

International Conference

Confronting Decline (CONDE) – Challenges of Deindustrialization in European Societies since the 1970s

Organization: C²DH / University of Luxembourg; Leibniz Institute for Contemporary History, Munich

Venue: University of Luxembourg, Esch-Belval

Date: 25–27 June 2025

Deadline: 30 June 2024

Since the 1970s, deindustrialization has fundamentally changed Western industrial societies. In North America and Europe, thousands of jobs have been lost in traditional industrial regions, in particular in the textile industry, coal mining, the iron and steel industry and shipbuilding. Even in the electronic consumer goods sector and the watch and photography industries, many millions of jobs have been eliminated or relocated to other regions of the world. There is no question that deindustrialization is one of the most far-reaching transformation processes in contemporary history, fundamentally changing landscapes, economic structures and socio-cultural environments.

Starting from this observation, the conference, organized by the CONDE research group, will reflect on the impact and wider historical reverberations of deindustrialization in Europe from the 1970s onwards. While deindustrialization was initially addressed mainly by the social sciences, in recent years historians have increasingly turned their attention to the subject, pointing to the complexity of the historical phenomenon. In contrast to economic concepts such as "restructuring" or "downsizing", which do not adequately capture societal and social change, a historical approach to deindustrialization can offer a broader view, encompassing multiple dimensions: first, the economic development of production, turnover and sales; second, the political shaping of the policy field; third, the cultural ramifications; and fourth, a perspective from below, which takes into account personal memories of workers, the dissolution of traditional social and cultural communities and changes in social spaces.

The conference will focus on the European particularities of deindustrialization since the 1970s – in Western and Eastern Europe, with an East-West comparison over the epochal years 1989/90, and in terms of entanglements among European states and beyond. What distinguished Europe from the US and Canada, from the North American experience of deindustrialization? To what extent did European reactions to deindustrialization differ from one country to the next? Did the Cold War resonate in deindustrialization policies, in the ensuing political mobilization or in personal experiences? In what ways did deindustrialization leave its mark on the co-transformation process after 1989/90, both in the East and in the West? Last but not least: is it possible to conceive of a specifically ‘European’ deindustrialization?

The aim of the conference is to widen our understanding of deindustrialization and its multidimensional impact on European politics and societies in the period of its most recent history. The conference organizers are especially interested in papers addressing the following seven fields of research:

- 1) International politics: What were the strategies implemented by European states faced with the rapid dismantling of industries on an international stage? Was the realm of international politics used by individual nation states, and if so, how did they address the issue of deindustrialization in this context? In what way was the challenge taken up by supranational and international organizations such as the EC/EU or the OECD or by trade unions, employers’ organizations and NGOs? Were there any joint industrial or economic policy measures to save existing industries or to accelerate the transition to a service society?
- 2) Welfare state: Although European welfare states played a key part in the integration of large swathes of European society after 1945, they were challenged by the demands and burdens placed on them by deindustrialization. Were they prepared for the loss of traditional industrial enterprises? What social and educational policy measures were adopted to compensate socially for job losses or to retrain workers within a different type of economic system?
- 3) Gender, migration, race: Men were particularly affected by the loss of hard physical work in mines and steelworks, whereas women were often disproportionately affected by job losses in the textile industry. Migrant workers were an important part of the industrial workforce and were hit hard by the decline of the manufacturing sector. The ensuing distribution battles laid bare the social and cultural inequalities of European societies. What role did gender, migration and race

play in deindustrialization? How did European experiences differ from deindustrialization in the United States? How did gender and racial inequalities show during deindustrialization? And what consequences did disparities in treatment have for social cohesion?

- 4) Religion and culture: What was the significance of religion and other cultural influences in the context of deindustrialization? The task of the workplace chaplaincy was to help employees with problems, conflicts or other emotional challenges in the workplace. Moreover, as a result of migration, separate communities, some of them Islamic organizations, emerged in Western Europe to engage with the concerns of “their” employees. What role did these organizations, networks and influences play in coping with deindustrialization? Deindustrialization also led to cultural manifestations in the form of images, music, visual art, literature, etc. Taking deindustrialization as a distinct lens through which to make sense of the world, the conference welcomes papers that reflect on Europe’s cultural history.
- 5) Ideas: From the perspective of the history of ideas, the conference will be an opportunity to reflect on the ideas, theories and approaches that circulated in order to prevent, manage or overcome deindustrialization. Where and from whom did these ideas originate – in the political or academic sphere, in companies or in trade unions? What political discourse was used to describe the fundamental change in industries, work and social life? And what ideational transfer processes took place between different nation states or industrial regions?
- 6) Economic landscapes: What impact did deindustrialization have on the European economic landscape? How did certain regions react in order to develop into successful clusters of future industries? Why did other European regions slip into crisis? What factors favoured or prevented the successful transformation of regions? Were there (supra-)national models – such as Anglo-American liberalism or Rhenish capitalism – whose specific characteristics helped to overcome deindustrialization?
- 7) Environment: Last but not least, the conference organizers invite participants to consider the effects of deindustrialization on the environment. As early as 1961, Willy Brandt called for the sky over the Ruhr area to become blue again. The book "Silent Spring" (1962) by Rachel Carson is often seen as the starting point of the global environmental movement. Many workers looked wistfully at the loss of their traditional jobs, but there is no doubt that the industrial age was also accompanied by enormous damage to the environment. The limits to growth had become

apparent by the 1970s with the Club of Rome study. Particularly in view of current calls for the decarbonization of the economy, i.e. the conversion of the economy to carbon-free production, a historicization of the relationship between deindustrialization and environmental history is essential.

We welcome submissions for 20-minutes papers across these fields of deindustrialization research. Please submit your abstract (around 250 words) and a brief CV in English to Stefan Krebs (stefan.krebs@uni.lu) and Christian Marx (marx@ifz-muenchen.de) by 30 June 2024.

The conference will take place at the University of Luxembourg in Esch-Belval (Luxembourg) from 25 to 27 June 2025 and will be hosted by the Luxembourg Centre for Contemporary and Digital History (C²DH), which is well known for organizing international academic conferences at the highest level. The conference venue on Esch-Belval campus – a former location for iron and steel production – is the result of an industrial wasteland that has been converted into a new hub for science and education. It is one of the largest urban repurposing projects in Europe and offers a relaxed but exclusive atmosphere for discussion. Travel and accommodation costs will be covered; publication of the lectures in an English-language edited volume is planned.

Deadline: 30 June 2024, at 23:59 (CEST)

Decisions by: end of August

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