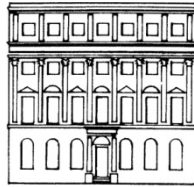


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Jörg Arnold:

Swan Songs? Reconsidering the Death of Industrial Britain (ca. 1970–90)

Conference Report

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Swan Songs? Reconsidering the Death of Industrial Britain (ca. 1970–90). Workshop organized by Jörg Arnold (Nottingham) and held at the German Historical Institute London, 17–18 October 2013.

In March 2014 it will be thirty years since the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) embarked on a national strike against a programme of accelerated closures in the coal industry, pitting the NUM against the National Coal Board (NCB) and the Conservative government of the day, but also against its own members who refused to heed the traditional obligation not to cross a picket line. The strike was the most visceral industrial dispute in post-war British history. It dragged on for twelve months and ended in the total (although unacknowledged) defeat of the NUM. In retrospect, the Great Miners' Strike of 1984–5 is often seen as a turning point. In Avner Offer's memorable phrase, 'the miners' strike of 1984 was the proletarians' last stand',¹ marking the symbolic end of a socio-economic and socio-cultural model that had conceived of British society in terms of manual labour, industrial production, and collective responsibilities. As two journalists put it in a recent popular history of the strike: 'Before 1984, Britain was an industrial nation, reborn from the ashes of the Second World War by Clement Atlee's vision of a welfare state. After the miners' strike, which ended with humiliating defeat in March 1985, Thatcher's Britain was born.'²

The workshop had two goals: on an empirical level, it aimed to place the miners' strike of 1984–5 into the context of broader changes in the economy, society, and culture of late twentieth-century Britain. Indeed, ever since the mid 1960s, seismic shifts had been observable, from manufacturing to services; from full employment to ever larger residues of structural unemployment; from collective identities to the rise of individualism; from consensual models of conflict resolution to antagonistic models; and from confident visions of the future to a dystopian contraction of horizons.

The full conference programme can be found under Events and Conferences on the GHIL's website <www.ghil.ac.uk>.

¹ Avner Offer, 'British Manual Workers: From Producers to Consumers, c. 1950–2000', *Contemporary British History*, 22/4 (2008), 537–71.

² Francis Beckett and David Hencke, *Marching to the Fault Line: The Miners' Strike and the Battle for Industrial Britain* (London, 2009), dust jacket.

On a conceptual level, the workshop aimed to bring into dialogue two historiographical traditions—and communities of scholars!—that, first appearances notwithstanding, all too often take too little notice of each other. For example, many comparative studies by German scholars on aspects of the social and cultural challenges facing European societies after the end of the post-war boom find little resonance in the mainstream historiography of contemporary Britain. Yet not only this specialist work, but also the broader theoretical underpinnings, such as the plea to reconfigure contemporary history in the light of the problems facing our present, are rarely taken note of by historians working in the UK.³ Likewise, a persistent belief lingers among scholars working in the German context that there is no such thing as British contemporary history, all the pioneering empirical work and methodological innovations of the last twenty-five years notwithstanding.

The workshop was organized in four sections, broadly corresponding to economic, political, social, and cultural developments in late twentieth-century Britain. The panels placed particular emphasis on Scottish, regional, and 'marginal' developments in order to balance what often seems like a woefully London and elite-centred perspective.

Section one, 'After the Boom: Economic Developments', looked at Scotland as a case study in order to assess the extent and limits of deindustrialization in the second half of the twentieth century, the political ramifications of socio-economic change, and the impact on individual localities. In his introductory paper George Peden (Stirling) provided an overview of developments in the Scottish economy from the mid 1960s to the early twenty-first century. As he made clear, the Scottish economy underwent dramatic changes in the period under discussion. The industrial sector, in particular, became much leaner, especially as far as employment was concerned, contracting drastically from 39 per cent of total employment to a mere 11 per cent by 2007. While the 'Victorian' staples of coal, shipbuilding, steel, and textiles became virtually extinct (with the exception of steel), and car manufacturing shared their fate, there were, however, also success stories, notably in the food and drinks sector and in electronics. In the light of this contradictory evidence, Peden cautioned,

³ See Lutz Raphael and Anselm Doering-Manteuffel, *Nach dem Boom: Perspektiven auf die Zeitgeschichte seit 1970* (3rd edn. Göttingen, 2012).

talk of the 'death' of industrial Britain might well be misplaced. In the second paper, Jim Phillips (Glasgow) examined the political management of structural economic change in Scotland, with particular emphasis on the coal industry. Taking as a point of departure the observation that 'deindustrialization does not just happen',⁴ Phillips employed E. P. Thompson's concept of the 'moral economy' in order to explain the relative absence of industrial conflict over the rundown of the coal industry in the 1950s and 1960s as compared to the 1980s and 1990s. Whereas the social and economic fallout of change was corporately managed in the former period, by the 1970s key players in the industry started to abandon consensual approaches and thereby subverted the 'moral economy' of deindustrialization. The first panel concluded with a paper by Jim Tomlinson (Glasgow) on the town of Dundee, where deindustrialization took the form of 'de-jutefication', making the town on the Firth of Tay a much less globalized place by the end of the twentieth century than it had been a hundred years earlier.

Section two, 'Divided We Fall?', shifted the focus from the economic sphere to politics and, in particular, industrial conflict. Chris Wrigley (Nottingham) examined the trajectory of the coal industry in the years following the 1984–5 strike. As he made clear, the denationalization of the industry, pursued since 1988 and hailed by one contemporary as 'the ultimate privatization', hastened the way to the virtual extinction of coalmining in the UK. In the process, the 'working miners' of the break-away Union of Democratic Mineworkers (UDM), who in 1984–5 had proved crucial to the defeat of the NUM, were unceremoniously cast aside. However, as Kim Christian Priemel (Berlin) showed in his paper on the printing trade unions in the period from the mid 1960s to the mid 1990s, unity proved no safeguard against what often appeared to be inexorable forces of modernizing change. In the conflict with management, the alleged industrial muscle of the trade unions, much debated in the 1970s, was soon exposed as the myth that it had always been. In the final paper of the section, David Stewart (University of Central Lancashire) drew attention to the link between deindustrialization and electoral politics. The huge Ravenscraig steelworks located near the town of Motherwell

⁴ Barry Bluestone and Bennett Harrison, *The Deindustrialization of America: Plant Closings, Community Abandonment and the Dismantling of Basic Industry* (New York, 1982), 15.

came to symbolize, in the eyes of many Scots, the status of Scotland as an industrial power. When the mill finally closed in 1992, after a long and protracted struggle, the Scottish Conservative Party was widely held responsible and, Stewart argued, never recovered electorally from the blow to its reputation.

Section three took its subtitle, 'From Producers to Consumers', from the influential essay by Avner Offer, but added a question mark in order to leave room for doubt about the heuristic value of a (wistfully nostalgic?) teleology. In her introductory paper, Selina Todd (Oxford) cautioned that to focus on (male) industrial labour is to neglect large sections of 'the people' throughout much of the twentieth century. Servants, for example, made up the largest group of the working class well into the 1950s. Todd also stressed that in order to understand the changes in working-class life, 'all the groups who shape class relations' need to be examined, and not just working people's own perceptions of themselves and others. Sina Fabian (Potsdam) looked at patterns of holidaymaking among manual workers in the 1970s and 1980s, charting the decline of the traditional British seaside resort and the concomitant rise of package holidays abroad. In so doing, she called into question broad generalizations about the 1970s and 1980s as 'crisis decades'. In the final paper of this section, Arne Hordt (Tübingen) conceptualized the miners' strike of 1984–5 as an example of a 'threatened order of workplace conflict', paying particular attention to the way in which the strike was played out at local level in the north-east of England.

Section four, 'To Think This is England', was concerned with the impact of economic change on the social fabric of urban communities and the cultural expressions of these developments. Klaus Weinbauer (Bielefeld) argued for a cultural history approach that interprets urban violence as a 'pattern of communication' and puts instances such as the English inner-city riots of the early 1980s into a broader European context. By comparison, Peter Itzen (Freiburg) focused on attempts by the Church of England to speak out in defence of societal groups and regions that were increasingly being pushed to the margins during the 1980s, such as 'the poor' and places like Merseyside and the north-east of England. In the final paper, Harry Cocks (Nottingham) looked at the work of radical filmmaker Derek Jarman as an example of cultural disenchantment with the present and a wistful romanticizing of a better past that never was.

Conference Reports

In a stimulating concluding discussion, the value of 'de-industrialization' as an analytical concept was debated and comparisons were drawn between the British and German experiences. Most but not all discussants agreed that E. P. Thompson's notion of the 'moral economy' might serve as a useful tool for explaining why often quite similar socio-economic challenges could elicit radically different political and cultural responses. While the workshop opened up vistas of future research on the history of de-industrialization in late twentieth-century Britain rather than providing definitive answers, there was universal agreement that it had succeeded in bringing into dialogue two historiographical traditions and, more importantly, communities of scholars.

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