottish independence politics. Gibbs convincingly locates the genesis of Scotland’s nationalist movements in increasingly fractious industrial relations. The Scottish National Party “prospered” from the early-1960s “through advancing a perspective which chimed with frustration at Scotland’s

perceived economic and political marginalization ... motifs [that] accorded with miners' experience of centralization and colliery closures" (p.210). Gibbs summarises:

As coalfield employment shrank, and the industry was disembedded from the towns and villages which had grown around it, a protective countermovement developed and articulated its objections in Scottish national terms. (p.21)

Not only critical for advancing understandings of the linkages between deindustrialization and current political landscapes, this historical tracing of nationhood and nationalist independence movements in Scotland should alert political geographers to the longer genealogies, and moral economies, of seemingly spontaneous populist ruptures in other geographies.

The value of Gibbs' arguments regarding the historical constitution of contemporary politics contributes to an overall remarkable text that will be read widely, and deservedly so. Gibbs has delivered a work that sits worthily alongside key studies of deindustrialization that manage the difficult task of balancing historicity, memory, and historical constitution while doing justice to those that lived, and are living through, "an imposition of class power and social violence that created a sense of crisis, removal, and social redundancy" (p.249).

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