

Beyond the Ruins: The Meanings of Deindustrialization. Edited by Jefferson Cowie and Joseph Heathcott. Ithaca, N.Y.: ILR Press. xvi + 372 pp. Index, notes, illustrations, photographs, tables. Cloth, \$49.95. ISBN: 0-8014-3921-3.

Reviewed by David Koistinen

Deindustrialization has been a topic of interest to historians for more than a decade. Inspired by the widespread plant closings of the 1970s and 1980s, scholars have examined cases of industrial downsizing, going back to the early twentieth century. The essays in *Beyond the Ruins* reconsider the history of deindustrialization. Much of the existing literature is concerned with the direct impact of factory shutdowns on workers and their communities. The editors, Jefferson Cowie and Joseph Heathcott, describe this collection as an attempt to move “beyond the ruins,” looking past the immediate effects of plant closures in order to “rethink the chronology, memory, spatial relations, culture, and politics” (p. 2) of deindustrialization.

The book’s thirteen essays accomplish this task admirably, on the whole. Quite a few of the authors offer new perspectives on the process and diverse impacts of industrial downsizing. This is so despite unevenness in the quality of the pieces and long-winded, wandering prose, even in certain of the better ones. Some of the more trenchant contributions of the volume are highlighted below.

In addition to its immediate effects, deindustrialization can have a dire secondary impact on municipal finances. Manufacturing firms typically pay a sizable portion of local taxes; this revenue disappears as plants shut down. Howard Gillette Jr. examines these dynamics in Camden, New Jersey, an industrial city that experienced a steady pace of factory closures, starting soon after World War II. A succession of mayors tried to rehabilitate city finances, turning to a variety of strategies, which ranged from renewing the downtown through redevelopment, to using political connections to secure state assistance, to providing sites for undesirable facilities such as a prison. None of these initiatives righted the fiscal situation in a city with an increasingly impoverished and heavily minority population.

Joy L. Hart and Tracy E. K'Meyer examine views of plant closure among former workers at shuttered car battery and metalworking facilities in Louisville, Kentucky. The harsh effects of factory shutdowns on displaced employees have been copiously documented. It thus comes as something of a surprise to learn that the workers interviewed for this piece do not give a wholly negative account of their experiences. Instead, they offer up a complex stew of emotions. The former factory hands are glad to be free of work that was hot, dirty, and dangerous. Many appreciate the more pleasant surroundings at their new jobs. One man, for example, now tends a municipal golf course where he sights wildlife during his early morning rounds. While their new positions invariably pay less than industrial work, some at least claim to have adjusted to a simpler lifestyle, although all miss the factory pension plans that promised a secure retirement. None of the interviewees admit to devastating consequences of the plant shutdowns in their own lives, but many refer to instances of great suffering among former coworkers.

A thought-provoking chapter by Kirk Savage takes up the related issue of memorials to downsized industries, particularly works commemorating the now-vanished steel sector of Pittsburgh. The author contends that, like monuments to disruptive events such as war, memorials to the industrial past often smooth over the conflicts and unpleasant realities of an earlier time, creating a harmonious image that is intended to be fixed in the historical memory. Savage interprets the 1985 piece *Carnegie* by modernist sculptor Richard Serra in this way. He argues that a memorial to steelworkers at the site of a former Jones and Laughlin mill shares many of the same pitfalls, even though mill floor veterans had a central role in designing the work. The author contends that a more honest and appropriate memorial to the momentous and destructive power of the steel industry may be the huge pile of slag that stretches for miles along a Pittsburgh-area valley. A byproduct of the manufacturing process, the slag nearly obliterated the original ecology of the site, supports no vegetation, and looms over neighboring homes.

The environmental concerns evident in the Savage essay are taken up in two other chapters. Kent Curtis examines the efforts of residents of Anaconda, Montana, to deal with the remnants produced by decades of (now-terminated) copper smelting in their town. Richard Newman recounts the casual waste-disposal practices of a local chemical maker that produced the disaster at Love Canal, New York. Taken together, these pieces

poignantly demonstrate that plant closures have left some former industrial communities in the worst of both worlds: the well-paying blue-collar jobs of previous years have departed, but the toxic leavings of the factory era remain.

Other chapters illuminate diverse aspects of America's postwar economic restructuring. Gregory S. Wilson writes about the demands made during the 1950s for federal action on deindustrialization, which produced the Area Redevelopment program of the ensuing decade. Few studies have been done on public policies pursued in response to industrial decline, and Wilson's piece helps fill the gap. Bryant Simon reveals that deindustrialization does not necessarily entail the decline of a goods-producing industry. His chapter on the demise of the once-flourishing leisure sector of Atlantic City shows that the effects of downsizing in services can be equally deleterious. Robert O. Self demonstrates that the drive for tax revenue from new industrial plants in outlying communities of the San Francisco Bay Area contributed to the shrinkage of manufacturing in central cities like Oakland.

A significant weakness of *Beyond the Ruins* is the complete absence of a business-history perspective on deindustrialization. None of the contributors come from that discipline, and they take no account of the ample literature produced by business and economic historians on industrial decline. The lacuna is particularly grave when the question of why plant closures occur is tackled. It has become almost an article of faith among labor-oriented scholars that capitalists shut down existing factories because they have identified a cheaper, more docile labor force elsewhere. Most of the volume's contributors write from a labor perspective and vigorously affirm this position. Hardly acknowledged is the reality that managers in numerous industries have been forced into plant closures by the emergence of new competitors with lower operating costs or by a drop in demand for their products. Although Lisa M. Fine supports the latter scenario in her essay, highlighting the complex factors behind the demise of a small Michigan truck manufacturer, she makes the case in a barely perceptible manner. (For more on the reasons for factory shutdowns and the political implications of these reasons, see my article "The Causes of Deindustrialization" in *Enterprise & Society* [September 2002], especially pp. 484–6, 509–16.)

Widespread plant closures, especially in older manufacturing industries, constitute one of the most dramatic changes in recent American economic life. Moreover, as the pieces here demonstrate, deindustrialization has a long history in the United States. Readers interested in the social, political, and cultural effects of these structural economic shifts should find much to interest them in *Beyond the Ruins*.

David Koistinen earned a Ph.D. in history at Yale University and is assistant professor of history at the American University of Beirut. His work has appeared in several economic and business history journals. He is completing a book on the political economy of deindustrialization in mid-twentieth-century New England.