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Book review of Deindustrialization and Plant Closure

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Deindustrialization and Plant Closure

Paul E. Straudohar and Holly E. Brown, editors. D. C. Heath, Lexington, MA, 1987. 350 pp. \$39.00.

Any planner assigned the responsibility of preparing a recovery plan for a community following a plant closing knows that frustration, heart-break, and demoralization are all part of the process. The planner also knows that there is little comprehensive literature at either the national or regional levels to help guide the effort. Finding answers to such simple questions as (1) what do I do when the largest plant in town closes or, (2) what are the community's rights and obligations when a plant closes, often proves impossible. The answers to these questions are a bit

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closer thanks to the work of Paul Straudohar and Holly Brown. *Deindustrialization and Plant Closure* consists of 26 articles focusing on how the nation, states, and cities must come to grips with the problems of a rapidly changing industrial base.

The book is divided into five major parts, each presenting a balance of perspectives. Part One is an overview of the process of deindustrialization, the impact of plant closings, and a range of potential corrective actions. Part Two is a detailed examination of how a plant closing affects the worker, the community, and society as a whole. This section will be of particular benefit to the planner in that the gut-wrenching problems of individual job loss (i.e., health, status, pay, security, and reemployment) are highlighted and appropriate actions suggested. If one has ever needed a rationale for involving oneself in attempting to prevent or slow down plant closings or to alter plant-closing procedures, this chapter will be very helpful.

Part Three is an examination of the roles and options available to the critical players in deindustrialization and plant closings. The responses of management and unions are emphasized. The authors devote considerable discussion to the obligation of management to the community. Is the first obligation to the workers and the community (the position of the late Malcolm Baldrige of Scovill) or is it to the stockholders, and the public be damned (a position once taken by President F. W. White of the American Woolen Company, who stated, "American Woolen owes Lawrence nothing.")? Clearly there is a range of approaches. Of most interest to planners will be the section that calls for community impact analysis studies on the part of a company about to close so that critical issues can be identified and ideally resolved.

Part Four supplies an analysis of displacement policies in Western Europe and Canada. American planners should not skip over this section, since there is much to learn from the comparative perspective. Above all, one will find that the Europeans and

Canadians treat their displaced workers with far greater care than we do in the United States. The final section is a review of state and federal legislation that has been enacted or is being discussed. The most interesting point here is that present efforts or "approaches in the works" can in no way be considered earth-shaking. In effect, after reading this section, the planner will again realize that meaningful legislation of direct assistance at the local level is far from becoming a reality.

The book is well organized and readable. It summarizes most of the critical issues surrounding deindustrialization and presents the alternatives without any stridency or "call to action." While some readers may regard this as a positive point, it also can be deemed a shortcoming. Anyone involved in reindustrialization efforts knows that the tools and resources available to help local communities are extremely weak. My own experiences suggest that, unless forced to take action, most plant managers will take the minimum steps possible to keep the peace, keep the plant running until the closing hour, and ensure minimum negative press relations. If this can be accomplished, then upper management will be pleased, and the local community be damned.

This book has several shortcomings. Above all there is the need for an activist's perspective. Too often we are reading the perspective of the academic, think-tanker, ideologue, or upper-level bureaucrat. If a direct participant in the Weirtown, North Adams, Youngstown, or Quincy plant-closing experiences had explained what actually happened and what role the planner played, the book would have much greater value. The volume also lacks a set of actions that directly focus upon what the planner can or should do. (Among the contributors to the book, Berkeley's Edward Blakely is the only planner.) Further, a set of methods designed to assess whether industries are likely to leave or close (i.e., an early warning system) would have been most helpful. Finally, one is

struck with how quickly material on this subject becomes dated. This book is being reviewed in 1989, it was printed in 1987, and most of the material was actually written in 1983-1984. Already some of the readings are close to being dated.

Despite these limitations, the book should be read by any planner who is involved in issues related to deindustrialization or plant closings. In fact, if one is looking for a single volume that covers the breadth of policy approaches and options, this is the one to purchase. It is a good, solid book.

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