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Book Review:

*Corporate Wasteland. The Landscape and Memory of
Deindustrialization,*

by Steven High and David W. Lewis Cornell University Press, Ithaca and
London 2007

Lodz, a city in Poland where I live owes its identity to the dynamic development of textile industry during the 19th century. In the last two decades this city, like many other industrial cities in Europe and North America have seen its factories being shut-down, lost workers' communities and ambiguous future of the buildings hoping for revitalisation. With the collapse of industry and so shift from production on consumption as the basic societal process, some factories where turned into amusement and shopping centres, whereas lots of them were demolished to make a place for parking lots or "brownfield investment". The former industrial cities within the city with workers' houses and amenities like hospitals, schools and palaces of the former powerful capitalist owners are turned into tourist attractions. The commercial centre located in the former industrial city concessioned few rooms to commemorate the factory's workers with a museum of factory with an objective of guiding the young consumers through the bygone industrial era... As deindustrialization is a global process, it was an exciting experience to read a book written by Canadian authors documenting similar processes in North America.

The authors are Steven High, researcher and expert from the field from Concordia University, Montreal, the author of *Industrial Sunset: The Making of North America's Rust Belt 1969-1984* and his fellow photographer David W. Lewis. The book consists of few separate narratives, some of which are based on oral history interviews and photographs, all of them highlighting different dimensions of the deindustrialization process. They start with telling the story of a worker who was presented a medal for 35 years of work by a liquidation commissioner over a barbed-wire separating his plant from outside world. They examine the cases from North America of mills and plants being closed in places such as Ohio or West Virginia, U.S. or Ontario, Canada, giving voice to the former workers and critically analyze the contemporary discourse on deindustrialization.

The deindustrialization is often welcome as a positive process, one step forward towards a new green and high-tech future. However, in the case of small cities as Sturgeon Falls in Ontario where the paper mill was only one significant working place, its closure puts an end to the people's identity, their local universe. The case of steelworkers in Youngtown, Ohio is a story of an unsuccessful resistance of workers and coalition of religious supporting them. In 1976 the city dwellers

constructed a steel capsule to commemorate 200th anniversary of US independence which was meant to communicate to people living after 100 years that steel made the community prosperous. However, in one year's time, the steel factory was closed and community was suffering economic hardships and identity loss.

The authors seem to be convinced that the popular representation of deindustrialization as "an only option" or "sad but inevitable process" is a mystification designed to cover man-made decisions. The Canadian laid-off workers often speak about the corporate greed and blame Yankee capitalist for taking over their plants just to close them down, thus eliminating competition. The workers often tried to rescue the plant, appealing to government's and union's help, striking and bolstering Canadian nationalism. The labour union decided to send six representatives to six different mills owned by the same company in Canada to spread solidarity actions. Sadly, their representative is ignored by workers in Dryden, Ontario, where "most of the paperworkers simply shrugged their shoulders and said that the company was treating them well" (p. 103). In about a year's time, some 500 workers in Dryden got laid off. All the defiance strategies fail and American owners from Weyerhaeuser company refuse to talk about selling the paper mill in Sturgeon Falls. As one worker's wife wrote in a letter to press "those Americans might as well have dropped a bomb on Sturgeon Falls" (p.113).

Although mill was bigger local tax-payer and employer still bringing profits and offering environmentally friendly production out of recycled paper, it was closed and demolished anyhow. Some workers observed and took pictures of how their mill was demolished, whereas some preferred to close their eyes. "Now it is going to be torn down just like part of your life is being ripped away" – confessed one of the workers (p. 106). The book provides us with a record of memory debate taking place in American and Canadian cities. Whose memory should be saved? Some columnists argue that the city is not a cemetery and it should be free to develop replacing old landscapes with new ones. The mines, smokestacks or mills are said to be too dirty or too ugly to be preserved. However, if the place employed significant number of workers, should it not be saved just for its symbolic value for them?

The authors pay attention to tragedies of the workers and their families who see a big parking lot in a place where they used to work for ages and have a feeling that their work was turned into dust. One laid-off machine tender decides to keep wearing a thirty-year ring with a letter "W" he got from Weyerhaeuser. "What do I think about Weyerhaeuser? (...) I hate them with a passion. (...) I wear this because I am proud to wear it. Not because it is Weyerhaeuser, but it's thirty years of service – good service" (p. 99).

The workers are in need of re-defining their identity which was based on the mill. The whole town makes efforts to move to post-industrial era through developing tourist and housing facilities for bigger neighbouring cities, offering more working places in retail stores. The former mill workers who used to be the richest social group are now poorer than others and more reluctant to imagine meaningful economic activity in their town without industry.

Although in Canada, the "greedy American capitalists" are often the ones to blame, the corporations do not feel any patriotic sentiments. The authors take readers to Detroit for a guided story of places shown by blue-collar worker of GM Detroit Gabriel Solano, "I-75 Gypsy" as he calls himself because he survived three plant closures along the Interstate Road 75. He tells a story when the workers were offered free hot dogs in last days of operating of their plant. He threw a hot dog into a wall in presence of plant manager as a desperate act of resistance: "Here you are

shutting our plant down, putting us out of work. You're playing Christmas music. It's at Christmas time. I should be happier than a pig in you-know what? (...) this is what I think of your hot dogs. A matter of fact, this is what I think of you (p. 125-126)".

As another element of big picture of deindustrialization, the authors present and critically analyze the urban explorers (UErs) movement which is one of the social outcomes of the mentioned process. The UERs are mostly white middle-class young people who fancy exploring and documenting the decay and destruction of industrial places that often used to be symbols of their cities. They go to "places you're not supposed to go" and through entering the abandoned sites "cross an imaginative divide separating the post-industrial present from the industrial past". The UERs are global on-line community that developed their ethics of "taking pictures and leaving no footprints" and publish their "exploration" stories on the Internet. Often they find a sense of a mission in documenting the places before they get demolished, saving memory. However, the authors point out that the UERs are concentrated on their own feelings evoked by the places and universal symbols of "truly decay at its finest" (p. 53) and inevitability of time running. They do not bother into investigating the reasons behind closing certain factories and looking for the responsible ones. Some of them do not pay attention to the geographic information, while focused on the aesthetics, be it aesthetics of decay, derive the places of its social context.

There are also groups purely focused on recording and presenting on-line video recordings of demolition of industrial buildings. The authors see in this an important "secular ritual" of transition to the new era of service, high-tech "lean" economy. While in my city old factories are usually demolished overnight with a purpose of not rising attention, in North America the demolition was made a public entertainment. The demolition professionals try to become new superheroes, insisting on creative character of their destructive work, as one of them claims, contrary to construction professionals, they work without a prior scheme.

The strong advantage of the book is a presentation of complexity of deindustrialization in a concise and comprehensible way through giving voice to those who experience it. The authors present varieties of workers' opinions and sometimes do not hesitate to include their own. The book offers an analysis of such diverse sources as oral interviews, on-line narratives, biographic interviews, press articles and popular songs. However, with its 150 pages, it is just an invitation to explore more deeply the challenges and atrocities that the deindustrialization provokes. The authors do not present ambitions to provide a theory of deindustrialization or any kind of general theoretical conclusions, they leave the reader alone with a perplexed picture of big complexity. In the end, it is just a nice collection of essays and stories on deindustrialization and laid-off workers perspectives on what happened, accompanied by visual materials.

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