The Role of Coal Mining Towns in Social Theory: Past, Present and Future

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Abstract: Coal mining has ceased in Britain to all intents and purposes. For centuries it was a source of employment and even economic security for thousands of men, and the women who lived with them. Miners clung on to life in dangerous occupations – second only to fishing in accident and mortality rates- but strong trade unionism and collectivism mean that for some periods they were regarded as relatively well-off within the working class, if one used internal comparisons. And whilst this group may have all but disappeared from the UK and most parts of Western Europe, today in other regions of the world, coal mining continues to expand. This article discusses a brief comparison of two pit villages in the 1950s when arguably coal mining in Britain was at its height, both in terms of tons produced and recorded manpower at work. It then turns to look to coal mining villages in China today as sources of sociological insight for our collective futures.
Keywords: Coal mining; pit villages; organisation theory; social theory; industrial sociology

Coal mining has ceased in Britain to all intents and purposes. For centuries it was a source of employment and even economic security for thousands of men, and the women who lived with them. Miners clung on to life in dangerous occupations – second only to fishing in accident and mortality rates- but strong trade unionism and collectivism mean that for some periods they were regarded as relatively well-off within the working class if one used internal comparisons. And whilst this group may have all but disappeared from the UK and most parts of Western Europe, today in other regions of the world, coal mining continues to expand. This paper is about the past and present, in the UK (Cronin 1979) and elsewhere (Shorter and Tilly 1974; Korpi and Shalev 1980; Conell and Cohn 1995), looking to coal mining villages as sources of sociological insight and even inspiration for our collective futures.

This article begins with a brief comparison of two pit villages in the 1950s when arguably coal mining in Britain was at its height, both in terms of tons produced and recorded manpower at work. And of course it was 'man' power, for women were totally excluded from the coal mining industry in the 19th century (John 1980). The National Coal Board was only five years old when our comparison begins and much hope had been grasped by the coal miners that this, long fought for, achievement would improve their living conditions dramatically. As Martin Bulmer (1975: 64) stated

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Mine-workers constitute a group of workers who are exploited— and experience exploitation—in an extreme form…. As such, miners are a distinct and important group within the working class as a whole, characterised both by the extreme conditions under which they are required to labour and by the solidarity which they display towards employers and the outside world.

Since the private mine owners had been bought out, those colliers that descended into newly nationalised pits in the Great Northern Coalfield on 'Vesting Day' in January 1947 expected much to have changed for the better. They were to be bitterly disappointed. A character in the play 'Close the Coalhouse Door' by Alan Plater, says acerbically, on looking at the composition of the nationalised management structure, 'Same bloody gaffers'. The Coal Board itself was constituted of 11 members, seven of whom were Knights of the Realm. Several others were soon to gain this honour. It was here, with the composition of the National Coal Board's directors, that the miners' great expectations began to fall away in disappointment.

Research on these expectations and how they had been met- or not- began in the late 1940s. The first case we shall look at is Ashton, a pseudonym for a village in West Yorkshire studied in the early 1950s by Dennis, Henriques and Slaughter and published as '*Coal is Our Life'* in 1956. The other, though it lies some 100 miles to the North, is a real mining community named Ashington in Northumberland where the author was born and lived through the historical period being discussed by Dennis *et al.* This comparison throws up many points of similarity but also points of difference. The methods used by Dennis et al. are essentially drawn from anthropology and rely upon the case method with interviews, anecdotes, statistics and observation as the main (and eclectic) forms of data collection. Analysis is aided by recourse to anthropological classics like Evans-Pritchard's work on The Nuer (1937) and there is more than a faint whiff in *Coal is our Life* of the observers' assumed superior understanding of culture, beliefs and habits as compared to those who practice them. Bearing this authorial authority in mind let us read what Dennis et al. (1956) have to say.

Ashton

Ashton is a fictitious mining village in West Yorkshire in the UK which at the time of the study (1953-4) had a population of 14,000. The village is dominated by pit heaps and air pollution, increasingly generated after the first pit was sunk there in 1868. Expansion was rapid between 1891 and 1901 when the number of dwellings doubled and took the form of 'thread' development along existing roads. According to Dennis et al. (1956) the skills of a miner are not transferable into other jobs and this has influenced their mobility. There was no work for women in the area and only six in every 100 women living in the village had a job outside the home. There was an ageing demographic at work in the community whilst of the two pits in the village, one employed 1755 men and the other employed 653 men. The description of life down the pit is detailed and is based on observation, anecdote and statistics in equal measure woven into a story of life in the community as if this was a village in some far-flung part of what remained of the British Empire. This community study tries then, in true anthropological manner, to look at life beyond the pit and considers the leisure time activities of the pit men and their families.

In a second edition, published in 1969, Henriques, writing alone, complains that criticism of the 1956 book was sometimes based on the 'smug provincialism of the Fabian Society' (Henriques 1969: 10) and that 'the facile assumptions of middle class observers of the life of the working class are questionable at every point' (Henriques 1969: 9). Yet, the original authors, Dennis, Henriques and Slaughter evince this set of value positioning themselves. For the tone of this 'community study' is surprisingly moralistic and condescending in places. It is judgemental about the values and behaviour of the people of the village so that, for example, we are told that a local dance hall advertised the following

'Saturday Night is Riot Night'. When attendance is invited in these terms it is not surprising to find that the local Court of Summary Jurisdiction records show many cases of obscene language, assault, disturbing the peace, and so on which occur at these Saturday night dances. (Dennis et al. 1956: 126)

This is 'normal behaviour' we are told, as if this marked off Ashton as somehow miles away from polite society and such goings-on did not happen up and down the land on a Saturday night! The book begins by describing 'filthy houses' and is very judgemental about the miners' alleged habit of going absent from work if there was 'money in their pocket'. It sees gambling on the 'football pools' and horse racing as worthy of expressing a judgement about and, in the process, makes an interesting point about disabled men acting as bookies' runners in the period. This is productive of a similarity with Ashington to which I will come back to in a later section.

Dennis et al. (1956: 173) then address the issue of the family as part of the 'total social system' which is the pit village. They argue that families in a pit village come to know the vast majority of other families by a whole range of cross cutting ties of kinship, school, leisure and work interconnections. Expectations become shared through these deep seated communal roots. There is no expectation of possessing material goods at the standard of 'the urban middle class…Nowhere does one find luxury' (Dennis et al. 1956: 179). Cosiness, tidiness and cleanliness are the values espoused and these are to be provided particularly by the wife of the miner. The collier looks to the outside of the family whilst his wife looks inward according to the writers of this case study- written at a time of course before the television set occupied its prominent and seductive place in the family home. Women know little of both what precise work her husband will undertake down the pit, and the contents of his wage packet. She is paid housekeeping money which is a fixed amount per week agreed between them, and the rest of the pay- whatever production bonuses it includes and so on -is his. Knowing his wages in any particular week is likely to be somewhat unusual. Dennis et al. (1956: 188) feel able to say 'this financial arrangement has severe disadvantages in that very often a large amount of a man's good wages is frittered away on his amusements and the wife has little say in saving'. They quote, somewhat gleefully, a widow of a miner who reported of her husband that there was not a single day when he did not go the bookies nor had less than a £1 in his pocket to spend on cigarettes and the football pools (Dennis et al. 1956: 193). Women, on the other hand, need the approval of their husbands before spending on their own amusement and before taking up smoking in the period of the early 1950s. They see neighbours and friends during the day and according to Dennis et al. engage in 'callin' which means visiting the homes of others, being visited at home oneself and engaging in either location with gossip about others. Men never swear in front of women or children (Dennis et al. 1956: 218). This rule is followed assiduously and there are penalties for those that transgress. Incidentally, it is worth noting that the movie 'Billy Elliott' set in the 1980s is totally incorrect in this aspect of mining life, for no typical miner would swear in front of his young son and certainly not his mother. The romance of labour is often exaggerated but Dennis, Henriques and Slaughter constantly 'describe' the miner in quite critical terms. It is a case study that is by no means value free.

Ashington

This comparison with Ashton is one rooted in my own personal experience and is based on a village well to the North and, at the time of Dennis et al. writing up their research, the writer was only 8 years old. Yet, in many ways it is very familiar to me. So this section is based on participation for 18 years, and close observation for many years thereafter, of a particular 'real' pit village. It is described by McManners and Wales (2002:57) as follows,

Ashington… is a product of the late Industrial Revolution. Its location is in the south east of Northumberland, the very north of the Great northern coalfield. The town has been described as the world's largest pit village.

At its height, the village contained nearly 40,000 people, within which the Ashington Coal Company employed 80% of the male workforce in the town. The land had originally been leased from the Duke of Portland who owned nearby Bothal Castle and thus the Dukes were able to manipulate what happened in the development of the town. It was in 1849 that the first colliery was established and by 1891 it was a boom town. In the years before the First World War, a huge new area of building was erected called 'the Hirst' which used a grid iron system of architectural arrangement and offered a consistent standardised appearance, as every house was built in yellow segar bricks from the Ashington Coal Company's own brickyard. Even by the standards of the time, this was poor quality housing, despite its appeal to conformity, rationality and modernity in town planning. Earth roads, two standpoint water pipes for every 25 houses and an average of six people in every house was the norm. This was the maximisation of housing density expressed in one pit village and it was not driven by philanthropic motivations. There were at least six collieries in close proximity and each sported a large pit heap that sometimes gave off fumes. The air was often yellowish brown in appearance and sulphurous in odour as every house was fuelled by 'free coal' delivered once a fortnight by the colliery and stored in a coalhouse in each and every dwelling. Certain atmospheric conditions trapped these fumes above the town and smog was often the consequence. Health implications for all inhabitants followed.

The description in Dennis et al. (1956) of face work in Ashton would adequately describe that in the six local pits of Ashington, Woodhorn, Linton, North Seaton, Lynemouth, and Newbiggin collieries, assuming this same point in time (Trist and Bamforth 1951). We have the pictorial evidence provided by the 'Ashington Group' of pitmen painters who were active between approximately 1930 and 1980. These pictures have attracted much attention for their portrayal of work down the mine and brought Ashington the special interest of the Mass Observation organization which started its work in 1937. McManners and Wales (2002: 66) speak of Tom Harrison, a self-trained anthropologist visiting Ashington around this time.

Harrison saw the Ashington Group as an ideal unit for observation, being highly motivated and, above all, an authentic group for study. He and his group of observers arrived in Ashington with ill-judged, pre-conceived ideas. His background had been in studying primitive societies and he probably saw the Ashington group as primitives, capable of being bought with gifts - in this instance a crate of beer which dumbfounded the group, many of whom were teetotal.

Also realistic in Dennis et al. (1956) would be their description of leisure activities in a mining village. But in Ashington, things were on a bigger scale; there were only 3 pubs but 56 working men's clubs. The Duke of Portland was a teetotaller so in his planning had allowed, for 30,000 residents, only one public house, named of course the Portland Hotel. The Central Hotel was to be a place for visiting mining engineers and those seeking commercial business whilst, outside of the Hirst, a pub named the North Seaton Hotel was set up to attract custom from the south side of Ashington. It was quickly named 'The White Elephant'. So three pubs existed to slake the thirst of the miners. But in addition, 56 private clubs were set up to cater for the working man. Women were allowed into the premises at weekends but were not, and could not be, members, even as the 1950s progressed. They had to signed in by a club member and convince the Doorman that they were going to be well behaved. Clubland was very big in Ashington and on Fridays, Saturdays and Sundays, people began a peregrination between their favourite clubs, leaving and departing on a tight schedule in order to see and be seen elsewhere. Typically, by the 1960s, Fridays were for men and women to go out in single sex groups and maybe enjoy a dance in the club- but not with their partners. Saturdays were for married couples

to leave the children with their grandmother to be babysat, and to go to the club together. Sundays were usually men-only affairs. Spatial segregation on a Friday meant that (childless) married couples moved independently from each other on a different schedule. Gambling on bingo (housey-housey) was a key activity and the practice of betting on horses was overseen by bookies' runners. As was the case in Ashton, the one 'runner' often ensconced at the end of our street (named, as all colliery rows were in this section of the Hirst, after a Shakespearean character, Rosalind) was called 'Bowkey Isaac' and he was very disabled, typical perhaps of runners. His body's stance was noticeable from a long way away as he stood on our street corner. To 'bowk' is a dialect term meaning to belch very loudly indeed, and Bowkey Isaac could be heard, in many yards, from many yards away. This bowk was how he called out his presence. His call to customers in Rosalind, Beatrice and Katherine Streets could hardly be missed, especially if doors were open.

Familial and husband-wife relationships (Bulmer 1975) seem to be well described by Dennis et al. (1956) but they adopt the anthropological, middle class lens throughout their study. 'Descriptions' always have to use language and, in the choice of words taken, we create an image that we probably mean to achieve. Anthropology brings with it something of the upper class view of the exotic and in some way less 'successful' tribes when compared to our own. I had not remembered this in my reading of *Coal is Our Life* many years ago but today it seems very patronising indeed. This is not to say their portrayal of the deep sexism of the miners or of their tendency to gamble is inaccurate. It is simply that Dennis et al. offer no explanation of why these traits are to be found. Paradoxically, the need for description robs their analysis of any attempts at even a functionalist explanation, wherein the handling the existence of such 'working class' behaviours would be in terms of what functions they performed for the community. Still less is there any Marxist or radical interpretation of these behavioural features, although Henriques' commentary from 1969 in the second edition appears to be written much more from this sort of stance. Anthropology does not tend to offer radical politics in most cases (Birx 2010). What are we to use then as concepts to offer some analysis of these two villages, perhaps at the peak of their powers?

The concept of the 'isolated mass'
This was a notion developed by two American sociologists, Clark Kerr and Abraham Siegel, in 1954 to explain the high level of strike activity in mining villages around the world. It looks at first sight to be some form of geographical determinism in maintaining that any spatial location of a population which places it in isolation from other communities is creating a 'mass' that will exhibit unusual behaviour and think differently from those workers found in more interconnected and thus 'conventional' places.

These communities have their own codes, myths, heroes, and social standards. There are few neutrals in them to mediate the conflicts and dilute the mass. All people have grievances, but what is important is that all numbers of each of these groups have the same grievances . . . The employees form a largely homogeneous, undifferentiated mass— they all do about the same work and have about the same experiences. (Kerr and Seigel 1954:68)

Of course, the concept is not only germane to mining communities. Docklands, logging camps and especially fishing villages are 'isolated' from larger populations by virtue of their positions within forests or on the coast, often in inaccessible harbours and these too are to be seen as isolated masses. Kerr and Siegel (1954) then have the problem of connecting high levels of industrial militancy to isolated masses. They argue that these communities, in the case of coal mining, rely on fixed locations within, or more accurately above, coalfields and with their highly visible and noxious spoil heaps are patently very unattractive to live in for reasons outlined above. This creates one-industry, homogenous groups of workers who are fixed in space by geology and isolated from the outside by aesthetics. Mobility into other occupations

is severely restricted. The work is dangerous and accident rates are high. Group norms are strong, often based on inter-personal needs 'to watch each other's backs'. These mining communities thereby are characterised by collectivism, strong trade unionism and intensively shared cultures based on occupation (Salaman 1971). This cultural and institutional set of arrangements create a defensive and often successful position with regard to opposing management initiatives regarding output control, via strike behaviour in particular but also by manipulating absenteeism.

Within the isolated mass, there is an emphasis on educational achievement and 'male' sports as escape routes from dirt, disease and danger. The Hirst North School in Ashington is the only English educational establishment to have produced three captains of the England football team. Educational achievement often takes the form of moves into regional and national political activism and coal mining is often a centre of labourist politics. Pit villages formed a 'vanguard' of the labour movement with annual galas such as that in Durham acting as ceremonial rites at a national level for Labour and Socialist supporters. In Ashton and in Ashington there is some evidence of political activism but nothing like to the same extent as in Wales and Scotland (Knowles 1960). The isolated mass concept, however, does seem to explain something of the inward looking nature of the communities and begins to address some of the 'why' questions which Dennis et al. seem unwilling to address.

The political centrality of such isolated masses to the Left in Britain and elsewhere in the form of pit villages however carries with it many disadvantages. Some 'modernisers' within left wing groups saw defensive labour militancy as a block to 'progress' within the 'new working class' (Lockwood 1960; Hyman and Price 1983). The 'new working class' was produced by the 'new division of labour' that required international thinking in a differentiated way (Frobel 1977; Charnock and Starosta 2016). The very isolation of the pit village was seen as its worst feature, making it dependent upon inward looking, anti-managerialist rhetoric. As 'archetypal proletarians' they were something from the past. In the need for 'new' versions of labourist politics, mining was seen as a drag from the past. Thus, there were sections of the Left that were not likely to support mining communities when they came under real threat because of their presumed resistance to change. And so it came to pass in the mid-1980s in the UK (Beech 2006; Bevir 2005).

The Isolated Mass in the 21st Century

Thirty years later, 'That capitalism has undergone a series of transformations over the last few decades and that these transformations have been reflected- at least to some extent- in a qualitative change in the nature, form and organization of labour is increasingly undisputed. Also widely recognised is that these developments have in turn had a reconfigurative effect on the political organization of workers and their resistance' (Dowling et al. 2007: 1).

If we accept that the notion of the 'precariat' (Standing 2016; Johnson 2015) will bear some analytical weight upon it, it is easy to see that coal mining in the UK in the 1950s was not inhabited by the precariat. Of course, men were likely to be killed, industrial disputes could easily send miner's families into penury and periodic fluctuations in the demand internationally for coal could lay pit workers off for long periods. However, miners were relatively well paid and were not burdened usually by having to find roofs over their heads or solid fuel to light and heat their homes. These came with working down the pit. Life was not a constant struggle to exist - in the main. Figure 1 might be helpful in expressing the differences between miners in the 1950s in Britain and the state of precariousness today. This comparison might allow us later on to re-consider coal mining villages in 2017 in the UK through the lens of precariousness.

Figure 1: A comparison of precariousness at work and coal mining

Coal Mining	Precariousness at work
'secure', predictable, repetitious	Insecure, contingent, flexible
regulated, permanent	Illegal, casualised, temporary
routinised, stable and endowed	Precarious, unstable, insecure
Available access to political system	Non-traditional forms of politicisation
Masculinist	Requiring new subjectivities
Central and strategic role in energy	Non-central place in economy
Identity is fixed and bounded	Identity is rendered fluid

Of course, coal mining is by no means the only form of *Industrial Labour*. Across Britain by the 1970s were to be found Fordist, large scale, fully integrated processes being undertaken on single factory sites. The size and complexity of these factories offered opportunities to the work force to unionise through the factor of scale and the homogeneity of (semi-skilled) work levels (Milkman 1997; Rinehart et al. 1997). Single employment contracts with single employers were offered in order to enhance centralised managerial control and there was a predictability of regular repetitive work with a predictable wage at the end of it. Sometimes these factories were placed in former mining areas such as Nissan's plant near East Bolden in County Durham (Garrahan and Stewart 1992). Resistance where it occurred was through strikes, absenteeism and sabotage. This meant there was at least a degree of affinity between mass production workers and coal miners over several decades of the 20th century, even if this was not totally solid. Then, however, came the rise of *Cognitive Capitalism and Immaterial Labour.*

First in this analysis (Vercellone 2007; Gill and Pratt 2008; Boutang 2011), it is argued that transformations take place in the workplace itself. The factory becomes a network of disparate productions of knowledge. The principal source of value comes to rest in the knowledges produced by workers and not in capital, nor their material labour on things. Workers willingly exploit themselves as individuals who are possessed of separable knowledges and not as part of a collectivity. This form of capitalism empowers those placed in strategic positions in the economy. This approach to immaterial labour is typically found in theorists and activists from France and Northern Italy. They tend to prefix discussions with 'neuro' (as in 'neuro-capitalism', Larsen 2014) indicating the focus upon *the mind* of the worker. Thus, it is felt acceptable to term this 'cognitive capitalism' and since the gold for the capitalist owner is in the mind of the worker with symbols, rather than workers with shovels, it is deemed acceptable to call this 'immaterial labour' (De Angelis and Harvie 2009).

Outside of the factory, perhaps simultaneous processes are seen to have created both *Affective Labour and Precarious Labour.* The position is taken (Dowling et al. 2007) that class and class struggle have been altered by the shift of gravity of employment from large-scale production sites (back) into the home. Thus, such forces mean that elements of class have to be seen as possessing twilight status. It is foreseen that we are about to face class de-alignment, class fragmentation and divisions based on a schism between those exhibiting poverty and unemployment versus 'valued persons' who have valuable jobs and resources of value. Because Post-Fordist regimes of production (Milkman 1997) spread production away from the

factory and into much smaller, geographically dispersed production units, collectivism wanes dramatically. Systems today highlight the individual as both the unit of production *and* consumption. Individuals are given 'permission to think' and to act as entrepreneurs, freed perhaps of the conformity of the isolated mass and the large, homogenizing factory. It becomes acceptable to utilize emotion within employment to sell products, design workplaces, and produce 'designer workers' (Casey 1996). The 'affective worker' is sought who will offer up her or his mind, body and soul to the corporation. Individuals become required to demonstrate high levels of intimacy, care or emotions as labourers and consumers. The drive is to make the 'worker's *soul* to become part of the factory' (Lazzarato 1996). Resistance where it does take place, takes the form of refusal to work entirely. The affective worker has to withdraw themselves from work completely to disengage from their own internally generated scopic regime of self-surveillance.

Biffo Baredi in '*The Soul at Work*' (2009) maintains that Humanity expressed in and through the form of the body is no longer the measure of the world. Whilst Da Vinci could draw the human male with legs and arms outstretched as the measure of all that surrounded him, today control is no longer exercised at a human level but at the level of nanotechnology and what is invisible to the human eye. What organizations reflect upon are psychopharmacology, algorithms, and forms of mass communication. In the first, key workers are not discouraged from experimenting with smart drugs. Indeed, they may be encouraged, just as pilots in the Luftwaffe were, to take amphetamines in the form of 'pilot's chocolate', to keep their concentration levels high whilst flying over Britain (Bloomfield and Dale 2016). Algorithms which change and transform data and produce decisions that humans have to depend upon and use in everyday corporate life remove decision making from the operative. And with mass communications between organizations and their customers, consumers and clients, linked to constant searches for feedback on your rating of your experience of the corporation's offering, social media have become a key part of employment practices. These govern the soul at work. In the 21st century then it might be possible to say that bodies, minds and souls have had their traditional places overturned – both in work and outside work. What we are short of, are models of the body, mind, soul triad set in employment.

What we do know is the traditional centrality of work to our 'identity' (Brown et al. 2007). In prisons, as Goffman (1959), showed one of the first processes a new inmate undergoes is identity stripping. One becomes a number, one's clothing and hair have to become standardised into a uniform way of being, one is forced to wear a uniform and freedom of movement is withdrawn. In the movie 'I, Daniel Blake' the expression of individuality in the title contrasts deeply with Mr Blake's experience in Newcastle of dealing with the social security system. He is far from being an individual and is merely fodder for the maw of the system which appears to be about *not* paying benefits. It is Kafkaesque in the original sense where Kafka worked in industrial insurance himself and obtained therein many ideas of how the system was designed not to pay out.

If prisons are places where identity is stripped from all inmates, and identity stripping is likely to be a part of the processes facing members of the precariat, might it be possible to ask in what ways these two elements interconnect? In both institutional locations, for the prisoner and the member of the precariat, options are very limited. Economic activity for either is highly constrained by management and the state of the economy. Without resources or because of incarceration, mobility is highly constrained. In these locations, many shared values are likely to develop which are anti-authority, for the only representatives from the outside who are ever seen by those imprisoned are the forces of the state apparatus. This may well create a sense of abandonment and isolation, leading perhaps to something akin to an 'isolated mass'.

Thus we have come full circle. Isolated masses may be produced by specific economic and geographical circumstances but once these circumstances have changed and disappeared,

the isolated mass is in a very poor position to find any form of renewal. In many cases, the isolated mass is a form of prison, enforcing uniformity, reinforcing poverty and ensuring a lack of mobility for 'inmates' across the 21st century.

If the 21st Century is characterised by Cognitive Capitalism, Immaterial Labour, Affective Capitalism and Precariousness then, what role can the pit village play anywhere in the future? We have seen that there is a very high dependence of the pit village upon world markets. There has been the rise of environmental groups warning of the dangers of global warming as a result of carbon emissions, particularly from coal fired power stations (Meijand Winkel 2007). There is a glut of cheap and dirty coal from Poland, India, China and Australia, yet pressure to secure fuel supplies is sometimes a national obsession. There has been a very noticeable move to oil and then gas as fuels of choice. All this has allowed a circumvention of the power of domestic miners in what was perceived to be a strategic industry 'bottleneck' where pit villages were seen as pinch points to national economic security. In the UK of course, we should never forget Thatcher's revenge against the miners through the deliberate closure of virtually every deep pit in the country. This set of closures led to the dismantling of old labour, and as we have seen not all on the Left were entirely unhappy about it (Beech 2006).

The effect on pit villages was and is to be seen in bodies, minds and souls of the community. There were massive changes to subjectivity, understood both as an objective feature of miners as a whole, and as meaning the inner beliefs and self-awareness of the individual miner. Manufacturing a new identity for each and every member of the community became essential for their psychic survival. Key here was the deliberate policy of destruction of pit heads so that the past was buried. In Woodhorn colliery, the day before the pit was to be handed back to the NUM for use as a museum, the NCB blew up the chimney which had stood for over 100 years. One does not have to be a Freudian to see the emasculation that this was meant to symbolically represent. Thus, pit closure brought with it, in many cases, the emasculation of masculine values. The wage earner in the household became much more likely to be the wife because there was the availability locally of 'women's work' in light industry. Many of the men immediately became unemployed. Unemployment of a prolonged nature is associated with crime, drug use and other escape attempts (Cohen and Taylor 1971). There was a marked flight of resources outwards, as capital expenditure reduced, and money in the form of weekly wages no longer circulated in the community. Ashington and no doubt Ashton became sites of enormous socio-economic neglect, wherein its community members lived life on the edge. And these processes of immiseration, polarisation and alienation identified by Marx are to be found in many places outside of the Great Northern Coalfield.

What this produces is a 'precariousness without work' for former coal miners, that has certain features to note within it, as in Figure 2.

Precariousness without work

unpredictability

economic deprivation

insecurity

crises in identity

marginalisation

reduction in life chances

The Pit Village Globally

So is this a tale then of the demise of the pit village and all its heritage? Not if we consider Colliery Towns today- but not in the West. For example, in India and China, pit 'villages' have developed and then faced economic uncertainty as the vicissitudes of the market hit home. However, many of these colliery towns are not deep pit ones but are often opencast where there are far fewer workers required and where working conditions are considerably less dangerous. But where deep coal mining is to be found, there are many dangers for the miner to face.

In China, it is said (Andrews-Speed et al. 2003: Andrews-Speed et al. 2005; Wright 2004) that over 4300 small, inefficient coal-mining operations have been earmarked for closure in addition to the 7250 that have been closed in the previous five years, slashing a further 560 Million Tonnes from Chinese production. In total, it is forecast that 1.3 million coal mining jobs and 500,000 steel jobs will be lost as part of a broader economic restructuring. Losses on this scale are suggestive of a huge coal mining workforce over the last decade, some if not all, of whom will be living in settlements that approximate pit villages. But these villages are very recent inventions in most cases and a tradition around coal extraction may not yet have gained any foothold.

Figures from January 2015 in India (BBC 2015) show that a strike was called by five unions representing some 3.7 million coal workers employed with the state-run Coal India, which has a near monopoly over production. India is opening a coal mine a month in order to double production by 2020. Its goal is to produce 1.5 million metric tons by 2020 exceeding U.S. coal production, and becoming the second largest coal producer in the world, after China. This expansion requires a huge number of new workers, all of whom through the use of company and State carrots or sticks, are willing to become coal miners. Consider the figures in the chart below. These are from 2012 and were produced for my use by staff in Basix Ltd in April 2016. They show in the column labelled 'mining and quarrying' that 1,908,000 workers were to be found in this category in that year. Yet compare this to the news item above, which claimed that in January 2015, 3.7 million coal miners were on strike. Clearly this means that nearly two million new miners have been added into the Indian coal mining industry in five years, dwarfing the expansion in European counterparts more than a century ago. The contraction of coal getting in Ashington and Ashton has been compensated by enormous expansion in Indian coalfields.

Indian Workforce categories

Industrial category	Main Workers ('000s)	Percentage (%)
Total main workers*	312,972	100.0
Agricultural & allied activities	176,979	56.6
Mining & quarrying	1,908	0.6
Manufacturing	41,848	13.4
Electricity, gas and water supply	1,546	0.5
Construction	11,583	3.7
Wholesale, retail trade & repair work, Hotel and restaurants	29,333	9.4
Transport, storage & communications	12,535	4.0
Financial intermediation, Real estate, business activities	6,109	2.0
Other services	31,131	10.0
Source: Industrial classification data based on sample.		

Agriculture sector employs largest number of workers : out of 313 million main workers, 166 million (56.6%) are engaged in 'Agricultural and allied activities'.

Source: Staff of Basix Ltd, Koti, Hyderabad

Of course, the USA continues to have a coal mining industry. Indeed President Trump has claimed that the industry in West Virginia, for example, will be expanded in his presidency (Loh 2016). It is interesting to note that peak coal production in the United States occurred in 2006 and by 2014, coal production was 14 percent lower than this, particularly in the coal producing states of West Virginia, Kentucky, Colorado, Indiana and Utah. Just as India is opening up new coal mines, across the USA coal mines have closed so that according to data from the Mine Safety and Health Administration (MSHA), the number of operating coal mines in the United States fell by 13 percent to 1700 pits (https://www.msha.gov/data-reports).

Thus, American Exceptionalism is again a possibility in which the Western trend of colliery closure might well be turned back by the Trump Administration. So globally, communities are arising that are dedicated to coal production whilst elsewhere communities are in steep decline, despite producing a very similar product. The world is a patch quilt of closing and opening coal mines and what one sees is not a uniform picture of the end of the pit village. Consider for example, a case of Tianfu township, located within Beibei county, 30 km north of Chongqing city in the People's Republic of China with a population of 47,000 (Andrews-Speed et al. 2005).

Tianfu Township

Since the 17th century, coal mining has provided an important source of wealth in Tianfu itself. China has the largest small-scale mining industry in the world in terms of production and employment. In 1999, coal production was valued at US$24 billion, and employment in the mining sector exceeded four million men (not women). However, these figures are likely to represent vast underestimates (Andrews-Speed et al. 2003). Just under a half of this production, approximately 650 million tonnes, came from 75,000–80,000 township and village coal mines (TVCMs), which are often owned and controlled at the township and village level by local government. A substantial minority of these mines are privately-owned but other state companies and agencies maintain ownership including even the army and prison service.

In 1998, because of overproduction of coal and the threat this offered to state controlled coal mines, China began a programme to close thousands of small-scale coal mines over a three year period. According to Andrews-Speed et al. 2003:?), 'The removal or deterioration of these

economic components of life around the mine site will not only affect the economic strength of the community but substantial economic decline will almost certainly result in a range of social problems (Rocha and Bristow, 1997 : Mining Minerals and Sustainable Development, 2002a). Common symptoms include unemployment, crumbling infrastructure, failing social services and rising crime'.

Because of the recent expansion in Chinese coal production, the labour force has been supplemented by migrant rural workers, just as it was in the UK 150 years ago. Indeed the TVCMs are largely composed of migrant 'underemployed' rural workers and hundreds of thousands lost their jobs as the number of TVCMs closed. For government officials in these coal mining areas, this part of the labour force were not seen as their responsibility and there were pronouncements that these migrant workers should return to their villages just as huge flows of rural workers into the cities was taking place.

Tianfu, our Ashington in the PRC, had 32 mines before the government induced programme of closures. Afterwards, the number of small scale mines in the township was 18. With a population of 47,000, the town is not huge when compared to Ashington fifty years ago, but the size of the mines must be much smaller. After closure, it appears that few new jobs had been created by local government, but some laid-off workers were able to find jobs elsewhere in Beibei County. As for Tianfu township itself, 'the village has reduced coal output through mine closure, but has failed to generate new economic activities within the boundaries of the township because of its location and its historic dependency on coal mining and quarrying for construction materials' (Andrews-Speed et al. 2003b) The township government of Tianfu received very little support from the county government of Beibei and many residents of Tianfu had to leave their homes to find employment in other parts of the county. Migration flows in China have been massive and it may be that pit closures are dealt with by movements of the population to other areas of economic activity in the country. The city of Chongqing, which has a population exceeding 10 million lay close by. For the residents of Ashington in the late 1980s this set of economic circumstances was a luxury not afforded to them.

Most small-scale mining provinces elsewhere in the world lack these advantages and will therefore be unable to react so effectively to an enforced programme of mine closure unless higher levels of government become directly involved in the formulation of policies and the provision of resources to implement these policies. (Andrews-Speed et al. 2005: 52-53)

From the brief details of the case of Tianfu, the reader should be able to discern that the isolated mass concept may not be a good fit with Chinese experiences in the 21st century. The growth in Chinese coal production was achieved by massive inward migration of peasants from the land- as it was in the UK much earlier. But the rapid dynamism of the Chinese economy has meant that these are not so much 'settlements' because large sections of the population of Tianfu are both incomers and outgoers within 10 years. The culture of the isolated mass may be thought to require at least a generation to 'bed in' and take root. Whilst Tianfu has been a source of coal production since the 17th century and therefore has a true longevity, this local enduring mining culture was quickly transformed by a wave of inward migration in the late 1990s. Maybe the old culture of Tianfu remains unchanged by the events of the last 20 years, but such is the level and depth of social transformation in the PRC that this would be doubtful (Andrews-Speed et al. 2003 b).

Conclusions; unsettled settlements

For Blumer (1975: 87-88),

> The traditional mining community is characterised by the prevalence of communal social relationships among miners and their families which are multiplex in form. The social ties (of work, leisure, family, neighbourhood and friendship) overlap to form

close knit and interlocking locally based collectivities of actors. The solidarity of the community is strengthened not only by these features themselves but by a shared history of living and working in one place over a long period of time. From this pattern derives the mutual aid characteristic in adversity and through this pattern is reinforced the inward-looking focus on the locality, derived from occupational homogeneity and social and geographical isolation from the rest of society. Meaningful social interaction is confined almost exclusively to the locality.

Today, locality has become an impellor for enforced enclosure not social solidarity. Mining villages in the UK, Belgium and France (*inter alia*) today, are in many senses, places of the unemployed male precariat. The very nature of the isolated mass with which many pit towns are associated, has created a form of imprisonment for men and women formerly earning their living from coal production. The pit village has had a history of danger, dirt, destruction and dire living conditions. It still does - but elsewhere in the world's political economy. These produce in the present time, albeit in the East, very specific conditions for an isolated mass with class motivations and access to resistance. Yet as we have seen in Tianfu, the pace of change may well prevent the conditions for an isolated mass from developing in the 21st century. The fluidity and liquidity of social structures and processes in rapidly transforming societies where transport systems make travel much easier and allow few settlements to settle, may preclude isolated masses from forming. Yet, strikes of 3.7 million miners in India two years ago show that mass strikes are still associated with such forms of employment and it would be interesting to have seen how Kerr and Siegel would have attempted to explain that today.

Coal has not disappeared then from the world economy and perhaps some of the same forces which affected the Atlantic economies historically are today at work outside the West. Moreover, Trump has claimed he will revive the US coal industry and this seems to have won to his side West Virginia in the Presidential election of 2016. The pit village, of course, may not be the same as we imagine looking at English villages in the North of England (in so far as we can) around the mid-1950s. For after all, colliery towns in Wales look quite different due to local geology and geography. The mining valleys produce different types of coal and social arrangements of a linear type along river bottoms when compared to the mining plains of the northern part of the Great Northern coalfield. This is to say nothing of the US coal settlement reflected in 'The Deer Hunter' where more differences between coal towns raise their heads. No pit village is the same. As Bulmer (1975: 70-71) notes of the isolated mass concept,

Though miners in Britain and America hold to certain common values, internal cross-currents exist within mining communities, and environmental conditions may be reacted to in different ways. It is precisely this pattern of variation which the concept cannot allow for.

Thus, Ashton coal face workers seemed to see deputy overmen (Deputies) as agents of management. In Ashington, this feeling was much less in evidence (Trist and Bamforth 1951). No two pits share exactly the same history, geology, settlement patterns, experience of major accidents, and union leadership. If there are differences between mining communities, certainly there are complex relations *within* these isolated masses with different inter-twinings of the body, mind, soul found throughout the population. It was certainly *never* homogenous - yet it was patterned. As Glucksman (1961) put it 'The African newly arrived from his rural home to work in a mine, is first of all a miner (and possibly resembles miners everywhere)'.

But the question to end on perhaps is 'what politico-economic role will pit villages play this century?' In the UK, the coal mining town has a long and honourable tradition of playing a role in Left Wing politics. Seen as bastions of class consciousness and traditional collectivist values, the pit village entered social science as a place of anthropological interest and what was found there was certainly different from metropolitan life styles. In some senses, the mining

community was seen as a piece of exotica, tribally based and closer to home than small Pacific islands. But those days have gone as relatively secure miners have become insecure members of a precariat, living day to day on the edge of a way of life that collapsed in front of them (Warwick and Littlejohn 1992; Waddington et al. 2001).

What can be done to reconcile village inhabitants to the collapse of their ways of life? Is it to embrace retrospection and to fall back upon deeper political resistance and masculinist values? Or is the best strategy for these dispossessed community members to welcome modernity and show openness to new ways of thinking? Does education still have a key role to play? But as I tried to point out at the beginning of this piece, upper middle class values are always the blinkers by which visiting anthropologists blind themselves to the reality of the lives of others. How can we say what are the best strategies for those whom we have little understanding, despite our best efforts? And 'strategies' are future oriented devices of the powerful. If one feels that the future matters not, why strategize about it at all?

But, for what it is worth, my experience of pit life in a period now located firmly in history is to suggest that community members may have to think of new bodies, new minds and new souls in order to accommodate to the future. The precise meaning of such a gnostic statement is open to much interpretation but in Ashington today, health is a crucial dimension to the everyday lives of people. Without much money, one buys cheap food. Without everyday comforts, one buys cigarettes and booze. The pleasures of the working class have always been 'bed and beer'. Without good GP's clamouring to work in one's area, health care provision is limited. The precariat face poor health every day and so new bodies are required by them for them. Not because these are needed to bring them into production and 'use' but because of their rights to health. New minds and new mind sets are easy to articulate as desirable in the safety of a middle class home but re-creation of selves and identities would be helpful to all within the ex-coal town. To have a future, the future- any future- must be conceivable and it need not be utopian. Finally new souls would imply the rediscovery of affect for others, where emotional expressions of fellow feeling become the everyday again, and self-possessed individualism (Macpherson 2010) is rebuffed. And how can these conditions of possibility be realised? From investment in and by the community, much of it financial but also in the realm of civil society which was ripped asunder in the mid-1980s.

But, like China today, it is surely not possible for ex-miners to move out and, in emulating many a Cornish tin mining song, emigrate to where jobs at the lode are still available? For nearly all the last generation of miners are no longer able to work, having been crippled, maimed and occupied (Dale and Burrell 2013) by their time underground. The West may have exported jobs but we have also exported deadly occupation by coal dust in the form of silicosis and pneumoniconiosis. On November 27th, 2005, Dongfeng Coal Mine, one of China's national key mines, suffered a major coal dust explosion, which claimed the lives of 171 workers. What's more, this accident was the 21st in which more than 100 employees' lives were lost (Zheng et al. 2009). Perhaps the closing of the last deep coal mines in the UK brings with it some less dangerous 'occupation' of what is rapidly becoming a post-industrial workforce. But this takes us into regional geography and the specific, non-generalized location of the post-industrial bases of cognitive capitalism, immaterial labour and affective capitalism. Precariousness may be what is left elsewhere, not only - but with certainty, within the once bustling mining villages of the 20th century (Johnson 2015).

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