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[Review of the Book *Why the Garden Club Couldn't Save Youngstown: The Transformation of the Rust Belt*]

Abstract

[Excerpt] As economic crisis once again grips the land, it is valuable to ponder the lessons of attempts to recover from past downturns. For example, the economic dislocations of the 1970s and 1980s transformed the industrial heartland of America into the “Rust Belt” and forced communities to grapple with how to recover from a lost standard of living revolving around good paying jobs in industries like steel production that were unlikely ever to return. In his interesting and highly readable book, Sean Safford examines the diverging economic trajectories of two similar rust belt communities, Allentown, Pennsylvania, and Youngstown, Ohio. Both had grown prosperous as centers of the steel industry through the mid-20th century and both fell on hard times with the contraction of that industry in the 1970s and 1980s. After the 1980s, however, Allentown recovered while Youngstown remained mired in depression. Safford sets out to explain the puzzle of why these two communities, seemingly so similar, ended up on such different trajectories.

Keywords

industry, Rust Belt, unemployment, plant closings

Disciplines

Human Resources Management | Labor Relations

Comments

Suggested Citation

Colvin, A. J. S. (2010). [Review of the book *Why the garden club couldn't save Youngstown: The transformation of the Rust Belt*] [Electronic version]. *Industrial and Labor Relations Review*, 63(2), 359-360.

Required Publisher Statement

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with how to recover from a lost standard of living revolving around good paying jobs in industries like steel production that were unlikely ever to return. In his interesting and highly readable book, Sean Safford examines the diverging economic trajectories of two similar rust belt communities, Allentown, Pennsylvania, and Youngstown, Ohio. Both had grown prosperous as centers of the steel industry through the mid-20th century and both fell on hard times with the contraction of that industry in the 1970s and 1980s. After the 1980s, however, Allentown recovered while Youngstown remained mired in depression. Safford sets out to explain the puzzle of why these two communities, seemingly so similar, ended up on such different trajectories.

Although this is primarily a story about the recent past, Safford begins his investigation by examining the early history of the founding of the two communities. The discussion of the late 18th and 19th century founding and early economic and social development of these two communities makes for a fascinating tale. Though working from secondary sources, the book expertly winds the histories of the two communities together to show how their initial founding conditions and early developmental paths would profoundly influence their more recent economic and social structures. This effect of earlier history is already apparent by the 1930s when both communities became important sites of conflict around efforts by the Steel Workers Organizing Committee to bring industrial unionism to the steel industry. The broader story has been told elsewhere, but it is interesting to see the comparison between the successful community-based organizing in Allentown, building on existing cross-class alliances, and the initial stymieing of organizing in Youngstown in the face of a united economic elite, which was only overcome after the rest of the national steel industry was organized.

The heart of the book is an examination of how the two communities responded to the economic crisis of the steel industry in the 1970s and 1980s. To investigate this issue, Safford combines extensive interviews with key actors in each community with a sophisticated network analysis of the relationships among economic and social organizations in each community. The story that emerges from this investigation is of two communities that may have appeared similar on the surface, but in fact were organized rather differently. Whereas Youngstown remained under the control of a unified economic and social elite, Allentown's social and economic power was more widely dispersed, as was its organizational structure. As a result, when the steel industry collapsed, Youngstown

Historical Studies

Why the Garden Club Couldn't Save Youngstown: The Transformation of the Rust Belt. By Sean Safford. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009. 212 pp. ISBN: 978-0-674-03176-0, \$29.95 (cloth).

As economic crisis once again grips the land, it is valuable to ponder the lessons of attempts to recover from past downturns. For example, the economic dislocations of the 1970s and 1980s transformed the industrial heartland of America into the "Rust Belt" and forced communities to grapple

was affected dramatically: its existing social and economic power structures collapsed and there were no alternative centers around which new development could emerge. By contrast, in Allentown organizations already existed to bridge different parts of this more diversely organized community. When the crisis came, these organizations were able to serve a new function in bringing together different actors in the community around revitalization efforts. Notably, organizations such as the Boy Scouts and the Bethlehem Citizens Association served as the springboard for the formation of the Lehigh Valley Partnership, an organization of local CEOs that played a critical role in rebuilding the local economy. By contrast, Safford notes, the most central organization in Youngstown was the Youngstown Garden Club, referenced in the title of the book, whose members were mostly wives of the local business elite and did little to help rebuild the local economy when the crisis came.

Safford's argument that historically rooted differences in the local social and economic structure influenced the responses of the communities to the economic crisis is well documented and convincing. However, two caveats should be noted. First, since the study is structured as a matched set of cases, it is important that these be as similar as possible to try to eliminate alternative explanations. In general, Safford does a good job of outlining the possible alternative factors that might have resulted in differences between the communities and explaining why they can be rejected. The one factor that is less easily dismissed is the difference in geographic locales. Although Safford describes Allentown as being part of the industrial heartland extending into the Midwest, it is undeniably much closer geographically to the East coast and therefore potentially more susceptible to influences from the more dynamic centers of economic activity in that region. Safford tries to argue that the two communities have similar proximity to large population centers, noting that although Allentown is only about 75 miles from New York and Philadelphia, Youngstown is located just about as far from the cities of Pittsburgh and Cleveland. It is hard to imagine, however, that any local economic development official, being given the choice of locations through the 1980s and 1990s, would pick proximity to Pittsburgh and Cleveland over proximity to New York and Philadelphia. More specifically, there was a general phenomenon of regional economic revitalization in southeastern Pennsylvania from the 1980s to the 2000s. It would have been worthwhile to see some discussion of the degree to which this regional phenomenon explains Allentown's success versus the contribution from local community efforts.

The second caveat to be noted is Safford's methodology. The book presents extensive results from the network analysis of relationships among social and economic organizations in the two communities. Some of the results are interesting, but it is less clear that they could sustain the causal argument on their own. The network analysis does support the importance of organizations like Muhlenberg College and the Boy Scouts in Allentown, yet one might have equally pointed to the greater density of economic ties found in Youngstown as a potential source of strength. With the depth of detailed evidence emerging from the interviews in this study, Safford's argument is convincing, but it is not at all obvious that the network analysis alone would lead one to these same conclusions absent this well-grounded qualitative case study evidence.

Overall, however, this book makes a splendid contribution to our understanding of the processes of economic transformation affecting communities. For scholars, it points to the value of developing an understanding of economic and social change that is grounded in the historical and local context. It also serves as a reminder that academic investigations of abstract constructs such as the network structure of social interaction need not be divorced from such quotidian concerns as how to address rising unemployment and economic dislocation. For policymakers, it should provide a lesson in the importance of developing broad-based institutional linkages across communities that provide the foundation for future economic development, rather than hopping on the latest trend for achieving prosperity. Lastly, this book should be of interest to a broader audience of people in Allentown, Youngstown, and communities like these. Unlike a lot of academic writing which tends to be divorced from the human side of social and economic developments, this is a story of the lives of two communities that will both engage and inform the reader.

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