

The Trauma of a Non-Traumatic Decline

Narratives of Deindustrialisation in Asturian Mining: The HUNOSA Case

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Introduction – Asturias as a Deindustrialised Region

Taking the case of the Hulleras del Norte Sociedad Anónima (HUNOSA), which comprised the state-owned mining industry in the Spanish region of Asturias, this article addresses the memory of deindustrialisation in Asturias in the last three decades. In doing so, I will use oral narratives compiled in three connected projects dedicated to industrial decline in Asturias (conducted 1994–1996), narratives of youth living conditions in the Asturian Coal Basins (2004–2006), and of work cultures, memory, and identity in the context of deindustrialisation (from 2013).¹

To some extent, Asturias seems to be an exception from the stereotype of a deindustrialising region as mainly described in the English-language literature about the subject. Comparatively good living conditions, low crime rates, good educational levels, including a high ratio of university degrees, plus high, though questionable, investment into local and regional infrastructures seem to make Asturias stand out. Foreign – or even Spanish – visitors of Asturian towns and villages, especially in places where industry weighed heavily in the past, are often surprised by the tranquillity and leisurely atmosphere – Asturias has a high proportion of “chigres” (local taverns) – and by the exuberant nature. “Natural Paradise” has been a motto for decades to promote tourism in the region. Even when focusing on the Coal Basins more particularly (“Les Cuenques” in the Asturian language), this overall impression does not differ too much.² New residential blocks, boulevards, refurbishments, and/or the gentrification of historical city centres seem to chime with the steady restoration of industrial spaces now out of use.

In contrast to the tranquil surface, however, if anything has taken root in the collective imagery of the Asturian people, it is the deep crisis the whole region is suffering from. Facing high unemployment rates, lack of expectations for the youth, and

1 Oral testimonies are deposited in the Archivo de Fuentes Orales para la Historia Social de Asturias (AFOHSA), <https://www.uniovi.es/AFOHSA/> (22.07.2020).

2 Coal pits in Asturias concentrate around two river basins: in the inner western, the anthracite mining industry surrounds the Narcea River, and, in the centre of the region, the Central Coal Basin joins the rivers Nalón and Caudal as well as the cities of Langreo and Mieres. These towns, much more directly tied to both the mining and steel industries, were the places where the Asturian industrial take-off first took place and exerted a strong social, political, and economic influence up to the very end of the 20th century. The very notion of the Mining Basins (Les Cuenques) often centres on the Nalón and Caudal Valleys with Langreo and Mieres, but we should consider that there are around 20 mining towns in Asturias altogether.

demographic change, this is as much a material crisis as it is one of values. The post-industrial condition is entangled with issues of identity as well as with the corruption and the exploitation of public funds which both leading political parties as well as the trade unions are embroiled in. Furthermore, there is an environmental aspect to the crisis as the long-term consequences of industrial activity are mirrored in high pollution ratios which affect soil, water, and atmosphere and increase the spread of several pollutant-related types of cancer.

These symptoms define the Asturias of the last few decades. The impact of the crisis and the decline of all industrial sectors that used to shape the Asturian economy, its identity, and its politics are undeniable, both on a statistical level and in regard to public perception, whether they are articulated by voices from below or from political authorities and social agents. The Coal Basin seems ridden by a “permanent crisis” (Lillo 1978) ravishing the region and by a sheer lack of hope for the future.

Measures to balance the social consequences of dismantling the coal industry, such as early retirement schemes and the promotion of investment into alternative industries, sought to minimise the social and economic impact of pit closures and tried to offer prospects for the future. In choosing the lesser evil in the face of an apparently inevitable process of deindustrialisation, political leaders as well as trade unionists frequently claim such instruments as signs for a successful policy of avoiding a more traumatic mode of change. Yet, this markedly contrasts with the more ambiguous memories of decline. Reactions vary from apathy to vindication of the past (and present) and materialise in cultural creations that address the loss of collective identities tied to work in the coalfields, even implying a fragile resignification of a regional identity as mining communities without miners.

Decline as Cultural Trauma

As a key to approach the impact of industrial decline in Asturias, the concept of cultural trauma provides a good framework of understanding. Following Ring et al., cultural trauma can be understood as a discursive response to a break in the social network that happens when profound changes shake the foundations of collective identity. The discourse that results from this process could be analysed as a struggle for meaning in which individual and collective actors try to define and make sense of a situation. A central aspect of cultural trauma is the collective attempt to identify the causes of suffering, of those responsible (and to blame them), and search for possible solutions. It also implies the constant working on discursive practices of memory and collective identity in a struggle to determine what is considered traumatic (Ring/Eyerman/Madigan 2017: 13 f.). From a slightly different angle, Jeffrey Alexander understands cultural trauma as a collective loss of identity. The traumatic experience threatens the community’s sense of orientation and challenges the individuals’ sense of who they are, where they come from and where they want to go. The deterioration of identity goes hand in hand with trauma (Alexander 2003: 85).

Along with the notion of cultural trauma, E.P. Thompson’s concept of moral economy provides a further instrument to comprehend the memory narratives analysed in the following more fully. Conceived here as a mechanism to balance the functioning of the community and confront grievance or external pressure, the concept of moral economy is useful to explain the reactions of mining communities – in

Asturias as elsewhere – when they face the menace of disappearing (Strangleman 2017: 466 ff.). The particular moral economy of the Asturian coalfield was addressed, for instance, when the HUNOSA company talked of pit closure for the first time in 1991. A motto such as “if there’s reconversion, there will be revolution” (Piñeiro 2008: 348) directly alluded to the historical image of the miners’ working-class radicalism and combativeness. More recently, the moral economy of the Coal Basin was underscored by the “Coal Women Collective”. Their reinterpretation of the protest repertoires of miners was part of their campaigns and rallies that denounced how the end of mining would bring to a halt the lives of their families and would destroy all future perspectives for the Coal Basins (Sanz 2017: 92). One of the banners prominently used in their marches was revealing in its double meaning: “Closing pits without offering any alternative is violence”; this could be understood strictly in a sense of industrial struggle, but also as alluding to the threat of increased domestic violence in the context of pit closure and unemployment.

The sense of threat to a community’s moral economy, to its heritage and construction of identity that seems to be in the very process of being fundamentally altered, is further entangled with what Raymond Williams has called the “structure of feeling”. As David Byrne has pointed out, feelings that inform and build “ways of life”, not just from the individual’s but from a collective point of view, last for longer than industry itself and can function as an element of cohesion (Byrne 2002: 279 ff.). However, we also have to be cautious not to be trapped by “smokestack nostalgia” (Strangleman 2013: 23 ff.).

Following these conceptual considerations, the analysis of cultural trauma with regard to the coal mining communities of Asturias will have to identify some of the key elements so distinctive for the regional mining culture and follow the ways in which these are both enshrined in the past and obtain new meanings or are completely under threat in the context of decline. At the same time, the wider Asturian context has to be taken into account. As much as the regional mining communities struggle with the fundamental change of their livelihood, the political measures to soften the social consequences of pit closure contrast starkly with the rough modes of deindustrialisation applied to other sectors of industry within the region (Köhler 1996: 87 ff.). This is also a reminder that – although the discursive struggle with the trauma of industrial decline is crucial and the engagement with memories and oral testimonies provides a necessary and complementary look onto feelings of uncertainty, pessimism, or resignation – we should not forget the structural level and the material causes and consequences in the context of which the structural transformation of deindustrialisation has taken place. Thus, economic and social analysis cannot simply be replaced (La Capra 2003: 15).

HUNOSA: Much More Than Just a Company

HUNOSA has a history quite particular in the context in which it was established as a company as well as on its road towards closure. Established in 1967, the Hulleras del Norte Sociedad Anónima was primarily an instrument to avoid the collapsing of all private mining companies that had been set up since the 1940s in the wake of Francoist politics of economic autarchy (Piñeiro 1990: 19 ff.). State ownership provided a means of socialising economic losses while at the same time it was an attempt to buy

“social peace” and silence mining communities who were increasingly vocal in opposing the regime amidst the harshest repressive policies applied by the dictatorship. As a core of the coal-producing towns and villages, HUNOSA became the main economic, social, and even cultural engine in the entire area of the Coal Basins (Díaz 2013: 149 ff.). Commemorating the 50th anniversary of the company’s founding act in 2017, the economist Juan Vázquez, born and raised in the Coal Basins and rector of the University of Oviedo from 2000 to 2008, wrote:

This place, this environment and this time allow me to think about the birth of HUNOSA (perhaps an unwanted pregnancy?). Its growth to maturity, its adult years and its slow demise have always been framed as the chronicle of a death foretold and a life miraculously stretched. I could confirm that by impregnating all tissues of economic, social and cultural life in the region, HUNOSA, much more than being a company, represented a way of living, a style, a mode of production and an image of Asturias that will remain for posterity and that won’t be erased for a very long time (<http://juanvazquez.es/>, accessed 01.12.2016).

The role assigned to the company, silently accepted in the Coal Basins, conditioned and set the pace for its phased and – in comparison – socially balanced mode of shrinking in terms of budget and workforce. Yet, the social impact which the company had and the broad social and cultural array it offered to the mining communities was hardly covered by these measures. The trade unions had made a fortress of working-class unionism out of the state-owned coal company, a characteristic that strengthened over time and presented a major point of reference for all mining communities in the Asturian coalfield. After the acceptance of Spain as a full member of the European Union in 1986, the role of the state as guarantor for the losses generated by the company was put at risk. Since then, every turn of the screw applied to the sector was met by campaigns which drew on the protest repertoires present in the collective memory about the working class revolution of 1934 and the great strikes of 1962 – icons of struggle that gave social legitimacy to the current protests and implicitly made reference to the moral debt owed to the miners on a national level, as Asturias had not only been the cradle of the working class movement in Spain but had also always generated wealth for the rest of the country (Erice 2013: 585 ff.).

The settling of the “coal question” in the form of a phased, socially cushioned contraction of the industry that would somewhat preserve the coal region without collieries and miners was to a large extent drawing on this historical debt. At the same time, the miners’ readiness for mobilisation put direct pressure on the political actors, all amidst the context of Spain’s transition from dictatorship to democracy. Early retirement schemes and designated subsidies were meant to be tools aiming to secure a future for the Coal Basins. These different layers of understanding the downsizing of the coal industry culminated in the dramatic events of 1991 which did indeed become manifest in the collective memory as trauma unfolded – the underground occupation of the Barredo colliery by the main trade union leaders on Christmas Eve. This act of resistance did not end in victory, but resulted in the ambiguous Future Plan for HUNOSA, signed a few months later, which for the first time and without potential loopholes set the agenda for pit closure and major cuts in the workforce (SADEI

1990).³ In an outstanding work on the mining section of the CCOO trade union, historian Ramon G. Piñeiro describes the 1991 protest as the end of an age: “The Barredo occupation and the subsequent mode of resignation in the face of the unavoidable put an end to a cycle that had begun with the 1934 revolution” (Piñeiro 2008: 448).

This article deals with the period that followed those 1991 events, the consequences of which can be felt until the very present. By 31st December 2018, all coal mines unable to keep up production without public subsidies were closed. For the Asturian coal industry this means that all three pits that HUNOSA still maintains were closed. Even if that does not imply the demise of HUNOSA itself, as the company has been developing a policy of diversification over the last 20 years, it has undoubtedly put an end to a tradition of almost two centuries of coal extraction in Asturias.

Due to the geological conditions that hampered the mechanisation of the pits and the mediocre quality of Asturian coal, these 200 years can be considered as a continued structural crisis with only short periods during which coal mining was profitable, primarily due to external and exceptional circumstances: During World War I, in which Spain remained neutral, coal prices rose, thus making Asturian coal a lucrative business. Asturian coal experienced a boom when the autarchy policy decreed by Franco reinforced the extraction of Spanish coal. The swan song for the Asturian coal mines came when the 1973 petrol crisis raised the global prices for energy, which caused even the young HUNOSA, which had only been established six years earlier, to make timid plans to adjust its production to the rising competitiveness of the sector (Santullano 1978). It is crucial to take the endemic nature of the Asturian coal industry’s weak economic position into account in order to fully understand the ways in which firstly private entrepreneurs aimed to make profits from it and how then, in the context of the Francoist dictatorship, merely cosmetic operations were applied to maintain social stability in the region. This was how the private coal mines and, since 1967, HUNOSA itself were able to survive during the 1939–1975 period (Vázquez 1994: 561 ff.). Once democracy was regained, all governments, regardless of their ideology, continued boosting HUNOSA with public funding and plans to heighten the company’s competitiveness, which all resulted in one failure after another. Oversized and mechanised too late, it was evident that the Asturian mines were not competitive or profitable when Spain entered the European Economic Union (Piñeiro 2008: 21 ff.). European regulations, then, urged the Spanish government to either find solutions for the domestic mining industry to function without state subsidies or to proceed with dissolving the industry along the lines previously set with regard to coal mining in France, Germany, and Belgium (Vázquez/del Rosal 1999: 219 ff.).

In the spring of 1992, and after harsh mobilisations, the “Future Plan for HUNOSA” was finally signed. This marked a turning point for the Asturian mining communities from a precarious hope for the future to resignation. However, this does not imply a lack of previous signals on the actual state of the industry’s perspectives. Popular initiatives had already been addressing the critical position of the coal sector since the 1970s, when the steel industry as a crucial interlinking sector went into crisis. In a context of political prosecution and repression against civil freedoms, a cross-class alliance such as “Iniciativas del Valle del Nalón” managed to gather 3,000

3 The Plan de Empresa began in 1992 with the closure of the first 11 out of 23 coal pits that HUNOSA had at that time, with a parallel cut in workforce from a maximum of 26,294 in 1970 to 12,286 in 1993.

people in a public demonstration to protest against deindustrialisation. A call to mobilisation under the contemporary sports slogan “we count on you!” in 1970 or a massive demonstration held in Mieres in 1976 to protest against industrial dismantlement underscore the already prevalent regional fears of the threat of structural change. The same happened in 1987, when, at last in the context of democracy, a massive strike paralysed the whole coalfield and was supported all over the rest of Asturias. In 1991, more than 100,000 people took to the streets of Oviedo, the Asturian capital, demanding solutions to the crisis (Díaz/Vega 2013: 309 ff.).

Given these earlier protests against an impending process of industrial shrinking, the question arises why it is particularly the 1990s which are usually considered to be the “beginning of the end” for the mining industry itself as well as for the communities so closely connected with it. One reason might be seen in the accelerated pace of workforce reduction taking hold since then. At the same time, a serious generational shift took place, as the occupational tradition of mining, handed down from generation to generation – which almost seemed to be part of an irrefutable destiny – stopped. Closely connected with such images was the taunting of the beneficiaries of the early retirement programmes for miners. The traditional work culture that emanated from the mining industry did not anticipate early pensioners, who were soon accordingly berated as “loafers”, “betrayers”, “sell-outs”, or other terms that linked the loss of work with shame, loss of respectability, or the loss of social acceptance by the community (García 2006: 63 ff.). “Unioners” became a contemptuous term to identify people belonging to trade unions and even to designate the unions themselves. This epithet is frequently used in reference to the “Plan de la Minería del Carbón para la Reestructuración de las Comarcas Mineras”, commonly referred to as “Mining Funds”. Established in 1998 to support the restructuring of the Coal Basins, it is particularly the active role of the trade unions in the Funds that triggers criticism, accusations of mismanagement and potential corruption, or denouncement of the unions as agents of nostalgia (Erice 2002: 413 ff.).

Narratives of Deindustrialisation

Particularly in the context of a broader wave of deindustrialisation in Asturias since the 1980s, the image of mining as a profession changed from being a somewhat “demonised” job to an occupation with a precarious chance of stability. As late as in the 1970s, being a miner was regarded as completely undesirable in the wider society. Yet, at the time of the economic crisis, being part of HUNOSA seemed to promise a relatively high degree of social security. The image of mine work as harsh, hazardous labour and as an unavoidable destiny overlapped with a sense of taking pride in one’s work and with the feeling of belonging to a special community. At the same time, this very community was severely threatened by the new policies of industrial restructuring. In the process of staff reduction, large numbers of highly skilled miners, experienced in the routines of extracting coal hundreds of metres underground, ended their working career in early retirement when they were still at the height of their abilities and physical strength. New employees filled the gaps where necessary, but new criteria of hiring were followed which gave preference to people from mining families, particularly in cases in which fathers or other family members had died or otherwise suffered in underground work accidents. While such practices raised suspicions of

nepotism and cronyism, especially as the trade unions played a key role in suggesting who should join the company, a main criticism from the perspective of the miners regarded the changing meanings of mine work itself:

What we have feared as miners is a devalorisation of the human factor, and we feel demoralised as traditional values of work have ceased to be the key to enter the mine. The mythology of underground work properly done and accomplished, of the good collier, has vanished. What matters now is just having a good job as long as possible. [...] HUNOSA is the only company that provides jobs in the '80s, '90s.

While this testimony from 1994 underscores a change in work ethic (pride in one's work, tradition, continuity, destiny), a woman working underground in 2013 emphasised that solidarity as a key value for the mining communities eroded when the shrinkage of the coal industry and the deterioration of other industries in the area led to a rise of individualism:

I can't any longer find that feeling of solidarity, of collective effort. It is a total crisis of values. You do not feel supported by the rest. It is not a black and white question. You ask the people of the Coal Basins for support, but when they wanted to get a job [in the mining industry], they did not get it. And then you are asking those families, "Please support me because I do not want my company to close." Then that family will probably think, "Okay, you do not want the mine to shut down, but my son did not get a job there, just so yours could get it instead." That is when solidarity collapses.

The mining industry has always shown a strong inner cohesion that went along with a seemingly natural mode of solidarity among workers, not just underground but also in the community at large. This sense of cohesion, however, is falling apart. In a context of crumbling employment structures and neoliberal policies, even the once vilified work underground comes to be a signifier of a past social security. For the new generation, this contrasts starkly with a current experience of far-reaching uncertainty, while the toll that has historically been paid to implement social security in the mining industry is forgotten, as an interview from 2005 implies:

It is not that we are looking to the past. We, as young people, focus on our families, our mothers and fathers. So if I tell you, "This person has a job in the mine and his working conditions are good regarding salary, working hours, and company agreements", you will not accept less than that. Because in the past, when you turned 18, you left school and headed for the mine – where collective agreements were in place from the very first day you started. But now you get to a company [...] and they say, "We're going to hire you for six hours, but you're going to work for 10, and your salary says 500, but you're going to earn 120." And you say, "Oh, no, no." And they will say, "This guy is living in the past." [...] Such things did not happen to your father at HUNOSA and you don't realise that these things unfortunately happen and many of us have to cope with them.

While their social provisions and regulations (fair salary, collective agreements that were carefully observed, fixed holidays and vacation periods) earned coal miners the reputation of being “funcionarios”⁴ in the past, this legacy of social surplus pinpoints the contradictions of the new market economy rules. This plays out particularly for the younger generation who are torn between the self-image of incapability and the public image depicting them as scroungers, unwilling to work and “living in the past”. Accordingly, a young woman, interviewed in 2010, points out:

There are two problems when you want to find a job. [...] One has to do with the maladjustments of the educational and training profiles of young people to the labour market. [...] The other is psychological and also regards the generational question. My father retired when he was 54. [...] 90% of the people you see nowadays who are taking a stroll on a sunny day are retired. And you think, “Man, that is nice, isn’t it?” because they are just 54 and they are at home. Given their age, a high percentage of them should be doing the lion’s share of the work. But they are not because they feel comfortable with their early retirement pensions. So it will be more difficult for me to find a job not because I am lazy [...] but because I lack the vision, the sight. In a region like this, in which most people have a mirror to look at themselves in places like the Coal Basins, a working day from eight to four, and a full month of vacation, [...] we are not used to fighting.

This new positive view of mine work and its social achievements is tinged with moments of both nostalgia and resignation. It corresponds with the thoughts of an early-retired miner who, in 2008, emphasises his urge to pass on the old values to the next generation. Just as underground work in the colliery is organised as a constant chain, he wants to see the transmission of the past into the present not to be seen as a burden but as an element to foster unity and collective claims against the excesses of the free market and its policies of flexibility that border on exploitation:

I am proud of belonging to a family of miners. And now more than ever because, in some way, we are losing it. We are losing our power to act together as a collective. I feel proud of belonging to a collective that protests, that fights, and that is proud of what we are. If there’s anything that disappoints me about Les Cuenques, it is that we did not manage to pass our values, our origins on to the new generations. We should not forget who we are and what we did to get here. I think the transmission of our history is broken because everybody said, “My son won’t go to the mine because I had a tough time there.” Yes, those were hard times, and the life of a miner wasn’t worth a damn, but thanks to our struggles we reached a certain status. Among all workers, miners have a special position because they earned it with blood and sweat. And thus, in the last few years it was not that hard.

4 In Spain, a “funcionario” is a person who works for public administrations (municipal, regional, or state). They gain their qualification through a public exam. Once obtained, their jobs last until retirement. There’s a widespread degrading public perception about them that suspects they are lazy and enjoy too many advantages.

The miner community's awareness of being the main actor in achieving the social security measures in place forms a key of collective self-understanding. Thus, it would not have been an external logic of "outside" politics that is responsible but the miners themselves enacting their agency in creating the conditions both for better working conditions underground and for the modes of shrinking the industry. This includes the everyday exposure to injuries and accidents as well as readiness for industrial action. The testimony of an underground drill runner who joined HUNOSA in 1989 makes this clear:

You have to like working in the mine; you cannot go there as if it were a punishment. When I first entered the pit, the hewer told me, "Boy, look over there: On the other side there are cars, houses, drinks, all the fun you want – but first, you have to push hard. Moreover, I am going to give you another word of advice: From your first three wages, you must spend the first one to the last coin because maybe you will not live to spend the second. When you get to the second, save part of it in case we have a strike. And take good care of the third one because otherwise you will be nothing in this life." And he was so right.

The promise of participating in consumer society and achieving a better standard of living, is always interlinked with the looming struggles to keep up the existing social stability – and also with the constant experience of work accidents and occupational disease. While the number of cases has actually decreased significantly over the last decades, work injuries and health issues remained a part of the mining families' routine.

The higher standard of living went along with better educational structures. However, the best-educated generation in Spanish history experiences a total lack of opportunities. They have been forced to either emigrate or to accept living in precarious work environments and to commence proper working careers in their thirties or even forties. In contrast, other youngsters who have not even completed the mandatory educational programs have found jobs in the mining industry and profit from the early retirement and social security measures (Köhler/Martin 2006). The first generational segment reached an educational level hardly possible for any other working class generation before. Yet, those who went into mining benefited from improvements in work safety, stable wages, and early retirement schemes while their generational peers were still commencing their professional careers:

Now, thanks to the pensioners and the early-retired miners, Asturias scrapes through, and the Coal Basins are even better off. So it's not us who should take the blame. [...] What do people think? We, the early-retired, would have preferred working until our fifties, as it would have suited us, but what would have happened if we'd done so? There would have been no jobs for the rest of the people in the Basins. Sons of workers and young people without jobs? It was better for all, but, of course, people think it was just a problem of the miners.

This statement of resignation echoes a widespread sentiment across the region. However, there is also a contrasting reading to this, namely the claim to a revaluation of the past and the demand for greater recognition:

This was a monoculture with the mine at its centre, and surrounding it there were retailers, truck drivers [...]. The whole society lived on this, and just because that history was not passed on to today's or tomorrow's generations, there are now people who are against our early retirements, against our strikes. Nobody has told these people who are against us that Spain has always been warm thanks to the Asturian coal from our Coal Basins; and owing to that coal there was electricity, and because of that we gained our rights as workers. But nobody has told them that, and that is why people are against us.

This quote is from a mining deputy who, after retiring early, has become heavily involved in industrial heritage activism and in the preservation of former industrial sites. His statement appeals to a moral economy that has lost its common ground. It describes a rift between the (former) miners and the wider community, not just nationally but even in Asturias itself, because of which the miners end up lacking the recognition and pride they once could take for granted. Drawing on a moral economy that has been lost, thus, is also tinged heavily with a nostalgic longing for the past.

At the heart of the interpretative conflict about the role of the miners is the question who benefited from the deindustrialisation process. This includes the ongoing accusations against the miners about continually being “funcionarios”, even after the final closure of the pits; it also involves the accusations against the trade unions for allegedly compromising the future of the region. To a large extent, the measures of avoiding a traumatic experience of deindustrialisation in the Asturian coalfields, the early retirement schemes as well as the investment of public funding into the recovery of the industrial structures, were broadly accepted and endorsed as achievements of the miners’ ability to mobilise. But they soon became the focus of bitter debates:

Some people, both politicians and trade unionists, were to blame for their selfishness because they did not want to spoil their public image. [...] And sometimes you have to cut off an arm so the whole body won't get infected. [...] Part of the negotiations for early retirements – and [I am] saying this as a grandson, son, nephew, and friend of early-retired miners – was that everybody looked after themselves. Those who were about to retire or who would in the future started calculating how much they were due to receive. The trade union leaders were followed by the miners with devotion. [...] But in the crucial moments, the labour leaders' only concern was to keep their unions happy [...] so they could earn good money and retain their share of power in the remains of the company. [...] And the political leaders, what or of whom did they think? They thought about their people and figured, “Well, if we screw things up, at least some of our workers will have enough salary to maintain those who, like us, have accommodated to the situation.”

On the one hand, in a context of significant cuts in employment and massive factory closures, the early retirement schemes in mining have kept the consumption levels intact within the Coal Basins. On the other hand, the schemes are considered by some observers as being a “poisoned apple”, as they compromised the legendary political and industrial combativeness of the coal miners and brought about the eventual end of the coal community at large.

I have something to say about the miners who leave the mines: they defended [the] coal [industry] quite well against a common enemy. It is remarkable that they have achieved a much better social standard than other industrial sectors. The mining issue still prevails in this country. We are bold and they fear us; however, this is falling apart because they realise that our mentality is changing.

To overcome the effects of pit closures, the European Union introduced the Mining Funds, the ultimate goal of which was the recovery of the battered industry in the Coal Basins through investment in new technologies, IT, and education. Although the according management of billions of euros was a responsibility shared jointly by the city councils, the Asturian government, and the trade unions, it was particularly the latter who were most criticised. The handling of large sums of money by the trade unions has always aroused suspicion. Even when the primary purpose of the Mining Funds – i.e., the (post-)industrial recovery of the region – has not been achieved, investment into infrastructures and projects boosting environmental sustainability or the preservation of industrial heritage do stand as partial successes. Yet, the regional response oscillates between serious doubt and open refusal, the trade unions regarded as the main culprits for the controversial management of the situation. In stark contrast to trade unions in other regions facing deindustrialising struggles, the major unions in Asturias, CCOO and SOMA-UGT, have experienced an increase in their power and influence, almost reciprocal to the process of industrial dismantlement. Compared, for instance, with the British case, this is unprecedented. Yet, while the more militant conflict strategies, such as the British miners' strike, are often framed as an "honourable defeat", the Asturian coalfield's more moderated transition is widely accepted to be a "shameful victory" in which the trade unions act as agents of cronyism, nepotism, or corruption. There is a general agreement about perceiving their power as excessive and their political manoeuvres as obscure. Even the functioning early retirement measures, which could well be appreciated as one of their significant successes during the transformation process, have exerted an adverse effect on their credibility. While their past is characterised by social struggles and epic defeats, their present is tightly interlinked merely with the management of decline and with making bargains while accepting this decline.

Do you know what worries me? We were misled – early retirements were sweet, but every man stole what he could. The Coal Basins are torn apart, early retirements will finish in 12 years, and what will happen then? What will happen? Well, let them build a reservoir in Olloniego so they can drown us all in it.

After securing extremely favourable social measures for all remaining coal miners and substantial funds for the economic recovery of the mining regions, trade unions have become a favourite target for all kinds of criticism and have fallen victim to a sinister smear campaign. They are accused of having allowed with their signature the gradual closure of mines and with that the vanishing of employment opportunities for the youth.

Some Conclusions

The first impression a visitor gets from Asturias and its Coal Basins would inevitably be focused on the regions' standard of living. Studies undertaken by SADEI point out that the Asturian per capita income levels are above the Spanish average and reveal that 50% of young adults have completed a university degree. Although the population has been decreasing constantly over the years, the overall purchasing power has continued to be stable; towns have not been left abandoned. Nevertheless, the Coal Basins have found themselves sunk in a deep crisis for several decades now. The social-political strategies to manage the process of industrial dismantlement, including the gradual, phased schedule of colliery closure and a similarly phased reduction of workforce numbers through early retirement, have not been enough to prevent frustration, uncertainty, and pessimism as the outcome of the process. What many inhabitants of Les Cuenques perceive as a collective trauma seems incomprehensible for people from the rest of Asturias: "What are they complaining about when they live so well?" is the sentence which frequently concludes arguments on the social and economic situation of the Coal Basins. Why, then, should we analyse industrial decline as cultural trauma? A possible answer could be found if we look at the complexities of the resignification process of the Coal Basins' mining identity:

This is coming to an end, but [...] what will happen next? Will the wind blow over us, and that will be the end of our story? Without taking into consideration what we have? People from Les Cuenques lack self-esteem and are overcome by a feeling of resignation.

Most of the social and political achievements in the coal region have relied on the strength of a vital working class movement, many of whose members are now positioned outside of the world of labour (through early retirement) while their very organisations have fallen into discredit as their role in keeping and improving those achievements is in peril. This situation generates a fracture in a community identity whose sense of being has always revolved around a particular working culture that combined class struggle with a strong inner cohesion. The binding elements of collective struggle have now given way to an ambivalent present that calls for a resignification of the past as well as the present. If, as Byrne points out, the structure of feelings inherited from the industrial past survives as a residual culture (i.e., non-dominant but persistent), this may contribute to analysing the post-industrial context from a critical point of view (Byrne 2002). This becomes specifically clear in an intergenerational comparison. While the testimonies of younger people are overwhelmingly tinged with elements of resignation and frustration, the narratives of the older generation echo the experiences of the past, evoking a nostalgia that draws on older sentiments of resistance and rebellion, such as "You cannot be from Turón without being a rebel", which refers to the role of the Turón mining valley during the 1934 revolution (Díaz 2017: 127 ff.; Vega 2017: 137 ff.). As Rubén Vega has noted:

Les Cuenques would be, in this respect, more similar to the [context] that Fentress and Wickham describe for Wales: If the miners remember the past struggle with such clarity, it is because they define themselves through it, and they

have long had a clear perception of an essential antagonism between their communities and the employers and the state that deserves to be commemorated. In the particular Asturian case, we need to add to the memory of the great strikes the revolutionary experience of 1934, the harsh post-war repression and the guerrilla resistance under the dictatorship, which are strong memory sites. The importance of these legacies of the past in the collective identity makes more intense the concern for their dissolution (Vega 2018).

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Abstract

Based on interviews conducted in the 1990s, the early 2000s and, again, since 2013, this article discusses views on deindustrialisation in the Asturian coalfields. While the historical experience of the Asturian miners has been shaped by forms of workers’ radicalism and their Anti-Francoist resistance, the conflicts around the shrinking of the coal industry have taken on a paradoxical outlook. On the one hand, the labour movement, and the trade unions in particular, have succeeded in securing measures to ease the transition into a post-industrial period. On the other hand, these measures are almost perceived as a “shameful victory”. Some aspects of this antagonist perception will be addressed in the following. This concerns the emotional attachment to the experiences and social bonds linked to working in the now obsolete coal mining industry. At the same time, the instruments of social security to help the miners master the crisis lead to almost contentious constellations with a younger generation that is facing severe unemployment. Thus, the aim of preventing deindustrialization from becoming a cultural trauma is therefore a difficult task in practice.