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The Face of Decline: The Pennsylvania Anthracite Region in the Twentieth Century (review)

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THE FACE OF DECLINE: THE PENNSYLVANIA ANTHRACITE REGION IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY. By Thomas Dublin and Walter Licht. Ithaca, NY and London: Cornell University Press, 2005. 275 pp. Hardbound, \$65.00; Softbound, \$24.95.

The term “deindustrialization” did not come into popular usage until the late 1970s as American heavy industry went into a precipitous decline and the industrial heartland became the “rust belt.” For the people of the anthracite coal mining region of eastern Pennsylvania, deindustrialization came much earlier as Thomas Dublin and Walter Licht graphically demonstrate in *The Face of Decline: The Pennsylvania Anthracite Region in the Twentieth Century* (2005). This work joins a growing body of literature that examines the rise, decline, and fall of communities impacted by the slow erosion of heavy industry. Recent works such as *Industrial Sunset: The Making of North America’s Rust Belt* (2003) by Steven High, Ruth Milkman’s *Farewell to the Factory: Auto Workers in the Late Twentieth Century* (1997) and *Steeltown U.S.A.: Work and Memory in Youngstown* (2003) by Sherry Lee Linkon and John Russo focus on deindustrialization in the late twentieth century and its impact on the communities that were once inextricably linked with industries such as steel and automobiles. The people and communities that make up the anthracite coal mining region experienced the loss of jobs and related problems more than a generation before the area was referred to (usually derisively) as the rust belt. What links these studies is not only the tale of economic disinvestment but the human story that plays a major role in deconstructing the history of deindustrialization. Oral history interviews are key to giving a human face to economic disaster.

Dublin and Licht begin their story of the anthracite coal region by discussing its geology and geography and how that impacted its history through 1900. Since the twentieth century is the main focus of the work, the authors spend several chapters detailing the history from the height of its economic prosperity to the depths of its

decline. It is a complex story, demonstrating that deindustrialization does not happen overnight but is a lengthy process that can be traced over time. The authors intertwine the role of business and economics with that of organized labor and the government. The picture that emerges, particularly of the United Mine Workers, is not a pretty one. Indeed, in some cases the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA) was just as guilty of mismanagement and questionable practices as was the management of the mining companies. As the authors state, “local and national leaders of the UMWA ... abdicated their responsibility to defend the jobs and prospects of anthracite mineworkers, choosing instead, often in corrupt ways, to defend the international union and their interests as labor bureaucrats” (6). This went so far as to include the union’s failure to support expanding compensation for black-lung compensation benefits.

The last portion of the book deals with attempts to revitalize the anthracite coal mining region, particularly at the grass roots level. Community groups, chambers of commerce, individuals, government agencies and the like, particularly in Scranton, Wilkes-Barre and Hazleton, all tried various approaches to attract new jobs to the area, with varying degrees of success. Scranton, as the authors note, took the lead in revitalizing itself through attracting industry to the area. Because of this, other communities copied the model established in Scranton, which included public-private community development organizations and local fundraising through public appeal campaigns. In investigating local redevelopment efforts, the authors studied three community corporations: the Scranton Lackawanna Industrial Building Company, Hazleton Community Area New Development Organization, and the Greater Wilkes-Barre Industrial Fund. These three agencies were roughly similar in the number and kinds of firms they recruited, using similar strategies and competing for the same pool of businesses. The authors find it significant that the assistance of these economic redevelopment efforts made a difference in “the employment picture. Assisted firms did not just take their subsidies and run, but stayed on, grew significantly, and contributed to the economic life of the communities where they set up business” (122). While federal government programs such as the Area Redevelopment Administration and Appalachian Regional Commission ultimately “made only modest, indirect contributions to economic redevelopment,” pork barrel politics was far more important to the economy of the anthracite region (124).

With all the local efforts in attracting new jobs to the region, the question remains: just how did the people themselves perceive reindustrialization efforts? This is where the oral histories the authors used proved to be enlightening. The interviews collected in the Panther Valley, which is the southern part of the anthracite region, reveal “the existence of multiple, conflicting narratives concerning the reindustrialization effort in the anthracite region in the post-World War II decades” (134). The public (or “official”) story touts the success in recruiting new firms, while the interviews present a different memory of the redevelopment saga. Generally, the grass roots view of redevelopment is rife with images of low paying, nonunion, insecure labor—hardly adequate replacements for higher paying, unionized coal mining jobs. The authors conclude that, “Viewing the evidence as a whole, reindustrialization efforts had a mixed impact on the anthracite region” (135).

Dublin and Licht make effective use of oral histories in chapters 6 and 7, where they examine responses to the decline first among the parents (1946–90) and then

among the children (1945–90). The stories are poignant, especially in terms of not only the loss of jobs but also the loss of place. A number of people were forced to migrate in search of better jobs, leaving behind the homes they knew and loved. Family dynamics changed, with more women entering the workforce, which had a dramatic overall impact on the region. The closing of the mines, however, actually had a positive impact on the children; many of them had new opportunities, including access to higher education and thus, better jobs. Although the population declined, especially in the Panther Valley, “There remained the abiding influence of the generation of the fathers and mothers ...” (170).

The authors conclude their fine study of the anthracite coal region with an examination of the legacy of its deindustrialization and redevelopment. Communities in the nation’s rust belt could learn much from the experience of the men and women of the anthracite region. Certainly, the attempts to revitalize dying steel towns and auto towns confirm lessons learned earlier in the anthracite region. The authors point out that reactions to job loss were similar and that economic decline “requires a long term perspective” (185). Although there are differences between the anthracite region and the rust belt, there are still valuable lessons to be learned. *The Face of Decline* is aptly named. By giving deindustrialization a human face, Dublin and Licht have produced an invaluable study of communities dealing with economic decline and rebirth.

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