



# Narratives of Gijón industrial workers: loss of collective identity, emotional conflicts and social consequences



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**Sociocultural change, Memory, Heritage and Identities in the context of industrial decline.  
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# Theoretical framework

- Intense transformation of western economies since the 1980s.
- Loss of millions of jobs in Western America, European Union and the United Kingdom...
- ... or entire sectors: mining, shipbuilding, textile and automotive industry.
- Great processes of social metamorphosis.
- Work incardinated in communities and people integrated into the work and local industry.

# Theoretical framework

- Oral memory reflects the subtle evolution of memory on the causes, consequences, and views of working people who experienced these transformations.
- Processes widely treated in the Anglo-Saxon field (Bluestone and Harrison, 1982; Bamberger and Davidson, 1998; Linkon and Russo, 2002; Cowie and Heathcott, 2003; Strangleman, 2008; Strangleman and Rhodes, 2014; Strangleman, 2017).
- Memory, nostalgia and collective identity analysis usually ignored in Spain: focused on the importance of trades, or on the mobilizations of workers.

# Approach

- **Meaning of closures: memory, nostalgia and collective identity**

- 3 responses to change:

"Creative destruction": give up an idealized type of work

Sombart

Schumpeter, 1942

Resignation and acceptance of globalization

Gorz, 1999

Strangleman, 2008

Lamentation about job losses and industrial heritage

Bluestone and Harrison, 1982

Doukas; Cowie and Heathcott, 2003

Mah, 2012

Strangleman and Rhodes, 2014

Linkon, 2018

# Three types of reflections

- **Creative destruction**
  - ✓ process of innovation. Transformation of old companies and business models.
  - ✓ opportunity to get rid of a degraded type of work: little real meaning and false identity.
- **Feeling of resignation in the face of what is considered inevitable**
  - ✓ necessary for Western nations to compete in international markets.
  - ✓ accept industrial restructuring... but bitterness, distrust and desire for revenge (alienation and rejection).
- **Lamentation for the loss of jobs and their impact**
  - ✓ identity, nostalgia, dramatic effects on workers and their communities.
  - ✓ “smokestack nostalgia”, “loss of family”, “funerals”(Cowie y Heathcott, 2003).

# Deindustrialization of Gijón

- **Confecciones Gijón (“IKE”): 1990.**
  - ✓ One million shirts manufactured annually and employed 680 people.
  - ✓ 300 women of textile industry unemployed after a fierce struggle since 1987 (Prieto, 2004; Pérez González y Cañal Fernández (2018):
    - ❖ intermittent strikes
    - ❖ mobilizations two days a week
    - ❖ on-site lockdowns (1990-1994)
    - ❖ roadblocks
    - ❖ performances
    - ❖ “doorstepping”.



# Deindustrialization of Gijón

- **Mina La Camocha: 2007.**
  - ✓ 13,000 workers, 30 million coal tonnes since 1935.
  - ✓ 173 workers fired in a modest coal farm quantitatively, but.
  - ❖ long history
  - ❖ transformation of the rural area
  - ❖ "foundational myth" of the first worker commission in 1957 (Donaire, 2015; Gago, 2016).





# Deindustrialization of Gijón

- **Naval Gijón and Juliana Constructora: 2009.**
- ✓ Around 4,000 workers in the late 1970s (all shipbuilding in Gijón).
- ✓ Important influence on other local sectors of activity and indirect employment.



- ✓ Harsh mobilizations, unable to prevent the end of the activity.
- ✓ Fired the last 250 shipyard workers after a long process (Agüera, 1996; Köhler, 1996; Vega, 1998; Alonso-Domínguez, 2013).



# Deindustrialization of Gijón

- **Suzuki Gijón: 2013.**
  - ✓ Introduced in Gijón the organizational and productive revolution -> *just in time system*: key to Japanese success in international markets.
  - ✓ Global recognition in the development of the engine equipment, and quality (2nd place in the global ranking in this type of standards).
  - ✓ 360 employees in the 1980s.
  - ✓ 40,000 units sold per year.
  - ✓ 203 workers fired (Granda, 2014).



# Deindustrialization of Gijón

- **Tenneco-Gijón (now Vauste): ¿?**



- ✓ still unfinished, but...
- ✓ ...conflict, both internal and external and intimidating and permanent presence of closure or relocation for its workers.
- ✓ symbol of the long-successful resistance of local work to global restructuring in a transnational company (Köhler y Begega, 2016).
  - ❖ To prevent their relocation (225 workers), they used traditional techniques to deal with the labour conflict, but also introduced other more innovative elements such as the socialization of conflict or the intervention of EU Industry Commissioner Antonio Tajani.

# Aim and research questions

- Delve into the multiple meanings of one of the most relevant and complex transformations of the last decades of the 20th century.
- ❖ **How have people concerned reacted to deindustrialization processes?**
- ❖ **How have communities dependent on these activities been affected?**
- ❖ **What is the predominant kind of nostalgia?**

# Methodology

- **Two focus groups.**
- 8 and 7 industrial workers -> textile, naval, mining and automotive sectors affected by deindustrialization processes, closures of activity or collective redundancies.
- Gijón, December 2019.
- Great diversity of profiles -> identify possible differences on sex (eight women and seven men), age, professional qualification and employment situation.
- 10 people interviewed for the first time, 5 questioned in previous researches.

# Interviewed workers

Name	Age	Sector	Company	Professional profile
J.	48	Mining	Mina La Camocha/Hunosa	Miner
B.	50	Mining	Mina La Camocha/Hunosa	Miner
R.	73	Shipbuilding	Juliana Constructora	Welder master
A.	70	Shipbuilding	Juliana Constructora	Office worker
J. I.	67	Shipbuilding	Naval Gijón	Intermediate officer
J. L.	64	Shipbuilding	Naval Gijón	Line operator
P.	50	Automotive	Vauste	General employee
V.	35	Automotive	Vauste	Office worker
M.J.	64	Automotive	Suzuki	Office worker
R.	64	Automotive	Suzuki	Shop foreman
E.	63	Textile	Obrerol	General employee
T.	68	Textile	Obrerol	Seamstress
B.	63	Textile	Confecciones Gijón	Pattern designer
R.	66	Textile	Confecciones Gijón	Office worker
V.	66	Textile	Confecciones Gijón	Seamstress

# Narratives

- 3 discursive axes -> replicate work done in other regions, especially in the Anglo-Saxon sphere: Bamberger and Davidson (1998); Dudley (1994); Strangleman (2008).
- Studying profusely the consequences of deindustrialization.
- The way people feel concerned is not the same for everyone...
- ...despite they are part of and participate in a common process.

# Narratives

## 1. Identity, pride and nostalgia: the loss of family.

- ❖ Deep pride in the work being done, the spirit of struggle and camaraderie, responsibility and loyalty to work and community [workers of Mebane (Bamberger y Davidson, 1998) / Gijón workers).
- ❖ Alienation, sadness and helplessness over the end of these "red neck, in smokestack places" (Cowie and Heathcott, 2003:13) that could have been avoided.

*A. (Juliana Constructora): In the end they were people from the shipyards, it didn't matter if it was from El Dique that... and people of Gijón knew it, the problem, and they didn't distinguish one company from the other.*

*E. (Obrerol): ... I know what I learned as a jobber, because I consider myself a jobber, working class... And... we organized ourselves, the women... Gijón textile women... And there I met people from shipyards, from Duro Felguera, from IKE... People from Duro Felguera helped us... We were in a very good tune. I have a very pleasant experience of my work, in relation to my peers.*

*B. (La Camocha) Early retirements caused each worker to start looking for himself and broke the unity of the sector.*



# Narratives

## 2. Corporate capitalism: disinvestment and speculation.

- ❖ Corporate capitalism (consumerism), vs the "old values" (producerism) of industrial work [Doukas, 2003 -> Mohawk Valley / industrial work of Gijón].
- ❖ Similar narrative -> the move from a family model to a corporate management model: beginning of the conflict and end of many of the factories.
- ❖ Loss of self-sufficiency and poor quality products. Subtle forms of closure, a kind of "milking" of local economies [Bluestone and Harrison (1984:7)].

*T. (Obrerol): Our boss, when he saw China's business, went to make it all... if we cost him 4 euros, with 4 euros he brought from China... He told us in our face, that we were expensive. He even made us a chart to justify that he was going to close the company. Chinese stores began to fill up with our products, but at half price.*

*V. (Tenneco): It is a multinational and it was pure relocation, because it was cheaper for them to do so in another country. In this case it was in the East, in Poland, they opened a new plant, where workers charge 400 euros, work every day... and they don't complain. Now we belong to a multinational, but this was a very familiar factory.*

*A. (Suzuki): We couldn't compete with Thailand, which has an impressive center. They make everything there. They closed the 3 plants that manufactured the most valued vehicles, Gijón, USA and Japan.*

# Narratives

## 3. The scars of closure

- ❖ The dismantling of Gijón's industrial sector has left deep personal and collective scars beyond job losses.
- ❖ People who were close to retirement feel privileged because they enjoy high incomes, but feel the scars of industrial decline in their nearest environment.
- ❖ Unsafe working life, in precarious jobs and with an uncertain future or inability to find a job in the city and even throughout the region, despite its high professional competence: stability of steelworkers (Cowie and Heathcott, 2003)

*M.J. (Suzuki): We were paid 45 days per year worked, 42 monthly payments and unemployment ... but for young people it was devastating, because there's none who are earning what they earned.*

*A. (Confecciones Gijón): I am very disappointed and very concerned about young people now, because they do not have the chances that we could have, and it turns out that my children have no chances. They're working on what they can and I'm very worried about that.*

*V. (Tenneco): ... here in Asturias there are few offers and dreadful for economic purposes and working conditions. Sometimes you have to work 12 hours for a miserable salary.*

# Conclusions: memory

- **Oral memory reveals people's experiences** in the processes of deindustrialization, their interpretation, their deeper, and sometimes changing meaning.
- The selected fragments provide narratives about the **causes, results, and point of view** of those who experienced these transformations in the first person.
- The feeling is **bittersweet**: pride of the job well done, never having given up the values of the culture of work, but at the same time the impression of having suffered a defeat that could have been avoided.
- To a large extent, they are **consistent with** what research on labour and industrial relations in the **Anglo-Saxon** field.

# Conclusions: collective identity

- First, we found a reaction based on **lament about job losses** and the impact it had on displaced workers, their families and the community in which they were rooted.
- ✓ The social ties provided by the work were highly appreciated, and the heartbreaking moments leading up to the closure are described as the "loss of the family", when not as authentic "funerals".
- Loss of identity and values as a result of such collective trauma.
- Work as a source of identity is now finished

# Conclusions: nostalgia

Some speeches that reflect the emotional conflicts they have faced  
(Davies, 1975)

## **1. Simple nostalgia**

- ✓ Things were better in the past.

## **2. Reflective nostalgia**

- ✓ Experience of job loss -> Questioning himself for what was indisputable in the past.

## **3. Interpretative nostalgia.**

- ✓ Emotion becomes problematic and feelings are more objective.

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attention!