Contextualising the Coalfields: Mapping the Socio-Economic and Cultural Loss of the Coal Industry

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Introduction

I have been teaching the sociology of work for over two decades and each year I get students to develop their own essay questions for the course and then engage in a review of the topic. Some years ago, a young woman in the class said she was interested in doing 'something on coalfield communities'. I asked where she wanted to look at and she replied, 'somewhere up north where the coal mines used to be'. For those outside the UK, I teach at the University of Kent, in South-East England. The student, born and bred in Kent, was completely taken aback when I informed her that Kent had a small but vibrant coalfield for much of the twentieth century, and that she actually lived near the site of one of the former collieries. I knew at the time this encounter would be the basis of a good anecdote, but the more I have considered it over the years, I have come

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to see it as telling, for this lack of knowledge about place and industry reveals the way an important industry can be eradicated so quickly from popular imagination (Byrne & Doyle, 2004).[1] It also shows the enduring popularity of the coalfields and their communities to study and understand what has happened to the UK over the last two and a half centuries, and especially over the last seven decades.

Coal underpinned and drove the industrial revolution from the mid-eighteenth century. It facilitated the growth of new industries by supplying cheap regular power. Coal was at the heart of the railway revolution beginning in the 1820s. Demand for coal threw up new settlements and gave importance to areas of the country which sat on coalfields. By World War I, there were over a million men and boys employed in the industry, a huge proportion of the industrial workforce (Ashworth, 1960; Mathias, 1969). In the interwar period, with its economic depression, coal and coal miners were central to political, social and economic questions of the day. The coalfields are often a byword for industrial distress (Powell, 1993). In the 1947, the industry was nationalised by Clement Attlee's reforming administration (Fishman, 1993). In the wake of nationalisation came investment and a rationalisation programme. Soon too, successive governments attempted to wean the UK off its overreliance on coal, seeking to diversify the energy mix through cheap oil and nuclear power (Hall, 1981; Powell, 1993). In the 1970s, industrial relations in the coal industry once again took centre stage with a series of strikes and disputes that ultimately brought down the Heath government in 1974 (Richards, 1996). By the 1980s, coal was once again thrust into public debate, first by the miners' strike of 1984–1985 and then the long aftermath of pit closure and privatisation. This period is also marked by a new focus on the problems of the former coalfields—the coalfields serving as exemplars of post-industrial ruination and its associated problems (Beynon & Hudson, 2021).

[1] Bryne and Doyle highlight the irony of this historical eradication when they note the lack of evidence of the mining industry and South Tyneside: "…there is actually more visible evidence of the Roman occupation, which ended in the fourth century AD and has no historical connection to any contemporary experience, than of an industry which at its peak in the 1920s directly employed more than 12,000 men as miners" (p. 166).

Over my adult life, I've had an ongoing relationship with coal in various ways. I was a young railway worker on the London Underground during the 1984–1985 strike dropping change into collection buckets on the streets of the capital. I wore solidarity badges (NUM/NUR) at work and helped raise funds for the dispute through my union branch. I attended an access course at Ruskin College Oxford in the late-1980s where some of my peers were former miners and other redundant industrial workers escaping the ravages of deindustrialisation. I did my undergraduate degree at Durham University, seeking out early in my first week the sanctuary of the Durham Miners Hall at Red Hills, a grand Edwardian pile on the fringe of the city, built with a non-conformist style meeting hall in a large horse-shoe pattern. As a post-doctoral researcher, I gained a post in 1997 looking at economic and social change in four coalfield regions of England and Wales: Easington in County Durham; Mansfield in the East Midlands; St Helens in the North West; and Cynon Valley in South Wales (Strangleman, 2001; Strangleman et al., 1999). After that two-year project, I thought I had left coal behind as I studied a variety of other sectors and workers experiencing industrial decline, loss and closure. But somehow, coal kept dragging me back through teaching undergraduates from coalfield regions and especially graduate students studying the coalfields as part of their PhDs. Gradually, I've come to realise just how important coal was, is and will be in future in understanding who we are—economically, socially, culturally and politically as a post-industrial nation.

This chapter explores what the coalfields and their communities can tell us about loss—loss of industry, identity, work ethic and a sense of industrial rootedness. I want to explore how that story of loss has, to some extent, ironed out complexity and contradiction. Fundamentally, this is an attempt to understand industrial loss through various accounts of an industry that has been central to academics, as well as occupying a special central place in popular imagination. The next section explores some of these themes through two films made thirty years apart: *Kes* and *Billy Elliot*. I then look at the question of the coalfields in relation to wider narratives of deindustrialisation, especially using the notion of the 'half-life of deindustrialisation' (Linkon, 2018). Finally, I suggest that the

coalfields act as a kind of post-industrial laboratory against which we tell at least part of our Island's industrial and post-industrial story.

The Tale of Two Billys

Two characters both named Billy were the main focus of a pair of films set in the English coalfields some three decades apart. *Kes* was adapted from Barry Hines' (1968) book *A Kestrel for a Knave*. Released in 1969, *and set* in and around the South Yorkshire coalfields, *Kes* centres around fifteen-year-old Billy Casper, the younger son of a single mother (Loach, 1969).[2] Billy is on the cusp of leaving school and has an older step-brother—Jud—with whom he shares a bedroom. His home is devoid of love and comfort. Ignored by his mother, and bullied by Jud, Billy seeks solace in training a kestrel he acquires and names Kes. Thirty years later, another Billy starred in the 2000 film *Billy Elliot*, set in the fictional village of Everington—in reality Easington Colliery on the coast of County Durham (Daldry, 2000). He too comes from a single-parent household, this time headed by his grieving father, and, like Billy Casper, Billy Elliot also has an older brother who works down the pit. While *Kes* was set contemporaneously, the later film was based on the events of the 1984–1985 miners' strike a decade and a half before.

Both films tell us much about post-war England, about growing up in an industrial landscape in transition. They speak to issues of place, home, identity, work, expectation, aspiration and above all class. Both films reveal a multitude of aspects of the coalfields, past, present and future, and uncover multiple tensions at the heart of the working-class experience. Billy's Casper and Elliot both want to escape their immediate and projected futures down the pit. For Billy Casper, temporary escape comes from his befriending of Kes and his discovery of nature in and around his local village. Nature affords him the opportunity to escape from his life of being bullied and humiliated by most adults in

[2] The 2000 Penguin Classic reprinting of the book includes an afterword by Hines reflecting on the character of Billy Casper and his role in the book. Hines returned to the topic of mining and mining communities in his later book—*The Price of Coal*.

his life. But equally the plot of *Kes* allows Billy to dream of escaping the destiny of working in the coal industry. Throughout the film, Billy Casper is reminded that he has little choice but to follow his stepbrother down the pit, a refrain taken up by his mother, stepbrother and the well-meaning Youth Employment Officer who assures him that coal is the future: '…there are good opportunities in mining…Conditions have improved tremendously' (Loach, 1969). Billy Casper aspires to anything *but* the pits but has few clues as to what the alternatives could be.

We never learn if Billy Casper becomes a miner. If he did, he would have entered an industry on the brink of upheaval. After a period during the 1950s and 1960s, where cheap oil was used to diversify the UK's energy mix, coal was about to make a comeback. This shift strengthened the miners' bargaining position and led to a series of industrial disputes that eventually brought down the Heath Conservative government of the early-1970s. These disputes were themselves born of the frustrations felt in the industry at terms and conditions and, above all, pay (see, for example, Richards, 1996; Taylor, 2003). *Kes* captures the era on a cusp well. There is full employment in the village, coal is in its pomp and workers were enjoying the backend of the long boom, the near thirty years of rising living standards that lifted all working-class lives. Pay careful attention to the scenes in *Kes* and the viewer sees a mixed picture of contemporary affluence (see, Lawrence, 2019). To be sure, the pit has been modernised in the wake of nationalisation; but look carefully and you see more than traces of poverty and depravation. Post-war England still bears the hallmark of its nineteenth-century industrialisation alongside signs of loss and decline of other industries that sprang up around the coalfields (Coates & Silburn, 1970). Equally, the coal industry itself had been contracting from the start of nationalisation as uneconomic, smaller or exhausted pits closed, miners and their families relocated, and, in some cases, whole villages bulldozed and abandoned (Gibbs, 2021; Pattinson, 2004; Taylor, 2003). Kes itself is set in an area and time where wages were depressed by wage restraint policies and rationalisation.

Billy Casper's school is a recently opened secondary modern designed by a more generous post-war welfare state. But for all its plate-glass modernity, it forms part of a deeply divisive educational system which separates the academically gifted children who pass the eleven plus test

and go to grammar school, and the rest who enter secondary moderns or technical schools where kids were funnelled into routine clerical, retail jobs, manual labour, factory work or, of course, coalmines. Coalfield communities are at once similar and distinct from other working-class communities. In many ways, Billy Casper could be one of the characters in Paul Willis' (1977) *Learning to Labour*. Though Billy Casper cannot be simply categorised as either one of Willis' 'Lads', nor 'ear'ols', Billy is a non-conforming non-conformist. The irony that Willis pointed out was that his 'Lads' ended up reproducing the industrial workforce because their rebellion against school cut off other avenues and opportunities. Both *Kes* and the novel *Kestrel for a Knave* on which it is based beautifully illustrate those same processes at work in Yorkshire. The 'Lads' found employment in the still vibrant light industry of the Black Country. Billy Casper and his secondary modern peers had a narrower set of options. One of the features of the coal industry was the way mines were often located in isolated settings. Poor transport and a lack of other employment, often deliberately excluded from coal areas, meant coal had to be *their* life.[3] *Kes* captured the parochial nature of coal communities well. Billy Casper wants to escape but has few clues as to how to make that move. This sense of entrapment is geographic, age related, economic but especially classed. To Billy Casper, the world outside his community is a strange and hostile place, one where he doesn't understand the rules, where his cultural capital, such as it is, has little or no value.

For all the modernising zeal of Coal Board publicity, coalfield communities occupied a different space in the academic imagination. Since the beginnings of post-war British sociology, the coal industry held an important attraction. In 1956, Norman Dennis, Fernando Henriques and Clifford Slaughter (1956) published their classic study *Coal is our Life*, based on research in 'Ashton' a mining village of some 14,000 people. The real-life Ashton was Featherstone a few miles from Athersley

[3] *Learning to Labour* is something of a touchstone in terms of sociological/ cultural accounts of the working class and the transition of the economy from 'Fordism' to post-Fordism. See Dolby, N., Dimitriadis, G., & Willis, P. (Eds.). (2004). *Learning to labor in new times.* Routledge. For studies framed in relation to Willis' book, see McDowell, L. (2003). *Redundant masculinities: Employment change and white working-class youth*. Blackwell; Ward, M. (2015). *From labouring to learning: Working-class masculinities, education and de-industrialization.* Palgrave Macmillan.

and Hoyland where *Kes* was filmed. *Coal is our Life* rendered a sympathetic account of coal communities looking in turn at the community, the work of the miner, trade unionism, leisure and the family. It was part of a wave of community studies spurred on by an ethnographic impulse to study the working class in their own environment as earlier anthropologists had understood remote tribes in faraway lands (see Roberts, 1999; Savage, 2010). Arguably, Dennis and colleagues gave a more balanced account than earlier anthropologists or the first wave of community studies after World War II. *Coal is our Life* has enjoyed an important half-life.

It was an early British study of an occupational community. Its relative homogeneity served well in an era where sociologists wanted to develop ideal typologies to interrogate and understand the world around them.[4] The people of Ashton then exemplified what were later labelled as 'traditional workers'. Sociologist David Lockwood (1975) noted in his seminal essay, S*ources in Variation in Working-class Images of Society,* that traditional workers were:

> …to be found in industries and communities which, to an ever-increasing extent, are backwaters of national industrial and urban development. The sorts of industries which employ deferential and proletarian workers are declining relatively to more modern industries. (p. 20)

Coal is our Life acted as an example of a traditional community in the process of eclipse, a particular type of working-class culture now overtaken by the newly emerging industries taking root outside the established industrial areas of the UK.[5]

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[4] See the prominent place *Coal is Our Life* is given in Frankenberg, R. (1965). *Communities in Britain: Social life in town and country*. Pelican. This sets *Coal is Our Life* as one of the foundational studies of British sociology. *Coal is our Life* was republished in 1969 in the wake of Frankenberg's volume. Later Graham Crow devotes a chapter to the centrality of mining community literature, especially the impact of *Coal is our Life*, in Crow, G. (2002). *Social solidarities: Theories, identities and social change*. Open University Press.

[5] There was a political fear on the left that post-war prosperity was weakening ties between labour and the manual working class. The miners are important here and so the perceived decline or marginalisation of the industry takes on a new significance. See Abrams, M., and Rose, R. (1960). *Must Labour Lose?* Penguin. See also the *Affluent Worker* Studies which sought to examine the notion of embourgeoisement. Although the groups of workers studied did not

If Billy Casper had stayed in the industry by the eve of the 1984–1985 miners' strike, he would have been in his early thirties, probably with a young family and a mortgage. It was this generation of miners that had most to lose by the planned closures which were the catalyst for the dispute. This cohort were too young to retire but had few alternative opportunities given their education and the state of the contemporary labour market. Perhaps now is a good point to leave Billy Casper and pick up on the life of our other Billy.

Billy Elliot is the eponymous hero of the 2000 film set in the midst of the 1984–1985 miners' strike; shot on location in Easington Colliery on the North-East Durham coast. The essential plot is that Billy Elliot discovers a latent passion for dance after being sent to boxing lessons. Accidentally stumbling in on a ballet lesson held in the same venue, he eventually joins in as the only boy in the group. Initially resistant, his family eventually come to accept and facilitate Billy's aspiration to train at the Royal Ballet School in London. The film plays out over the period of the strike with the pit row houses and the police lines acting as a backdrop to Billy's dancing. *Billy Elliot* is a lighter film than *Kes*, somewhat ironically given the comparison between the two periods in which they are set.[6] While the strike exposes suffering and to some degree violence, most of the characters are sympathetic in themselves, and towards Billy. The real parallels with *Kes* are in the portrayal of a community where aspiration is discouraged or crushed. In the latter film, aspiration is highly gendered and part of the reluctance to speak of, or later countenance, a career in ballet that is seen as the threat to the established hegemonic masculinity of the area. But this question of aspiration—crushed or realised—is revealing in a number of ways. While gender norms in coalfield areas is the obvious transgression taking place in *Billy Elliot,* we can also see the way this is a film profoundly about class rooted in a particular place and industrial culture. Resistance here

include miners, they were part of the traditional foil against which the emerging affluent workers were contrasted. See Goldthorpe, J., Lockwood, D., Bechhofer, F., & Platt, J. (1969). *The affluent worker in the class structure*. Cambridge University Press.

[6] Comparing unemployment statistics between 1970 and 1984, we can see that seasonally adjusted unemployment was around 3% in 1970 but had peaked at 11.9% by 1984. By the time, the later film was made the rate had fallen back to nearer 5%. Office for National Statistics Unemployment rate (aged 16 and over, seasonally adjusted) 1971–2021.

is partially played out on the grounds of authentic work based on mining and a classed rejection of work/leisure/pleasure based on mining. Thus, work identity intertwines and overlays a masculine identity and culture present in a coalfield area (Nayak, 2003; Walkerdine & Jimenez, 2012; Ward, 2015). Importantly, place is gendered here too. The working-class masculinity of the coalfield is silently juxtaposed to the effeminacy of London and South-East England and its culture (Russell, 2004). In order to fulfil his dream, Billy has to escape Everington. He is less obviously alienated from his home village and has to confront both class and place estrangement in his new home in the south.

Although three decades apart, the films reflect similar themes around work expectations, culture and class. Both speak to the restricted and restricting culture of mining communities and the difficulties involved in developing and realising aspirations—in education, employment and more broadly. But what I have long found interesting about *Billy Elliot* is that there is an unremarked central contradiction at the heart of the story. It is perhaps ironic that the same venue where Billy initially tries his hand at ballet is a miners' welfare hall. These places were a central feature of many coalfield communities, funded sometimes by employers but always by levies raised on miners themselves. One reading, therefore, of Billy Elliot's journey is that far from blocking aspiration, working-class mining culture and the physical and social structure of an industrial district allow Billy to follow his dream. In the wake of deindustrialisation, many welfare halls closed down, and so the likelihood of a place like Easington producing another *Billy Elliot* is reduced (Emery, 2020). It is to that aspect of the coalfields that we now turn, examining the relationship of coal to broader understandings of deindustrialisation.

The Half-Life of Coal and the Half-Life of Deindustrialisation

The modern study of deindustrialisation really began with the publication of Bluestone and Harrison's (1982) *The Deindustrialisation of America*, which defined deindustrialisation as the systematic reduction in industrial capacity in formally industrially developed areas. Bluestone

and Harrison's volume placed social and community factors as central alongside economic and political considerations of industrial change. Early writing on deindustrialisation focused primarily on plant closures and the immediate responses of workers, politicians and unions (Hoerr, 1988; Lynd, 1982; Massey & Meegan, 1982; Staudohar & Brown, 1987; Westergaard et al., 1989). Interest lay in the number of job losses, shifts in the rates of unemployment, changes in employment within different sectors of the economy, and the spatial distribution of industry and its loss—what Cowie and Heathcott (2003) describe as the 'body count' approach. As an alternative, Cowie and Heathcott argued for a broader more historical account of industrial decline, seeking to understand individual plant or site loss in a wider, richer, more nuanced context.

Gradually, however, those working in the field of deindustrialisation have tried to incorporate a broader set of narratives into their accounts, examining issues of culture, community and identity (Strangleman & Rhodes, 2014). The catalyst for recasting the field was the insight provided by Linkon's (2018) notion of 'the half-life of deindustrialisation'. Like all the best ideas, Linkon's is beautifully simple. Essentially, it is the notion that, like radioactivity, industrial loss has a half-life:

> For these communities, deindustrialization is not an event of the past. It remains an active and significant part of the present. Like toxic waste, the persistent and dangerous residue from the production of nuclear power and weapons, deindustrialization has a half-life. Its influence may be waning, slowly, over time, but it remains potent, and it remains potent, and it cannot simply be forgotten or ignored. (p. 2)

One of the virtues of the notion of half-life is that it holds in tension the past, present and future. It allows us to appreciate the roots of issues that go back decades or centuries. It speaks equally to the present, to the here and now and how the past shapes the present. Equally, it allows us to make informed guesses as to what the future holds. The half-life confronts us with uncertainty and liminality. By implication, the past is over, but the future is unclear and uncertain.

In my own work on deindustrialisation, I have theorised with the idea of the half-life (Strangleman, 2017a). I chose to look back to the writing

of E. P. Thompson (1963/1968) who, in his preface to his classic *The Making of the English Working Class*, argued that historians needed to appreciate that there was a pre-industrial culture in common with which the nascent working class took with them in the early stages of the industrial revolution (see also, Thompson, 1991, 1993). This was a developed moral order—a set of customs, norms and values which help shape an understanding of changes occurring around people and communities. I tried to capture this in Fig. 1.

Building on Thompson's ideas, I drew on the conceptual work of economist Karl Polanyi (1944) and cultural Marxist Raymond Williams (1977). Polanyi popularised notions of disembedding and re-embedding, which he used to describe the process whereby economic change pulls up established social, economic, political and cultural practice and then re-embeds them in a different socio-economic pattern. Thus, for Polanyi, the industrial revolution was a gigantic process of disembedding and re-embedding, from a traditional rural economy to a new industrial economy with profoundly different relationships. Raymond Williams is important as he also speaks to this process through his idea of structure of feeling, again, like Thompson, this hints at shared values and ways of seeing culture and society (Williams, 1973, 1977). Structures of feelings are not fixed but constantly in the process of being made, remade

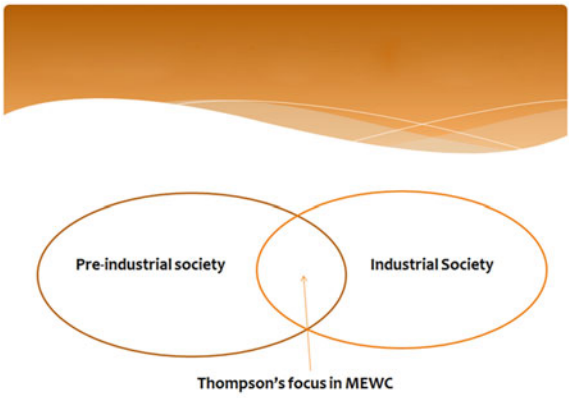

Fig. 1 Thompson on industrial change

and eroded. Williams imagined three forms of structure of feeling—emergent, dominant and residual. For the purposes of this chapter, perhaps this last form is the most vital. A residual structure of feeling speaks to a process of loss, marginalisation and eventually erasure. Taken together, Linkon's half-life, Polanyi's notion of dis- and re-embedding, and Williams' residual structure of feeling allow us purchase on the liminal space that opens up after industrial closure. Developing Fig. 1, I have tried to capture these various shifts in Fig. 2.

To return then to the coal industry, while keeping those theoretical conceptualisations at hand, we can see that the coal industry and coal communities stand out as the sector that has attracted sustained attention—as an entire industry, specific coalfields and even particular villages (see Strangleman, 2017b). This perhaps allows us to colour in this diagram, to populate it with previous studies and understand the sense making of change in context. For example, a number of studies have examined the early coalmining industry and how it created, and was created by, the industrial revolution (Samuel, 1977). We can cite other studies examining the industry in the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries and expansion under private ownership (Beynon & Austrin,

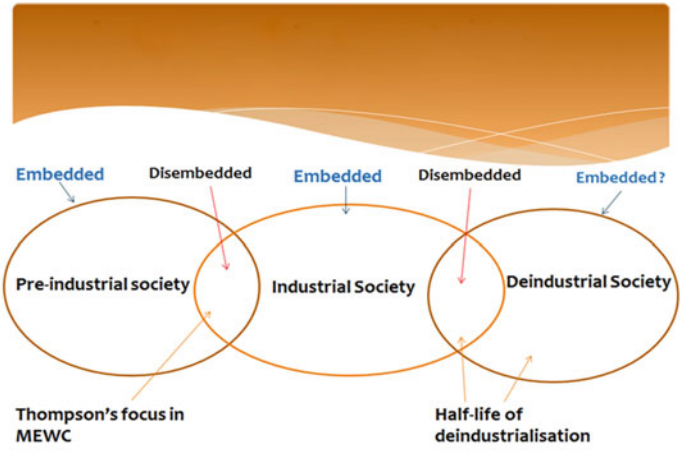

Fig. 2 Theoretical understandings of industrial change

1994; Harrison, 1978). In the 1950s, *Coal is our Life* was one of the ways of understanding working-class community as noted above (see also Williamson, 1982). But coal was also an important way of conceptualising work and organisational change as well as trade unionism and industrial relations (see Allen, 1981; Brown, 1992; Hall, 1981; Scott et al., 1963; Trist & Bamford, 1951). This interest is sustained through debates about the decline in 'traditional workers' and 'traditional communities' during the 1960s and 1970s. In the 1980s, coalmining again draws attention primarily through the lens of politics and the 1984–1985 miners' strike. It was in the wake of that dispute that closure, loss and deindustrialisation begin to become the focus of attention. It is because of that sedimented academic and popular knowledge that the notion of half-life is important. It is the ability for scholars to understand the trajectory of place over decades and generations that gives special appeal and salience to coalfield studies.

If coal has enjoyed more than its fair share of attention, certain places attracted multiple studies across years. Sociologically, two places stand out in this regard, Featherstone in West Yorkshire and Easington in the North East. Featherstone was the original site for Dennis and his colleagues' study *Coal is our Life* discussed above, and has been revisited in books such as *Coal, Capital and Culture* by Warwick and Littlejohn (1992), and Royce Turner's (2000) *Coal was our Life.*[7] Warwick and Littlejohn's book examined the strike period and its immediate aftermath but had prescient things to say in the final chapter about the likely fate of the coalfields after closure. In particular, they trace the economic and cultural legacies of the coal industry and show how these shaped the experience of loss and were likely to continue to unravel later on. Warwick and Littlejohn emphasised the toxic mix of social problems facing former mining communities, including large numbers of semi- and unskilled men being dumped on the labour market in a short period, low educational attainment, poor transport and communication as well as embedded health issues. All these factors were compounded by

[7] In terms of Easington and the Durham coalfield, see Beynon and Austrin (1994), Strangleman et al. (1999), and Bulmer (1978).

the coalfield areas being situated in economically depressed regions, and where resources for economic transformation were likely to be stretched:

> The mining communities which we have discussed are being restructured by such forces, largely out of the control of the people who live there. The certainty of employment in a local industry, always subject to the constraints of the market for coal, the geological conditions and the organisation of production, has now virtually disappeared. What may have been a dream, or a nightmare, for boys in these localities [coal employment] is now no more than a fading shadow. (p. 206)

Coal, Capital and Culture drew out the historical specificity of coalfield areas like West Yorkshire in understanding both the problems being faced concurrently around closure as well as projecting the likely trajectory of the long-term effects of decline. Using Bourdieu's (1979) notion of different types of capital, Warwick and Littlejohn (1992) struck a depressing note as to the fate of the communities they study:

> The local cultural capital which has been created in the four communities is likely to be eroded within a generation as the reality of coal mining as employment as that basis for social and political organisation disappears. The disadvantage which this will reinforce ought to be the subject of much more scrutiny than it is receiving. (p. 206)

For these writers, working in a sociological tradition, an important link is made between the long-standing industrial heritage of an area and the way this shapes both the present and future possibilities. The focus on cultural and social capital is noteworthy as it gives insights as to how sociologists conceptualise the ability of communities, families and individuals to exercise agency. While some of the forms of capital developed in working-class coal regions was transferable, Warwick and Littlejohn stressed that much of that capacity was as redundant in the wake of closure as the actual plant and machinery of the mines being lost.

Royce Turner's (1992) *Coal was our Life* was an even more deliberate attempt to revisit the 'Ashton' of *Coal is our Life*. Turner's book was a brutal account of Featherstone in the wake of closure. He relentlessly related the multiple problems facing inhabitants of the town while

stressing how all but the most affluent of residents were trapped by poverty and lack of economic opportunity. Turner's final chapter was unrelenting bleak, relating a series of dark vignettes of life for young and old at the margins. Towards the end of chapter, his anger breaks through:

> You walk around, and you want to help them. You want an economic, and a social, and a cultural, revolution. You want to remember them, as they were, full of pride and hope for the future. You want them strong, and confident, knowing that their day is still to come, but it will come, as they used to believe. But you know it isn't. And you know that you can't really do anything about it. (pp. 270–271)

Turner too drew on notions of social and cultural capital. He made the link between Warwick and Littlejohn's use of the concept in their book and with the way the authors of *Coal is our Life* drew on similar ideas, although not of course using that same terminology. At the end, the epilogue for *Coal was our Life* Turner notes the way social capital was effectively destroyed by the loss of the coal industry. While he noted the efforts to retrain workers in coalfield communities, he says: 'But rebuilding social capital, rebuilding the spirit, may take a lot longer. And it may well be too late' (p. 280).

This all reflects the Bordieuan turn in sociological discussions of class around the turn of the millennium. Here again, the notion of the half-life is useful in getting at the complexity of what is going on in the former coalfields generationally. Even post-coal the social structures of the industry are important. When I was researching coalfield community regeneration in the late-1990s, it was apparent the multiple ways in which there was a residual legacy of knowledge within the areas studied—the North West, North East, East Midlands and South Wales. This knowledge manifested itself in numerous ways—most notably in terms of knowledge about the benefits system and the ability to claim invalidity support. However, one of the most poignant for me was witnessing the continued duty of care felt by former miners towards each other (Strangleman, 2001).

One example from my research in the former North-East coalfield sticks with me. Frank was in his late forties when made redundant from

Easington Colliery in 1993. For a time, he had, in his words, 'been completely lost'. His way of coping had been through support networks from other, slightly older, former miners—if not quite father figures, then certainly caring older 'brothers'. Frank was adopted into a group of older men, each accompanied by a dog, who took extended walks along the Durham coastal paths. Every weekday this group would set off at 9am and sometimes walk up to eight miles 'setting the world to rights'. Though left unsaid, the start time seems to have allowed these grandfathers to help in grandchild care while still providing the discipline of a relatively early start. Frank's wife indicated that the group had been 'the saving of him', in that it had given him back a routine, regular male contact, some purpose and status. On reflection, there was more going on in this simple example. There is a series of adjustments occurring—from working life to forced retirement; to playing a more active role in caring for grandchildren and in the process re-establishing caring relationships with adult children. But Frank's story also highlights the ongoing role of homo-sociability, caring and nurturing. Frank was in need of care; this was given willingly by men who had already experienced the transition from work to retirement—forced or voluntary. This willingness and ability to provide care were itself rooted in a caring industrial social identity that was being made residual by economic change. Finally, Frank's need for care gave extra purpose to his older comrades; in the giving of care, they were themselves drawn into social life, the kind of generational relationship Faludi (2000) noted in the shipyards. I've made the argument elsewhere that deindustrialised communities were often able to cope as well as they did because of the industrial structures of feeling, care and support still present even as they were being made marginal. Through personal embeddedness in an industrial culture, redundant men could still enjoy some of the benefits of that culture (Strangleman, 2001). But what of the younger people in the coalfields who had never known coalmining directly?

Here again, we can see the value of Linkon's (2018) half-life model, which has at its heart the need to pay close attention not so much to the generation who lost their jobs, but to the generations thereafter—the sons and daughters, or increasingly grandsons and granddaughters of

industrial workers. Linkon's point is that the generation that lost industrial work have some roots and links to an industrial past. Economically, they may have received some kind of compensation or continue with health care and pensions. It is the subsequent generations for whom the reality of deindustrialisation is often unmediated by compensations of the past. Linkon looks for clues in how the post-industrial generation make sense of their world through literature and other forms of creative writing—including in former coalfield areas.

In the context specifically of coalfields in the UK, there is a growing number of scholars researching and writing on precisely those people.[8] Some of the most impressive work makes use of Avery Gordon's (2008) work on 'haunting'—examples of which are found elsewhere in this collection. One of the first to see value in Gordon's work applied to the former coalfields was Geoff Bright. Bright's paper on young people in former coal areas and the way their oppositional stand was rooted in the social, cultural and political legacy of working-class life (Bright, 2016). It was, for Bright, a sense that the coalfields remained haunted by their past and that social structures were still shaped by an industrial past that the students he interviewed had little or no knowledge of and often connection to. He is attracted to Gordon's work because it encapsulates the absent presence of the coal industry and its structures of feeling which continue, long after their death, to shape everyday experience.

Finally, I want to examine a new impulse in the interest in the coalfields, in particular the role they played in the Brexit vote of 2016 and its aftermath. One of the standout features of that vote and the later 2019 General Election was the crumbling of the so-called Red Wall of Labour Party seats across northern England. Often these were constituencies strongly associated with coalmining—the story of Labour's loss was amplified because these were mining seats which had gone through the events of 1984–1985 and the subsequent dismantling of the industry.[9]

[8] See some of the other contributions to this volume.

[9] See Gibbs (2021) for how the SNP has become the dominant progressive force in Scottish politics. Also see Beynon and Hudson (2021).

Discussion

What are we to make of the breadth and depth of academic writing on coalfield communities? Why do they continue to exert such a strong fascination for scholars? What more is there to say about an industry which saw its last deep mine closed in 2015? The answers to those questions are many and varied. As I've argued here and elsewhere, the coalfields are important because they were important. We have at present the ability to see through the lens of one industry the rise and fall of a wider industrial Britain. The miners and their communities have always fascinated academics as they as workers, their families and communities stand apart. Miners were once viewed as archetypal working-class workers and their communities as ideal typical industrial settlements. Mining has long been studied in the arts, humanities and social sciences. Part of that fascination was that as the social sciences emerged after World War II, mining provided vivid examples of industrial culture, occupational communities as a type of work simultaneously modern and premodern. The passage of time and the decline of the industry have intensified the richness of the story. This sedimented knowledge about the industry is itself important. Coalfield areas act now as a post-industrial laboratory—valuable precisely because we know so much about them. They remain, often, relatively isolated places—perhaps adding to their attraction where other variables can be held apart. Thinking back to the model of industrial change I offered above, we can see how mining can populate each of the parts of the model—pre-industrial, industrial, post-industrial. For me, the power of the model in relation to mining is it helps us place many of the studies of the last five decades, and in particular those that focus on deindustrialisation and transition. The overlapping section in my diagram between industrial and post-industrial is precisely where Linkon's half-life analysis is so vital. This is where we make sense of people on the ground who themselves are sense making. Using coal as our example, the notion of half-life offers a range of possibilities. Some deindustrialised places are noted for a wide range of social, cultural, economic and health problems. US industrial anthropologist Kate Dudley (2021) recently described a rust belt community she studied as marked by opioid addiction which

was both cause and effect of the despair felt by many. More worrying still, she notes the 'loss of futurity', the collective and individual sense of the pointlessness of hope in future—the futility of believing in the idea of a better future. This is certainly one aspect of former coalfields. This inability to see hope, or imagine something positive may risk normlessness, or raise the rise of far-right extreme politics, such as the AfD in Germany.

More positively, the space afforded by the half-life might represent a chance to reassess sedimented norms, to reorientate to a more progressive future. Here again, literature recently emerging from the coalfield speaks in part to this. Gibbs (2021) suggests that the early closure of the coal industry in Scotland, as part of a wider, deeper deindustrialisation process has seen a space cleared for a more progressive politics based on a rejection of the Labour Party and an embrace of a progressive Scottish Nationalist Party. Here, the industrial past is used as a contextual tool for understanding the possibilities afforded by a post-carbon future.

To answer my last question—what else is there to say about coalfield areas and the legacies of the mining industry? For a time in the early-2000s, I was repeatedly asked to act as a referee on prospective articles on various aspects of coal—community, culture and politics. Many of these pieces seemed to be exercises in a kind of academic left nostalgia with little new to say, few insights to offer. One of the really impressive things about researchers examining coal is that they represent a new generation who enter the field bringing new ideas, concepts and questions. They are a generation of scholars of the half-life trying to ask novel questions of the world around them. That is why there will always be new things to say about coal. It is their scholarship that will help us identify loss, new possibilities, emerging and receding options, futures hopes and fears.

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