



Conclusion: The Ghost of Coal

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This book brings together ten chapters which critically examine education, work and social change in Britain's former coalfields. The authors draw on a range of disciplines and methodologies, and each chapter provides valuable insights into the past, present and perhaps the future of ex-coalmining communities—in terms, for example, of changing patterns of employment; community relations; experiences of school and post-compulsory education; and shifts in the gendered nature of work and social relations more broadly. What each chapter has in common though is a perspective or stance which recognises the social, economic and cultural importance of coal, but avoids either romanticising or demonising coalmining communities. We know that coal began

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to decline in importance, particularly as a form of employment, by the early-twentieth century and that colliery closures accelerated from the 1950s onwards. We also recognise that the Great Strike of 1984–1985 was a momentous turning point which effectively signalled the beginning of the end of the coal industry. But it is also important to remember that some fifty coalmines survived into the 1990s, and Britain's last deep mine, Kellingley, did not close until late-2015.

One of the book's most significant lessons is that Britain's former mining communities are marked by diversity and difference as much as similarity or unity. Different coalfields were marked by more or less radical politics, and different mining communities were more or less dependent on coal in terms of both economics and identity (Gilbert, 1991). But even the act of extracting coal differed substantially according to geology, technology and different working practices which, in turn, affected earnings, workplace relations and community life across different coalfields (Beynon & Hudson, 2021). Different communities therefore have different histories; memories of the industry are more or less recent or distant; and it is fair to say that some places have managed to ameliorate the effects of the demise of coal better than others. This is partly because of the different histories and cultures which characterise different coalfield communities, but also because of differences in geography and transport, and the various 'regeneration' initiatives which have attempted to offset the impact of pit closures (see Beatty et al., 2019). It is nevertheless possible to make certain generalisations about Britain's former coalmining communities. It would, for example, be reasonable to say that they have been less successful in reinventing themselves than some of Britain's major conurbations which, at least in popular discourse, have been transformed from declining urban wastelands into trendy, cosmopolitan twenty-first-century cities (it is, of course, also important to look past such rhetoric and recognise that significant pockets of poverty exist alongside affluence in Britain's cities). Either way, former coalfield communities remain unfashionable places, rarely worthy of attention—other than as objects of curiosity, pity or derision: bleak and old fashioned, full of resentful people with questionable attitudes and opinions. But, whilst such stereotypes are unfair,

it is perhaps unsurprising to find a certain bitterness can sometimes be observed in the former coalfields.

Neoliberalism, Dispossession and the Ghost of Coal

Much has been written about how neoliberalism has dispossessed working-class communities over the last forty years or more, not only economically but also socially, culturally and politically. This can be seen, for example, in high levels of unemployment and underemployment; in job insecurity; low pay; deteriorating conditions of employment; and increasing managerial control and surveillance. But the impact of neoliberalism reaches far beyond employment and the labour process. It has, for example, also affected access to, and the operation of, housing, health, social care and other public services, all of which now function as quasi-businesses operating in competitive markets created and maintained by the state—often to the detriment of staff and service users. Education from early-years settings through to further and higher education is now the subject to diktat and discipline, managerialism and performativity. Whilst dominant discourses present educational competition and choice as improving standards, empowering the individual student-consumer and of course driving social mobility, it actually exacerbates existing patterns of inequality, especially in terms of social class (see, for example, Ball, 2005; Reay, 2017; Thompson, 2019). Meanwhile, trade unions, local authorities and grass-roots organisations which traditionally represented the working classes have been disempowered by successive waves of neoliberal policy. It is more than this though. Neoliberalism has arguably reshaped virtually all aspects of social life according to the strictures of the market—from health, welfare, travel and communications through to sport, leisure and even daily inter-personal relationships (see, for example, Davidson, 2013; Harvey, 2007). Such processes have affected all working-class communities but have been felt particularly sharply in the former coalfields, especially in some of the more isolated and deprived locales, like those Nicky Stubbs and Richard Gater write about in this book.

Chomsky (1996) describes neoliberalism as essentially a form of *Class Warfare* and, whilst such language may sound extreme, it is quite possible to interpret the way coalmining communities were treated in the 1980s and 1990s in such a way. The tale of the decimation of the coal industry has been rehearsed extensively elsewhere and, whilst there are different versions of this story, it is safe to say that confrontation between the miners and the Conservative governments of that time was no accident (see, for example, Beynon, 1985; Milne, 2004; Phillips, 2014). The Tories, of course, had history with the NUM, which effectively brought down Edward Heath's government in 1974. During their years in opposition, Keith Joseph and others on the Right of the Conservative Party, including new leader, Margaret Thatcher, demanded a break with the so-called consensus politics which dominated post-war Britain. Over time, a new doctrine based on previously unfashionable ideas about individual liberty, free markets and the inherent inefficiency of the state effectively colonised the Conservative Party (see, for example, Hayek, 1944, 1960). Mrs Thatcher then swept to power at the end of the 1970s following the so-called Winter of Discontent—a series of high-profile public sector strikes presented as symbolic of Britain in abject crisis. Overly powerful trade unions were, the Conservatives argued in the run-up to the 1979 General Election, troublesome, backward-looking organisations interfering with the natural order of the economy, sapping the profitability of business and the morale of the country (see Sandbrook, 2012).

Whilst in opposition, the Tories made detailed plans to tackle strike action in key nationalised industries, including coal. The 1977 Ridley Plan recommended building up coal reserves at power stations; importing coal from overseas; recruiting non-unionised lorry drivers to haul coal; and converting power stations to burn oil and gas. It also suggested cutting off welfare benefits to striking workers and creating a mobile squad of specially trained police to be deployed against pickets. The tactics of successive Thatcher governments reflect all this. In 1981, the prime minister was forced to back down to the threat of NUM strike action in response to the plan to close twenty-three 'uneconomic' collieries, largely because sufficient coal stocks were not in place. Three

years later, however, preparations had been made and a bitter year-long strike was triggered by the announcement of another round of pit closures.

Different commentators have different perspectives on the 1984–1985 strike and its key protagonists—prime minister, Margaret Thatcher; the President of NUM, Arthur Scargill; and the Chairman of the NCB, Ian MacGregor—as well as the respective role played by police, the courts and the miners themselves. What is clear, however, is that the full resources of the state were mobilised to beat the strike, and eventually, Britain’s strongest trade union, the NUM, was roundly defeated. Miners and police fought pitch battles on picket lines, union assets were seized, soup kitchens fed striking miners and their families, and 26 million working days were lost before the NUM admitted defeat (Paxman, 2021). The physical and psychic violence inflicted on mining communities should not be underestimated, and its aftereffects live on in the former coalfields (Simpson, 2021; Simpson & Simmons, 2021). Either way, the coal industry entered swift decline in the years after the Great Strike and just fifty collieries remained by the early-1990s. Over thirty of these were shut in 1992, and the rest were sold on to the private company RJB Mining (later known as UK Coal) which continued to close pits until the industry effectively ceased to exist when Britain’s final deep mines shut in 2015 (Paxman, 2021).

Life After Coal

The way Nicky Stubbs mobilises the Gramscian notion of interregnum in this book offers a powerful way of understanding the plight of many former mining communities following the closure of the industry—although the extent to which the interregnum has passed is debatable. The likes of Bright (2011), Simpson (2021) and Walkerdine and Jimenez (2012) help us to understand how the former coalfields continue to be haunted in ways which go beyond numerical data. In other words, being from the former coalfields continues to affect both individuals and communities in multiple ways—as is evident from many chapters in this book. There is, we suggest, still something *different* about ex-coalmining

communities and about being from a former coalmining community. For us as individuals, the legacy of coal continues to affect us in multiple ways. It is present, for example, in our sceptical dispositions; in our suspicion of authority; and in the coarse ‘pit humour’ that characterises the way we goad each other about work and life broadly. In the past, this harsh, sarcastic humour acted as a survival mechanism for miners and their families living and working in conditions of adversity (Dennis et al., 1956). It lives on in the bleak banter which those from elsewhere seldom ‘get’.

There has, of late, been something of a resurgence of interest in the social and economic history of coal (see, for example, Beynon & Hudson, 2021; Gibbs, 2021; Paxman, 2021). There are, however, still significant gaps in our knowledge and understanding of former coalmining communities, although it might be more accurate to say that much has been disregarded or forgotten. Some of this relates to the role of women. Dennis et al. (1956) wrote about women’s unpaid labour—cooking, cleaning, fetching and carrying, rearing children and so on—without which the male workforce (and by extension the coal industry) would have struggled to function. The role of women in the Great Strike has also received significant attention (see, for example, Loach, 1985). There is moreover some research on ‘women’s work’ within the coal industry in terms, for example, of clerical and administrative roles, and in catering, cleaning and ancillary work (University of Wolverhampton, 1982). There is, however, little understanding of the importance of women’s labour in the coal production process itself. Whilst the 1842 Coal Mines Act banned all females (and boys under ten-years-old) from working underground, women continued to be employed in ‘pit-brow’ work—unloading, sorting and shifting coal—for over a century thereafter. The last pit-brow girls were not made redundant until 1972, one hundred and thirty years after women were forbidden from working underground yet their story remains largely untold (although see John, 1982).

Some chapters in this book focus on girls and women, mainly in terms of their experiences of school. Martyn Walker’s chapter focuses on post-compulsory education and training for (male) mineworkers, but there is a paucity of equivalent research on the experiences of women who were

employed by the NCB. Thousands of women were employed to process, administer and manage miners' pay and pensions; handle finance and purchasing; deal with health and safety records; and work in support functions including personnel, occupational health, sales, export and marketing. Many of these women undertook significant programmes of education and training, often attending colleges and polytechnics on 'day release' from their place of work. Yet there is virtually no research on their experiences of education and employment.

The nature and purpose of education in capitalist societies have always been complex and multi-faceted, although it has often been associated with failure and humiliation for working-class pupils (Reay, 2017). This continues to be the case, despite claims that more education will somehow provide the antidote to a range of social and economic ills (see Smyth & Simmons, 2018). Whilst such notions are at best wishful thinking, it is worth thinking a little more about the notion that education can drive social mobility, especially in relation to coalmining communities. Martyn Walker's chapter explains how the NCB provided many coalminers with access to vocational education and training which opened up significant opportunities for career progression—both in mining and sometimes in other industries after redundancy and pit closure. Martyn's work illustrates how these processes were linked to social mobility *within* the local community, whereas nowadays social mobility—especially in terms of access to secure professional work—is far more likely if young people leave the former coalfields (Beatty et al., 2019).

It is, however, necessary to critique dominant discourses of social mobility more generally. On the one hand, notions of social mobility have become something of a mantra in UK policy circles. There are various reasons for this, not least that promoting social mobility as a goal deflects attention away from thorny questions about the redistribution of wealth, fairness and equality. Effectively, social progress becomes a competition whereby (working-class) individuals fight to try and escape their origins. There are numerous problems with this, not least the patronising notion that working-class youth somehow need to become better, more civilised and productive individuals. But the possibility of downward mobility is generally overlooked (Ainley, 2016). Employment in the

former coalfields is now largely characterised by insecure, low-pay work in warehouses, call centres, retail, distribution and social care (Beatty et al., 2019). Upward social mobility, at least as it is currently supposed to function, effectively becomes a mechanism whereby sections of talented working-class youth are ‘creamed off’ into the ranks of the middle and upper classes. There are, however, also more ‘technical’ problems about dominant discourses of social mobility, especially the assertion that education should be the primary way through which it can be achieved.

Let us be clear, participation in education and training has, over time, undoubtedly improved the life chances of many, but the relationship between education and social mobility is not straightforward or unproblematic. No amount of education can facilitate significant social mobility without concomitant labour market opportunities (Bukodi & Goldthorpe, 2018). During the 1950s and 1960s, the ‘golden age of social mobility’ was driven largely by the expansion of professional and managerial jobs associated with the nationalisation of key industries and the creation of the welfare state. But, whilst there has continued to be some growth in high-skill work, this has not kept pace with rising educational attainment (Ainley, 2016). Traditionally, gaining degree-level qualifications secured entry to professional employment, but the great expansion of higher education which has taken place, especially since the 1990s, means this is no longer the case. There is now a general over-supply of graduates which means that many employers can be highly selective, often preferring to recruit graduates from the top-end of the Russell Group (the wealthy research-intensive universities), rather than less-prestigious institutions. ‘Top employers’ moreover now frequently demand a CV embellished with a range of other achievements and experiences in terms, for example, of sporting excellence, travel, music or voluntary work—all of which advantages students from more privileged backgrounds viz-a-viz those with less social, economic and cultural capital (Brown et al., 2010). Working-class young people therefore remain systematically disadvantaged despite increased participation in further and higher education (Thompson & Simmons, 2013).

It is also important to consider other changes in the UK labour market. Whilst many manufacturing jobs are now gone, this does

not mean that Britain has somehow been transformed into a 'knowledge economy' based on skills, creativity and cutting-edge technology (Elliott & Atkinson, 2007). There has in fact been a great expansion of low-pay, low-skill employment across the British economy, especially in retail, hospitality, catering, care and other forms of service sector work—particularly in the former coalfields. There has also been something of a 'hollowing out' of intermediate-level employment, especially in craft, technical and supervisory roles (Ainley, 2016). The gap between high-skill and low-skill employment has therefore widened, and the 'rungs' on the ladder of social mobility are now fewer and more broadly spaced. Whilst never commonplace, progress from the shop floor into professional or managerial roles becomes increasingly difficult.

Dominant mantra about the importance of skills, creativity and innovation rings hollow when so many jobs basically entail routine, fragmented low-skill tasks with little worker discretion or autonomy. The recent expose of conditions at the Sports Direct warehouse at Shirebrook near Mansfield illustrates some of the harsh realities of working life in the former coalfields (The Guardian, 2020). The implications for education and training associated with such a labour market are profound, and it is difficult to avoid turning to classic Marxist analyses about the role of education in society (see, for example, Bowles & Gintis, 1976). The role of vocational learning is particularly problematic. Traditionally, the coal industry created significant demand for post-compulsory education and training—in terms not only of craft and technical skills, but also in subject disciplines ranging from engineering and surveying to management, accountancy and other branches of business studies. Importantly, most of these qualifications were delivered in partnership with local institutions of further and higher education which also drew a considerable number of staff from the coal industry. All this was lost with the demise of coal, and there is, among many employers, little demand for high-level qualifications and skills. This, in turn, has significant implications for colleges other providers of education and training. Ainley (2016) points on the one hand to the virtual collapse of a coherent youth labour market with young people required to invest more and more time, energy and money in various forms of learning for diminishing returns. Young

people are, Ainley argues, effectively left trying to ‘run up a downwards escalator’.

Revisiting the Ghost of Coal

We recognise this all paints an irksome picture, but the future need not be bleak for Britain’s former coalfield communities. Paxman (2021) argues that coal in many ways ‘made Britain’ and there is no doubt it played a key role in fuelling industrialisation and urbanisation, and the growth of empire which made Britain a world power, militarily and in terms of commerce and trade. The UK is now a largely post-industrial economy, the empire is long gone, and the coal industry no longer exists. Whilst Britain continues to import significant quantities of coal, fossil fuels are now deeply unfashionable with the stated intention of moving to green and renewable energy in vogue across most advanced economies. This shift could—perhaps even should—provide new opportunities for the former coalfields. Reducing carbon emissions will not happen by accident. Significant investment and leadership from the state will be required if we are serious about building a ‘green economy’ (see Beatty & Fothergill, 2021). New forms of manufacturing, transport, construction and recycling, and a workforce able to provide new goods and services will be required. In other words, investing time, energy and, of course, money in coalfields communities would allow them to make a substantial contribution to the national economy once again. There are some signs that this is beginning to happen. A new Britishvolt ‘gigaplant’ to produce batteries for electric vehicles—providing around 3,000 direct jobs and another 5,000 jobs in the supply chain—is currently under construction in the former coalmining town of Blyth in Northumberland (DBEIS, 2022). Significant further developments of this kind will be required to move the former coalfields forwards.

Finally, we return to the role of education, which can be both a conservative and a progressive force in society (sometimes simultaneously). But schooling has, we know, often disparaged, belittled or demeaned working-class cultures and histories. The challenge, if we are serious about engaging working-class pupils in education, is to provide a learning

environment and culture relevant to their lives and aligned with working-class values and principles. This is difficult especially under neoliberal regimes, but there are various strategies which can be used. This relates to promoting learning which young working-class people can relate to; education which develops respectful relationships with communities; and forms of learning which recognise the richness of working-class lives as a basis for investigation. This might include a focus on place, relationships and involving the local community to celebrate particular ideas, events or cultures (Smyth & McInerney, 2007; Smyth & Simmons, 2018). In other words, methods such as those Ewan Gibbs and Susan Henderson-Bone write about in this book. Whilst such an approach is relevant to all working-class communities, it is needed in the former coalfields perhaps more than anywhere—where we should recognise not only the loss and pain of the past, but also the ‘goodness’ of the ghosts which remain to haunt them (Simpson & Simmons, 2021).

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