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Tagungsbericht: Rethinking the Histories and Legacies of Industrial Cities

vom 10. bis 11. Dezember 2020 am Luxembourg Centre for Contemporary and Digital History (C²DH), University of Luxembourg (online)

The history of (Western) European industrial cities is often told as a tragic tale of rise and decline: from rapid industrialisation in the late 19th century and economic prosperity during the *Trente glorieuses*, to the structural changes of the late 1970s and the subsequent deindustrialisation of the 1980s and 1990s – decades in which most mines and steelworks closed down, unemployment rates went up, new social problems emerged, workers' identities eroded, and once prosperous urban centres became faced with shrinking populations and empty stores in their shopping streets. Finally, since the 2000s, former industrial towns have tried to reinvent themselves as creative and cultural centres. A closer look, however, reveals that the socio-economic, demographic, and cultural transitions were more complex than suggested by a simple rise-and-decline narrative.

By offering an opportunity to compare the historical trajectories of various European industrial towns, the two-day online workshop “Rethinking the Histories and Legacies of Industrial Cities” aimed to reinvestigate the transitions outlined above. Organised by the REMIX team from the Centre for Contemporary and Digital History (C²DH) at the University of Luxembourg, the workshop placed special emphasis on perception of change: how did people living in industrial regions make sense of a rapidly evolving “lifeworld”, and how did they cope with the shift in norms and values that accompanied this evolution?

On the first day, following a general introduction of the workshop's goals and ambitions by REMIX team leader STEFAN KREBS, the first thematic panel dealt with transnational crossings. ROMAIN BONNET (Florence) explored the personal trajectory of Italian fascist missionary Flavio Settin, who settled in the Luxembourgish industrial town of Esch-sur-Alzette during the late 1920s.

Prior to this, Settin had been active in the agro-towns of his native Veneto region. An exponent of far-right Social Catholicism, a movement with major strongholds in Italy, Spain and France during the interwar period, Settin combined nationalist views with an eagerness to cross borders. Similarly paradoxical is the link between the missionary's work in both agrarian and industrial *milieux*, indicating that industrial towns were not conceptually isolated from rural regions. While Bonnet focused on the transnational crossings of an ideological movement, MARA MARGINEAN (Cluj) investigated the transfer of expert knowledge. In the late 1960s, when the Ceaușescu regime was at the height of its popularity, the Romanian government established an interdisciplinary research institute dedicated to what it called “youth problems”. Drawing upon internationally accepted methods from disciplines such as sociology and architecture, this institute sought to improve both the quality of life and the productivity of the young labour force employed in Romania's industrial towns. In one of its main conclusions, the institute suggested that young labourers be accommodated in their rural family homes rather than in new urban dwellings. This solution, facilitated by the existence of an intricate railway network, was not only cost-effective but also took psychological factors (the preservation of family ties) into account.

The second thematic panel focused on the (re)creation of social cohesion in times of industrial decline. THÉO GEORGET (Nancy/Metz) analysed the difficult and ongoing transition of the former French steelmaking town of Longwy. In the 1970s, a series of massive layoffs initially sparked a communal spirit as many of the affected workers (and their families) engaged in strikes and events. In the long run, however, this cohesion was subject to erosion because of the changing socio-economic and cultural profile of Longwy's inhabitants. Located close to the Luxembourgish border, Longwy effectively evolved into a “sleeping town”, with a large percentage of cross-border workers employed in Luxembourg's flourishing service sector. In this new context, many physical remnants of Longwy's industrial past were unscrupulously destroyed. In recent years, nonetheless, local media have criticised this collective amnesia by calling for a commemoration of the social struggles that took place in the 1970s. JULIA WAMBACH (Berlin) examined the question of “social cohesion after deindustrialisation” through the prism of football. Her case study of the public and social profiles of two clubs – the French *Racing Club de Lens* and the German *Schalke 04* (Gelsenkirchen) – showed that football has played (and continues to play) a crucial role in the creation of solidarity and a collective sense of belonging. Club managers, players and supporters from both Lens and Gelsenkirchen have consistently emphasised a continuity with the industrial past of their respective towns. One example: to this day, Lens players regularly visit the local

mining museum, where they are symbolically turned into “miners for a day”. A similar nod to the “invention of tradition” can also be found in rhetoric emphasising the players’ “puritan work ethic”, which supposedly harks back to the miners’ work ethic during the heyday of industrialisation. However, this tradition oriented mindset has come at a cost, as exemplified by the almost complete absence of women as well as new (North African) migrant groups, despite club discourses evoking “one big family” of players and supporters. The observation that industrial decline need not go hand in hand with social disintegration was also central to the presentation by SARAH THIEME (Münster). Her case study on religious social networks in 1970s and 1980s Manchester showed that churches of various denominations played a crucial role as facilitators of social action by stimulating volunteer work and bringing people together in church buildings outside the context of services. Moreover, by translating popular grievances into well-defined policy recommendations, local church leaders also acted as intermediaries between the population and politicians. In this way, they succeeded in placing the structural causes of poverty and urban decay on the political agenda while significantly improving the self-esteem of Manchester’s inhabitants.

Concluding the first day of the symposium, the third panel assembled papers on urban reconversion issues over the past three decades. FEDERICO CAMERIN (Valladolid/Weimar) explored major developments in the urban geography of Barcelona and Bilbao since the 1980s, focusing on the crucial role of local authorities in creating frameworks for long-term strategic planning. In both the Catalan and the Basque cases, reconversion processes were greatly facilitated by the waterside location of the cities, which made them attractive to tourists and real estate developers. Ironically, former port areas once disparaged by urban elites because of their industrial function and working-class image have now turned into gentrified hotspots for the wealthy. Similar ironies could also be found in the presentation on Sheffield by CHRIS CORKER (York) and JAMES FENWICK (Sheffield). After the decline of mining and steel-making activities in the 1980s, local governments sought to turn Sheffield into a consumption hotspot (through the creation of a vast shopping centre) as well as a “sporting city”. The latter ambition resulted in the construction of a sports stadium, which was demolished in 2013, less than fifteen years after being built. The example of the Don Valley Stadium illustrates that not only can industry itself fall into decline; the same fate can also befall visions that guide future development. Nowadays, reconversion strategies focus primarily on marketing Sheffield as a tourist destination, given the city’s proximity to the Peak District. Overall, however, Sheffielders have not yet found a satisfactory solution for their ongoing identity crisis.

Another northern English city, Salford, was investigated by CAROLE O'REILLY (Salford). Part of the Manchester conurbation, Salford has long been perceived by many (particularly those in southern England) as an exceptionally bleak place, inhabited by a large and deprived working class. In the early 2000s, a controversial attempt was made to counter Salford's "slum" image: in order to reinvent the town as a "media city", some BBC departments were moved from London to Salford. Far from becoming the source of a new civic identity, this move did little to alleviate the city's negative image, and the effect on local employment was also very limited. Moreover, the creation of the BBC media hub went hand in hand with an eradication of industrial remains: large parts of Salford's heritage were thus replaced by a rather bland technocratic architecture representing a blind veneration of a vague digital future.

The second day started with a thematic panel mainly dealing with local identities and workers' memories through the use of life stories. DENNIS MÖBUS (Hagen) presented his research related to the "Lebensgeschichte und Sozialkultur im Ruhrgebiet (LUSIR)", a collection of personal life stories of workers who lived in the Ruhr area between the 1930s and the 1980s. His goal was to find a way to explore life narratives more effectively using digital history methods such as text mining and topic modelling. This method makes it possible to go beyond certain assertions that were previously considered as certainties (for example, to highlight the existence of different political discourses among women in the industrial region).

JOÃO PEDRO SANTOS (Lisbon) presented an ongoing research project about the life stories of workers in the Setúbal region in southwest Portugal. The collected stories offer new insights into the history of the region, from its rise (1960s-1980s) to its subsequent economic decline. These sources provide information on fundamental issues related to population growth, the economic crisis and unemployment, as well as the advent of new artistic movements and museums that bear witness to memories of this iron and steel region. A salient aspect of the research presented by MATT BEEBEE (Exeter) on the shipyards in the late 1960s in the Tyneside conurbation (northeast England) was the demonstration that workers were anticipating the future decline even at the height of the industrial age. The author treated deindustrialisation as a meta-narrative that encompasses different life trajectories and diverse social representations. A firm belief in the value of manual skills among older workers in the 1960s attached a certain prestige to the act of shipbuilding. Even then, however, the younger generation of workers no longer had the same vision about the future prospects of their work. The last presentation of this panel was given by NICOL HORÁKOVÁ (Ostrava). She described a forthcoming research project on the living conditions and identity of the working class in the Ostrava re-

gion (northeastern Czech Republic) since the early 1990s. This life story-based research aims to shed light on sets of values and social norms through the study of the oral discourse of coal miners in this “Manchester of the East”.

The fifth and last panel studied the question of the visual and, more broadly, artistic representation of the memory of industrial cities. It provided an opportunity to analyse how images associated with the memory of the popular classes can develop in a context of structural changes such as industrialisation and deindustrialisation. First, NADÈGE MARIOTTI (Nancy-Metz/Paris) gave a presentation of the history and types of audiovisual sources in the collection of two million photographs and 30,000 films from the “Mémoires d’images de l’association Image’Est” project on the industrial past of the Lorraine region. New digitisation techniques have made the diversity of this industrial heritage more accessible than it used to be, in particular through online resources. During her presentation, Mariotti showcased images of daily life in the past in the Lorraine region (both professional and personal aspects) gleaned by means of a study of extracts from films including *Vulcain 53* (a short film directed by Bernard Brun in 1953) and *Les Nouveaux Hommes de l’acier* (a Jean G. Duclos film from 1968). IRENE DÍAZ (Oviedo) explained that the Asturias region has been affected by a significant industrial decline since the mid-1980s. This region in northern Spain was once prosperous and booming. As in many other industrial regions, factory closures have severely affected the economy and the socio-cultural fabric, generating high unemployment rates. After a considerable lapse of time, this identity-related trauma for the local population has given rise to research on memory and to various artistic creations on the legacy of industrial heritage. From this point of view, Diaz analysed a selection of artistic productions (by filmmaker Ramón Lluis Bande and comic book illustrator Alfonso Zapico) noting that: “Far from falling into the reverie of idealising the past, this nostalgia appears tightly bound to an epic memory full of defeats, but also of conquests which reinforce an embodiment of resistance.”

In his closing comments, SEBASTIAN HAUMANN (Darmstadt) summarised the workshop’s main points. In his view, each case of the transformation of an industrial town or city invites us to call into question the related local master narratives. Adopting a methodological historical approach can help us to study the inclusion or exclusion of certain social groups in the chronological evolution of each narrative accompanying the transition process from industrial heartland to post-industrial urban area. For the author, two aspects are crucial when rethinking the histories and legacies of industrial cities. First, it is important to determine precisely what defines an industrial and post-industrial city; second, we need to examine the history of how these cities represent themselves as well as the representations conveyed on them by others.

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