

SPECIAL FEATURE

The World We Have Lost: Reflections on Varieties of Masculinity at Work

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Abstract

The focus on gender in and around the process of deindustrialisation is a very welcome development. The academic attention paid to the decline of male dominated places of work in part can be seen as a continuation of industrial/work sociology's longstanding interest in working-class industrial workers. It may seem counterintuitive to suggest that, notwithstanding a critical gendered account of deindustrialization that pays more attention to women, there remains a need to understand more fully the subtle processes of male gender construction within industrial work. Arguably what has not been fully accounted for are the subtle, complex, and varied ways in which younger males became fully fledged men through a shopfloor ritual, social and cultural transmission, and rites of passage. The article makes two main points. Firstly, it reflects on the notion of care in work and the idea of a moral order of the workplace wherein the workplace acted as an extended caring family. I want to think about this social form through my own research as well as that of other scholars in a variety of industrial workplaces, and also by drawing on workplace autobiography. Secondly, the piece highlights the continued attraction of an older one-dimensional image of male industrial work. In studying this aspect of workplace masculinity, we might be better placed to think about the nature of gendered loss associated with mass industrial closure over time and how in-work socialization patterns have been dramatically transformed. In the process this account will add great depth to our understanding of deindustrialization and industrial culture more generally.

Introduction

In this article I want to reflect on something that has been a longstanding concern of mine, but which I haven't centrally addressed in my writing until now: masculinity at work. Part by choice, part by accident, and part by circumstances I have often, although not exclusively studied working-class labor in male dominated traditional industries or sectors. Usually this is labor in a period of decline, or after full closure, especially through processes of deindustrialization. My focus then has been on gendered deindustrialization. My own background was originally in a very male dominated industry—the rail sector and the London Underground, which I joined in 1983 straight from school at the age of sixteen. On my first day, I joined the

National Union of Railwaymen, and was one of around forty male apprentices and I think one female. I subsequently became a signalman in a grade which boasted approximately 260 other signalmen and no more than a couple of female workers.

What I learnt from that formative experience, especially as an apprentice from sixteen to eighteen years of age, was the sheer variety of masculinities on offer as role models, although at the time I was only subconsciously aware of its importance. While there were some “macho” men in my grade—actually, often, these tended to be managers—these were very much in the minority. Instead, what I was exposed to was a wider range of male role models from openly gay men who had been “out” since the early 1970s, through to many types of men who in their different ways offered what could be described as exhibiting “caring masculinity.” This environment was also a kind of family in the sense that it reflected different age cohorts from teenagers (sons or brothers) to those in their twenties, thirties, and forties (fathers) to those in their fifties and sixties (grandfathers). Railways, like many traditional industries, worked on a system of seniority; length of service in the organization gave you the pick of jobs as they opened up. This was a system which structurally advantaged men through their ability to have continuity of service.¹ One’s starting date was important in shaping career options and choices. On a seniority list from 1985 there is a forty-eight-year span from the newest signal worker, me, and the oldest, who enjoyed a 1937 seniority date. The point being that there was a great deal of difference and variety within this overwhelmingly male group. London Underground was a great place to learn a lot of things, and prime amongst these was that it is dangerous to stereotype and be reductive. I also learnt to develop a sociological eye without having the first clue about what that was.

Later as I became an academic, I began to specialize in work sociology, or what was just about still known as “industrial sociology.” The criticism of this field was that it had largely ignored the experience of women in the workplace, or of women’s work more broadly defined outside the employment relationship.² Later this would develop into a more nuanced idea that what was being ignored was gender. There was, and is, a lot of value and truth in this observation. Industrial sociology had grown out of a wartime need to increase productivity, recognizing that factors other than purely economic ones were at play in questions of industrial efficiency. Interestingly many of the issues around increasing productivity during the war considered gender directly, largely through the question of how caring responsibilities could be accommodated by employers.³ In the 1950s and 1960s, however, these interests shifted to focus on “typical” male work. Here we could list off coal mining, fishing, car plants, and shipyards as the kinds of places sociologists thought they would find “typical workers.”⁴ Such workers were imagined as white, blue-collar, working-class employed in industries, whether they be traditional or more modern. This reflected a Parsonian and later Weberian methodological influence on British industrial sociology, which sought out closed systems and ideal types.⁵ There were of course many exceptions to the dominance of male workplaces as arenas of study.⁶

To defend that generation of academic researchers for a moment we need to understand not only the context of the people undertaking that work—often, but not exclusively men—but also their aim in researching specific types of employment. The studies they undertook were of workplaces, however some sociologists were

interested in what might be described as more formal sociological ideas and concepts such as community, transitions, power, authority, social class or stratification, and identity. Here I always think of John Eldridge's 1968 *Industrial Disputes*. To read the title or the contents page you would think that this is just about male workers but actually it used demarcation disputes to examine questions of power within and between groups. It was a deeply sociological account of human interaction, which happened to be based on a workplace, one where issues of boundary work, the negotiated order, and the division of labor were most marked.⁷

What is also notable is that what could be described as the first generation of UK work/industrial sociologists were at the forefront of recognizing that the subject matter of the sub-discipline had to shift from the narrow "industrial" to the more broad "work" sociology. This shift encompassed a much wider range of labor carried out in a variety of sectors. Perhaps even more importantly this widening of focus recognized a crucial distinction between paid work (employment) and unpaid work (often domestic or caring labor often dominated by women).⁸ This was a really important step forward and potentially could open up a far more interesting set of understandings about the employment relationship. Unfortunately, too often some of the ways of seeing work continued to be practiced in terms of the dominance of certain industrial sectors or areas, which tended to marginalize questions of gender.

Masculinity, Work, and Deindustrialization

Over the last three decades or so there has been a welcome attention paid to the issue of masculinity as part of a widening understanding of gender. Importantly, such attention associates men and masculinity as focused around the workplace, although often masculinity scholars are not rooted in work sociology. What is interesting about the writing in this field is that it often posits a "crisis in masculinity" and locates this in the "crisis in work." Here, a range of causes are cited for the crisis, such as the end of a job for life, the collapse of manufacturing and traditional industry, the so-called feminization of the workplace/workforce, and the rise of the service sector and especially customer facing employment requiring emotional or aesthetic labor.⁹ As James Gilbert says: "...the shift from production to consumption has disrupted the tight definition of manhood around work and individual initiative."¹⁰ In her thoughtful piece on shifts in work experience in the "new economy," social geographer Linda McDowell notes the differentiated experience of men at opposite ends of the life course:

... men in their fifties and sixties face declining opportunities to engage in waged work. At the opposite end of the age spectrum, too, men face growing inequalities in gaining access to well-paid employment. In a society in which overall participation rates in further and higher education are rising rapidly, young unskilled men, who previously might have found work in heavy industry face declining opportunities...¹¹

While these "crises" affect all men, there is particular concern around the fate of young men and boys and their relationship with work. A lodestone of much of the

writing about the relationship between male youth and work is of course British sociologist Paul Willis and his classic study *Learning to Labour: How Working-class Kids Get Working-class Jobs*.¹² This is an important study in lots of ways, not least as it has enjoyed a considerable “half-life” in framing debates about the absence of work and stable transitions to it, which is reflected on below.¹³ Where once working-class boys would adopt a form of anticipatory masculinity for work in school, the type of jobs the “lads” would have entered now no longer exist. As Bill Lancaster noted three decades ago: “‘Pit-hardened’ young males, with no pit or shipyard within which to vent their machismo, sublimate their traditional industrial toughness into the carnivalesque”—here Lancaster is referring to popular culture and the night-time economy of Newcastle.¹⁴

Discussions of working-class masculinity are haunted by loss. The loss of industry, jobs, wages, identity, and meaning. The young, post-industrial male is juxtaposed to a series of qualities associated with the receding industrial male ideal. Here, Ward encapsulates that loss through his research on the South Wales Valleys:

Men once earned respect for working arduously, and these roles were often seen as heroic, with punishing physical labour that involved different degrees of manual skill and bodily toughness, creating a strong, stoic masculinity.¹⁵

A theme running through these accounts is a reification of the past male cultures of work and the associated identities but, also the continuing salience of these caricatures for a range of young men in areas of industrial loss. Nayak, for instance, in his ethnography of teenage men spoke of a “A prominent masculine legacy of manual labour ran through their familial biographies,” and this was an obvious source of pride and rooted local identity.¹⁶ In many studies this individual and collective identification was seen as locking young men into a lost industrial past. These younger men suffered the dual burden in terms of an unobtainable lost masculinity, but also the identification with historic industrial work limited their ability to access the new jobs being created in the context of labor market transition. This is illustrated in Walkerdine and Jimenez’s account of masculinity, again in South Wales where young men experience sustained peer and intergenerational pressure to hold out for “real” men’s work.¹⁷ But this is best encapsulated in Nayak’s study of North East “Real Geordies” young men. Here, their intense identification with older manual traits—loyalty, hard graft, and routine—saw them rejecting office or service work available. One of Nayak’s interviewees, trying to attract young people into new industries described this as “pit mentality.” Nayak draws out the logic of such identification:

With the local employment situation so unstable, the transition into the masculine world of work would remain, in many cases, as if in a perpetual state of deferral. Like flies in amber the Real Geordies had become petrified in the hardened solution of an older period from which their values descended, making metamorphosis ever more difficult to achieve.¹⁸

Nayak, like others, sees this dichotomy playing out is a type of embodied hyper-masculinity—the rejection of “feminine” jobs, the routines and rituals of machismo

behaviors. This identity filled the vacuum left by deindustrialisation, as he puts it “... the muscular values celebrated by the subculture were forever encased in the mythical traditions of a former era.”¹⁹ Industrial identity then acts as a “structuring absence” in the lives of young men in deindustrialized spaces. This is an identity inflected by nostalgia for a past they have not shared with their fathers or grandfathers. This identity has obvious parallels with what Vashti Kenway, drawing on Connell’s ideas of hegemonic masculinity, describes as “hegemonic industrial working-class masculinity,” a kind of toxic industrial masculinity. We are presented here by what Bakker described as the gender paradox, the contradictory effects of the dual process of gender erosion (the loss of traditional male working-class jobs) and intensification (the adoption by some young men and boys of a caricature of traditional masculinity in a heightened form).²⁰

In the remaining sections of this article, I want to use these ideas of contemporary masculinity to think about that older version of industrial masculinity. Essentially my argument here is that we need to move beyond a clichéd account of industrial work and male workers of the past. This straw (macho) man is ahistorical and damaging for understanding masculinities in the past as well as the present.²¹ In his important contribution to debates about middle-class masculinity, sociologist Michael Roper studied a group of British senior managers in the 1980s. What emerges from his study is the nuance and variety of the men interviewed. Roper argued the need to recognize the variety of masculinities that emerge, shaped by the respondent’s education, army life, family, and occupation. The result is a far richer understanding of difference and variability than the Weberian inspired one-dimensional, “organizational man.” If this is true of male middle-class white-collar work then might it not be equally true of blue-collar masculinity?²²

Deindustrialization

This prehistory of work sociology is important for understanding how debates about deindustrialization have themselves been framed. It is understandable that the loss of traditional jobs means that there has been a greater focus on the experience of male workers that would have dominated many of the sectors lost. It is true that in the United States, many of the studies carried out do speak more broadly about the experience of men and women, albeit in sectors still dominated by men.²³

What I want to do here is reflect upon my own research and some of the writing that has influenced me in thinking about masculinity at work; especially as it is revealed through the process of job loss and deindustrialization. I offer some fragments, intimations, or reflections on work by men which expose questions of masculinity, affect, identity, and embeddedness in and through work. What they cumulatively reveal is the caring aspect of masculinity that was often unacknowledged in studies at the time and in subsequent accounts. This is a culture of nurturing and care, which has to be seen as a complex enactment and learning over the course of a career and lifetime. This relative neglect of the positive side of industrial masculinity has two important implications. First, it allows the perpetuation of the myth of undifferentiated blue-collar machismo, which is then uncritically projected into the post-industrial era. Secondly, more speculatively, I wonder if some of the neglect in UK

work sociology of this more nuanced understanding of masculinity was a product of the middle-class nature of the gaze, which interrogated and interpreted working-class men.

One of the most important aspects of the formation of masculinity is through socialization at work. This type of socialization is something that could occur even before the worker enters the work space through what is labelled “anticipatory socialization,” the ways in which expectations and understandings about work are formed from an early age. This can be seen in many of the autobiographical reflections on work, or in the case of Ian Roberts in his sociological account of Sunderland and the town’s shipyards:

The shipyards in Sunderland physically dominated many panoramas within the town, with large cranes and fabbing²⁴ sheds or covered berths of Pallion and Southwick yards punctuating the skyline. As a small child, one of the several rituals to be practiced during a bus journey to the ‘town’ was, on crossing Wearmouth Bridge, to look for my father working on one or other of the ships being outfitted in the river below. This, on reflection, was a pointless exercise as they were too far away to identify individuals. However, there was something magnetic about the yards and the ships themselves, which never failed to attract the eye; for, as well as being excited at the flashes of welding or cranes moving huge loads, I always endeavoured to find the names of the particular ships, especially the ones that ‘my dad built.’²⁵

This passage, written after the closure of the yards and wholesale sterilization of the Wearside industry, illustrates a form of industrial socialization through his father’s occupation and identity as a maritime plumber. This is a generally positive account, one where the young boy actively identifies with his father’s occupation rather than that of his mother. Although after briefly working in the yards himself after winning an apprenticeship, Roberts left to go on to higher education. Interestingly his mother who worked in the town was “sent to Coventry”²⁶ as a social disciplinary act by fellow women who saw her son’s behavior as disrespectful—the breaking of social and gender norms.

There are lots of other examples of this positive, anticipatory gender socialization, but I think one of the most negative, at least a more rounded account of working-class masculinity, is through Paul Willis’s *Learning to Labour* mentioned above. In *Learning to Labour* Willis’s anti-heroes, the “lads,” have a firm, if somewhat sketchy, understanding of work and the types of identities seen as valuable in the adult world of employment. Their hyper-masculinity, and anti-educational, anti-authority, stance has been an influential account both of adolescent masculinity in working-class communities and possibly has become interpreted as what contemporary working-class workplaces *were* generally like at the time. So we have a situation where subsequent scholarship about gender at work was seen through the lens of a small group of adolescent males on the point of entering the adult world of work in the 1970s.

Learning to Labour is also important for deindustrialization studies as itself has a “half-life” as a study. It is poignant as the “lads” were pretty much the last generation that could expect a smooth transition from school to workplace in the way they did.

After them, male adolescents in the West Midlands would almost certainly have a very problematic relationship with adult work as a result of job loss, factory closures, and the collapse in apprenticeship—in other words deindustrialization.²⁷

Socialization into Masculinity at Work

To continue this theme, once in the workforce and workplace young male workers were quickly socialized into work culture. Roger Penn, for example, talks about young workers being simultaneously socialized into work, craft, and adult identities.²⁸ There are many great examples and I'll use a couple that I have reflected on before in my writing. The first is an account of a worker's initial impression of his new workplace having just left school. Here, first published in a *New Left Review* collection, are the impressions of toolmaker Jack Pomlet:

I was instructed to report to the foreman of a small workshop which produced components out of which electrical instruments were constructed. My future place of work lay on the far side of the plant, in that part which dated back to the firm's origins in the late nineteenth century. To reach it I had to pass through sights as alien to my past boyhood experiences as the moon's landscape will appear to the first men to tread it. On every piece of open ground lay mental shapes; some mere bars and sheets straight from the steelworks; others gigantic welded constructs covered in a deep brown rust. Beside these objects in the open spaces of the plant were small huts reminiscent of building site 'cabins.' Then I entered the great main workshops. Each chamber, or 'aisle' as they were called, was about one hundred and fifty feet across and anything between five hundred and seven hundred yards long. Several of these great Vulcan halls lay parallel to each other. Within them the huge steam turbines which drove the equally massive electrical generators were built. Overhead rolled the girdered cranes capable of carrying weights of more than two hundred tons. As I made my bewildered way through this strange place one passed over my head. At once I understood the instinct which makes small creatures freeze as the birds of prey encircles overhead. My startled attitude to the crane's passage amused the men at work upon the turbine shells. One glance revealed my newness and a series of catcalls followed my passage down the 'aisle.' Mostly the shouts were good-natured advice to get out of the plant while I had the youth to do so. Such advice never even penetrated my outer consciousness, for how could anybody abhor this great masculine domain with its endless overtones of power and violence? During my short journey through that place of steel and power my memories of school and all it stood for were largely erased. It must have been an experience similar to that of young country boys recruited from the old English shires, and then thrust into the trenches of the Somme.²⁹

This is a wonderful quote as in a relatively short passage it evokes so much about work, class, and masculinity. It speaks to transition, of course, from schoolboy to junior worker. It dwells on the inner experience of shock and awe, of being in an alien environment. It also highlights simultaneously the complex overlapping aspects

of masculinity, the humor, the good natured “cat calls,” and banter, which reveal a sense of care, I believe, in wanting to integrate through seeming rejection—through the advice to get out while the narrator still can.

My next example is from the memoirs of a railway signalman. I particularly like this passage as I myself experienced something similar, and certainly did the same work. Ron Bradshaw’s book, *Railway Lines and Levers*, is one of the best accounts of working life on the railway, especially of socialization. I have used the following quote many times in my writing, precisely because in a relatively short passage it manages to convey so much about working life and the way masculine culture operates. Here, Bradshaw discusses his evolving relationship with the signalman who trained him in his first signal box:

At fifteen and a half years of age, I was quickly to learn the meaning of maturity and manhood, for here I was a lone teenager thrown into a world of adult working men, without a single person of my own age group for companionship or consolation.³⁰

But this loneliness is quickly transformed by being enrolled into the adult world of work:

By the eighth day that hitherto impenetrable barrier had been conquered and Ted Cox’s face broke down into a satisfied smile. With a pat on the back he announced ‘You’ll make it lad. Now we’ll show you how to write. Your script is appalling.’ ... Up to then, I had secretly feared him; now I felt a conversion to almost hero worship.³¹

Captured here is a worker in the process being embedded in their work. It is an instance of an occupational identity being formed, or to be more precise, the teller recalling a significant moment, a privileged occasion, when working life goes way beyond the cash nexus but speaks to us as a process of human bonding and maturation. It also illustrates the different forms of masculinity available as a range of options—the distant authoritarian father figure, the caring, kindly encouraging man. Equally, Bradshaw is playing a role himself in each of these moments—the hard-working dutiful son, the boy who proves himself worthy of trust and investment, the young man willing to learn and be part of a workplace culture, a prospective adult working man himself.

Another aspect of this sense of discipline emerged in an interview I carried out while working on a project about the deindustrialization of the coal mining industry in Durham, in the Northeast of England, over twenty-five years ago. A National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) official talked at length about the way social relations in the pit spilled out into extra-workplace situations:

Young people entering the mining industry were very, very quickly brought into an atmosphere of self-discipline, because when they got underground, you have to have very good discipline... you might have three generations of people working in the mine and the elderly generations, was always very well respected that

discipline and respect of yer elders was immediately fostered onto you. So, you got people growing up with respect, for the elderly people. The mining industry itself, formed part of the discipline, that's required in society in general, and I'm not talking about discipline in the sense, where you brutalise people, anything like that, it's a condition of mind, it's how you condition peoples' minds, as to which way they should be conducting themselves, not only in their work, but in society in general.³²

Thus, occupational identity and community identity, norms, and values are produced and reproduced within the context of workplace and community networks. This passage points to the positive aspects of discipline within such a context. This is the sense in which stability or predictability is valued, acting as a basis for individual realization, enabling identity through the achievement of role. It is interesting to speculate what would have happened to Willis's "lads" when they confronted the type of culture related to here. I suspect that the bravado and confidence of the "lads" would have quickly been restrained, redirected, or more crudely knocked out of them, physically or verbally.

The final illustration here is from a film project I was involved with in 2010 called *Watermark*, which told the story of the Buckland paper mill in Dover Kent.³³ It closed in 2000, and the film attempted to capture the story of the working plant as well as the experience of its closure and deindustrialization. In many ways the whole film is about gender but in particular there was a brief passage when several men, by now in their late sixties or seventies, remember their interactions as much younger men with women. I find this interesting as it shows a restrained respect. In particular, there is a scene where two men remember starting at the mill as fourteen- or fifteen-year-olds and having to go into the part of the plant where the majority of women worked. Other interviewees had talked about the verbal and non-verbal acts carried out by these older women, to playfully intimidate the young men. What was interesting in this specific interview was what is left unsaid rather than the spoken account. The men were collectively remembering and sensemaking their own experience of masculinity and gender at work. I think it speaks to a certain type of respectful masculinity both at the time, and in later life revealed through reminiscences.

The Masculine Revelation of Deindustrialization

The process of deindustrialization reveals lots of things. It reveals taken for granted knowledge about work, place, community, and the social. It has also allows access to a wider understanding of the complexity of masculinity at work. I keep returning to the notion that deindustrialization *reveals* complex social processes that were ignored, misrecognized, or taken for granted when work seemed more stable. This process of revelation has been occurring for some time now. Take, for example, Susan Faludi's *Stiffed*, where there is a brilliantly incisive early chapter "Nothing But Big Work," where Faludi examines the experience of men made redundant. For sure there is a litany of problems with the masculinities she encounters, but also, she talks beautifully and sensitively about what was lost in the closure of the men's former workplaces, such as ship repair yards:

As in so many blue-collar jobs and union environments, old-style paternalism could easily become an exclusionary despotism. But such a system also held a capacity for nurturance through apprenticeship and it was on this that the shipyard workers came to base a viable and encompassing work life. Each successful man in the shipyard had a “father”, a more experienced older man, not a relative, often not even the same race, who had recognized his abilities and cultivated them.³⁴

Faludi recounts instances of this relationship through the workforce, with “son” becoming “father” over the years with an intergenerational masculinity produced, reproduced, and transmitted across time:

To be a shipyard “father” in the later years was to have command not over men but over a body of knowledge – and to be capable of transmitting that knowledge to a younger man who would, through his mastery, become a teacher himself. The more knowledgeable man was the “father” not simply because he had authority but because he was willing and able to confer some of the authority upon another. The shipyard had devised a model of a father-and-son relationship based on work, skill, and usefulness, not on the monopoly and control of power. It was a model not much in evidence in the world beyond its gates.³⁵

That final sentence is telling. The social relationships inside the yard, ones that had taken generations to build up became vulnerable, or were simply lost, with the closure of the yard. Again, complex social relationships are revealed by loss, by what sociologists call “breaching experiments,” where a break from norms reveals the hidden patterns and wiring of social interaction, in this case masculinity and age at work.

This masculinity is not simply seen in the interaction between men, but rather is evident across accounts of working life. It speaks to a masculinity embedded in a web of gendered, classed, and generational identities and relations. Tom Juravich captures the quality of working life in a quote from a laid-off machinist:

“My godmother’s brother was a foreman over here for years. My next-door neighbour when I was little, little kid worked there ... my oldest boy is named after a toolmaker that I worked for when I first got here. My godchild, who I gave away last summer at her wedding, was one of the guys I worked with’s daughter, and he passed away at a young age ... and I gave her away. And it goes on and on and on. I mean, the girl in the office in personnel, she and I went through kindergarten and through all of school together. In this plant, everybody had those interactions. These weren’t just people you worked with. They were sometimes your relatives, they were mostly your friends.”³⁶

This quote from Boden speaks to a whole different way in which people engage and position themselves in terms of work; it shows how people see themselves as being embedded in their work. We see here and in many of the other oral histories from deindustrialized workers the interpenetration of economic, social, and cultural lives. What these insights reveal about deindustrialization is how the process inspires

complex reflection on industrial work and its meanings. We can see the consideration of loss, of nostalgia, and of critique, as the industrial past is continually subject to forms of emphasis, erasure, and contestation.³⁷

There is then an opportunity afforded by job loss, and especially deindustrialization, to reflect on industrial employment. In the past, a reflection on a working life comes through the “breach” of retirement. In many of the autobiographical accounts I have studied from various industries, but in particular from the railway industry, we can see a more critical evaluation of working life, especially the appreciation of the complexity of social relationship of which the actor had been a part. Through redundancy, glimpses of these same processes become apparent earlier on.³⁸

The disruption of deindustrialization is captured poignantly, for example, in these comments from Steven High’s interview with General Motors (GM) worker Gabriel Solano:

To watch the people go to work. To watch my Dad get up. To see this just was mesmerizing, because this was what America was about. This was what we all worked for, to make corporations their money so we could get on with our lives. People tended to their houses. Everyone was part of the community. Community was whole and it was wholesome ... This was what we lived for. And I enjoyed it. I enjoyed going to work. I enjoyed being with my coworkers because this is what we lived for ... And this was taken away. To see the abandoned houses popping up, to see the storefronts closing, to see the devastation of the joblessness, because the small shops fed the big shops. It was like a domino effect.³⁹

This feeling was apparent when I interviewed former miners in the late 1990s. But there is another sense in which the experience of work has changed. All of those interviewed then spoke of the lack of comradeship in their new work places when compared to the mines, as Phil, thirty-seven years old at the time of interview, told me:

It’s a massive change! Going from somewhere like that [a colliery], into a factory. Comradeship was unbelievable, in the collieries you all stuck together, very little going behind people’s back. [Now] People climbing the ladder all the time, shopping you for the least thing you do wrong.⁴⁰

For all of the younger workers, the quality of work-based networks had been eroded; many, unprompted during the interview, wished to return to the sociability of the mining industry citing the quality of the friendships and sense of trust engendered by the industry. Several men talked about not socializing with their current work-mates, preferring to reminisce on their former occupation with friends from the coal industry. It was clear from such discussions that a complex nexus of friendships based on the industry had been kept alive in villages through various networks of pubs, clubs, and family and friends.

One example from my research in the former Northeast coalfield sticks with me. Frank had been 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 understanding and coping with his situation had been through support networks from other, slightly older former miners—if not quite father figures then certainly caring older “brothers.” Frank had been adopted into a group of older men, each accompanied by a dog, who now took extended walks along the East Durham coastal paths. Every weekday this group would set off at 9 a.m. 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 to me 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 even more going on in this simple example. There is a series of adjustments occurring here; from a working life to retirement forced by deindustrialization; 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 those who had already experienced the transition from work to retirement—forced or voluntary. This willingness and ability to provide care was 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 noted in the shipyards. I’ve made the argument elsewhere that deindustrialized communities were often able to cope as well as they did because of the industrial structures of feeling, care, and support, which were 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.⁴¹ But what of the younger men who had never known that form of masculinity directly?

Masculinity, Younger Men and, the World We Have Never Known?

An important aspect of masculinity and deindustrialization is in that generation who have never known industrial work, nor the positive aspects of it.⁴² Here, there are some important contributions to the field that may, or may not, talk directly to the issue of deindustrialization because what they look at is contemporary work of whatever quality, or unemployment. Here, we can see themes of the legacy of deindustrialization—what many in the field label the “half-life of deindustrialization”—mixing with a host of other features of contemporary work such as precarity, zero hours contracts, the gig or platform economy.⁴³ This literature straddles a number of fields and is present in gender studies, youth studies, social policy as well as sociology and geography, and here, we return to some of the themes and issues raised earlier in the article.

Striking here is the continued salience of Paul Willis’s *Learning to Labour*. The original study in the English West Midlands area has been returned to time and again by scholars in the United Kingdom and beyond. Linda McDowell’s 2003 *Redundant Masculinities* is a good example of this. McDowell finds her group of

lads confronting a very different labor market from the “lads” of the 1970s. But while the rejection of school may be the same or similar to Willis’s study, there is a real work ethic, sometimes that is based on a rejection of a stay-at-home father.⁴⁴ There is a need for work and a work ethic, without a great judgement of the type of work on offer. This is apparent elsewhere in the literature, for example, in Anoop Nayak’s research on working class youth in post-industrial Tyneside.⁴⁵ *Learning to Labor in New Times* is an edited collection from 2004, which directly or indirectly looks at the topic of masculinity and work in the so called “new economy” that emerged in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Much of this collection is predicated on a rupture of standard, normal work, and takes for granted deindustrialization.

Arguably the study which most directly examines the question of masculinity, work, and deindustrialization is Walkerdine and Jimenez’s 2012 *Gender, Work and Community After De-Industrialisation*, which is based on research on a former South Wales steel community. For Walkerdine and Jimenez, older forms of masculinity associated with the traditional industries such as coal and especially in this case steel act as break on the wider community and especially the men moving forward. “Real” men’s work equates to the world they have lost. The answer seems to be either to wait for these types of jobs to return, or simply not offer yourself up to the labor market of perceived feminine jobs of the service sector and retail. The most telling point Walkerdine and Jimenez make is in instances where younger men who have never known or experienced traditional jobs in the steel industry are effectively hounded out of jobs as pizza delivery drivers or supermarket workers by the collective male community pressure of the older men. This represents a kind of intergenerational reinforcement of hypermasculine gender norms, a kind of negative other to the type of “father” roles of Faludi’s study. In their study, Walkerdine and Jimenez suggest that women are critical in keeping up the fiction of the male bread winner. Rejecting crude accounts of machismo, they argue that the women of the former steel-making community they studied were fully aware that the crisis they recognized in their menfolk was also a crisis for them. This was because both masculinity and femininity of the industrial era were so heavily entwined or embedded that women maintained that residual set of structures as they feared the loss of relationships and their communities. Walkerdine and Jimenez’s sensitive account ends by talking about the need to recognize that that industrial legacy is a psychosocial trauma, which needs to be confronted and moved away from. As they say:

Only the acknowledgement of the death of this form of masculinity can allow this change to take place, and, as we have seen, this is a terrifying prospect, yet ways need to be found to help both women and men to grieve and to be able to face the possibility of change together.⁴⁶

This characterization of the legacy, or the half-life of deindustrialization, seems to be the prevailing one, but one that has not gone unchallenged. In his 2013 study of young men in the Southeast of England, sociologist Steve Roberts found a far more nuanced, open, caring form of masculinity. Roberts’s respondents were prepared to take precisely the types of jobs rejected elsewhere. Here, Roberts also detected a

willingness to move away from older forms of gender patterns and socializations, revealing a softer, caring side. Roberts himself notes the contradiction that while the contested and contradictory nature of masculinity has been recognized for two decades or more, and yet he says:

...the dominant picture of working-class masculinity that pervades academic literature and popular media continues to correspond with traditional representations: adherence to male bread winner ideals, homophobia and misogyny, alongside suspicions of anything connoting femininity.⁴⁷

Gater, who draws extensively on Roberts's research, shows how younger working-class men still identify with manual labor, as opposed to office work. However, in his study there is an acknowledgement that the traditional, hard, dangerous work of the past should be left there, and is not something to be aspired to.⁴⁸

Conclusion

In conclusion, then, what can we say about masculinity and deindustrialization? I think masculinity can tell us a number of things about both deindustrialization and the type of work that went on before widespread industrial loss. As I have said here and in other publications, deindustrialization acts as a breaching experiment, allowing the unacknowledged and the untold to become apparent.⁴⁹ In this context the loss of work on an individual and collective basis allows a variety of workers to consider what they gained from industrial work over and above a wage. What is often shared in such moments is a recognition that there was something of value which passed between men. This type of space for nurturing and maturing is seen in all sorts of examples and articulated in a number of instances above. For sure, industrial work bread macho men at times, but it is interesting how few of these types appear in the accounts of industrial work. Indeed, you could make the argument that the hyper masculinity of Willis's "lads" was a caricature of which those lads would have been quickly disabused of in their new 1970s workplaces.

What is also revealed here is the persistence of the stereotype of the archetypal macho male industrial worker in the academic and popular imagination, as Steve Roberts acknowledges. This is clearly a useful foil, a binary other against which to cast equally simplistic accounts of the now: working-class/middle-class; industrial/post- or deindustrialize; macho/caring. But just as Michael Roper made clear over three decades ago, middle-class masculinity was and is complex, and by extension working-class masculinity should be seen as equally complex both now and in the past. So, useful as this stereotype has been for writers, time is now ripe for its retirement. In doing so we also have to problematize the machismo inherent in some of the accounts of male youth masculinity, and here part of the problem is that very caricature of homogenous industrial masculinity. To continually perpetuate this stereotype is to offer an unattainable identity that was never a viable option.

Deindustrialization raises a number of questions about masculinity in the past, present, and future. If workplace masculinity was complex and played multiple roles in ongoing socialization across careers and generations of men, what can we say in the absence of this type of social form? Does the type of caring, nurturing

masculinity still exist? What happens when you remove this type social structure and work identity from younger men? How do hyper-masculine cultures become eroded by alternative ways of being in the absence of an industrial workplace? Deindustrialization then opens up a new space to discuss gender, and it is important that this space also discusses masculinity in a wide variety of forms, one where there is a perhaps more positive account of masculinity at work than in the past. In that way we can truly do justice to the world we have lost through the process of deindustrialization.

Notes

1. Although while structurally discriminatory in gender terms it was to have real advantages in terms of racial and ethnicity as the system was “blind” to all but one’s date of entry to service.
2. Harriet Bradley, *Men’s Work, Women’s Work: A Sociological History of the Sexual Division of Labour in Employment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989); Lynne Pettinger, *What’s wrong with Work?* (Bristol: Policy Press, 2019).
3. See Richard K Brown, *Understanding Industrial Organisations: Theoretical Perspectives in Industrial Sociology* (London: Psychology Press, 1992).
4. Typical examples would be Huw Beynon, *Working for Ford* (London: Allen Lane, 1973); Norman Dennis, Fernando Henriques, and Clifford Slaughter, *Coal is Our Life: An Analysis of a Yorkshire Mining Community* (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1956/1969); Jeremy Tunstall, *The Fishermen: The sociology of an extreme occupation* (London: Macgibbon & Kee, 1962).
5. Brown 1992, especially chapter 2; John E T Eldridge, *Sociology and Industrial Life* (London: Nelson, 1971); John Hassard, *Sociology and Organization Theory: Positivism, Paradigms and Postmodernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).
6. Anna Pollert, *Girls, Wives, Factory Lives* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1981); Ruth Cavendish (aka Miriam Glucksmann) *Women on the Line* (London: Routledge, 1982).
7. John Eldridge, *Industrial Disputes: Essays in the Sociology of Industrial Relations* (London: Taylor & Francis, 1968).
8. Ray Pahl, *Divisions of Labour* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1984); Grahame Salaman, *Working* (London: E. Horwood, 1986); Duncan Gallie, ed., *Employment in Britain* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1988); Author ref in collection.
9. Author ref; Linda McDowell, “Life without Father and Ford: the new gender order of post-Fordism,” *Transactions, Institute of British Geographers* 16, (1991): 400–19.
10. James Gilbert, *Men in the Middle: Searching for Masculinity in the 1950s* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 17.
11. Linda McDowell, “Father and Ford revisited: gender, class and employment change in the new millennium,” *Transactions, Institute of British Geographers* 26, (2001): 448–64, 455.
12. Paul Willis, *Learning to labour: How working-class kids get working class jobs* (London: Columbia University Press, 1977).
13. *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 the edited collection Nadine Dolby Greg Dimitriadis and Paul Willis, eds., *Learning to Labor in New Times* (New York: Routledge, 2004). For studies framed in relation to Willis’s book, see, for example, Linda McDowell, *Redundant Masculinities: Employment change and white working class youth* (Oxford: Wiley, 2003); Michael R.M. Ward, *From Labouring to Learning: Working-Class Masculinities, Education and de-industrialization* (Basingstoke: Springer, 2015).
14. Bill Lancaster, “Newcastle: capital of what?” in *Geordies*, Robert Colls and Bill Lancaster, eds. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1992), cited in Anoop Nayak, “‘Boyz to Men’: masculinities, Schooling and labour transitions in de-industrial times,” *Educational Review* 55, 2, (2003) 1465–3397, 1465.
15. Ward, *From Labouring to Learning* (Basingstoke: Springer, 2015), 39.
16. Nayak, “Boyz to Men,” (2003), 150.
17. Valerie Walkerdine and Luis Jimenez, *Gender, Work and Community After De-Industrialisation: A Psychosocial approach to affect* (Basingstoke: Springer, 2012).

18. Nayak, "Boyz to Men," (2003), 153.
19. Nayak, "Boyz to Men," (2003), 156.
20. See Isabella Bakker, ed., *Rethinking restructuring: Gender and Change in Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996); Jane Kenway and A. Anna Kraack, "Reordering Work and Destabilizing Masculinity," in *Learning to Labor in New Times*, eds. Dolby et al. (New York: Routledge, 2004).
21. See, for example, the argument of K. Elliott and S. Roberts, "Caring masculinities among working-class men in blue-collar occupations in the UK: Understanding biographies of care," *Gender, Work & Organization* (2022) 1–17.
22. Michael Roper, *Masculinity and the British Organizational Man since 1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994).
23. North American researchers do seem to be better at reflecting the loss of work for men and women. See, for example, Kathryn Marie Dudley, *The End of the Line: Lost Jobs, New Lives in Postindustrial America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994); Meg Luxton and June Corman, *Getting by in Hard Times: Gendered Labour at Home and on the Job* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001); Victor Tan Chen, *Cut Loose: Jobless and Hopeless in an Unfair Economy* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2015).
24. "Fabbing" here refers to the fabrication sheds where smaller elements of the ship would be constructed before being assembled.
25. Ian Roberts, *Craft, Class and Control: The Sociology of a Shipbuilding Community* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1993), 1.
26. Being "Sent of Coventry" refers to being shunned or shamed for not conforming to a social norm or value. In this case the perceived disrespect being shown to the value of a craft apprenticeship.
27. Like many others working in the field of deindustrialisation studies, I am drawing on Sherry Linkon's idea of the "half-life of deindustrialisation," which encapsulates the process of industrial loss unfolding over years and decades rather than just at the time of closure. See Sherry Linkon, *The Half-Life of Deindustrialization: Working-Class Writing about Economic Restructuring* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2018).
28. Roger Penn, "Socialisation into skilled identities," Unpublished paper presented to labour Process Conference, Aston University, 1986; Roger Penn, "Technical change and skilled manual work in contemporary Rochdale," in *Skill and Occupational Change*, eds. Roger Penn, Michael Rose, and Jill Rubery (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994).
29. Jack Pomlet, "The Toolmaker," in *Work 2: Twenty Personal Accounts* ed. Ronald Fraser (London: Penguin, 1969) 22–23.
30. Ron Bradshaw, *Railway Lines and Levers* (Paddock Wood: Unicorn Books, 1993), 25.
31. Bradshaw, *Railway Lines and Levers* (1993), 25.
32. Durham Area NUM official, interview by the author 1998.
33. *Watermark: The Story of Buckland Paper Mill in Dover*, directed by Marianne Kafer, Dover Arts Development (2010).
34. Susan Faludi, *Stiffed: The Betrayal of Modern Man* (London: William Morrow, 2000), 72.
35. Faludi, *Stiffed* (2000), 73.
36. Boden, quoted in Tom Juravich, *On the Altar of the Bottom Line: The Degradation of Work in the 21st Century* (Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2009), 152.
37. Author ref; Christine Walley, *Exit Zero: Family and Class in Postindustrial Chicago* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013).
38. See Author ref.
39. Steven High and David Lewis, *Corporate Wasteland: The Landscape and Memory of Deindustrialization* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2007), 12.
40. Phil, redundant miner, interview by the author 1999.
41. Author ref.
42. Linkon, *The Half-Life of Deindustrialization* represents one of the best discussions of the generational void between those who "enjoyed" industrial work and those that followed them. Linkon argues that often it is the sons and daughters of deindustrialised workers who provide some of the keenest insights into what has been lost.
43. See, for example, Anthony Lloyd, *Labour Markets and Identity on the Post-Industrial Assembly Line* (Farnham: Routledge, 2013); Ward, *From Labouring to Learning* (Basingstoke: Springer, 2015).

44. McDowell, *Redundant Masculinities* (Oxford: Wiley, 2003).
45. Nayak, "Boyz to Men," (2003); Anoop Nayak, "Displaced Masculinities: Chavs, Youth and Class in the Post-Industrial City" *Sociology* 40, (2006): 813–31.
46. Walkerdine and Jimenez, *Gender, Work and Community After De-Industrialisation* (Basingstoke: Springer, 2012), 181.
47. Steve Roberts "Boys Will Be Boys ... Won't They? Change and Continuities in Contemporary Young Working-class Masculinities," *Sociology* 47 (2013): 671–86, 682–83.
48. R. Gater, "'Dirty, dirty job. Not good for your health': Working-Class Men and their Experiences and Relationships with Employment, in *Education, Work and Social Change in Britain's Former Coalfields Communities: In the Shadow of Coal*, eds. K. Simpson and R. Simmons (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022), 107–26.
49. For a fuller elaboration of the idea of the "breaching experiment" and its value in the study of deindustrialisation see Author ref; for an account of its applicability in the context of unemployment, see Douglas Ezzy, *Narrating Unemployment* (Aldershot: Routledge, 2001).