CHAPTER 9

Collateral Damage

Deindustrialization and the Uses of Youngstown

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From the Monongahela valley
To the Mesabi iron range
To the coal mines of Appalachia
The story's always the same
Seven hundred tons of metal a day
Now sir you tell me the world's changed
Once I made you rich enough
Rich enough to forget my name.
BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN, "Youngstown"

In a speech at Youngstown State University in 1988, Bennett Harrison welcomed a large audience by saying how proud and grateful he was to be in Youngstown. Youngstown and its steel industry had been a starting point for his book with Barry Bluestone, The Deindustrialization of America, but that was not the reason that he was happy. That very day, ten years after Youngstown's Ecumenical Coalition had begun the first community effort to purchase one of the closed mills, the nation's first plant closing legislation was enacted. As Harrison noted, that legislation was the direct result of the historic community struggle to save its steel mills. He was not the first to acknowledge that the fight against shutdowns had resulted in changes in social, economic, and religious policy. For example, the uses of eminent domain for community purposes and the Catholic Bishops' Pastoral Letter on the Economy both emerged in part from the fight against shutdowns in Youngstown. But that history of struggle and its role in shaping the future have been all but lost following the precipitous decline of this once great steel city.

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The Youngstown-Warren area in northeast Ohio became a leader in the basic steel industry in the beginning of the twentieth century. It was settled by successive waves of European immigrants and migrants from the American South attracted by the difficult but often high-paying jobs in the steel industry. From World War I through the 1960s, the area was known for its high level of home ownership and its highly skilled and hard-working labor force. But in 1977, a wave of plant shutdowns began that resulted in the loss of over fifty thousand jobs in basic steel and related industries over a ten-year period.

The legacy of the plant shutdowns in Youngstown has continued for almost twenty-five years. Youngstown has been and remains among the national leaders in unemployment, poverty rates, population decline, devaluation of housing stock, foreclosures, bankruptcies, and arsons. Neighborhoods adjacent to mills have been the hardest hit. For example, in 1999, in the city of Campbell, the former home of the Campbell Works of Youngstown Sheet and Tube, only 33 percent of city residents were working. Thirty-three percent were retired, 33 percent received some form of public assistance, 22 percent were over 65, and 56 percent earned less than $25,000. Between 1980 and 1999, Campbell's population dropped from 13,000 to 9,246.* While the specific statistics might vary a bit, Campbell is typical of the communities that make up the Youngstown-Warren metropolitan area. So great has been the social and economic devastation that David Rusk, the former mayor of Albuquerque and leading urban theorist, has argued that Youngstown may be "beyond the point of no return."

The Youngstown story illustrates a common pattern in deindustrialized communities. Deindustrialization leads to multiple experiences of loss. At first, there is the economic loss marked by unemployment, bankruptcies and foreclosures, arson, and declines in community services and physical and emotional health. Closely associated is the loss of faith in institutions (business, unions, government, religious organizations, family) that failed to provide the economic and social protection they had seemed to promise. A sense of helplessness may develop as deindustrialization is normalized as part of the "natural" economic order of shifting capital and competition. After deindustrialization, communities face the loss of self-esteem as the population declines, efforts to attract reinvestment fail, and social and economic conditions decay.

As those who remain begin to question the community's identity, outside observers, especially the media, define deindustrialized communities as places of failure. According to this rhetoric, while other communities are sites of investment, the deindustrialized community is a place of disinvestment. Other places are resourceful in their efforts to attract new business, but the deindustrialized city is desperate. In some cases, these comparisons take on moral overtones, pitting virtuous places against corrupt ones, congratulating some cities for self-reliance while describing others as helpless and dependent. Over time, deindustrialization may be turned back on the community, which becomes a scapegoat for its own loss and comes to accept failure as its due.

Our study examines local and national media representations of Youngstown from the early 1980s through the 1990s, twenty years after the major steel mill shutdowns. We will trace media images of Youngstown as a national "poster child" for deindustrialization and discuss representations of the city as both a helpless victim and a corrupt criminal. Whether in network broadcasts such as NBC's Dateline, widely read newspapers such as the New York Times, or political journals such as Mother Jones—which reach fewer people but are distributed around the country and beyond—media reports created and read by outsiders almost always begin their analyses by reminding the audience of the devastating loss of jobs in the early 1980s. But in many cases, these publications associate Youngstown's failure to attract new business with political corruption, mob influence, and crime, rather than systematic structural disinvestment. Although people in Youngstown often complain about these images, many in the area have internalized this vision. By the end of the century, the community had come to blame itself for deindustrialization and the subsequent social and economic struggles.

Poster Child for Deindustrialization

The steel mill shutdowns in Youngstown drew national media attention, in part because many people recognized the beginning of a trend that would affect industrial communities around the country. The Youngstown story was told in national newspapers and magazines and on national television news broadcasts, offered up as the prototypical tale of loss, struggle, and perseverance. Initial media responses ranged from denial to pity, as reporters struggled to define the meaning of deindustrialization in Youngstown.

Some tried to represent Youngstown as a reassuring example, suggesting that the community was not deeply harmed and was recovering quickly. For example, in 1978, the Wall Street Journal reported that the "dire predictions about economic decline [in Youngstown] had not materialized"; steelworkers were taking jobs in nearby communities and had been aided by state and federal unemployment benefits, and unemployment was acut-
ally dropping. Business and political leaders also tried to counter the perception that economic collapse was imminent. Youngstown Mayor J. Phillip Richley told *Newsweek*, “We’re not as bad off as you might think.” *Newsweek* agreed that “so far there hasn’t been any widespread economic devastation,” but it warned that the real consequences would not be felt for several more months.

Other accounts were more concerned with governmental failure to protect business interests than with the effects of plant closings on the people of Youngstown. For example, *Business Week* suggested that the costs of meeting environmental regulations had contributed to the steel mill closings. In Youngstown, the federal courts had invalidated Environmental Protection Agency exemptions, thus stopping local steel plants from dumping wastes into the Mahoning River. The article quoted the director of the United Steelworkers in Youngstown, who asked, “What good’s a river if the guy who used to have a job can’t buy his kid a fishing pole?”

By the 1980s, as the effects of deindustrialization became clear, some attempted to normalize the situation. Between 1982 and 1986, neocconservative theorists such as Irving Kristol, Ben Wattenberg, and Michael Novak were invited to speak at Youngstown State University as part of a special lecture series funded by local business leaders. To shore up the growing disillusionment and unrest in the community, these intellectual leaders echoed the ideas of economist Joseph Schumpeter, suggesting that deindustrialization amounted to “creative destruction” associated with economic development and that it was temporary. This attitude was reflected in repeated queries from such popular magazines as *Time* and *Newsweek*, who regularly called community leaders and academics to ask whether Youngstown had “turned the corner.”

As a national representation of deindustrialization, Youngstown also served ideological purposes, especially in the neocconservative politics of the 1980s. While some reports described deindustrialization as a normal part of the business cycle, others used it as a way to promote deregulation, personal responsibility, and the virtues of entrepreneurship and individualism. For example, in 1980 Ronald Reagan campaigned in Youngstown and lambasted the Carter administration for the mill closings. Standing in front of Youngstown Sheet and Tube, Reagan suggested that his deregulatory policies and supply-side economic theories could have kept the mills open: “These [closings] would not have happened if I were president.”

The emerging 1980s conservatism mirrored the community’s own deep sense of institutional failure, which went beyond government to include corporations, unions, and even the Ecumenical Coalition that had attempted to save the mills. After all, these institutions appeared to be helpless in preventing mill closings and ameliorating their effects. As a deep disbelief in and cynicism toward institutions developed, it was every individual for himself. *U.S. News and World Report* quoted a steelworker who said he had learned a “bitter lesson in the layoffs. They used to tell us: ‘Get out of high school, get a job in a mill and you’re fixed for life.’ Now I know better.”

The combination of political conservatism and bootstrap journalism represented the first in a series of representations that shifted the blame for deindustrialization to its victims, putting the onus for recovery on the individual. Consequently, the story of deindustrialization in Youngstown both heightened institutional resentment and played into the conservative individualism of the 1980s.

Yet most of the national reports on the shutdowns in Youngstown tried to counter these apologist representations, and in doing so, they defined the city as a representative example of the social costs of deindustrialization. For example, *In These Times* used the Youngstown closings as the foundation for a four-part series later reprinted as a stand-alone booklet, *Shutdown*. In this series, David Moberg describes both the short-term and potential long-term effects of the plant closings on local steelworkers. Barry Bluestone and Bennett Harrison used what happened in Youngstown as the prelude for their seminal work, *The Deindustrialization of America*. Documentary filmmaker Larry Adelman used scenes from Youngstown and its former mill sites in *The Business of America* to show the effects of unregulated business enterprise and its impact on communities and individuals. In *Journey to Nowhere: The Saga of the New Underclass*, the first book on homelessness in recent history, Dale Maharidge and Michael Williamson begin their story of how industrial migrant workers traveled around the country searching for employment in Youngstown. In 1983, *Wall Street Journal* reporter James M. Perry described the Youngstown-Warren area as “a necropolis,” citing the miles of “silent, empty steel mills” up and down the Mahoning Valley. Perry captured the community’s fear and loss through interviews with laid-off workers, one of whom explained, “We’re just mill huns. . . . We can’t do anything else.” Perhaps most important, though, Perry recognized the community’s failing sense of hope, noting the “widespread concern that the economic recovery, when it comes, will pass the valley by.”

In part because Youngstown had been the focus of so many news stories, by 1983 *New York Times* reporter Peter Kilborn could easily include Youngstown, along with Detroit and Akron, in a brief list of cities that represented “the clichés of unemployment and shut-down factories in the nation’s depressed industrial core.” A 1985 “Talk of the Town” column in the *New Yorker* offered an even more dramatic assessment: “We ponder
the ongoing news from yet another hopeless, sorry corner of the world. Youngstown. Chile. Ethiopia. South Africa. We’re tired. Everyone’s tired of their turmoil. As Michael Williamson, the photographer for Journey to Nowhere, commented years later, Youngstown became a “poster child for deindustrialization,” a symbol of the devastation of economic change. Youngstown as a place of loss is probably the most enduring representation to emerge from deindustrialization in America. While many voices offered alternative stories, this one was especially powerful.

Site of Loss, Site of Failure

As the city struggled during the 1980s and into the 1990s without making a serious recovery, Youngstown was increasingly seen as a site of failure. That image was used in different ways by different groups, some offering critiques of capitalism and others defending corporate interests. Some used Youngstown’s failure as a persuasive tool for projects focused on social change and liberal politics. For example, a 1999 documentary, Michael Harrington and Today’s Other American: Corporate Power and Inequality, uses the Youngstown story to show how corporate power harms ordinary people. In a section entitled “Downsized,” filmmaker Bill Donovan uses Bruce Springsteen’s song about Youngstown together with images of abandoned mills, closed businesses, relief offices, and empty lots to portray Youngstown as a site of loss. Scholar and activist James Chapin explains that Youngstown’s story illustrates the power of private, business-oriented decision making, noting that it was “possible for four to five people in a room to make a decision to shut down Youngstown, Ohio.” Another interview, with Irving Kristol, underscores the efforts of conservative critics to erase the problem of corporate greed and to downplay the impact of deindustrialization. We should, however, also take note of Donovan’s use of Youngstown’s struggle to promote the issues championed by Harrington and to critique capitalism. The video defines Youngstown as a representation of how ordinary people and communities are victimized by corporations. Like so many versions of the story, Donovan’s shows Youngstown only as a site of loss, completely ignoring the communitywide struggle to save the mills. Such images make Youngstown an object of sympathy, yet they also exploit the community’s difficulties.

At the same time, Youngstown’s continuing hardship served as a standard against which viewers were invited to measure how economic restructuring was affecting them and their communities. As white-collar workers suddenly found themselves being downsized, the Youngstown story provided a sense of shared misery but also offered an example of a place where things were really bad. In 1995, Bruce Springsteen released his album The Ghost of Tom Joad, which included the song “Youngstown.” The song and Springsteen’s January 1996 visit to the city brought renewed attention to Youngstown. A report on CBS This Morning told how Springsteen had written several songs after reading Journey to Nowhere one sleepless night; he later encouraged Mahardige and Williamson to retrace their journey and update their report on unemployment and homelessness in the United States. CBS This Morning explained that Youngstown in the mid-1990s was in worse shape than it had been in the early 1980s, as the downtown was “just fading away.” Interviews with Springsteen, Mahardige, Williamson, and the Marshall family (on whom the song is based) all emphasized that Youngstown’s experience was not unique but, rather, representative of the difficulties facing the nation at large. As Joe Marshall Jr. pointed out, about forty thousand workers had been laid off from AT&T just that week—just one example of the downsizing of middle-class and white-collar workers during the mid-1990s. As Williamson put it, “Now the rest of the country knows what only Youngstown knew then.”

While these comments focused on the national economy and the “failure of American industry,” the story’s focus on Youngstown and on the Marshall family served at once to humanize the issue and to deflect attention from the role of industry. Significantly, the segment included almost no discussion of why the mills shut down, and no critique of the business decisions that led to widespread downsizing in the 1990s. American industry failed, yet the emphasis here was on Youngstown as a “symbol of failure.” CBS This Morning host Mark McEwen commented, “For some people, having your heart in the right place is just a cliché, but for Bruce Springsteen, no cliché, it’s a way of life.” Youngstown was left behind, then, erased by the virtue of Springsteen’s good intentions. Missing from this story, as from so many others, was any recognition of the role of corporative disinvestment or of the community’s efforts to act on its own behalf.

The business media also found Youngstown to be a useful allegory. In 1998, a Nightly Business Report segment during the GM-Flint strike used Youngstown’s history as part of a story about the potential threat to workers and communities of further economic restructuring. Reporter Stephen Aug examined the effects of the Flint strike on workers at the Lordstown GM plant outside of Youngstown. The report suggested that workers and business owners who still remembered the economic devastation of the early 1980s were especially sensitive to the economic effects of layoffs. At the same time, the report emphasized Youngstown’s worries that Lordstown might close or significantly reduce its workforce as the company
moved to modular production and increased outsourcing. Images of deindustrialization in Youngstown both validated workers’ fears and hinted at the dangers of workers asking too much. Indeed, viewers were reminded that another local plant, Delphi Packard, a GM parts supplier, had already lost seven thousand jobs to Mexico. Autoworkers in the 1990s, the story implied, were just as helpless as steelworkers at the end of the 1970s. “They may have jobs now,” Aug said, “But what about next year, or the year after?”

Site of Desperation

Once cast as a site of loss and failure, by the late 1990s, Youngstown had come to be seen as a site of desperation, a community so hard up for jobs that it would accept any form of economic development, even prisons. Between 1992 and 1997, four new prisons were built in the Youngstown area, adding sixteen hundred jobs, $67 million in annual payroll, $720,000 in taxes, and an additional $200 million in economic activity in the Mahoning Valley. This amounted to over 7 percent of the area’s total economic growth in the 1990s. As the Youngstown Vindicator headline touting the prison economy ironically suggested, “Steel Bars Are Still Part of Big Business in the Region.” But the prisons also brought a number of problems, including questionable management and a 1997 escape by six inmates at a private prison on Youngstown’s north side. Not surprisingly, the growth and difficulties of the local prison industry attracted continued media attention, much of it focused on the community’s economic desperation.

Most of the stories on Youngstown’s prisons open with a description of the community that focuses on its well-known history. National Public Radio referred to Youngstown as “a rust-belt city long synonymous with steel, more recently with unemployment.” NBC’s Dateline reminded viewers that Youngstown was “so depressed by the collapse of the steel industry it lost half its population in just 20 years.” On 60 Minutes Youngstown was identified as “a former steel town with double-digit unemployment.” While Youngstown’s economic history was often used as a quick way of defining the place, it was also, in some cases, used to portray Youngstown as desperate and even foolish. Jane Pauley introduced the Dateline segment, for example, with this comment: “How would you like to have murderers, rapists, and thieves living in your neighborhood? It’s a frightening prospect, even if they’re kept behind bars, barbed wire, and under the watchful eyes of prison guards. But, believe it or not, some towns actually welcome prison facilities because of the jobs they create.”

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When one of the new prisons, the privately owned Northeast Ohio Correctional Center on Youngstown’s north side, had a series of problems—including assaults, a murder, and the midday escape of six prisoners—several major news organizations came to investigate. While these reports focused on the malfeasance of the owner of the prison, the Corrections Corporation of America (CCA), they also used the familiar but incomplete conventional wisdom about Youngstown’s history and its economic struggles to portray the city as a victim. In a 60 Minutes report called “Medium Security, Maximum Problems,” Youngstown’s history helped to position the community as a hapless victim of yet another outside corporation. The report paid no attention to efforts within the community to fight against prison development or to improve conditions within the prisons. Rather, the story suggested that the community had come to see itself as helpless. In one segment, Mayor George McKelvey speculated that “someone in Washington obviously said ‘Let’s dump on Youngstown. There’s nobody there smart enough to even know what we’re doing.’” His comment revealed resentment but also some measure of acceptance of the city’s image.

While broadcast news stories emphasized Youngstown’s economic desperation, a 2000 Mother Jones story used powerful visual images to emphasize the feeling of being once trapped and abandoned. The article begins with a two-page spread featuring a pair of contrasting photos representing the two halves of the article title, “Steel Town, Lockdown.” On the left, a full-page, black-and-white photo shows a pair of railroad tracks crossing in the empty field where the Youngstown Sheet and Tube Company once stood. Downtown Youngstown stands in the distance. The sky looks gray, and a bit of snow lies on the ground, which is scattered with a few pieces of debris from the long-gone mills. The image suggests a landscape that was once occupied but is now abandoned. On the facing page, a much smaller, more constricted image shows a scene inside a prison. In about two square inches, we see another set of converging lines, here the walls of a prison hallway, reflected in the shiny, empty floor. Running through the entire image are the vertical bars of an interior prison gate. Neither scene shows a single person, nor does either suggest a hospitable location. Each image comments on the other. The larger photo suggests that the desolation outside parallels the austerity inside; the smaller photo hints that the outside space might be just as constricted as a prison. Together, they also point to the connection between deindustrialization and the growing prison economy in Youngstown. As the Mother Jones photos suggest, past, present, and future intersect in complicated ways in representations of economic development in Youngstown.
While these media images portray the growth of prisons in sharply negative ways, many in Youngstown bought into the idea that prisons offered economic hope. Despite difficulties with the first CCA prison, many residents were enthusiastic when Representative James Traficant began negotiations to have the company build two additional facilities, ironically on the same brownfield sites that were deemed too polluted for any other use. As the article in Mother Jones pointed out, “This plan suits many elected officials, who are desperate for an economic boost to a region hardened by the loss of its steel industry.” If the CCA expansion succeeded, one of every fifty residents of the Youngstown-Warren area would be an out-of-state inmate. Youngstown would have become “the private prison capital of the world.”

Crime Town

While news stories about Youngstown as a site of economic struggle were a recent phenomenon, stories about Youngstown as a site of crime and corruption were not. The prison industry may have drawn attention from the media because they already associated Youngstown with crime, a link that dated back to a 1962 article in the Saturday Evening Post that dubbed the city “Crime Town, U.S.A.” A series of stories appeared in the national press about crime and corruption in Youngstown, starting in the early 1990s, when the local murder rate increased dramatically. The stories were followed by tales of white-collar crime and reports on a large-scale investigation of corruption among public officials. As the prison reports had done, most stories about crime in Youngstown made use of familiar elements of the city’s image. The cover of a July 2000 issue of the New Republic is a good example: a battered “Welcome to Youngstown” sign full of bullet holes stands before a silhouette of smokestacks, a gray building, and telephone poles, providing a background for “A Story of the Mafia, the FBI, a Congressman, and the Most Crooked City in America.”

Youngstown became known as a “murder capital” in the 1990s. The local paper chronicled the carnage periodically, reporting that Youngstown’s per capita murder rate was in the top ten in the nation for cities larger than fifty thousand. Youngstown’s murder rate was eight times the national average, six times higher than New York’s, four and one-half times higher than that of Los Angeles, and twice as high as Chicago’s. The paper noted that criminal justice experts define a homicide epidemic as a murder rate over three times the national average. Such reports created an atmosphere of fear in the local community, presenting the city of Youngstown as a dangerous place and the rising murder rate as a mysterious trend, explainable only by the declining morality of those involved. Although the relationship between persistent high unemployment and per capita murder rates is well established, it was rarely discussed in the local media. The Vindicator compared Youngstown with Gary, Indiana, and Compton, California, whose murder rates were often higher, without mentioning that both of those cities had also experienced high levels of unemployment and deindustrialization.

Furthermore, the Vindicator failed to recognize that most of the murders occurred in the African American community, a point that was highlighted by a story in the Cleveland Plain Dealer in 1999. An analysis of death records from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention from 1988 to 1997 found that black women in Youngstown were murdered before their sixty-fifth birthday at a higher rate than anywhere else in the nation. In addition, black women in Youngstown were murdered at a rate nearly eleven times higher than white women, the largest racial disparity in the country. The high murder rate was attributed to the women being “long abused by husbands and boyfriends or caught in the middle of drug deals gone bad.” The study also found that “homicides, heart disease, and lung cancer—all considered preventable and treatable by public health officials—killed blacks at a much higher rate than whites.” While such patterns hold true nationally, Mahoning County (where Youngstown is located) had one of the widest overall racial health gaps in the county. The Plain Dealer’s portrayal of murder as a “black problem” fed into existing racism, reinforcing the predisposition of the local white community to dismiss the problem as not their concern. The Youngstown press had ignored what was happening in the city’s African American neighborhoods, perhaps because it knew that its largely white audience simply did not care.

Deindustrialization exacted enormous social and economic costs, and the rising crime rate was one of those costs. Prior to the mill closings, the local crime rate did not stand out. Six to ten years after the mill closings, as unemployment benefits ran out, families and neighborhoods were broken apart, and economic conditions worsened, nonviolent crimes and traditional domestic violence increased. The most significant increase in crime came some fifteen years after the first mill closings, however, as the children from these broken families and neighborhoods became both perpetrators and victims of the wave of homicides in Youngstown. Lacking economic opportunities and access to real wealth, these young adults turned to selling drugs, especially crack cocaine, largely to suburban residents who did “drive-bys” into poor neighborhoods. Most young adults in Youngstown did not have the money to purchase drugs; rather, they had op-
opportunities to sell drugs, purchase guns, and join gangs to protect territory and profits. No doubt, violent crime in the 1990s was rooted partly in the corporate economic violence of the late 1970s and early 1980s. Yet most representations of Youngstown as a murder capital paid only passing attention to the lingering effects of displacement and deindustrialization.

Youngstown’s association with crime in the 1990s was not limited to violent crime. White-collar and organized crime also received significant media attention. Two high-profile business leaders, Michael Monus and Edward J. DeBartolo Jr., were convicted of fraud and bribery. Some reports positioned such white-collar crime in the context of local corruption, pointing out that Monus and DeBartolo had been raised in this atmosphere, and that both were seen as local heroes despite their illegal activities. For these reasons, news stories positioned Monus and DeBartolo as representatives of Youngstown. The stories made their failures appear to be failures of the wider community. As Newsweek suggested in one report on Monus, “the public is almost a co-conspirator.”

Michael Monus founded PharMor, a discount retail chain, in 1982. The company grew rapidly and soon began to rival Walmart. By the late 1980s, Monus had expanded into professional sports operations. He founded the summer professional World Basketball League (WBL) as well as several other ventures. He owned the local team, the Youngstown Pride. The team’s moniker suggested courage, strength, self-esteem, and the solidarity of family and community, ideas that had powerful resonance in a town struggling to overcome the ravages of deindustrialization. In 1988, Venture magazine honored Monus as a top entrepreneur, and Newsweek reflected that Monus had become an “icon in the American cult of the entrepreneur.” Such accolades played well in Youngstown—a town that had become increasingly distrustful of outsiders and frantic for economic development. As a PBS Frontline documentary suggested, Monus became a “favorite son” whose creation of thousands of jobs, renovation of an abandoned retail store, and relocation of his national corporate offices to downtown Youngstown were seen as acts of loyalty to his hometown.

But when PharMor began to falter, Monus turned to fraud and embezzlement to keep the company afloat. When the fraud was uncovered in 1992, 50 percent of PharMor stores were closed, thousands of employees were laid off, hundreds of suppliers went unpaid, and investors suffered enormous losses. In May 1995, Monus was found guilty of 109 counts of fraud, tax evasion, and embezzlement and sentenced to twenty years in prison. The story was reported nationally as “a modern morality tale,” some reports implicating both Monus and the Youngstown community. Local newspaper columnist Nancy Beeghly explained in a Newsweek article that the community had had high hopes for Monus: “We were the fifth largest steelmakers in the world. . . . I don’t think we ever got over that. People wanted something magical again.” As Beeghly’s comment suggests, the community was betrayed by Monus, but because it was so desperate to believe in him, it also helped to make his rise and fall possible.

A few years later, when Edward J. DeBartolo Jr. was convicted of bribing the Louisiana Governor Edwin Edwards to procure a license to open a casino, Youngstown again found itself associated with white-collar crime. While Edward J. DeBartolo Sr. had long been suspected of having ties to organized crime, he was also viewed as an important local business leader, and his son was esteemed as the owner of the successful San Francisco 49ers football team. Because both DeBartolos proclaimed their Youngstown roots with pride, they and their businesses were often seen as reflective of the local community. This connection was complicated, however, as evidenced by a 1993 special Sunday section on DeBartolo in the Pittsburgh Press; “DeBartolo’s identification with Youngstown also may be the source of the shadow over seven decades of success—persistently linking him to organized crime.” DeBartolo Jr.’s 1998 conviction in the bribery case added to Youngstown’s image as a community that bred and even revered local “leaders” who combined toughness and entrepreneurship with touches of corruption. The fall of DeBartolo Jr., like that of Michael Monus, was presented not simply as a tale of individual avarice and greed, but also as evidence of larger-scale corruption that was supported, or at least accepted, by the local community.

Object of Ridicule

Organized crime has had an influence on the Mahoning Valley for over seventy-five years. The Saturday Evening Post’s designation of Youngstown as “Crime Town, USA,” in 1962 was based on the area’s mob wars of the 1950s. But except for occasional violence, the presence of organized crime seemed to fade into the constant haze that accompanied the steelmaking process and received little publicity. As the New York Times suggested, “When Youngstown’s economy roared in the 1970s like the steel furnaces that once lit its skyline, the mob’s influence became less visible. But as the mills closed and the area’s economy slumped, mob influence was slowly revealed.”

Undergirding the strength of organized crime in Youngstown was its hold on both city hall and law enforcement. Mayors and public officials control the public assets in most communities. The ability to enter into
contracts, provide services, and control who gets and keeps city and county jobs bestows incredible power, especially in a city in economic decline. In county government, the county engineer often controls major contracts involving roads, water, and snow removal. Through such oversight, mayors and county engineers control public works and can, given the right incentive, circumvent the bid process. Occasionally, this disposes politicians to corruption and to kickbacks. As former Youngstown mayor Patrick Ungaro explained to the Vindicator, “bribery was so common, it almost seemed normal,” and this permitted organized crime to control local politics. The presence of organized crime “was so overwhelming, so ingrained. Either you are intimidated by it or you join it.”

Mob influence and infiltration extended into nearly every branch of local government, including the full gamut of the legal system, from police to prosecutors, judges, and the bail bond industry. It was not a criminal justice system, according to Mayor George McKelvey, but a “Justice for Criminals” system.

These practices had existed in Youngstown for decades, and were widely known but not openly discussed. It was not until the 1990s that a series of federal investigations fully revealed the level of mob influence on public officials. Those investigations resulted in eighty convictions by 2001; among the Mahoning County officials convicted were the county prosecutor, the sheriff, the county engineer, two county commissioners, local judges and lawyers, and top aides to Representative Traficant. The large number of convictions for various forms of public corruption contributed to another round of media stories, this time focused on Youngstown as a site of corruption. Indeed, in 1998, George magazine named Youngstown one of the ten most corrupt cities in the country. Significantly, although many of those convicted worked in county positions and most lived in the largely white, middle-class suburbs outside the city, media attention focused on “Youngstown,” ignoring any distinctions between the city, the county, and the greater metropolitan area. The media focus on “Youngstown” contributed to the predisposition of many in the Youngstown area to distance themselves from the city and to perceive the problems of corruption as happening somewhere else.

Much of the media focus on corruption in Youngstown centered around Traficant, a former county sheriff who had successfully defended himself from charges of accepting bribes from the mob in the early 1980s. U.S. News and World Report placed Traficant at the center of Youngstown’s corruption, describing the city as having a “cast of characters [that] sounds like a real-life version of HBO’s popular show about a low-rent mob family, The Sopranos, starting with the disheveled Traficant, who is best known for shouting interminable speeches in the well of the House.” USA Today suggested that, while his oddball appearance and one-minute rants on the House floor against government institutions, corporations, and hypocrisy have not endeared him to his House colleagues, his defiant populist sentiments and “junkyard dog” approach to politics have resonated with the media.

The media’s fascination with Traficant and his populist politics brought additional national attention to Youngstown and reinforced the community’s image as a place where corruption and crime are accepted parts of everyday life. But Traficant’s legend is based, in part, in Youngstown’s struggles after the mill closings. His reputation for disdain of government and institutions began during his stint as sheriff, when he refused to enforce eviction orders for unemployed families. When charged with contempt of court, Traficant chose to go to jail. The Plain Dealer tells the story of how Traficant defended himself when the Justice Department charged him with accepting bribes from the Cleveland and Pittsburgh mobs. Despite enormous evidence against him, including his own written confession, Traficant was acquitted because he claimed that the bribes were part of an elaborate “sting” operation that he had planned to trap local mobsters. The Justice Department was incensed at the acquittal, but the community cheered Traficant’s “up yours” attitude toward the federal government. The Justice Department continued to hound Traficant and got a measure of revenge when the Federal Tax Court found him guilty in 1984 of income tax evasion for the $163,000 in bribes and held him liable for $180,000 in back taxes and penalties. But Traficant’s “legend as a hero of the little people” was launched, and he was elected in 1984 to the U.S. Congress, where he became the most visible representation of Youngstown’s anti-institutional sentiment.

Before his 2002 conviction on racketeering charges, Traficant represented the Youngstown-Warren area for more than fifteen years. He was seen as an iconoclastically populist who for many years had a near-perfect labor voting record, while he supported a highly conservative agenda on illegal immigration, capital punishment, and the involvement of the military in drug intervention. While many in the community vehemently defend Traficant’s record in Congress, in fact the representative brought home relatively little in terms of federal dollars or significant legislation. Given his limited success, his public image, and his association with corruption, it is difficult to understand why he is still viewed as a local hero, even as he remains in prison. In order to understand why local voters continue to support Traficant even though he contributed to the community’s image as a site of corruption, we need to take a closer look at local attitudes and local history.
Traficant's populist politics reflect local attitudes toward the federal government and large institutions. Resentment of government intrusion—based largely on class conflict—has a long history in Youngstown, rooted in the role of the state in protecting the interests of steel mill owners and the upper class during strikes during the first half of the twentieth century. The resentment developed further during deindustrialization, when the government was blamed for imposing environmental regulations and failing to protect the interests of the steel industry. Both Republican and Democratic presidential candidates have promised economic support for Youngstown, yet their administrations have never followed through. Other institutions also failed to provide real help during deindustrialization. Big businesses, especially after outside corporations shut down the steel mills, were clearly suspect. The Ecumenical Coalition's move to buy one of the local mills failed, leaving some doubting the effectiveness of both churches and unions as sources of support. The result was distrust of institutions and a belief that individuals and groups that challenged and even violated traditional rules were the community's best hope. Overall, this politics of resentment is best summarized by Don Hani Sr.—a former steelworker, a criminal defense attorney, and the longtime Mahoning County Democratic chairman—who told the Washington Post that "a lot of people around here are hurting economically, and they're tired of a lot of phony promises from people like Bill Clinton." In Hani's eyes, this explained Traficant's popularity: "Jim is competitive and combative, and people around here like that."90

In many cases, however, news reports on Traficant also link his popularity to the community's acceptance of crime and corruption, describing both as part of Youngstown's working-class culture. As the Washington Post noted: "In this gritty, shot-and-beer town where the mob has proved more durable than the steel industry, the prospect of being indicted by a federal grand jury does not intimidate the flamboyant House member who favors polyester suits and dominates politics here."91 A Plain Dealer story on mob activity in Youngstown citedYSU anthropology professor Mark Shutes, who explained that Youngstown's immigrant working class saw mob leaders as heroes because—like Traficant—they "had found a way to beat the larger, more corrupt outside world." The idea that corruption close to home was acceptable because it provided protection against outside threats was, according to Shutes, part of the working-class experience of Youngstown's immigrants: "The roots of Youngstown's mob problem can be found in those old steel mills, which were largely manned by European immigrants who had grown up in small, close-knit rural villages where governments and the outside world were viewed with suspicion." In such villages, Shutes noted, "closed cultural groups encouraged the idea that it is OK to pay someone, be it business or a politician, to get a job or some benefits."92

The idea that corruption could be explained, in part, as a symptom of working-class culture also emerged in a 1998 book by Rick Porello, which offered a history of organized crime in northeastern Ohio. In the book, Porello cites Steven Olah, the head of Cleveland's Federal Organized Crime Strike Force, who explained that organized crime resisted reform efforts and continued to prosper in the area because gambling and political corruption were accepted by the sizeable "millworking population."93 In fact, as Carmen Policy, former president of the San Francisco 49ers and later the Cleveland Browns, said of his hometown, "This is a working-class area and gambling is not considered a vice. In fact, gambling permeates everything. For its size, I must admit, there is no city in America like Youngstown."94 This popular mythology of working-class culture is accurate in many ways, yet it also ignores the more complicated story of what happened in Youngstown. While some illegal activities, like gambling, were accepted as harmless, others were seen as survival strategies or ways of fighting back. Further, this version of the story ignores the active role of Youngstown's professional-managerial classes, who also participated in gambling, who were key players in other forms of corruption, and who presided over the dismantling of the industrial economy that built Youngstown. Once again, we see an account of Youngstown that privileges culture and identity, rather than key public policies and corporate decisions, in the unraveling of the steel era.

Conclusion

As the Youngstown story shows, deindustrialized communities are vulnerable to all kinds of loss—not just the loss of jobs or economic security but also the loss of identity, as outsiders interpret the meanings of deindustrialization to serve their own purposes. Over time, the focus of the story shifts, and community history is erased. Tales of corporate disinvestments and collective resistance to shutdowns are forgotten, and images of individual and communal failure gain precedence. Further, such media representations do not simply define the community in the national view. They also have power to shape the way local residents think about their past and their future. In many cases, locals internalize the image of their community
as a site of loss, failure, crime, and corruption. For some, this generates a sense of despair and helplessness, while others become defensive or engage in denial.

Yet it is also possible for deindustrialized communities to reclaim their stories and their identities, as the example of Palermo, Italy, demonstrates. A United Nations conference in December 2000 explored "The Role of Civil Society in Countering Organized Crime: Global Implications of the Palermo, Sicily, Renaissance." Presentations examined the relationship between the erasure of community memory and the rise of a culture of criminality in Palermo, and they showed how the community's systematic reclamation of its past had helped build a new culture of lawfulness. For the Youngstown delegation, by far the largest in attendance, the idea that civic culture is undermined by economic, cultural, and geographic fragmentation and the loss of history had great resonance, for they had seen a similar pattern in their deindustrialized community. The symposium also suggested that a community's recovery of a positive memory of itself is the first important step toward reconstructing a sense of place, belonging, and ownership.55 As the Palermo commissioner of education, Allesandra Siracusa, told the Youngstown delegation, in order for a city to prosper, it must recover its identity by embracing its past and refusing to let others destroy or humiliate it. Community members must understand that cities are the fruit of relations among people living together, and they must have a sense that their community, including its past, belongs to them.56


9. Collateral Damage

This chapter was presented at the conference "Winning and Losing in the New Economy: Work, Employment, and Society" held in Nottingham, England, on 12 September 2001.


2. For a detailed discussion of the local efforts to buy one of the mills, see Stauthum Lynd, The Fight againstShutdowns (San Pedro: Singlejack Books, 1982).

3. In 1919 the U.S. bishops' Pastoral Letter on Social Reconstruction provided a foundation in Catholic social teaching for the obligation of the state in economic affairs in appealing for economic justice. Within the religious community, the Pastoral became the basis for lobbying for New Deal reforms over the next two decades. With the dismantling of the welfare state by the Reagan administration in the 1980s, U.S. bishops in their Pastoral Letter of the Economy (1984) felt compelled to reiterate the themes from the earlier pastoral letter in light of changes in contemporary capitalism, deindustrialization, and the plight of American workers and their unions. In so doing, it provided a moral and ethical challenge to current U.S. economic policy.


9. John Russo was periodically called by publications such as Time magazine to check on Youngstown's situation.


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