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Living with Industrial Ruination

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Industrial ruins make great photographs. From crumbling brick textile factories to vacant shipyards stripped of cranes, industrial ruins are fascinating. Spectacular in their scale and sublime in their decay, they are the haunting background to “everytown” in the industrialized world. They are the rubble piled outside our redeveloped cities; they are our collective heritage left behind. Detroit is an iconic example of a city of industrial ruins, having endured decades of urban decline. Since the 1990s, the ‘fabulous ruins of Detroit’ have attracted photographers, tourists, and film-makers from around the world (1). The term ‘ruins porn’ aptly describes this voyeuristic fascination with the aesthetics of ruination (2).

Industrial ruins may evoke barren apocalyptic landscapes, but they cannot be separated from the people and places that surround them. Where are the people in the fabulous ruins of Detroit? In *Industrial Ruination, Community, and Place* (University of Toronto Press, 2012), I examine how people live in and with industrial ruination. In this book, I use the term ‘ruination’ instead of ‘ruins’, to describe a process rather than a fixed form. Industrial ruins are never static, except in photographs. They are constantly changing, part of social, economic, and environmental processes of creation and destruction. In time, abandoned industrial sites will be neglected, condemned, demolished, reused, or redeveloped.

The idea behind my book was inspired by my experience of driving through the Rust Belt of the United States and Canada – through Detroit, Michigan, Hamilton, Ontario and Buffalo, New York—and seeing vast abandoned factories; old car plants, steelworks, chemical factories. Much of the literature on industrial ruins tends to romanticize these sites as aesthetic and sadly beautiful. But I was interested in exploring a more sociological, critical perspective, beyond the ‘ruins porn’. I wondered what had happened to produce this scale of abandonment. What were the stories of the people who had worked in the factories, and the communities that surrounded them?

Around the world, industrial ruins have been converted into artists’ workspaces, museums, galleries, and shopping centres. The Tate in London and Liverpool, the Kulturbrauerei in Berlin, the Louvre-Lens in France, and the Baltic Arts Centre in Gateshead are examples. However, not every old industrial city can have a Tate. In many old industrial cities, industrial ruins remain derelict and undeveloped, and the ‘post-industrial’ has yet to take hold. My research examined how industrial ruination relates to an uneven geography of capitalist development, where some places are developed or redeveloped while others are left behind. Methodologically, the research was guided by the sociology of waste, the idea that it is revealing to study what societies discard.

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Many urban scholars focus on the promise and potential of regeneration, of post-industrial transformation based on growth in the service and knowledge economy. But there are many places that struggle to follow post-industrial models of regeneration, which remain stigmatized and deprived. For thinking about the future of cities, particularly in contexts of economic recession, it is important to think critically about these neglected places. Living with industrial ruination is a raw and painful experience for people who have witnessed the destruction of the lifeblood of their communities, and who continue to suffer from the effects of economic insecurity and toxic pollution.

Abandoned factories and areas of industrial decline can be found around the globe, and there are a number of different places that I could have chosen for my study. In fact, during the course of my research, a number of people offered their own stories of old industrial places-- the steel in Sheffield, the tin in Malaysia, the Ruhr area in Germany, and the coal mines in British Columbia. The issue of industrial decline resonates very widely. I decided to focus on examples from 'classic' areas of deindustrialization in the UK and North America: the North of England, and the Rust Belt of North America, but in areas that had not been widely researched.

I didn't choose Detroit or Manchester, which are famous examples of old industrial cities. After careful consideration of many different possibilities, I chose Newcastle upon Tyne, with its legacy of shipbuilding and its strong sense of identity and collective memory around that history, and Niagara Falls in Ontario and New York, which is widely known as a tourist destination but less well known for its chemical factories and devastating history of environmental contamination. To widen the global scope of the project, to contrast with the Anglo-American focus, and to complicate the analysis of an uneven geography of capitalism, I chose the third case of Ivanovo, once the biggest textile city in Soviet Russia.

Each of the cities that I selected was associated with a different iconic heavy industry: chemicals in Niagara Falls, shipbuilding in Newcastle, and textiles in Ivanovo. Each case was at a different phase of deindustrialization. Niagara Falls had endured a deep and prolonged phase of deindustrialisation, a traumatic Rust Belt story that is largely unknown, beneath the façade of tourism. The decline of heavy industries in Niagara Falls was marked by the Love Canal environmental disaster in August 1978, when a toxic chemical dump was discovered buried beneath a residential school in a working class neighbourhood (3). My research revealed that there are a number of other 'Love Canals' with unknown levels of contamination in Niagara Falls. The toxic legacies of chemical industries remain an important but neglected issue for deprived communities living adjacent to these sites.

By contrast, the Walker Riverside community in Newcastle upon Tyne was at a phase of impending regeneration after a protracted process of decline. After years of government and corporate lifelines to Swan Hunter, the 'last shipyard of the Tyne' on Walker Riverside finally closed in 2006. Collective memory and identity based on

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shipbuilding was evident in the strength of community resistance to City Council-led regeneration, which would demolish people's homes. Finally, Ivanovo was at a phase of partial reversal of deindustrialisation. The textile industry in Ivanovo completely collapsed with the end of the Soviet Union. Post-Soviet Ivanovo became renowned as a grim city filled with industrial and Soviet ruins. In the 1990s and 2000s, textile factories throughout the city gradually re-opened and operated at reduced capacity, primarily on a non-market system of barter deals, a legacy of Soviet times. By doing comparative case study research, I was able to analyse both global and local dynamics across different national, political, and cultural contexts.

The research for this book involved visiting each of the places and doing case study research, which involved a number of different research methods. I would start in each city by walking or driving around city, the abandoned factories, taking photographs, writing notes, and talking to people about the history of the city. Then I would start doing interviews with city councillors, with community development activists, with former workers, trade unionists, residents, and anyone else who was connected with the sites and memories of industrial ruination. In the interviews, I asked people questions about their experiences of change in relation to work, family, community, education, and services; their memories, perceptions and experiences of industrial decline and ruination, and their involvement in local politics related to redevelopment and change. I also spent a lot of time in local libraries and archives, collecting documents and photographs, and I also examined local area statistics about employment, population, and indices of deprivation. Gradually I developed an ethnographic approach, where I would spend time with research participants in their homes, community centres, or accompanying them on walks or drives around the abandoned industrial sites and the surrounding residential communities.

There were four key findings which emerged in this comparative study. Firstly, industrial ruination is a lived process. Deindustrialization and industrial ruins are not simply matters of historic record, but they represent legacies of industrial ruination: enduring and complex lived realities for people occupying the in-between spaces of post-industrial change. Living with industrial ruination relates to inner landscapes of uncertainty and disruption, marked by ambivalent nostalgia and traumatic collective memory.

Secondly, the study revealed landscapes of devastation but also of 'home'. Many people who live in landscapes of industrial ruination have strong place attachment to their homes and communities despite living amongst 'devastation', and there are profound differences between stigmatized views of places from the outside, and the perspectives of people who actually live in and with industrial ruination.

Thirdly, the research showed the importance of imagination for urban policy and change. Local people's ways of imagining possible futures in their communities offer important alternatives to top-down urban planning strategies.

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Finally, industrial centres have diverse challenges and strengths, and urban policy requires diverse strategies. Dominant post-industrial model of transformation based on arts-and-property-led regeneration, cannot work for all cities within the context of an uneven geography of capitalist development.

References:

- (1) <http://www.detroityes.com/fabulous-ruins-of-detroit/home.php>)
- (2) <http://paulmullins.wordpress.com/2012/08/19/the-politics-and-archaeology-of-ruin-porn/>
- (3) <http://www.opendemocracy.net/alice-mah/lessons-from-love-canal-toxic-expertise-and-environmental-justice>

Alice Mah is Assistant Professor in Sociology at the University of Warwick. She researches urban sociology, political sociology, work and socio-economic change. She is the author of Industrial Ruination, Community and Place: Landscapes and Legacies of Industrial Ruination (University of Toronto Press, 2012), winner of the 2013 BSA Philip Abrams Memorial Prize. Listen to Alice talking about her book on Radio 4's Thinking Allowed (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b01rqj1q>). Alice is currently working on a new book on the struggling port cities of Liverpool, Marseille, and New Orleans, which will be published in 2014 with Palgrave Macmillan.