

Steven High. *Industrial Sunset: The Making of North America's Rust Belt, 1969-1984.* Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003. 304 pp. \$32.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-8020-8528-3.



Reviewed by Ian McKay

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Steven High, professor of history at Nipissing University, has written a stimulating account of responses to factory shutdowns on either side of the U.S.-Canadian border from 1969 to 1984. Many reviewers and prize juries have already highlighted this book's many merits—its humane and balanced vision of working-class agency in the face of economic devastation, its multi-faceted primary research strategy (encompassing 137 oral history interviews, 26 undertaken by High himself) and its substantial base in the secondary literature. The winner of the Raymond Klibansky Prize, the Albert B. Corey Prize of the Canadian Historical Association and the American Historical Association, and the John Porter Memorial Book Prize of the Canadian Sociology and Anthropology Association, *Industrial Sunset* comes highly recommended. In the words of the John Porter prize committee, it "delivers fine-grained results of meticulous research (almost all of it primary research). The volume couples a significant oral history component with compelling macro sociological analysis."

These words of praise strike me as being entirely justified. High has developed a coherent thesis which promises to stimulate much further research and reflection. In essence, he proposes that, although the wave of shutdowns was similar on either side of the border, economic events were "filtered through national contexts." In the United States, he argues, "the fears and anxieties engendered by industrial transformation turned workers into metaphorical gypsies, encamped on an emptied industrial landscape. Under the banner of local community, plant closing opponents in the United States proved unable to save factories from closing or to soften the blow of displacement. Ultimately, the identity of many Americans was irrevocably altered by the experience of displacement." In Canada, on the other hand, opponents of plant shutdowns "were able to marshal nationalist claims as rhetorical weapons against plant shutdowns and lobbying tools. Canadian politicians were convinced to legislate advance notice of layoffs, severance pay, pension reinsurance, job placement assistance, and preferential hiring rights" (pp. 11-12).

In this review, I would like to ask some questions about the significance of this book within the wider context of the writing of late-twentieth-century Canadian history. The 1960s, '70s and '80s are only now starting to take shape on the historians' horizon. What does this book contribute to the emergent discussion of this period? How can the "High Thesis" be further developed?

High points out that overly ambitious descriptions of "deindustrialization" were "part myth and part fact" (p. 8). He cites aggregate economic data showing that "manufacturing employment in the United States did not decline but actually increased from 16.8 million in 1960, to 20.1 million in 1973, and 20.3 million in 1980" (p. 8). Yet plant closings hit some communities with the force of a hammer blow. In the United States, because of Vietnam-era bad blood between leftists and labor, activists relied upon a strategy that pitted "the community" against capital, whereas in Canada, such activists drew heavily upon economic nationalism. Even the shut-down literatures are different--the American studies look at the local context, whereas Canadians overwhelmingly prefer the "national" context (p. 14).

Chapter 1 looks at "Regions of the North American Mind." High imaginatively traces the influence of the "Dust Bowl" on the eventual emergence of the "Rust Belt." Such "large vernacular regions" are, it is suggested, important in framing issues and conditioning oppositional responses. Chapter 2, "Transplanted Identities," effectively uses the oral-history interviews as ways of exploring "metaphors of home and family." The author suggestively argues that U.S. narratives stress the "disruption of the social boundaries that had long demarcated people's place in the world" which "left local residents disoriented" (p. 64), while Canadian narratives worked very differently: "none of the Canadians interviewed questioned their old identities as workers or union members. The ties that bound them to people and place, though weakened by layoff and the resulting out

migration, remained strong" (p. 71). Chapter 3, "Back to the Garden," looks at changes in the architecture of factories--increasingly, an aesthetic of "industrial pastoralism" has meant the disappearance of the very word "factory" from the corporate imagination, to be replaced with such terms as "facility," "real estate," even "campus." This chapter, although interesting, seemed to me to be loosely integrated into the argument of the book as a whole. Chapter 4, "The Deindustrializing Heartland," argues for the importance of planned obsolescence as well as plant relocation as an element within the "creative destruction" of 1969-84. Arguing against analysts who assume that national frontiers have lost their significance in an age of trade liberalization, High remarks, "Yet the border did matter. The geographic concentration of people and industry in the Montreal-Windsor corridor worked against companies that considered relocating to low wage areas in other provinces. In the United States, the earlier development of the industrial Midwest meant mills and factories there began to reach obsolescence between 1969 and 1984" (p. 96). No Canadian jurisdiction had right-to-work legislation comparable to that found in the United States. (He might have mentioned in this connection, however, Nova Scotia's Michelin Bill, which denied rubber workers the ability to certify their union in the province's tire factories.) Moreover, since industrialization in Canada occurred at a later date than in the United States, "economic obsolescence did not claim as many mills and factories in Canada until the 1990s" (p. 110). It was this factor more than any other which distinguished "the pattern of plant closings in the United States from that of Canada" (p. 130). Chapter 5, "In Defence of Local Community," ponders the enigma of the American labor movement, seemingly so passive and accommodating in the face of a corporate agenda throwing thousands of its members out of work. If much of the blame must be borne by a hidebound and protectionist trade unionism, myopically and mistakenly thinking that what was good for Gen-

eral Motors was good for the autoworkers, High also places some responsibility for this state of affairs on New Leftists, who have allowed an "anti-government animus" to frame their resistance to shutdowns to the "community versus capital" framework. Looking at the autoworkers, High also points out that the union structures north of the border allowed both for more grassroots mobilization and participation by radicals. Finally, chapter 6, colorfully titled "I'll Wrap the F*#@ Canadian Flag around Me': A Nationalist Response to Plant Shutdowns," suggests that Canadian nationalists were able to soften some of the worst effects of job loss. Nationalists were able to invoke a sort of Thompsonian "moral economy" that exalted the values of Canadian community over those of corporate capital. In 1986, 41.6 percent of manufacturing workers in Canada were unionized, nearly double the percentage of the United States (p. 167). Noting the two camps--the "economic" and the "institutional"--of interpreters of Canadian/American divergences in levels of trade unionism, High discerns an emergent third, political line of explanation: unions that were able to bring powerful pressure to bear upon politicians and mobilize public opinion. Notwithstanding their earlier disparagement of the left-nationalists, both the NDP and the trade unions came to draw upon the nationalist de-industrialization thesis; after the mid-1970s, the Ontario Federation of Labour had abandoned its earlier continentalism. "If there was any message in the string of legislative and plant victories for the anti-shutdown movement in Canada," High argues, "it was the usefulness of economic nationalism for their cause. Canadian trade unionists literally wrapped themselves in the flag in order to defy foreign-owned companies that wished to abandon workers with little or no compensation. Their efforts were not in vain, as the flag softened the blow of economic displacement during the 1970s and early 1980s. But the gains made by worker protests proved to be only a partial victory. Despite frequent appeals for a public review process, opponents of plant

closings did not seriously impinge on management's legal right to close plants" (p. 191). Thanks to economic nationalism, Canadian opponents of shutdowns could construct a very different understanding of plant shutdowns: "Instead of symbolizing the last rites of local community, or a rite of passage into a new post-industrial world, plant shutdowns in Canada seemed to threaten national sovereignty. By literally wrapping themselves in the Canadian flag, industrial workers won important legislative victories that forced companies to soften the blow of displacement" (p. 194).

Such is the High thesis. It is no small tribute to this scholar and his book that it will be debated for many years to come, as a stunningly original and innovative contribution to our understanding of modern Canadian history. No one with a scholarly interest in a diversity of fields--working-class history, economic history, public policy, and cultural studies--should overlook this major book.

My major critique of High would be that, by putting all his interpretive eggs in the basket of a somewhat diffusely defined and under-theorized concept of "nationalism," he has not paid enough attention to the way the country's multi-faceted left was able to bring into play a variety of "nationalisms." At times, I worried that his dichotomy of U.S. "communitarian protest" versus Canadian "nationalist protest" was just as open to critique as that which pits "social unionism" versus "business unionism." Did plant-closing opponents in the U.S. principally rely simply on appeals to community and those in Canada principally on appeals to nationalism (p. 9)? The evidence in the book for the evocation of radically different myths on either side of the border is suggestive but not conclusive. An interesting test of this thesis might entail an exploration of earlier experiences of cut-backs and shut-downs before modern "Canadian economic nationalism." The coal industry, since the 1920s dominated (on its labor side) by an American union that accepted much of the

logic of "creative destruction," might provide a telling field for such comparative work.

The High thesis is that Canadian workers were able to soften the blow of creative destruction because they still had unions capable of mobilizing people on such issues and because they could draw upon nationalist sentiments to limit capital's power. Yet, at times in this study, it is not that clear to me that the two movements were all that divergent in their willingness to resort to nationalistic arguments. The more significant difference may be discerned in the occasional glimpses we occasionally are given in this account of an effective and energetic social-democratic left—even in the Dark Ages of the 1980s. It occurred to me to reflect, as I read High's largely ideological critique of the position of the American New Left, that even had such leftists had an entirely different analysis, they lacked the means to make their ideas effective at a national or state level.

Moreover, I think a Canadian rather than an Ontario account would need to place much more emphasis on Quebec's drive for sovereignty, which placed a prohibitively high price tag on any federal complicity in plant shutdowns in that province. Industrial relocations from Rustbelt to Sunbelt in the United States raised regional and class issues; any massive desertion of Quebec by capital raised the specter of a crisis of the Canadian state itself. Small wonder, one might speculate, that an "industrial policy" aimed at limiting the effects of industrial transformation made such good political sense. It seems plain that one thing anti-shutdown activists had going for them was a social democratic party that was, at times, well-positioned to embarrass governments and influence legislation. While slighting remarks and off-hand disparagements have long characterized a certain school's handling of "slowcialism" in Canada, the further development of High's thesis suggests that such ultra-left positions have blinded their proponents to much of the political reality around them. Both when we look at the remarkable stay-

ing power and accomplishments of socialist feminism, and at the survival in many places of effective trade unionism, the role of social democracy—and not just, as in many passages in this book, "nationalism" per se—seems central. The crucial variable, in other words, may be a surviving and coherent left tradition, rather than a diffuse sense of nationalism.

High effectively critiques the media's clichéd treatment of shutdowns at the community level, noting, when he describes the Youngstown agitation, the "basic formula: an interview with the mayor, an interview with the spokesperson for the Ecumenical Coalition, and video footage of the closed mills" (p. 160). It is not as clear to me that he convincingly shows that the other side of "community activism" was "nationalism" so much as it was social-democratic progressivism. In other words, I think the fuller development of his thesis would require a consistent comparison of the U.S. and Canadian lefts since at least the 1940s. North of the border, there has been at least the episodic possibility of a "left" capable of undertaking serious hegemonic politics and making a loud noise when the Liberals/Conservatives run roughshod over the democratic rights of working people.

Canadian nationalism itself is somewhat under-theorized in this discussion. That Anthony Smith and Benedict Anderson represent very different positions would not be plain to most of High's readers. High's work again should be widely discussed and cited in the emergent camp of serious students of Canadian nationalism. Here (with the caveat that I know these scholars personally) the innovative work of John Smart, on Ottawa's intermittently effective attempt to nurture high tech in Silicon Valley North, and Ryan Ed-wardson, on the ideological and political-economic development of "Canadian content," might be mentioned as important indications of a strongly awakened interest in writing a new history of Canadian nationalism. The emergence of a Canadian left academia itself must start to become a

topic for cultural and intellectual historians of the 1970s and 1980s. It seems we are working towards a badly needed and more comprehensive exploration of postwar Canadian nationalism, theorized in all its complexity.

One strength of the High thesis is its comparative dimension. Yet its further development might well entail sustained reflection on the suitability of the units being compared. Taking the "Golden Horseshoe" as one term and the "Rustbelt" as the other may involve quite a few "apples-and-oranges" problems. On the one side, we involve ourselves in seven Midwestern states; on the other, mainly just Ontario. Yet, as High himself points out, Southern Ontario's industrial base was more diversified than that of many cities across the border. Textile and electrical industries were included within the "heartland." In the period covered by his book, no steel mills or auto assembly plants closed on the Canadian side (p. 6). The "objective situation," so to speak, was not the same for U.S. and Canadian workers.

I wonder if a more reasonable comparison might not involve more integrated and discernible "corridors"--that from Montreal to Windsor (invoked once on page 96) or that from Buffalo to Milwaukee, for example--or, less ambitiously, specific economic sectors. A more tightly focused comparison might yield a more clearly presented causal argument. There are substantial cross-border difficulties in moving from "region" as a "complex and fluid mental construction rather than an objective spatial entity" (p. 19) to discussions of actual places and events. It seems to me that "region" has more concreteness, in Canadian political practice, than it appears to have in the United States. It will always be difficult to see "regions" in Canada, the most thinly populated country on the planet, principally as "regions of the mind," when they have had, since the 1970s, such a palpable political and cultural presence. One map testifies to this core issue of uncertainty: Wisconsin, Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and

New York all stand out clearly on the American side, but only (southern) Ontario is discernible in the north; Montreal is pointed out, but both Quebec and the St. Lawrence River north of the Ontario border vanish from sight (p. 5). Taking a more consistent "Great Lakes-St. Lawrence" approach to "the heartland" would also allow historians to draw more fully upon the rich Quebecois scholarship, which is absent from High's bibliography and, one guesses, from his vision. Jorge Niosi's highly influential *The Economy of Canada: A Study of Ownership and Control* (1978) is missing, as are Niosi's *Les Multinationales Canadiennes* (1982); *Firmes Multinationales et Autonomie Nationale* (1983); and (with Bertrand Bellon), *L'Industrie Américaine: Fin de Siècle* (1987). [1] Of particular interest, given High's interest in the ways in which nationalist political economy converged with working-class activism, is Jorge Niosi and Henri Gagnon, *Fermetures d'Usines, ou bien, Libération Nationale* (1979), produced by the doyen of Quebec political economy and an outstanding working-class standardbearer of the Montreal left. An exciting prospect opened up by the High thesis is one of comparative explorations--Quebec/Rest of Canada; Atlantic Canada/Prairie West, etc.--on labor's vernacular political economy in the era of the new capitalism.

The research agenda potentially unveiled by High's pathbreaking book is an exciting one. One could imagine systematic comparative work across Canada, drawing upon such experiences as the Sydney steelworkers' struggle to preserve their mill, the battles of fishers in northern New Brunswick, the vibrant struggles in Quebec that linked the national liberation movement to the struggle against plant closures. One can also envisage sustained attempts to explain more fully the evident U.S.-Canada divergences in the areas of trade unionism and politics. Pat dismissals of Canadian independence from labor scholars, many of whom have spent years erasing the Canadian-American border, are now clearly dated and unsatisfactory. They were the result of preferring,

as Gramsci put it so well, historical economism to historical materialism. Yet the narrative in this book of the conversion of Canadian labor to economic nationalism nonetheless still leaves me wondering, exactly, why this transformation happened.

Equally interesting are the challenges the High thesis raises for analysts of globalization. A major staple of much of the literature has been the impotence of the state-focused left in the face of footloose capital. High confirms that a "paradigm shift" has indeed occurred, a massive transition from "civic capitalism" with ties to communities to a "national or global capitalism" largely without them. Yet one implication of his analysis is that, among the tools of resistance, the symbols of the nation-state are not to be scorned, not even under conditions of postmodernity. Or perhaps, and this hypothesis remains to be explored, *especially* not under such conditions.

Note

[1]. *Les Multinationales Canadiennes* has been translated by Robert Chodos under the title *Canadian Multinationals* (Toronto: Between the Lines Press, 1985); and *L'Industrie Americaine: Fin de Siecle* has been translated by Robert Chodos and Ellen Garmaise under the title *The Decline of the American Economy* (Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1988).

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