

CALL FOR PAPERS

“European Rust Belts. West-East Comparisons – and Beyond”

International Conference, Regensburg, 7-8 May 2020

Organized by Leibniz Institute for Contemporary History (Munich-Berlin) and Leibniz Institute for East and South East European Studies (Regensburg), in cooperation with the Institute for Social Movements (Bochum)

Conveners: Ulf Brunnbauer, Max Trecker, Sebastian Voigt

The 1970s marked the end of the “glorious thirty years,” as the French sociologist Jean Fourastié famously described the postwar economic boom period. Growth rates declined, the Bretton Woods system partially collapsed, and unexpected turbulences in the resource supply of industrialized economies emerged. The years of uninterrupted economic growth were finally over. The crisis that emerged in the 1970s exerted a heavy influence on heavy industries. After the Second World War, industrial sectors had – by and large – experienced an impressive expansion that stimulated other branches as well. Yet in the 1970s, saturated markets increased competition between companies and, at the same time, between governments subsidizing them. Many European states responded by cutting taxes and subsidies. Companies, for their part, attempted to reduce labor costs by slashing jobs. The ensuing processes of “restructuring” profoundly altered both working environments and the labor markets. Governments in both Western and Eastern Europe struggled to ease the rising social costs of industrial reform.

At the same time, what might be described as the crisis consciousness of the 1970s produced new critiques of existing production relations. In West and East, demands for the humanization of work became increasingly vocal. Intellectuals in both halves of Europe criticized alienation in what they described as “late capitalism” and “developed socialism.” Trade unions pushed for more workplace safety, as well as greater participation of employees. In addition, the 1974 publication of Harry Braverman’s volume, *Labor and Monopoly Capital*, lent impetus to criticism of scientific management methods as a degradation of work. And not least, the rapid development of information technology foreshadowed a new wave of automation.

The economic crisis following the oil shocks thus affected both Western and Eastern Europe; as we know, the state socialist countries eventually failed to adapt their previous economic strategy to the new reality of declining heavy industries. In the western heartlands of industrialization, the crisis of the 1970s greatly intensified ongoing processes of industrial restructuring. The 1970s, thus, marked a substantial divergence in patterns of shop floor organization between West and East. Less well known are the remarkably diverse outcomes *within* the West: while some countries and regions experienced a near terminal decline of traditional industries (for two examples, much of Midlands in UK and the Great Lakes region in the US), other countries managed to restructure industries without destroying them all

together. Both the political-economic context and the power configuration in national contexts were, it seems, essential framework factors for possible trajectories of industrial restructuring. Labor relations, too, also shifted in the context of the socio-economic transformation. They looked very different at the end of the 1980s when compared to where they stood at the end of the 1960s.

Similar processes were at work in Eastern Europe after 1989: while post-socialism is usually associated with widespread if not complete deindustrialization, the reality is more complex. On average, post-socialist countries still have a higher share of employment in manufacturing than most Western countries. Some Central European countries even experienced an industrial revival at the end of twentieth century thanks mainly to an influx of foreign investment and their integration into global supply chains. Again, the political conditions, including class relations and the nature of the political landscape, as well as timing were crucial factors that help to explain different outcomes from apparently similar starting positions. Geography and the availability of foreign capital, play a role as well.

Our conference attempts to stimulate a comparative discussion of the divergent developments of heavy industries in Europe since 1970. We seek to promote East-West comparisons in order to identify differences and – even more importantly – similarities. Glimpses across the North Atlantic to developments in North America are welcome as well, given the striking divergence of industrial developments south and north of the US-Canadian border in the Great Lakes region. Our aim to establish, insofar as possible, a framework to explain the different trajectories. What role did social actors such as managers, workers, trade unions, political parties, and government officials play in these processes? The (power) relations between them seem to have been a crucial factor. The manifold responses to the crisis, the importance of temporality and space and (non-)interventions by the state, the changes in shop-floor relations and work organizations are also topics of interest.

Finally, we also wish to consider current representations of industrial decline and restructuring: what, for instance, do attempts to establish heritage sites former industrial heartlands – as in western Germany's Ruhr Valley – actually mean to different social actors and different interest groups?

The following list provides an exemplary overview of possible conference sections:

a) The Struggle for Survival or the Calm before the Storm? Reactions to the Crisis of the 1970s in East and West

Papers in this section deal with the reactions to the challenges of the 1970s on a micro- and macro-level by explaining the various outcomes between different regions. Papers on various concepts coping with the crisis of different industries, e.g. by shifting the focus of attention to “growth” industries and the service sector, are highly appreciated. It is a common assumption that the socialist societies of Eastern Europe were shielded from the turbulences of the 1970s by their peculiar economic and social system. We invite contributions that question this widely held assumption.

b) A New Equilibrium? Adapting to the Post-Cold War World

The end of the Cold War opened up large parts of the world in Eastern Europe and Asia to the global competition in a seemingly unipolar world in which economic and political standards were set mainly by actors in the US. How did the opportunities and challenges of the 1990s/2000s and the rise of the “new economy” affect heavy industries? How did industrial change across regions intersect, which learning and adaption processes can we identify in an East-West comparison?

c) Another One Bites the Dust? What Happened to the “Losers”?

Dead workers don't talk. Or do they? How did life go on in regions that lost their industrial heart? How is the industrial past incorporated in the present identity of such regions? Questions related to what happened to the “losers” gained new momentum after the 2016 Electoral College victory of Donald Trump and electoral successes of so-called populist parties across Europe during the 2010s. We invite papers to deal with the transformation of infrastructures, different social groups, and questions of appropriation and agency alike.

We call for paper proposals that explore individual case studies or that are of a more theoretical or general nature. Comparative perspectives are particularly welcome. We invite not only historians but also colleagues from other social sciences and humanities disciplines who are interested in different aspects of (post-) industrial change.

Please send your proposal (maximum 300 words, in English) plus a brief academic CV as a pdf document to Dr. Max Trecker: trecker@ifz-muenchen.de. Deadline for submissions: **15 August 2019**.

The conference organizers will provide hotel accommodation in Regensburg and also aim at supporting travel costs.