Winning or Losing?
German Pit Closure and the Ambiguities of Memory

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Introduction

Herbert Hötzel was born in 1923 in Lower Silesia. After serving as a soldier in the Second World War and following a short term as a prisoner of war, he ended up in the Ruhr valley and, amidst the severe post-war crisis of food and energy supply, became a coal miner in the winter of 1946. “After all those injustices that have happened, now you can do something good for the people”, he remembers what he told himself back then. He started as a haulier at the Friedrich Thyssen Mine in Duisburg and later became an underground train driver. His memories of going underground for the first time are rather bleak:

“You cannot actually describe it. I was always used to my freedom – and then down into the hole for the first time. And I was sent to the 9th level: it was 46 degrees hot, and as a non-miner this is damn difficult. But you have to start from somewhere, right?” (Interview Hötzel).¹

Notwithstanding such difficulties, Hötzel’s narrative is by and large shaped by a sense of pride in the work and industry he had been involved in. Even his memories of literally closing his very mine in 1976, as a member of the crew in charge of dismantling the underground works, is tinged with motives of pride and nostalgia. However, as a beneficiary of the first early retirement schemes to prevent sudden mass redundancies, Hötzel interprets the end of his working career as a gift. Instead of continuing mine work at a neighbouring pit, he decided to opt for his pension and immediately went on a hiking tour to the Harz Mountains with his wife. “Those were the years I received as a gift.”

Hötzel’s testimony embraces an array of discursive points of reference. There is the image of the miners’ self-sacrifice after 1945, working under severest conditions in order to provide the basis for post-war survival and eventual reconstruction, a trope frequently employed before the backdrop of the “economic miracle”. This is closely connected with a work ethic of endurance, masculine strength and productivity. Most crucially, in narrating the end of his working career, Hötzel combines a sense of crisis awareness regarding the long-term perspective of mine closure with feelings of both sadness and relief. He quotes the social worker who advised those who took early

¹ This and all following quotes translated by the author.
retirement as early as 1976: “‘It won’t get any better, it will be even worse for the mining industry.’ – As early as that!” Yet, the possibility to get out of the mine is felt as a liberation.

In this long-term experience, spanning the war and post-war period to the early 21st century, Hötzels adult memories are certainly exceptional. However, with regard to his view on deindustrialisation, pit closure and early retirement, he articulates an ambiguity that somehow represents two sides of the same coin, yet is often painted over by an overriding master narrative of successful welfare-state crisis management.

The Ruhr region in particular, along with a number of smaller West German coalfields, has been facing a prolonged process of industrial demise that has eventually taken six decades, from the first signs of crisis in 1958 to the closure of the last remaining coal mines in 2018 – the Prosper-Haniel colliery in Bottrop (Böse/Farrenkopf/Weindl 2018) and the Anthrazit Ibbenbüren colliery near Osnabrück (Gawehn 2018; Schürmann 2020). From the late 1950s, when the Ruhr industry alone employed well over half a million miners, both underground and aboveground, this number has shrunk to 3,400 in 2018; between 1970 and 2000, employment was reduced by roughly 50,000 per decade.

There are two grand narratives connected to this process. Firstly, the Ruhr towns, as well as their counterparts in the Saar region and other coalfields, struggle with the consequences of industrial decline as a long-term structural transformation, forcing the old mass industries of coal and steel to be replaced by more modern patterns of production and work (Goch 2019). With hubs in higher education, research and new industries, parts of the Ruhr seem to be fairly successful in making this shift from the heavy industries of the past to the “knowledge society” of the future. Unemployment figures, however, still rank amongst the highest in Germany (Hüther/Südekum/Voigtländer 2019: 99, 124 ff.). In contrast to this image of mass unemployment as a consequence of deindustrialisation, the second grand narrative is closely tied to the “socially responsible”, “socially compliant” way of handling the downsizing of the mining industry. Social responsibility – Sozialverträglichkeit – has been a central element to discursively frame the targets and viability of keeping up as many coal mines as possible while at the same time constantly shrinking the industry but avoiding uncontrolled redundancy. This was mainly set into practice in a system of direct and indirect state subsidies and in a scheme of early retirement that allowed underground workers who had mostly started their professional lives at the age of 14 to 16 to retire once they had reached 49 or 50. In their efforts to find consensual crisis solutions, Sozialverträglichkeit became a key semantic denominator for trade unionists, shop stewards, company executives as well as politicians to address an apparently obvious common goal. This was epitomised by a phrase attributed to Adolf Schmidt, the head of the Industrial Union of Mine and Energy Workers (IGBE) from 1969 to 1985, declaring the goal of social responsibility had to be “Niemand fällt ins Bergfreie!” – “Nobody falls into the void!”, i.e. nobody will fall into unemployment. Thus, in hindsight, the history of the German coal mining industry in the second half

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2 For data see Huske (2006) and https://www.rag.de/unternehmen/mitarbeiter-und-fuehrung/zentrale-personalsteuerung/ (24.03.2019).

3 The term “bergfrei” initially refers to land that could potentially be mined but was as yet without concession to do so. In contrast to that, the phrase uses the term in the sense of an underground crevice which a miner might fall into.