

Florida Atlantic University

*Beyond the Ruins:*

*The Meanings of Deindustrialization*

Edited by Jefferson Cowie and Joseph Heathcott

A Book Review Submitted To

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by

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## Book Review

Cowie, Jefferson and Joseph Heathcott, ed. *The Face of Decline: The Pennsylvania Anthracite Region in the Twentieth Century*. With a foreword by Barry Bluestone. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006.

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Twenty-five years ago Barry Bluestone and Bennett Harrison's influential study *The Deindustrialization of America: Plant Closings, Community Abandonment, and the Dismantling of Basic Industry* sparked a new historical sub-field. Their study of America's deindustrialization focused on the loss of industry and how the workers and their communities coped with this loss. In *Beyond the Ruins: The Meanings of Deindustrialization*, professors Jefferson Cowie and Joseph Heathcott edited an anthology that expands on Bluestone and Harrison's study. Cowie and Heathcott's work includes stories from the Rust Belt, coverage of environmental degradation left by industry, government responses to deindustrialization, the legacy of deindustrialization, and the memories that the workers have of their former vocations and how it shaped the rest of their lives.

Cowie and Heathcott's compilation of "thirteen original essays suggest[s] that deindustrialization is not a story of a single emblematic place, such as Flint or Youngstown, or a specific time period, such as the 1980s; it was a much broader, more fundamental historical transformation" (p. 2). This point is demonstrated exceptionally well in Howard Gillette Jr.'s "The Wages of Disinvestment." In this essay, which he adapts from his more extensive study, *Camden After the Fall*, Gillette explains how the Great Depression caused a reduction in industrial production in his featured city of Camden, New Jersey and in other industrial cities, like Philadelphia. This trend

continued into the post-war years as industries diversified, and moved to previously non-industrial cities, especially in the South. As these industries moved elsewhere, thousands of jobs that they provided left with them. The loss of those jobs resulted in lost tax revenue for the city that had to be made up somehow. In order to recoup these losses, Camden Mayor Joseph Nardi claimed, “There seems to be no escaping the conclusion that Camden taxpayers must shoulder the financial burden until, through the promise of urban redevelopment, the city hopefully makes its comeback” (pp. 145-46). The increase in taxes drove the remaining middle class out of the city and into the suburbs, while the remaining poor residents and the incoming African Americans who migrated to the city from the South had to endure the trials and tribulations of a city in severe decline and one with a high tax rate.

The wide selection of articles in this anthology is one of its greatest strengths. In particular, Richard Newman’s study on the toxic hazards that continue to pollute Niagara Falls, New York at a site infamously known as Love Canal and Kirk Savage’s revealing look at how Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania honors its steel legacy through the creation of artistic steel monuments, like *Carnegie*, shows the depth and the contribution of this study on the field of deindustrialization. Long after industry departed from these cities, the legacy of the “golden age” of industrialization as Kirk puts it and the damage and the harm it did to the environment continue to affect the lives of the residents in these cities that industry left behind.

While this study covers a wide range of material on deindustrialization, it does have some faults. First, this work does not cover the historiography of deindustrialization. Authors Cowie and Heathcott seem to dismiss or lump together all

previous studies on deindustrialization as complements to Bluestone and Harrison's message in *The Deindustrialization of America*. Consequently, important works, like Thomas Sugrue's *The Origins of the Urban Crisis* that focuses on deindustrialization in Detroit, Michigan was not highlighted. Additionally, in their introduction, Cowie and Heathcott argue that the history of the industrial era should be studied as a "temporary" part of American history that seemed real and timeless to those who lived in the era and worked in factories (p. 4). This claim trivializes the human experience and the lives of those individuals who suffered at the hands of deindustrialization. Looking back, any event or even empire, including Ancient Rome, can appear temporary when the authors have the benefit of hindsight that the individuals did not. Before any reader accepts Cowie and Heathcott's perspective on the past, he or she must consider that any profession in a region is potentially temporary because a hurricane, such as Katrina in New Orleans, could blow in and destroy the infrastructure of the city, taking the job with it.

Despite this difference of opinion on how best to study deindustrialization, the totality of their work should be commended. As the scholarship in the historical sub-field of deindustrialization advances, it will undoubtedly alter America's perspective on its domestic scene in the twentieth century. This widely researched body of information serves as a good springboard for scholars who wish to alter the memory and honor the legacy of America's past.