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Deindustrialisation and the Historical Sociological Imagination: Making Sense of Work and Industrial Change

Abstract

Following recent calls for a more self-aware and historically-sensitive sociology this article reflects on the concept of deindustrialisation and industrial change in this spirit. Using E.P. Thompson's classic *The Making of The English Working Class* and his examination of industrialising culture with its stress on experience, the article asks how these insights might be of value in understanding contemporary processes of deindustrialisation and work. Drawing on a range of sociological, cultural and literary studies writers it conceptualises the differences and similarities between two historic moments of industrial change and loss. In particular it draws on the literary concept of the 'half-life of deindustrialisation' to explore these periods. The paper has important implications for how we think about contemporary and historical industrial decline.

Key Words:

E.P. Thompson; Half-life of Deindustrialisation; Historical Sociology; Work Meaning and Identity

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Introduction

Over fifty years ago social historian E.P. Thompson completed what was to become his classic *The Making of The English Working Class.* Thompson argued that between 1780 and the early 1830s a significant class consciousness emerged amongst English working people as a result of proto and early industrialisation. The book attempted to piece together fragmentary evidence left by this emerging working-class in contemporary England; a mixture of cultural and political writings, of observations and other ephemera including poetry and song. In his famous *Preface* to *The Making* he writes:

> I am seeking to rescue the poor stockinger, the Luddite cropper, the obsolete hand-loom weaver, the 'utopian' artisan, and even the deluded follower of Joanna Southcott, from the enormous condescension of posterity. Their crafts and traditions may have been dying. Their hostility to the new industrialism may have been backward-looking. Their communitarian ideals may have been fantasies. Their insurrectionary conspiracies may have been foolhardy. But they lived through these times of acute social disturbance, and we did not. Their aspirations were valid in terms of their own experience: and, if they were casualties of history, they remain, condemned in their own lives, as casualties (Thompson, 1963: 12).

The importance of Thompson's writing then and now lies in the way he both allows access to, and values, the social experience of industrial change. Thompson's work still has resonance with the process of *industrialisation*; however, in this article I want to ask

questions about what help it can offer us in understanding the contemporary process of *deindustrialisation*. Here I suggest that the historical moment that Thompson was concerned with, the experience of communities emerging into an industrial age, can be usefully compared and contrasted with contemporary researchers studying communities experiencing deindustrialisation. These two historically discrete epochs can be thought of as two bookends of what was an industrial era. The intention of the article is essentially conceptual and theoretical in drawing-out the similarities and obvious differences between these two moments. In the process I hope to throw new light on both the value of Thompson's work as well as the study of deindustrialisation, and indeed the value of that phrase itself. The purpose of the article is in part informed by Inglis' (2014) recent welcome call for a more historically informed sociology. As he puts it 'Sophisticated historical consciousness is largely moribund in mainstream British sociology today, posing acute questions about the intellectual solidarity of the discipline as it is currently organized and practiced' (Inglis 2014, 101). In particular Inglis highlights the tendency of contemporary social theorists and empirical sociologists to rely on 'a range of periodizing constructs – risk society, globalization, late modernity, liquid modernity, network society…' (*ibid*., 100). What this leads to, he suggests, is a set of ideas which, while seemingly emphasising historical awareness, in reality rely of crude overly simplified accounts of present society and the past. This historical amnesia is in stark contrast to an older tradition in sociology which stressed the centrality of history as part of the sociological imagination (Mills 1959; see also Abrams 1982). It seems to me that the only way to understand contemporary industrial loss is precisely through a historically informed sociology wherein a richer account of deindustrialisation recognises historically mediated structures, action and experience.

The article begins by revisiting Thompson's writing on early industrial society and culture and augments this through reference to later authors such as Polanyi, Raymond Williams and Humphrey Jennings. It then turns to the issue of deindustrialisation and how it has been conceptualised by a range of contemporary thinkers ranging from sociologists, historians and those working in literary studies – in particular the idea of the 'half-life of deindustrialisation'. I want to think about how they are conceptualising this new period and how we can use Thompson's understandings to illuminate that work. I conclude by offering a synthetic account of industrial change that historicises the way we think about contemporary issues around economic life.

Theoretical Understandings of Industrial Change

Thompson's writing offers us important ways of thinking about industrial change. He reminded his readers to be attentive to history's losers as well as its winners. Through careful attention to the experience, ideas, values and cultures we understand the response to change in Georgian England and what those dispositions were grounded in. In confronting the prospect of industrialisation Thompson's subjects were drawing on a vibrant, independent stock of knowledge, of tradition and custom - a plebeian culture. When faced with the emergent values of *laissez-faire* capitalism and of liberal political economy they did so not as blank slates, but rather with a pre-existing system of morals and values of their own which were not simply swept away. We can note this resilience and robustness in some of Thompson's other writing, most notably, in his essay on food riots where he argues persuasively that the popular raiding of grain stores and more general food riots followed a particular logic and rationality based on opposition to market ideology. As he notes:

It is possible to detect in almost every eighteenth-century crowd action some legitimising notion. By the notion of legitimation I mean that the men and women in the crowd were informed by the belief that they were defending traditional rights or customs; and, in general, that they were supported by the wider consensus of the community (Thompson, 1991: 188).

There was then, for Thompson, a traditional basis for action and reaction to the social and economic forms of the emerging capitalist order. This was action that was rooted in a moral economy albeit one being eclipsed, informed by what Raymond Williams might describe as a residual structure of feeling, which is explored more fully below.

Thompson's argument in *The Making*, and elsewhere, was that class as it emerged during that period had to be understood as a relationship rather than a thing. As he memorably put it:

Sociologists who have stopped the time machine and, with a good deal of conceptual huffing and puffing, have gone down to the engine room to look, tell us that nowhere at all have they been able to locate and classify a class. They can only find a multitude of people with different occupations, incomes, status-hierarchies, and the rest. Of course, they are right, since class is not this or that part of the machine, but the way the machine works once it is set in motion - not this or that interest, but the friction of interests - the movement itself, the heat, the thundering noise...

(Thompson, 1965: 357)

Class and culture then were recognisable in a variety of settings, each with their own distinctive features. But his stress was on the experience of this relationship. The key

strength Thompson's work offers us is precisely this focus on the experience of such relationships and how existing ideas, norms and values – culture if you will – were drawn-on in the midst of changing circumstances of the late eighteenth-century. This was a theme Thompson would return to time and again in his writing across his life. In the last book he published, shortly before his death, Thompson used the life of William Blake to excavate contemporary attitudes to religion, politics and morality. Thompson (1993) stressed that Blake's intellectual context was very different from our own, and that through his art and writing he urged his contemporaries to resist materialism and the related values brought forth by a nascent capitalism. In short Thompson's Blake emphasised the need for his contemporaries to 'bear witness against the beast', to use his memorable phrase. Thompson's historical practice invites us to embed ourselves in the understandings and cultural milieu of precisely that group of people caught up in industrialisation. He wants us to understand those values through the eyes of those who resisted these developments, however 'backward-looking', as he puts it, they may appear to us now. If one were to visualise what Thompson was engaged in, and he would probably hate this abstraction, we could imagine his focus as the space between a traditional pre-industrial culture and what would later be seen as industrial society (see *Figure 1*).

Figure 1 Thompson on Industrial Change **(About Here)**

Thompson would object to this, I think, because it does violence precisely to a careful attentiveness to the lived experience of history '… the friction of interests - the movement itself, the heat, the thundering noise...' (Thompson, 1965: 357). One aspect of that violence, or simplification, is the way the abstraction seals off history into a neat period hermetically distinct from that which comes before or after. The huge historiographic scholarship around

the industrial revolution shows this process was messy, complex and extended far beyond

the classic era c1760-1830. As Samuel (1977) pointed out many years ago industrialisation

varied enormously within and between industries, sectors and regions. So, by implication

that imagined neat space in *Figure 1* between pre-industrial and industrial society begins to

look messy. Nonetheless, I think *Figure 1* allows us to envisage the space in which this

process is occurring, and its value will become more obvious below.

One author unfazed by this 'messiness' was the English polymath Humphrey Jennings, who

in his broader work was interested in the experience of industrial culture himself. In his

book *Pandaemonium* Jennings compiled hundreds of fragments of writing – reportage, diary

entry and creative – by people who had lived through and witnessed the industrial

revolution in Britain between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries. Posthumously

published thirty-five years after his death *Pandaemonium* comprises of 372 excerpts, or

'images' to use Jennings own phrase, which reflect the coming of the machine-age over two

centuries from 1660 to 1886. The images are arranged chronologically from John Milton's

1660 'The Building of Pandaemonium', through to William Morris' 1886 'The Day of the

Earth'.

Pandaemonium is important in both form and content for this current article. The collection

and structuring of the material is an illustration of Jennings' surrealist sensibility – the

juxtaposition of differing images that allow us to look anew upon the process and events of

industrialisation. While interested in differing views of industrial transition his collection

seeks to capture a poetic sensibility for that change. He described these passages as

'images' and his intention was to create what he called an *imaginative history*. In explaining

his method he wrote in the introduction to *Pandaemonium*:

I do not claim that they represent the truth – they are too varied, even contradictory, for that. But they represent human experience. They are the record of mental events. Events of the heart. They are facts (the historian's kind of facts) which have been passed through the feelings and the mind of an individual and have forced him to write. And what he wrote is a picture – a coloured picture of them. His personality has coloured them and selected and altered and pruned and enlarged and minimised and exaggerated. Admitted. But he himself is part, was part of the period, even part of the event itself – he was an actor, a spectator in it (Jennings, 1985: xxxv).

What Jennings alerts us to is the sublime power of the forces unleased by industrial change, but, also how these changes were rendered into normal life. This is in itself a significant aspect of the processes Thompson was attempting to capture – not simply the shock of the new and the eclipse of the old, but also the process by which the new was rendered intelligible, accepted, normalised and in turn acted upon.

Another instance of attention to the moment of industrialisation can be seen in Karl Polanyi's (2001/1944) classic *The Great Transformation* written at the end of WW2. Polanyi's most significant conceptual contribution was his coining of the relational phrases 'embedded' and 'disembedded' to describe the link between the economy and wider civil society. Polanyi argued that the new forms of capitalism and market liberalism espoused by a number of intellectuals at the time, most notably Malthus and Ricardo, undermined, or disembedded, existing social relationships of the eighteenth century. The distinction he made was between an economy embedded in social relations and social relations which were simply an add-on to a market. Importantly Polanyi was not suggesting that this

separation had occurred, but rather this was a trend against which various groups reacted

to during the early and later stages of industrialisation. As Polanyi notes:

> Our thesis is that the idea of a self-adjusting market implied a stark utopia. Such an
>
> institution could not exist for any length of time without annihilating the human and
>
> natural substance of society; it would have physically destroyed man and
>
> transformed his surroundings into a wilderness (Polanyi, 2001 [1944]: 3).

For Polanyi then a purely disembedded economy, one completely separated out from social

institutions, was not possible, let alone desirable. Nonetheless the process of disembedding

was disruptive and destructive of existing social relationships, mechanisms and structures.

However, this process was itself a stimulus for new forms of social relationships as society at

various levels sought to control the worst excesses of market fundamentalism. What Polanyi

describes in his wide-ranging account was the way this pressure creates new forms of social

relations emerging out of previous ones. These new forms were adaptations but speak to

older forms of morality and order. Like Thompson and Jennings, Polanyi was describing a

social order in flux, attempting to make sense of a new economic order by drawing-on and

adapting its own stock of pre-existing knowledge and experience.

Before moving on to discuss the issue of deindustrialisation I want to add one further

element to our thinking about industrial change; the ideas of Raymond Williams, and in

particular his idea of the structures of feeling. The most fully articulated explanation of

Williams' ideas on structures of feeling appear in his *Marxism and Literature* (Williams

1977), but they also emerge in his earlier writing such as *The Country and the City* (1973).

Williams makes the distinction between three forms of structure of feeling – *dominant*,

residual and *emergent*. By dominant Williams means a hegemonic vision of the world or

part of it. For our purposes the other two forms, residual and emergent, are perhaps more interesting as they imply a focus on emerging future trends or social forms in the process of being made marginal. Williams emphasised the distinction between residual and what he called 'archaic'. By archaic he meant something that was very much an element of the past. By contrast a residual structure of feeling had been formed in the past but which was still very much alive in the present, still active in the cultural process. As Williams says:

> Thus certain experiences, meanings, and values which cannot be expressed or substantially verified in terms of the dominant culture, are nevertheless lived and practiced on the basis of the residue – cultural as well as social – of some previous social and cultural institution or formation (Williams, 1977: 122).

Williams goes on to suggest that this residual structure of feeling may have an alternative or even oppositional relationship to the dominant culture. We will return to the issue of emergent forms later in the article. The power of Williams' notion of structures of feeling is the stress he places on these as living cultures not fixed; they are intelligible when they are articulated and explicit:

> For they become social consciousness only when they are lived, actively, in real relationships, and moreover in relationships which are more than systematic exchanges between fixed units. Indeed just because all consciousness is social, its processes occur not only between but within the relationship and the related (Williams, 1977: 130).

Williams drew the distinction between received and practical consciousness, or experience, where there was a tension between a dominant and residual structure of feeling which

were at odds. Williams is interested in the ways meaning and values are actively lived in an historical moment, again emphasising that culture is not static but adaptive, relational and contextual.

To briefly recap, I have emphasised a commonality of focus on the experience of industrial change. Starting with Thompson's writing within and beyond his classic *The Making* I have drawn attention to the power in Thompson's approach in revealing of social processes in motion. Thompson throughout his historical writing was concerned with the values and beliefs which shape and define people's attempt to make sense and act in and on their world. I drew attention to the fact that the real focus of Thompson's interest in *The Making* can be abstractly understood as the vector between pre-industrial and what we might call 'industrial culture'. He was interested in the experience that is brought to bear on the period of industrial change. Building on Thompson's insights I explored Jennings' study of the longer drawn-out period of the industrial, or machine-age. Jennings was similarly fascinated by the question of experience and how to capture or resurrect this through a fragmentary set of texts. Polanyi's ideas, especially his notions of disembedding and embedding were useful in further deepening the understanding of that process of flux that was Thompson's focus. Polanyi conceptualised this moment in similar ways in that he understood economic changes – in particular the attempt to entirely disembed the economy from the social – as being resisted from within society. Finally, Raymond Williams, through his notions of structures of feeling, allows us to consider the intrinsically dynamic quality of social life. We can see the way Thompson's marginalised fight industrial change through the articulation of residual structures of feeling, norms and values in the process of being made marginal.

This combination of insights is a powerful one in conceptualising historical processes of industrial change; how it is understood, resisted and coped with. Individually and collectively they display a stunning breadth of ambition in telling a complex, historically informed story about the experience of industrial transformation, an approach that needs to be rediscovered in the social sciences of the twenty-first century. But to what extent can these ideas frame an analysis of contemporary economic change? What value, if any, are they in understanding deindustrialisation as a process in those societies studied by Thompson and others? How neatly do historic insights map from one era to another, and finally, what can the study of deindustrialisation tell us about the historic process of industrialisation? The second part of this article aims to answer some of these questions.

Conceptualising Deindustrialisation

It is now nearly four decades since what has come to be described as the modern process of deindustrialisation began. One of the most important early academic portrayals of this process was written by Bluestone and Harrison (1982) in their seminal *The Deindustrialization of America*, where they defined deindustrialisation as:

> … a widespread, systematic disinvestment in the nation's basic productive capacity. Controversial as it may be, the essential problem with the U.S. economy can be traced to the way capital – in the forms of financial resources and of real plant and equipment – has been diverted from productive investment in our basic national industries into unproductive speculation, mergers and acquisitions, and foreign investment (Bluestone and Harrison, 1982: 6).

Crucially they continue: 'Left behind are shuttered factories, displaced workers, and a newly emerging group of ghost towns' (ibid.). The power of *The Deindustrialization of America* lay in how it combined an economic account of the process *alongside* the social consequences of industrial change. The book's legacy, over thirty-years later, is the way Bluestone and Harrison understood deindustrialisation as an ongoing process which linked international capital flows and investment decisions with local and personal troubles for those left behind. Early interest in deindustrialisation was not confined to the USA. The term appears no less than six times in the index of Pahl's (1984) *Divisions of Labour*, and indeed one could make the argument that Pahl was pioneering in recognising the multiple dimensional nature of the process (Strangleman 2016; see also Blackaby 1978; Bazen and Thirlwall 1989).

If we can talk about a coherent field of writing about deindustrialisation we need to see it as broad and interdisciplinary, combining insights from sociology, history, economics and anthropology and increasingly the arts and humanities more generally (Strangleman 2013). What was notable about the analysis of deindustrialisation is the way it has evolved in several waves (see Strangleman and Rhodes 2014). Early studies were often engaged in what Cowie and Heathcott (2003) describe as the 'body count', where the numbers of laid-off workers were compiled while others attempted to record the struggle over closure and resistance to it. Both of these approaches had their value. We could also see a long and continuing tradition of monograph studies of single plants and their closure (Fine 2004; Sidorick 2009; O'Hara 2011). However, arguably such volumes did not link their carefully focused study into wider processes and trends.

From the 1990s onwards one of the features in deindustrialisation literature was an attempt to provide just such a synthetic account of the process with historical and comparative

techniques, often deploying inter and multi-disciplinary techniques (see High 2013; Cowie

and Heathcott 2003; Strangleman and Rhodes 2014; Strangleman, Rhodes and Linkon 2013;

Altena and Van der Linden 2002). Each of these contributions poses wider, broader

questions about the meaning and value of the term deindustrialisation, and the longer term

consequences of such industrial upheaval. Vital to this trend was how this questioning of

the meaning of deindustrialisation was in turn casting new light on older industrial culture

itself, prompting questions about environment, economy, social relations, divisions and

class, gender, race and the meaning of work. The most important of these synthesising

accounts was Cowie and Heathcott's (2003) *Beyond the Ruins*, a collection of studies

prefaced with an important reflective editorial introduction. Cowie and Heathcott used their

piece to, in their words, 'move the terms of the discussion "beyond the ruins"' (2003: 1).

While they made clear their purpose was not to dismiss the important testimonies from

workers caught in the midst of plant shutdowns, they instead argued that:

> … the time is right to widen the scope of the discussion beyond prototypical plant
>
> shutdowns, the immediate politics of employment policy, the tales of victimization,
>
> or the swell of industrial nostalgia. Rather, our goal is to rethink the chronology,
>
> memory, spatial relations, culture and politics of what we have come to call
>
> "deindustrialization" (2003: 1-2).

These issues of chronology and history are an important ones for the study of

deindustrialisation for in defining the term we are forced to confront its conceptual

slipperiness; what do we mean by the phrase, when did deindustrialisation begin and how is

it different from industrial change more widely? To take the issue of chronology first the

classic era of deindustrialisation is taken to be the widespread shutdowns of basic heavy

industry in the USA and Europe from the mid to late-1970s. But as soon as that marker is

placed we begin to see far earlier examples of this trend. In the UK we could see closures

occurring in the mining industry in the 1960s, or earlier during the interwar depression as an

era of widespread industrial loss (Linehan, 2003). In the USA economic historians have

identified these processes occurring from WW2, and before that during the Great

Depression. Koistinen's (2013) *Confronting Decline*, for example, is an historical account of

deindustrialisation although one that again casts back much further than the 1970s to

capture evidence of the trend. Koistinen studies the New England textile industry and

argues powerfully that the process of industrial retrenchment began during the 1920s as

mills in the North-East states came under intense competition from newly industrialising

South. This competition in part was a function of newer technology but was mainly due to

lower wages commanded in the South as a result of a general lack of unionisation. Thus the

relatively high wages of the North were progressively undermined through the 1920s and

the Depression era of the 1930s. Koistinen suggest that the first signs of the structural

weakness of the sector in New England were detected as early as the 1890s, which brought

the response of investment in textile schools to train workers and especially managers in

improved industrial techniques. In another example, Christopher Johnson's (1995) book on

the woollen textile manufacture in the Languedoc region of France argues for the use of

that phrase in the nineteenth-century to describe industrial eclipse. Earlier still, classical

historian Robin Fleming (2010, 9) uses the term deindustrialisation to describe fifth-century

post-Roman Britain. The point is that deindustrialisation is closely related to industrial

change more generally. Therefore, technological and economic innovation historically leaves

in its wake those subject to what E.P. Thompson described as 'the enormous condescension

of posterity'(Thompson, 1963: 12). Indeed Marx and Engels famously summed up the ephemeral nature of capitalist society in their phrase 'All that is solid melts into air':

> Constant revolutionizing of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation distinguish the bourgeois epoch from earlier ones. All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify (Marx and Engels, 1967: 83).

For Marx and Engels then, deindustrialisation was part and parcel of the earliest stages of modernity itself not something that would occur in the late twentieth-century.

Rethinking Deindustrialisation

I want to present here a model for rethinking deindustrialisation, drawing-on and synthesising a number of theories around the topic. First, and perhaps most important is derived not from sociology at all, but from the field of literary studies. Sherry Linkon has coined and developed the idea of what she has described as the 'half-life of deindustrialisation' in her exploration of a variety of creative writing that emerges after industrial loss. As Linkon puts it:

> People and communities are shaped by their histories – by experience, by memory, and by the way the economic and social practices of the past frame the structures, ideas, and values that influence our lives long after those practices have ceased to be productive (Linkon, 2014: 1).

The past, she contends, remains both as a source of pride and pain and it is the tension between these that leads to a selective reworking of the past in the present. As she continues:

> Thus, even as the active memory of industrial labor may fade, the landscape, social networks, local institutions, as well as attitudes and cultural practices bear the stamp of history (*Ibid*.)

Crucially this impact is felt both on those who directly experienced industrial culture, but also those subsequent generations who grew-up, or were born after mass closings. As Linkon says, 'Deindustrialization didn't so much affect them as define them.' Explaining:

> Deindustrialization has a half-life, and like radioactive waste, its effects remain long after abandoned factory buildings have been torn down and workers have found new jobs. … We see the half-life of deindustrialization not only in brownfields too polluted for new construction but also in long-term economic struggles, the slow, continuing decline of working-class communities, and internalized uncertainties as individuals try to adapt to economic and social changes. It is not yet clear how long it will take for the influence of deindustrialization to dissipate, but the half-life of deindustrialization clearly extends well into the twenty-first century (Linkon, 2014: 2).

The power of Linkon's term, the half-life, lies in how it enables us to consider a range of social, cultural and political factors and determine how they continue to shape and structure the lives of individuals, families, communities and places long after the immediate event of

shutdown and closure. Conceptually the half-life allows us to think in more historically informed ways about these processes and their intergenerational, ongoing impact.

While this notion of the half-life of deindustrialisation was developed in the study of literature and other narrative writing the idea it encapsulates is echoed elsewhere in sociology and the social sciences in the writing on industrial change, or change more broadly considered. In her *Ghostly Matters* US sociologists Avery Gordon examines how the past comes to haunt the present, interestingly through the study of literary texts. The past constantly resurfaces, or bubbles-up, reminding us of something forgotten, or half remembered. As she puts it 'These specters or ghosts appear when the trouble they represent and symptomize is no longer being contained or repressed or blocked from view' (Gordon,2008: xvi). The present then is haunted by spectres of the past, a past which continues to shape the present and the future.

Similarly, Alice Mah talks about the idea of 'ruination', and she stresses how the phrase captures both process and form.

> Despite their state of disuse, abandoned industrial sites remain connected with the urban fabric that surrounds them: with communities; with collective memory; and with people's health, livelihoods, and stories (Mah, 2012: 3).

Like Linkon and Gordon, Mah's writing explores the traces left behind by industrial society on both physical remains and shared cultures. A final instance of cultural legacy can be found in Walkerdine and Jimenez's study of former steelmaking communities in South Wales. Their psychosocial approach examines the intergenerational transmission of cultural attitudes and assumptions concerning work and gender. They illustrate how the collective

failure to address the loss of heavy manual industrial labour has led to the continuation of unsustainable attitudes towards 'new' jobs. In particular they note how the sons of former steelworkers are dissuaded from taking, or staying in, service sector employment. These new posts are dismissed as feminine and deemed unworthy of a masculine identity which is no longer viable in a labour market without a steelworks. These norms are reinforced both by peer pressure in the younger group as well as from the older generation. Here that older industrial culture is profoundly corrosive, toxic in the sense of the idea of the half-life of deindustrialisation.

There are then a number of instances where writers from various disciplines have tried to theorise and conceptualise the contemporary era of deindustrialisation. What I want to do here is to add to this mixture by returning to Thompson, and the other theorists mentioned previously. As a starting point it is useful to think back to *Figure 1* and imagine how we might visually express the period of deindustrialisation.

***Figure 2 Theoretical Understandings of Industrial Change* (About Here)**

In *Figure 2* we can see a vector to the right of the diagram between industrial society and what we can call deindustrial society. The notion of the half-life of deindustrialisation is shown as part both of that vector, as well as occupying the period of deindustrialisation. The ideas of the half-life, and that of Mah's ruination, both imply a temporal open-endedness where there is no clear end point, or transition, to something else. To further add to this model we can return to Polanyi's ideas of embeddedness and disembedding. If early industrialisation was a process of disembedding, bookended by periods of embeddedness,

then deindustrialisation can be thought of in similar terms. Therefore, that vector between industrial and deindustrial society can be imagined as a process of disembedding where cultural, social and economic norms are disrupted. Further as Polanyi would argue this is a period where market forces can be seen to be detached from wider social restraint. Again there are questions to be raised here as to how the market might be re-embedded in whatever we might conceive of as coming next.

This uncertainty about the nature of the times we inhabit is reflected in much of the contemporary debate about work. The success of Guy Standing's books on what he coins the precariat is perhaps the latest instance of what has been described as the 'end of work' debate. In the sequel to his *The Precariat* Standing has recently published *A Precariat Charter* (Standing 2011, 2014). If his first book was diagnostic then his second is a prescription for change. Importantly Standing's thesis is underpinned by Polanyi's work with the *Precariat Charter* containing 29 articles aimed at essentially re-embedding the market in civil society. Standing's writing is important as it reminds us just how insightful Polanyi's ideas were historically, and are potentially for the state we currently find ourselves in. Standing would suggest that the old certainties of industrial society and the political economy it supported have disappeared. We need to reimagine a new social support structure to match this new political economy.

If Polanyi is useful in thinking about deindustrialisation then what of the other thinkers we examined above? Clearly Raymond Williams' ideas can help us think through contemporary society. As was the case with industrialisation his notion of structures of feeling and especially that of the residual structure of feeling are crucial. Just as he wrote about preindustrial cultures shaping industrialising, and indeed industrial society, then we can talk

of an industrial residual structure of feeling manifest in those experiencing

deindustrialisation as well as subsequent generations. As we saw above these can be

thought of as experiences, meanings, and values made marginal by the dominant culture,

but which are nonetheless 'lived and practiced on the basis of the residue – cultural as well

as social – of some previous social and cultural institution or formation' (Williams 1977,

122). In a number of pieces exploring industrial change in the North-East of England David

Bryne (2002) used the phrase 'industrial structure of feeling', to capture what he saw as a

culture in the process of being eclipsed, marginalised or erased altogether. The phrase

captures a sense of an autonomous culture lived in and through working-class life based on

traditional industrial employment lost over the last three decades or more. In a later piece

with Adrian Doyle Bryne stresses the urgency in recording such cultures:

> The programme of 'elimination' of mining progressed very rapidly. In mining parts of
>
> South Tyneside, an area which until the 1970s had four large modern collieries and
>
> where coal mining had been the largest single source of employment for men, 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 (Bryne and Doyle, 2004: 166).

Williams' structure of feeling – residual or industrial – again alerts us to the way culture

makes intelligible the experience of change. People experiencing upheaval bring to bear

previous patterns of understanding their circumstances in facing new challenges.

Taken together then, these ideas, when combined with E.P. Thompson's work, allow us to

place our current concerns within historical perspective. Thompson was under no illusions

that the industrial revolution was a profoundly disruptive period, and yet he also showed that this upheaval was understood and rendered intelligible by a share set of customs held in common. These cultures went on to have a residual presence, a half-life, in industrial society. Those ideas and customs were embedded in the lived lives of those Thompson studied. In just the same way we need to understand industrial change and how it is experienced through those who are living it now and in the future.

Conclusion

What I have done here is rethink deindustrialisation and how it is conceived of through both historical and contemporary writing about industrial change. In part this is as a response to recent calls for a return to a more historically grounded and aware sociology. In this spirit I began by drawing on the work of E. P. Thompson and especially his famous *Preface* to *The Making*. What was important here was the way Thompson sought to understand industrialisation through the experience of change and in particular how pre-existing preindustrial cultures and practices were deployed in both resisting and making sense of that transition. The industrial cultures that emerged from the late eighteen-century onwards bore a heavy imprint of pre-industrial norms, values and customs. Thompson's ideas are valuable in numerous ways in examining the process of deindustrialisation. We can conceive of industrial workers seeing their livelihoods destroyed by industrial change, new technology and market forces as inhabiting a similar space to Thompson's 'poor stockinger, the Luddite cropper, the obsolete hand-loom weaver, the 'utopian' artisan'. Their latter-day equivalents might be the 'poor redundant steelworker, the obsolete textile operative and the laid-off coalminer'. Thompson was describing the experience of disembedding and the attempt to resist this process, or possibly to re-embed the newly detaching market economy

in a moral order, albeit a modified one. Thompson's writing can therefore be read as capturing, or reconstructing the way the machine works once it is set in motion, the friction of interests - the movement itself, the heat, the thundering noise (Thompson, 1965: 357). If the moment Thompson intended to capture was industrialisation then deindustrialisation represents another such moment, one which is both simultaneously symmetrical and asymmetrical with the earlier period. Deindustrialisation can be conceived of as the negative bookend to industrialisation, a mirror image of change. Like the process of industrialisation deindustrialisation is quite rightly seen as a process rather than a neat event. If the classic period of industrialisation in the UK was 1760-1830, as some have argued, then the classic period of deindustrialisation in Western economies began in the mid to late-1970s and continues to this day.

David Inglis' critique of much of contemporary sociology was that it is insufficiently historical. History, the past, is too often deployed as a mere context, a background for present events. What this leads to is a vision of the unstable 'now' juxtaposed to a stable 'past'. This does violence to a more sensitive understanding of the flow of history and the presence of the past in the present. What the ideas discussed in this article show is that the past was far from stable and yet social and cultural forms made that change intelligible, helping to embed and resist change, or at least ameliorate some of the insecurity it induced. The contemporary notions of the 'half-life' and of 'ruination' also speak to similar instances of change being retarded, slowed and redirected by pre-existing industrial cultures. Such an understanding allows us to be less wedded to the language of breaks – solid/ liquid; early/late modernity – and more attentive to continuities and more subtle change.

Thompson's work comes alive again if we draw out those insights in the context of this later period of flux. We can identify many of those same processes that he recognised in his various manuscripts, documents and archives of the eighteenth-century mirrored in contemporary society. Using concepts like 'ruination' and especially 'the half-life of deindustrialisation' we can draw on these historical parallels more readily. What these concepts add to our understanding is the recognition of long-term effects of events beyond the simple act of company downsizing and layoffs. Using the notion of the half-life sensitizes us to the ongoing experience of industrial change and the lives it animates, whether it be a former industrial worker, or their children and possibly grandchildren. These subsequent generations may never have enjoyed the compensation of the industrial pay check but they do live with the legacies of those industries – political, economic, educationally, culturally, socially and in terms of gender patterns.

Thompson's writing also alerts us to another urgent issue, namely the need to record and bear witness to this half-life. In *The Making* Thompson painstakingly drew together the fragmented cultures of those long dead and neglected through what remained of their historical record. While the revolution in oral history and history from below over the last half-century provides a far richer archive of contemporary events than was available to Thompson in his research in to his period, we nonetheless should not be complacent at the speed of change and process of erasure. As Bryne and Doyle remind us, the traces of once important industries can be eradicated almost entirely within a generation. From my own research I heard several times coalfield residents noting the indecent haste with which pithead gear and other physical reminders of the coal industry had been removed from their areas. One woman said at a public meeting "they just took them down; we didn't have a

chance to mourn". Images, ephemera and oral history may therefore be one of the few ways to connect to something so recently lost. As Castillo says:

> Recovering the collective and historic memory requires then struggling to identify the different forms that memory has adopted in time and space. Not just recovering and integrating in a work and production process the material vestiges, but also the marks left in persons and institutions. This "industrial atmosphere" as Alfred Marshall called it… (Castillo, 2011: 7).

One way to conceive of the project we as sociologists, anthropologists or social historians are engaged in is in terms of a social industrial archaeology, the seeking out of intangible aspects of culture rapidly being lost (see Smith *et al.* 2011). We could then view the many different studies of deindustrialisation as a similar project to that of Jennings in his collection *Pandaemonium*. Jennings recognised the complexity of these processes and as a result we have to seek approaches and methods which allow us access to these complexities in our own time. His art captures fragments of identity and meaning, in the doing, the waiting, the listening, the rhythms of work and the sheer awe and terror of industrialisation. He captures in minute fragments the richness of work and in the process an industrial structure of feeling. In the study of deindustrialisation we need to adopt a similar sensibility.

The final point to make here is to consider how useful deindustrialisation is as a descriptive or analytical term, and what in turn it can add to our understanding of industrialisation? There have been a number of recent studies which deploy the term deindustrialisation in far more historic settings than is usually accepted in its modern usage. As noted above studies such as Koisten's (2013) date deindustrialisation back to the interwar period or late nineteenth-century, while Johnson (1995) finds decline in the nineteenth-century France. At

the extreme classical historian Fleming (2010) uses the phrase is describing the withdrawal of Rome from fifth-century Britain and the consequent collapse of industry. Such uses of the term deindustrialisation challenge the utility of the phrase if it can be applied to the disappearance of any industry at any time. Equally, once we confront that issue we also have to ask questions about the term industrialisation in the first place, for was not Thompson himself describing simultaneously the rise of a new industrial order while marking the eclipse of another. These and other questions are, I think, ones that need to be asked and what I have offered here is a new way of looking at the relationship between these two industrial moments.

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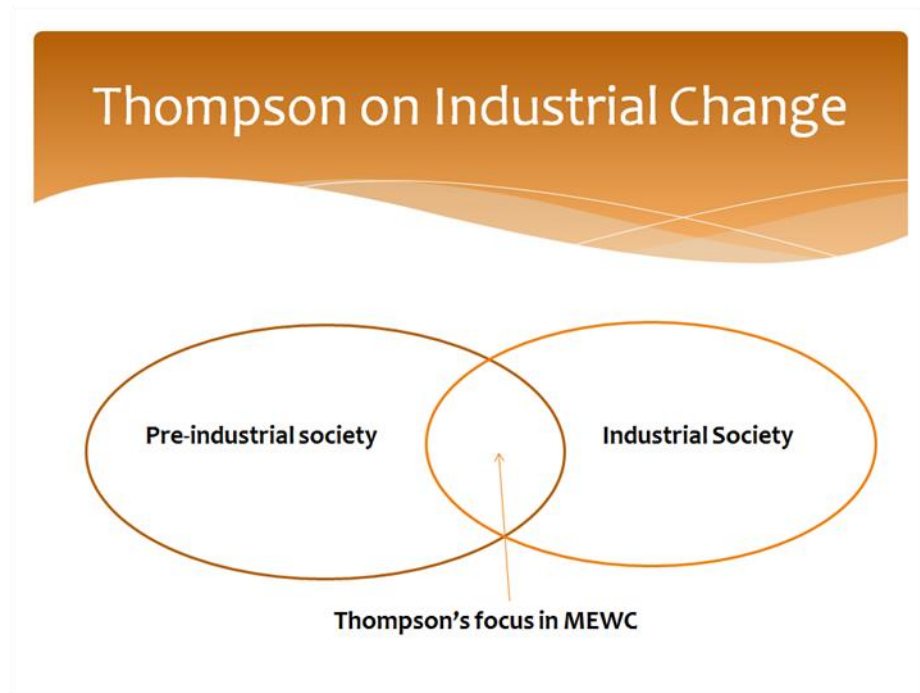
Figures

Figure 1 Thompson on Industrial Change

Figure 2 Theoretical Understandings of Industrial Change