

The Trauma of a Non-Traumatic Decline

Narratives of Deindustrialisation in Asturian Mining: The HUNOSA Case

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Introduction – Asturias as a Deindustrialised Region

Taking the case of the Hulleras del Norte Sociedad Anónima (HUNOSA), which comprised the state-owned mining industry in the Spanish region of Asturias, this article addresses the memory of deindustrialisation in Asturias in the last three decades. In doing so, I will use oral narratives compiled in three connected projects dedicated to industrial decline in Asturias (conducted 1994–1996), narratives of youth living conditions in the Asturian Coal Basins (2004–2006), and of work cultures, memory, and identity in the context of deindustrialisation (from 2013).¹

To some extent, Asturias seems to be an exception from the stereotype of a deindustrialising region as mainly described in the English-language literature about the subject. Comparatively good living conditions, low crime rates, good educational levels, including a high ratio of university degrees, plus high, though questionable, investment into local and regional infrastructures seem to make Asturias stand out. Foreign – or even Spanish – visitors of Asturian towns and villages, especially in places where industry weighed heavily in the past, are often surprised by the tranquility and leisurely atmosphere – Asturias has a high proportion of “chigres” (local taverns) – and by the exuberant nature. “Natural Paradise” has been a motto for decades to promote tourism in the region. Even when focusing on the Coal Basins more particularly (“Les Cuenques” in the Asturian language), this overall impression does not differ too much.² New residential blocks, boulevards, refurbishments, and/or the gentrification of historical city centres seem to chime with the steady restoration of industrial spaces now out of use.

In contrast to the tranquil surface, however, if anything has taken root in the collective imagery of the Asturian people, it is the deep crisis the whole region is suffering from. Facing high unemployment rates, lack of expectations for the youth, and

1 Oral testimonies are deposited in the Archivo de Fuentes Orales para la Historia Social de Asturias (AFOHSA), <https://www.unioviado.es/AFOHSA/> (22.07.2020).

2 Coal pits in Asturias concentrate around two river basins: in the inner western, the anthracite mining industry surrounds the Narcea River, and, in the centre of the region, the Central Coal Basin joins the rivers Nalón and Caudal as well as the cities of Langreo and Mieres. These towns, much more directly tied to both the mining and steel industries, were the places where the Asturian industrial take-off first took place and exerted a strong social, political, and economic influence up to the very end of the 20th century. The very notion of the Mining Basins (Les Cuenques) often centres on the Nalón and Caudal Valleys with Langreo and Mieres, but we should consider that there are around 20 mining towns in Asturias altogether.

demographic change, this is as much a material crisis as it is one of values. The post-industrial condition is entangled with issues of identity as well as with the corruption and the exploitation of public funds which both leading political parties as well as the trade unions are embroiled in. Furthermore, there is an environmental aspect to the crisis as the long-term consequences of industrial activity are mirrored in high pollution ratios which affect soil, water, and atmosphere and increase the spread of several pollutant-related types of cancer.

These symptoms define the Asturias of the last few decades. The impact of the crisis and the decline of all industrial sectors that used to shape the Asturian economy, its identity, and its politics are undeniable, both on a statistical level and in regard to public perception, whether they are articulated by voices from below or from political authorities and social agents. The Coal Basin seems ridden by a “permanent crisis” (Lillo 1978) ravishing the region and by a sheer lack of hope for the future.

Measures to balance the social consequences of dismantling the coal industry, such as early retirement schemes and the promotion of investment into alternative industries, sought to minimise the social and economic impact of pit closures and tried to offer prospects for the future. In choosing the lesser evil in the face of an apparently inevitable process of deindustrialisation, political leaders as well as trade unionists frequently claim such instruments as signs for a successful policy of avoiding a more traumatic mode of change. Yet, this markedly contrasts with the more ambiguous memories of decline. Reactions vary from apathy to vindication of the past (and present) and materialise in cultural creations that address the loss of collective identities tied to work in the coalfields, even implying a fragile resignification of a regional identity as mining communities without miners.

Decline as Cultural Trauma

As a key to approach the impact of industrial decline in Asturias, the concept of cultural trauma provides a good framework of understanding. Following Ring et al., cultural trauma can be understood as a discursive response to a break in the social network that happens when profound changes shake the foundations of collective identity. The discourse that results from this process could be analysed as a struggle for meaning in which individual and collective actors try to define and make sense of a situation. A central aspect of cultural trauma is the collective attempt to identify the causes of suffering, of those responsible (and to blame them), and search for possible solutions. It also implies the constant working on discursive practices of memory and collective identity in a struggle to determine what is considered traumatic (Ring/Eyerman/Madigan 2017: 13 f.). From a slightly different angle, Jeffrey Alexander understands cultural trauma as a collective loss of identity. The traumatic experience threatens the community’s sense of orientation and challenges the individuals’ sense of who they are, where they come from and where they want to go. The deterioration of identity goes hand in hand with trauma (Alexander 2003: 85).

Along with the notion of cultural trauma, E.P. Thompson’s concept of moral economy provides a further instrument to comprehend the memory narratives analysed in the following more fully. Conceived here as a mechanism to balance the functioning of the community and confront grievance or external pressure, the concept of moral economy is useful to explain the reactions of mining communities – in