

H-Net Reviews

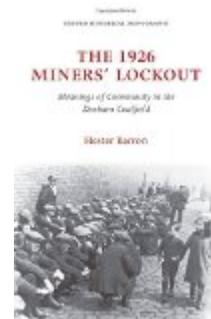
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Hester Barron. *The 1926 Miners' Lockout: Meanings of Community in the Durham Coalfield*. Oxford Historical Monographs Series. New York: Oxford University Press, 2010. 320 pp. \$115.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-957504-6.

Reviewed by Matt Perry (Newcastle University)

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Through this study of the miners' lockout of 1926 in county Durham, Hester Barron has fallen upon a significant gap in our understanding of that dispute. She eyes the Durham coalfield through the optic of community. This entails encroaching on a mature multidisciplinary field, and her introduction ranges skillfully from Ferdinand Tönnies's *Gesellschaft-Gemeinschaft* dichotomy via Clark Kerr and Abraham Siegel's isolated mass thesis to Benedict Anderson's imagined communities. This concept of community is deployed to probe the remarkable solidity of the Durham coalfield during the seven-month lockout and to come to grips with the reason why the levels of strikebreaking were so much lower in Durham than other coalfields.

This discussion of community blends into the historiography of miners and class. Barron adroitly locates her study within the wider regional and international comparisons of coalfields and mining culture. The romantic account of the miner as the "archetypal proletarian" holding exemplary class consciousness has long been challenged. In scholarly accounts of the Ruhr, South Africa, and South America, ethnic and religious divisions were able to frustrate efforts to establish a unitary union culture. Previous structuralist accounts based on the notion of the isolated mass of mining settlements have long been judged to be inadequate at dealing with these fragmenting forces operating within coalfields.

Such questioning of coalfield cohesion is echoed in recent studies of the working class more generally. In this regard, county Durham is no exception as assumptions about isolation and occupational homogeneity fail to correspond to the diversity of the coalfield, which

stretched from urban South Tyneside and Sunderland to more remote villages. A singular identity ignores the very real fractures along lines of gender, skill, respectability, and religion. Such observations highlight the onus to provide a satisfactory explanation of the seeming paradox that despite all of these cultural fissures the strike movement remained so cohesive in this northerly part of England. As a consequence of the recognition of the complexity of identity formation in mining communities, there has been a shift toward the specificity of regional experience, allowing Barron to set her bearings according to the insights afforded by studies of the Dukeries, South Wales, Lanarkshire, and Lancashire. Challenging the notion of South Walian exceptionalism, she argues that Durham miners outdid their South Wales counterparts in the construction of a society within a society around lodge and union structures. While the South Wales coalfield had significant traditions of syndicalism and militancy, union loyalty was stronger during the lockout in county Durham.

The chapters follow a series of these identities within the community: class and region, attitudes to women, religious identities, education, memory, and experience. The book relies on an impressive combination of primary materials: oral testimony, newspapers, union records, personal papers, and official documents. In her deliberations on class and region, she considers the position of the middle class within county Durham. In more economically diverse towns, there was a considerable social separation between the middle class and miners. In the more socially homogeneous pit villages, local shopkeepers were generally sympathetic toward the miners and their grievances were more likely to be with the

co-operative movement. Oral history reveals social antagonism to be sharpest toward colliery management on the grounds of their visibility. Resentment also extended to coal owners and those who drew royalties from the collieries sunk on their land. Paternalistic practices, such as the provision of company housing, were read as mechanisms of control. Occupational consciousness did not necessarily extend to class consciousness; and cleavages of respectability, locality, and region (particularly the tensions between the Durham Miners' Association [DMA] and the Miners' Federation of Great Britain [MFGB]) constrained its emergence. Barron also highlights how, despite international solidarity, miners' representatives used the language of patriotism to make their case and subvert the accusation of the employers and Conservatives that the colliers were betraying the nation. The chapter on women identified the alternate ideal types to which coalfield women were assumed to conform: individualists pushing their husbands to return to work, innocent victims alongside their children of the hardships of the dispute, or heroines who enforced communitarian values and supported the strike. The author found that there were few examples of women publicly

opposing the strike and many more involved in fundraising or challenging blacklegs or the police.

Drawing together her themes, Barron arrives at the conclusion that the mining communities were successfully able to subsume and integrate other forms of identity. Thus the community acted as an anchor of multiple identities—religion, gender, occupation—and a primary building block of wider identifications with the DMA, the MFGB, and even the working class.

Despite this being a laudable contribution to the historiography of 1926, the study fails to persuade on occasion. Barron's choice of community as the master category causes some explanatory difficulties. This synchronic concept of community proves ill-adapted to the temporal dynamics and historical openness of the dispute. Time loses out to (imagined) space. Also, if our understanding of 1926 is derived from rival imagined meanings of community, then there is a danger of displacing the conflict between miners and their employers as the animating force of the dispute. Nonetheless, this book is impressive as a well-written, thoughtful, and empirically rich piece of research.

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