Rubén Vega

Nothing Compares to the Past: Industrial Decline and Socio-Cultural Change in Asturias[1]

Abstract

Processes of industrial decline have often generated nostalgia phenomena in the affected communities based on the more or less idealised memory of a past time of prosperity that disappeared as the chimneys went out ('smokestack nostalgia', this has been called sometimes). In an earlier time, the development of industries and mining had resulted in the configuration of well-defined social structures and socio-political frameworks. Class identity, collective action, labour disputes and trade union organisations provided the basis on which to build communities that revolved around work. Deindustrialisation undermines both the material and symbolic bases of those cities and regions that have known an industrial boom and exposes them to great uncertainty about their future. The elaboration of a collective memory capable of adapting to a radically transformed context constitutes a research field full of possibilities, despite its complexity. The references can be adapted to new post-industrial scenarios only with considerable difficulty, but at the same time they provide sources of pride and identity and response schemes to adversities. In the following lines, we will concentrate on a specific case: that of Asturias, a mining and industrial region with a prominent role played by the labour movement that has suffered a prolonged decline in its economic bases but has largely managed to preserve social cohesion. The traumatic nature of these changes invites us to explore the way in which collective perceptions manifest themselves and also the role that memory (and oblivion) can play in the reactions of young people subjected to very different challenges from those of their elders.

Keywords: *deindustrialization; sociocultural change; class identity; collective memory; cultural representations; labour; unionism; Asturias*

1 Translated from Spanish into English by Matthew Kerry, University of Stirling.

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The Present

In October 2014, a corruption scandal in Asturias came to light involving the figure of José Ángel Fernández Villa. As the leader of the socialist Union General de Trabajadores (UGT) mining union for 35 years, he had been the most powerful political figure of the region. The discovery of a hidden fortune of unknown origin in the hands of the union leader shook the very foundations of Asturian politics and led to both a judicial inquiry and an investigation by a parliamentary commission. The president of the Asturian regional government highlighted the symbolic impact of this corruption case: it involved the same organisation that had led an attempted working class revolution 80 years prior and which boasted a century-long tradition of trade unionism. In the context of heightened sensitivity of public opinion to cases of corruption—which are frequently exposed by the media and courts all over Spain—the peculiarity of this particular case is that it was a union leader who had amassed such power. The main trade unions have not been isolated from the contaminating effects of money and influence peddling over recent years, though their role in such cases has been subordinate. What had been unheard of—and what was true of the Asturian case—was that a union leader could manage to accrue such power and successfully maintain it even in the context of weakening union organisations. In addition, in this particular case, Fernández Villa was the leader of a mining union in a context of a disappearing coal industry; when the mining workforce only represented 0.3 per cent of the Asturian population.

This anomaly is revealing of the structures of power that have emerged during Asturias' industrial decline. As the traditional industrial foundations of the regional economy have diminished, particularly so in the case of mining, public funds for social services and regional aid have gained importance while also serving to reinforce the power of the unions who manage such funds. In a context of few economic opportunities, employment and investment have become heavily dependent on public subsidies and political favours. It is in this context that the mining unions, with their marked hierarchical structure, were able to negotiate generous compensation in exchange for the gradual closure of mines and secure for themselves a decisive role in deciding how such funds would be spent. The main union, closely tied to the hegemonic party in local and regional politics, has played a critical role in decisions concerning infrastructure, investment, awarding of contracts, subsidies to companies and contracting of workers. Its shrinking membership—and by extension its diminished capacity to mobilise—has been mitigated by a new source of power built on a network of clientelist relationships defined by influence over political and economic decisions.

The discovery that a hidden fortune had been in the hands of an influential union leader for more than three decades marks the end of an era in Asturias, an era of both industrial decline mitigated by public funds and the creation of power networks

resulting from attempts to maintain social harmony. In 2012, in the context of government public spending cuts, subsidies for the mining industry were brought to an abrupt end and a long strike in protest of unfulfilled promises was defeated. Coalmining, though only a small sector, was coming to an end, as were the structures of union power based on the collective force of mineworkers. In truth, the power that mining unions enjoyed at the beginning of the twenty-first century owed more to inertia and memories of the past than their actual size or importance.

Beyond the unique role played by the mining unions, other features of the socio-political realities of Asturias continue to underline the importance of its industrial past and the traditional hegemony of working-class movements. These include the left's continued electoral predominance, an above-average level of union membership for Spain and a particular repertoire of collective action that reveals the legacy of and continuity with the past, despite the deep changes that have taken place. Recent conflicts indicate the endurance of such features, including the 2012 mining strike, the resistance shown by the workforce of the multinational Tenneco to the proposed closure of the plant throughout 2013 and 2014, and the creation of a coordinating committee of workers from different companies affected by dismissals and closures. The latter organised joint demonstrations and mutual support throughout 2014 and 2015. In the context of the deep social crisis experienced since 2008, struggles aimed at defending jobs have enjoyed wide social support and have used traditional forms of mobilisation that, in some cases, have been successful.

Between the end of May and the beginning of August 2012, the miners of the Asturian, Leonese and Aragonese coalfields went on strike to fight for the survival of the coalmining industry. Clashes with police in the coalfields and a march by 200 miners on foot all the way to Madrid received widespread sympathy. Indeed, they were welcomed by a huge demonstration upon their arrival in the capital. This important level of popular support enjoyed by the miners, whose example even served to spark other protests, did not prevent the strike from being defeated, however, and this meant the definitive eclipse of their power.[2] The workers at the Tenneco factory (which produces shock absorbers) was luckier. The plant closed in December 2013 but reopened again in September 2014 after tenacious resistance. Demonstrations exerted constant pressure on the multinational company, while the workforce occupied the factory on a continuous basis, preventing the withdrawal of machinery and the products manufactured over previous months from the factory. In the end, the company was forced to back down from its decision to close the plant. The victory of just over 200 workers, against a company backed by American capital and a world leader in the manufacturing of automobile components, was due to the workers' determination and refusal to

2 Rubén Vega García: La última gran huelga de mineros, in: Salvador Aguilar (ed.): Anuario de conflictos 2012, Barcelona 2013, pp. 831–854.

accept the closure of the factory, the cohesion forged in the assemblies, union solidarity and a skilful combination of mobilisation, negotiation and political contacts (both in Spain and at the European Commission).[3] Moreover, the Tenneco conflict was a catalyst for the coordination of different and hitherto fragmented groups of workers who were united by the struggle to defend their jobs in the context of closures or dismissals. This horizontal collaboration has been maintained over a couple of years through mutual support and assembly-based practices. Newly along 2018/2019, the workers of the aluminium plants owned by Alcoa in Asturias and Galicia successfully resisted the closure and managed to save their jobs.

These examples of labour conflict aimed at defending jobs have enjoyed widespread support from the local community and can be seen as an example of the survival of traditional frameworks. However, other aspects highlight the differences and demonstrate the profound decline of industrial society. The Asturian landscape is strewn with the ruins of old mines and factories that are frequently not considered to be heritage worth preserving, nor do they receive protection from those responsible for cultural or planning policy. The deterioration of this industrial heritage runs parallel to an atmosphere dominated by pessimism and trauma caused by the loss of the foundations of past prosperity.

The general tendency towards pessimism is evident in the main indices of the social situation in Asturias. There were 98,400 citizens unemployed at the end of 2014, representing an unemployment level of 20.78 per cent. This figure becomes even more serious if it is placed in a wider context: the economically active population only represented 51.6 per cent of those of working age (compared to a national average of 59.77 per cent) and youth unemployment for those under 25 was pushing 45 per cent.[4] Furthermore, working conditions for young people are worse than those enjoyed by their parents, as is manifest in the precarious employment and lower salaries offered to them. Frequently, working does not equal economic independence, as the average age at which young people leave home is almost 30.

The gloomy situation on the labour market has coincided with a prolonged tendency towards demographic decline. In 2018, Asturias had a population of 1,028,244 inhabitants—in contrast to a figure of 1,129,556 in 1981—and has one of the lowest birth rates in the world: 5.6 births for every thousand inhabitants in 2018, while the mortality rate reaches 12.93 in every thousand inhabitants.[5] The population is age-

3 Holm-Detlev Köhler/Sergio González Begega: We say no to La Monroe closure! Local defiance to global restructuring in a transnational company, in: Critical Perspectives on International Business 14:1 (2018), pp. 83–100.

4 *Instituto Nacional de Estadística*: Encuesta de Población Activa (EPA): Cuarto trimestre de 2014.

5 *Instituto Nacional de Estadística*: Padrón Municipal de Habitantes. Datos a 1 de enero 2018 and Indicadores Demográficos Básicos, 2018.

ing—there are twice as many Asturians over 65 as there are under 16—and the situation is worsened by youth emigration. According to a report by the Youth Council (Consejo de la Juventud), the number of young people residing in Asturias dropped by 7,318 in 2012 alone. Most move to other areas of Spain, but emigration abroad, mainly to the United Kingdom and Germany, is becoming increasingly pronounced. In 2012, 17,848 Asturians between the ages of 16 and 29 lived abroad, a figure that represented 12 per cent of the total Asturian youth.[6]

Table 1: Demography. Sources: Own elaboration based on figures of Sociedad Asturiana de Estudios Industriales (SADEI) and Instituto Nacional de Estadística (INE). See https://www.ine.es/ and www.sadei.es respectively.

Year	Asturias	Spain	%
1975	1,102,294	36,012,241	3.06
1981	1,129,556	37,742,561	2.99
1986	1,112,186	38,473,332	2.89
1991	1,093,937	39,433,942	2.77
1996	1,087,885	39,270,313	2.77
2001	1,075,329	40,499,791	2.65
2006	1,076,896	44,708,964	2.40
2011	1,077,090	47,190,493	2.28
2016	1,040.925	46,440,099	2.22

The Past

Since the nineteenth century, the industrial tradition of Asturias has been based on coal mining and steel production. The origins of Asturian industrialisation lie in its natural coal deposits, the early development of which was largely dependent on foreign investment, due to the weakness of local capital. Strong unions and a solidly rooted working-class movement formed around the mining and steel industries. The struggles of the Asturian working class have been a guiding light nationally and have had an international impact on at least two occasions (the 1934 revolution and the 1962 strikes against the Francoist dictatorship).

6 Santiago González García/Nacho Quesada de la Fuente: Informe sobre la juventud asturiana con cualificación para trabajar en el sector juvenil en el exterior, Oviedo 2014, pp. 11ff.

The working-class movement has been the main social and political axis in Asturias throughout the twentieth century. In democratic contexts, the organised working class has enjoyed social, political and (on occasion) cultural hegemony, while during dictatorships—particularly during Francoism—the Asturian working-class movement was one of the main forces of democratic resistance. In the coalfields and industrial cities on the coasts, cohesive and politically active working-class communities emerged during the first third of the twentieth century. Socialists, anarchosyndicalists and communists managed to firmly establish themselves in the region. Values from working-class culture and class solidarity were transmitted socially, becoming so sufficiently cemented and predominant that they even survived the repressive conditions of the dictatorship that followed the Civil War (1936–1939).[7]

Compared to the social and political strength of the working class, the Asturian bourgeoisie has been historically weak. In the absence of local business, foreign capital filled the gap, though the bourgeoisie has almost always been dependent on state protection and lacked a political project. Contributing factors include the low profitability of the mines (protectionist policies have always been necessary), the absence of nationalist demands like those maintained by the Catalan and Basque bourgeoisie, and the ease with which solutions could be obtained from the government both to safeguard their profits and resist the unions. During the Francoist dictatorship, this weakness led from hyper-protection of industry to the later withdrawal of private capital. This was replaced by the state, which stepped in to manage primary industrial sectors.

The two decades following the Civil War (the 1940s and 1950s) were characterised by autarky and isolation. In this context, Asturias provided the fascist ideal of economic self-sufficiency with two strategic products—coal and steel—and as a result the Asturian economy enjoyed a special level of protection. The mining and steel industries were profitable even if they were not competitive. Low productivity was compensated by abundant labour kept in line through iron discipline, and the working class swelled with the arrival of thousands of migrants from other areas of Spain. The shift towards a more liberal and less protectionist economic policy in the 1959 Stabilisation Plan also marked the beginning of decline for the coal industry. From then on, the weakness of the industrialists and intense conflict led to increased state intervention. Franco's governments combined harsh repression with subsidies for miners' salaries and company investment. In the end, most mines were nationalised in 1967

7 Rubén Vega García: Solidaridades de base: Instinto de clase y resistencias obreras en la Asturias franquista, in: Julien Lanes Marsall/David Marcilhacy/Michel Ralle/Miguel Rodríguez (eds.): De los conflictos y de sus construcciones. Mundos ibéricos y latinoamericanos, Paris 2013, pp. 163–182.

and a public mining company (Hulleras del Norte Sociedad Anónima, HUNOSA) replaced private enterprise, becoming the main coal producer.[8]

During this period, the growth of the steel industry (then comprised of one state-owned and three private factories) compensated for the decline in coalmining, though private capital again showed symptoms of weakness. Together, the private companies began an ambitious expansion project, though they were eventually unable to fund it and had to ask the state to step in to rescue them. In 1973, the state also nationalised the steel industry and assumed its debts.

When the entire steel industry and most of coalmining were transferred to the state, most industrial workers in Asturias—above all those most organised and working in the most conflictive industries—became public employees. At the end of the Francoist dictatorship, this meant at least 20,000 miners and 25,000 steelworkers, in addition to several thousand who worked in the shipyards and factories producing arms and aluminium. With the return of civil liberties during the transition to democracy, these state-owned companies became bastions of class-based unionism, with high levels of union membership, a significant ability to mobilise and a strong influence over the left-wing parties who have governed local authorities and regional governments since 1979 and 1983 respectively. In this way, the zenith of the unions' political power coincided with the eclipse of economic prosperity, while their power was rooted precisely in those sectors most affected by the crisis. Asturias lost economic clout and its industry began a process of deep, long-term and generalised decline.

8 Rubén Vega García: De la militarización a la gran empresa pública, in: Rubén Vega (ed.): El movimiento obrero asturiano durante el Franquismo, 1937–1977, Oviedo 2013, pp. 45–74.

Table 2: Industrial Decline, employment by sector. Sources: Own elaboration based on SADEI figures (Datos y cifras de la economía asturiana, Estadísticas Laborales and others). For SADEI figures see www.sadei.es.

Year	AGRICULTURE	INDUSTRY	CONSTRUCTION	SERVICES
1970	75,133 22 %	153,741 45 %		112,123 32.8 %
1975	103,325 26.0 %	123,971 31.2 %	33,804 8,4 %	136,800 34.4 %
1980	77,564 21.0 %	116,961 31.6 %	26,356 7.1 %	149,180 40.3 %
1985	79,949 21.3 %	99,378 26.5 %	25,992 6.9 %	169,507 45.2 %
1990	64,678 16.7 %	88,587 23.0 %	35,920 9.3 %	196,391 50.9 %
1995	49,764 14.4 %	65,775 19.0 %	33,300 9.6 %	196,546 56.9 %
2000	38,299 10.5 %	61,745 16.8 %	43,489 11.8 %	222,706 60.8 %
2005	24,850 6.2 %	60,235 15.0 %	47,355 11.8 %	269,180 67.0 %
2010	16,851 4.3 %	62,299 15.9 %	36,199 9.24 %	274,110 70.3 %

As is evident, over the past 40 years, industrial employment has continued to decline. At the end of the 1970s, every important sector in Asturian industry, including mining, metallurgy, shipyards and textiles, was in crisis. The impact on employment, however, was initially more moderate due to the ability of public companies to absorb losses without closures or dismissals. The workers retained a certain amount of power that prevented the implementation of measures that would have had damaging effects on local communities. The weakness of the government and political instability during the first few years of democracy contributed to delaying any decision that could have provoked conflict.

Between 1983 and 1985, the accumulated losses, the strength of the socialist government (backed by a parliamentary majority and its union, the UGT) and the conditions for entry into the European Community demanded the re-structuring of heavy industry. Steelworks and shipyards closed plants and shrunk their workforces, leading to the loss of thousands of jobs. Early retirement schemes were the main strategy used to achieve this and led to intense conflict. Meanwhile, the restructuring of the mining industry was delayed until 1992, despite the important losses suffered by the

state-owned mining company. Coal was not included among the factors describing the industrial restructuring necessary for entry into the European Community and fear of the miners' capacity for mobilisation, along with the political influence of their unions, kept the situation paralysed during the 1980s. It was only after 1992 that there was a gradual reduction in the size of the sector, with pit closures and early retirement for thousands of workers. This adjustment in mining coincided with a second restructuring of the steel industry. In both cases, the measures guaranteed living standards for those who lost their jobs. It was these early retirement plans, which granted generous compensation for those who qualified, that allowed the government to overcome resistance. The whole process had particularly tough consequences for the region and for job opportunities for the young. Nevertheless, older workers happily accepted the conditions of early retirement. These were the workers who had greater capacity for mobilisation and for applying political pressure, but whose labour was no longer required and who were able to leave their jobs in exchange for advantageous early retirement.[9]

The restructuring of the steel industry and coalmining undertaken between 1983 and 1992 meant a substantial reduction in the role of state-owned companies, both in the economy and in the granting of employment. Restructuring, focused mainly on reducing the size of the workforce, was followed by privatisation of the steel industry, shipyards, the two arms factories and the aluminium plant.

The influence of state-owned industry has diminished in Asturias over the past 30 years. An overall reduction in the 1980s and again in 1992 was followed by privatisation of the factories producing steel (acquired by Arbed in 1997 and later integrated into Arcelor Mittal), aluminium (bought by Alcoa in 1998), arms (taken over by General Dynamics in 2002) and shipbuilding (purchased by Vulcano in 2006). The situation created by the 1967 and 1973 waves of nationalisation has disappeared. Thus, the role of the state as the main motor of industrial activity and creator of employment has proved to be solely an intermediate phase. State-owned companies during the Francoist dictatorship replaced private companies (regional and national) and were then themselves substituted by transnational corporations, which had acquired the state-owned industries in the process of privatisation. But the withdrawal of the state has not been matched by successful policies of reindustrialisation and economic reactivation. Private initiatives have not filled the hole left by the disappearance of state-owned companies and in some cases privatisation has even eventually led to closures.

9 Holm-Detlev Kóhler (ed.): Asturien. Der Niedergang einer industriellen Region in Europa, Essen 1998.

Table 3: State-owned industry in Asurias. Sources: José M. Agüera Sirgo: Die Restrukturierung der Industrie in Asturien, in: Holm-Detlev Köhler (ed.): Asturien. Der Niedergang einer industriellen Region in Europa, Essen 1998, p. 83 and author's elaboration from companies' annual reports.

YEAR	NUMBER EMPLOYED
1971	51,600
1980	54,955
1986	44,639
1990	38,787
1993	27,064
2000	8,516
2017	1,098

At the same time, whether publicly or privately run, the restructured industries that formed the foundation of the Asturian industrial economy have undergone a deep, steady fall in the number of workers they employ.

Table 4: Changes in employment in restructured companies. Source: Companies' annual reports. Own elaboration.

Industry/Year	MINING	STEEL INDUSTRY	SHIPBUILDING
	(HUNOSA)	(ENSIDESA/Arcelor Mittal)	(Juliana/Naval Gijón/ others)
1980	22,648	25,682	3,488
1985	21,122	19,765	1,977
1990	18,380	14,885	1,381
1995	10,175	9,495	1,060
2001	6,151	7,635	641
2008	2,760	6,592	273
2013	1,693	5,800	0

Industrial Disputes

The slow but continuous decline in the industrial linchpin of past prosperity has led to a series of disputes in Asturias. The capacity of workers to resist has been higher in those sectors that formed the foundations of the industrial economy and their problems have easily become politicised due to the important social repercussions of the problems they face and the strong links between the unions and left-wing parties. The unions were the main political agents over the last quarter of the twentieth century and workers' struggles have received a great deal of support from wider society. Lengthy strikes, radical forms of mobilisation, local and regional general strikes, and enormous demonstrations protesting the crisis of industry, fighting to keep jobs and demanding reindustrialisation have all taken place over the last 40 years.

The specific political circumstances that Spain experienced in the 1970s greatly affected the response to the difficulties the world economy faced after the oil crisis of 1973. Neither the last Francoist governments, who were preoccupied with the final crisis of the dictatorship, nor the first democratic governments, whose priorities were to ensure the stability of the new institutional framework, were capable of drawing up a strategy for the long term or adopt measures that would avoid negative social repercussions. During the transition to democracy, inertia continued in industrial policy even as the workers' movement was legalised and rights were gained. Meanwhile, business leaders were disorganised and disconcerted by the loss of coercive power after the fall of the dictatorship, and political institutions were weakened by their lack of legitimacy, or else unstable due to their lack of consolidation.

Between 1975 and 1977, a wave of frequently long strikes erupted in Asturias.[10] These conflicts were characterised by massive mobilisation, assembly-based practices and results that were relatively favourable to the demands of the workforce (wage increases, improvements in working conditions, union rights, readmission of those sacked in previous conflicts). In the mining, steel and shipbuilding industries, leaders emerged and forms of collective action were consolidated that would still be in place when these sectors had to deal with industrial decline and restructuring. At the time, however, there was little awareness of the crisis despite the continued increase in losses. Recent experience offered false security that such companies were too large to fail and the state would continue to support them indefinitely. According to the president of

10 Irene Díaz/Rubén Vega: Conflictos obreros y movilizaciones sociales en el tardofranquismo y la transición (1965–1977), in: Rubén Vega (ed.): El movimiento obrero en Asturias durante el franquismo, 1937–1977, Oviedo 2013, pp. 309–370.

the regional government, large state-owned industries would be like 'cathedrals'—important edifices but ones that no longer formed part of the future.[11]

The particular situation faced by the large state-owned mines and industries did not affect other sectors or private companies, where the symptoms of crisis were already visible by the second half of the 1970s. Between 1976 and 1979—coinciding with the final crisis of the dictatorship and the first steps of the young democracy—several general strikes against closures took place in the coalfields. The most prolonged of these strikes managed to prevent the closure of a privately owned mine. The state nationalised Minas de Figaredo, taking on its losses. With this latest addition, direct employment by the state in mines and industry reached 55,000 workers in 1980, which was equivalent to 44.3 per cent of all those in industrial employment. Taking into account indirect employment, the impact was much greater, as a large number of small and medium sized companies depended on the mining and steel industries.[12] In truth, their weight continued to grow as the crisis affected sectors in private hands, which did not enjoy the protection of the state budget.

Consequently, the problems of large state-owned companies automatically became issues that affected the entire Asturian society. When, in 1978, the first alarm bells warned of a possible restructuring of the metal industry, a demonstration marched through the streets of Avilés under the banner "To save ENSIDESA is to save Asturias", a call which would be repeated on later occasions during the 1980s and 1990s. In the same way, the struggle to defend jobs in the mining industry has been projected over the last few decades as a question of survival for the coal valleys. Arguments based on the social benefits that industry provides and the responsibility of the state with regards to the future of the region have been frequent in the justification of the mobilisation that has marked the long, traumatic process of decline.

Before restructuring was undertaken, the stabilising effect temporarily offered by the large state-owned mining (HUNOSA) and steel (Empresa Nacional Siderúrgica, ENSIDESA) companies mitigated the symptoms of industrial crisis in the areas most dependent on them (the Nalón and Caudal coal valleys and the city of Avilés), while the situation worsened in the city of Gijón, a larger town where mining and metal were important but whose industrial fabric was more diverse. The problems caused by closures or dismissals in the shipyards, metal, textile and other factories led to an in-

11 Pedro de Silva: Asturias, realidad y proyecto, Oviedo 1982, pp. 53–70. Written just before he became president of the Autonomous Community, the chapter on publicly-owned companies is entitled "The eclipse of the Cathedrals", with the intention of warning against the false sense of security prevalent at the time. The term 'cathedrals' is to be found in the index, at the heading of a chapter (p. 53) and throughout this chapter (pp. 53–70).

12 Comisión de representantes del Principado en la empresa pública: Informe sobre la Empresa Pública Industrial del INI en el Principado de Asturias: antecedentes y perspectivas de futuro, Oviedo, December 1992.

tense cycle of conflict that shook Gijón between 1982 and 1985. Five 24-hour general strikes paralysed the city completely and the streets were filled with giant demonstrations expressing the dissent of the majority of its citizens. The city was in a permanent state of agitation, with burning tyre barricades and clashes with the police every Tuesday and Thursday, and protest demonstrations formed by workers and their supporters (students, neighbourhood associations, cultural and citizens' organisations, etc.).[13]

At the same time, maintaining the status quo in the mining industry could not avoid raising tensions. Negotiations regarding a four-year plan for HUNOSA led to intense conflict in 1987, which included four general strikes in the coalfields and fierce clashes with police. The vigorous mobilisation of the miners and the political influence of their unions demonstrated their ability to veto any attempt at closing mines or mass dismissals. In 1987, HUNOSA managed 24 mines and employed over 20,000 individuals directly. This situation, which was an extension of the situation inherited from the dictatorship, changed in 1991 when the government decided on a substantial reduction in the size of the company. Changes in the mining industry, which had been postponed during the restructuring of the shipbuilding and steel industry during the years 1983–1985, coincided with the second restructuring of the steel industry in 1991–1992 and a general crisis in several sectors (fertilisers, textiles, arms production, etc.) with important effects on the economy and employment. The unions calculated that 40,000 jobs were under threat in a region that had suffered immensely during the restructuring of the previous decade. They also challenged an industrial policy that dealt with the issues on a sector and company basis, rather than taking a global approach to the crisis in Asturias and offering a strategy aimed at re-industrialising the region as a whole. In support of this demand, a general strike was organised for 23 October 1991, paralysing the region completely and bringing more than 100,000 people together to demonstrate.[14]

The need to take a comprehensive approach to the Asturian crisis and the attempt to co-ordinate workers' mobilisation and protest by the local population clashed with the specific characteristics of each sector and area. The greater ability of the mining unions to apply pressure meant that the coal industry was prioritised and aid for the coalfields negotiated first, managed separately and not integrated into a regional approach. Resistance to changes in the mining industry resulted in general strikes in the coalfields in June, September and December 1991, with the latter including demonstrations in the streets and the occupation of a mine by leaders of the two unions. In contrast to previous occasions, the government was unmoved and the agreement reached granted early retirement to 5,900 mineworkers and stipulated the closure of

13 Rubén Vega García: Crisis industrial y conflicto social, Gijón 1975–1995, Gijón 1998.

14 Rubén Vega García: CC.OO. de Asturias en la transición y la democracia, Oviedo 1995, pp. 205–214.

eight pits. Though the retirement scheme was extremely favourable to the mineworkers, who were able to leave work at an early age while maintaining their purchasing power (the pensions were equivalent to their salaries), for many, the key issue at stake had actually been met with defeat. For the first time in 25 years, closures were accepted that would dramatically reduce the size of the coal industry and pave the way for its gradual disappearance.

In a similar way, the steel industry underwent a new phase of restructuring in 1992 with the loss of 4,000 jobs. There were waves of protest between April and December, including a general strike in Avilés, a march on foot to Madrid and a subsequent dispute in auxiliary industries. Once the adjustment was completed and investment introduced—which absorbed a large amount of public funds—the road to privatisation was clear. In contrast to the coal industry, the steel industry managed to re-establish its profitability and successfully compete in the global market.

The restructuring of the coal and steel industries at the beginning of the 1990s took place in the context of a general crisis in Asturian industry and led to a large number of job losses. This sparked the last great explosion of working-class mobilisation backed by wider sections of society through participation in the general strikes and widespread endorsement of the unions' stance by the public and politicians. From 1993 onwards, conflict was reduced to localised flares of resistance. General strikes disappeared from the repertoire of mobilisation and the social and political power of the unions—though still considerable—began to decline. Dependence on the state persists, but its main role as an investor and manager of industry has been reduced to transferring resources through regional funds, particularly the Mining Funds (Fondos Mineros) established in 1998, and paying pensions to the early retired.[15]

Over the last few years of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first, several conflicts developed into episodes of prolonged resistance that adopted more radical strategies, including violence. Radicalisation of the methods of struggle is not a novel phenomenon in itself, given that it formed part of previous repertoires of conflict. This can be understood as a result of workers' desperation at drawn-out struggles and their feeling isolated or without support. The clearest case of this is the dismissal of 232 workers by Duro Felguera, a company that has been emblematic in Asturian industrial history since the middle of the nineteenth century. Prolonged, hard resistance that lasted for four years (1993–1998) resulted in a victory for the workers, who, thanks to an intransigent refusal to accept the dismissals, were re-employed or taken on by other companies. During the conflict, those affected combined attention-grabbing initiatives (an eight-week hunger strike, a 318-day sit-in in the cathedral tower in Ovie-

15 Rubén Vega: Déclin industriel et résistances ouvrières dans les Asturies depuis les années 1970, in: Laurent Jalabert/Christophe Patillon (eds.): Mouvements ouvriers et crise industrielle dans les régions de l'Ouest atlantique des années 1960 à nous jours, Rennes 2010, pp. 67–83.

do) with sabotage (burning trains, banks, government offices, electric substations, radio antennae) and countless barricades and clashes with the police.[16]

Between 2000 and 2009, the long agony of the two shipyards that were still open in Gijón led to strikes and demonstrations in the streets. The ever-diminishing number of shipbuilders still managed to secure considerable public support, but nevertheless this was ultimately insufficient to prevent the end of the industry. Over the last few years, the worsening of the economic crisis and the cuts introduced by the state have sparked many conflicts in defence of jobs. The 2012 mining strike and the victorious resistance against the closure of the Tenneco plant are the two conflicts which stand out most clearly. In both cases, workers managed to secure widespread support. The foundations of social mobilisation are, however, much weaker than they were two decades earlier. Regional general strikes have disappeared and the ability to obtain political backing and find solutions via state intervention is very much reduced.

In general, workers who have managed to respond using collective action have been minority groups, drawing on pre-existing organisational and symbolic resources. In areas where the strength of the organised working class has traditionally resided, workers are much more capable of defending jobs or negotiating a better deal in exchange for their disappearance.

When considered on a wider scale, the resistance by workers in Asturias to the dismantling of industry has been greater than in other regions. Mobilisation has also been more fruitful for those who have shown a greater capacity to resist. The impact on the social effects of deindustrialisation has not been negligible in the short and medium term, despite the reduced ability to strike at the heart of problems or combat the tendency towards decline, which has been delayed at times but never avoided. In this way, the most effective strategy for those directly affected has been radical mobilisation combined with political pressure.

In accordance with the predominant role that the state has played in the Asturian economy as a business owner and given the opportunities for political intervention available to the working-class movement, the state has been on the receiving end of practically all the demands and has served to guarantee a certain standard of living despite the economic decline. This has been true since the middle of the Francoist dictatorship up to the recent democratic governments formed by different parties and has not been limited to the sectors with greater capacity for organisation and struggle. Rather, it extends to Asturian society as a whole, though with some exceptions. Swathes of the population continue to believe that the state should offer alternatives for the future through the construction of infrastructure, facilitating investment and developing a reindustrialisation policy.

16 A documentary was even produced about these conflicts on Canal+: El polvorín asturiano. 24 horas de conflicto laboral en Asturias, 1997.

This attitude is particularly prevalent in the coalfields. The strength of the unions has given them an important level of political influence in these socially homogenous areas with deeply rooted leftist traditions. The socialists historically followed the trade unionist model of dual union and party membership, with the mining union dominating the party. This was reconstructed during the transition to democracy and showed similar characteristics to the situation prior to the Civil War. The mining industry contributed both material and human resources, as it allowed the 'freeing up' of individuals to work in both representational and political capacities. This has resulted in the spreading of union power to the local party organisation. This numerous, disciplined and active core has extended its influence to municipal and autonomous government-level institutions, given its position as the main political force.

Far from weakening, union power has even increased as industry has been in generalised decline. Although the mining industry has been in decline, its weight was actually reinforced due to the greater ability to delay closures and obtain concessions when faced with restructuring. Furthermore, the unions have managed to find a substitute source of power when the closure of pits and the reduction of the workforce seemed to diminish the foundations of their support irrevocably. The funds designed to stimulate the economy of the coalfields became a new, alternative source of union power even as the coal industry began to gradually disappear.

The context of industrial decline, defensive struggles, scarcity of resources and endogamous political frameworks made the powerful and entrenched mining unions a key player in the coalfield societies in aspects beyond union activities. The progressive deterioration of their image due to the dismantling of the industry and the expansion of clientelist networks was not matched by an equivalent loss of influence. Rather, the opposite happened. The unions filled the gap left by the absence of other sectors, such as business, which was much weaker, and public institutions, which lacked a strategy. This concentration of power has been bound up in a hypertrophy of vice bureaucratisation, clientelism, authoritarianism, particularly in the case of the socialist mining union (Sindicato de Obreros Mineros de Asturias, or SOMA), which is affiliated with the socialist union federation (UGT) and is the real nucleus of regional power in the hegemonic socialist party (Partido Socialista Obrero Español, or PSOE).

Union power has also benefited from the memory of the historic mining struggles over the twentieth century (a miners' strike continues to evoke memories and receives attention out of proportion with its actual impact) and from miners' continued ability to mobilise despite their drastic reduction in numbers. But such factors can also undermine the public image of the union organisations, whose power is now exercised through political influence and participation in the management of state funds, investment and contracting of workers. There is a general perception that their power is excessive and exercised far from transparently.

In fact, what could seem like one of their greatest successes has actually had a negative effect on the prestige of the unions: their past is linked to victories or epic defeats

while their present is about managing decline, including accepting agreements that will extinguish the coal industry. After having succeeded in negotiating plans with extremely favourable terms for those miners who were laid off and large investment to reactivate the economy of the coalfields, the unions have become the target of criticism and suffer from a seriously tarnished reputation. They are accused of accepting the progressive disappearance of the mines and the subsequent lack of job opportunities for young people.

The process of decline accompanied by the increase in union power is a phenomenon specific to the coalfields. The situation in areas based on the metal industry is very different. While the coalfields were characterised by an economic structure that depended on coal and by a marked homogeneity which identified, almost automatically, the interests of the local community with that of the miners, the socioeconomic fabric of the metal-based areas was more heterogeneous, with weaker social cohesion around the demands of the workers. Union strength and influence has diminished as industrial foundations have been eroded, while they have not participated in the distribution of public funds aimed at social benefits or economic reactivation. Neither has the survival of the memory and traditions of the working-class movement supplied comparable symbolic resources.

Social Consciousness

In general, there has been scarce reflection or debate about industrial decline in Asturias. The dominant characteristic, the dominant response or attitude in face of industrial decline has been an instinctual defensive reaction amongst those affected (workers and communities) while political decisions—both regionally and nationally—have lacked an actual strategy. Generally, the governments of Asturias and Spain have taken decisions based entirely on the circumstances of the moment. Business leaders have been completely absent. Instead, they have limited their role to seeking out subsidies for investments or contracts for public works, without diagnosing the problems or making far-reaching proposals.

On a theoretical level, neither the university nor the political institutions or the wider society have paid much attention to studying and analysing the issue. The main exceptions are two rigorous studies which included a diagnosis of the problems and a strategy for the future: *La industria siderometalúrgica en Asturias* (a study by the Nederlands Economisch Instituut de Rotterdam and the Sociedad Asturiana de Estudios Industriales carried out in 1968 and published in 1971) and *Estrategias de Reindustrialización de Asturias* (a report co-ordinated by Manuel Castells in 1993). While both were commissioned by political institutions (the former by Provincial Deputation of the Francoist dictatorship and the latter by the Autonomous Government in the context of the democracy), neither was taken into consideration as a guide for policy. At the same time, the most rigorous piece of research (*Asturias, el declive de*

una región industrial, conducted by Holm Köhler and published in 1996) has received little attention and hardly generated debate, despite its critical perspective.[17]

Due to this prolonged tendency towards decline, it is unsurprising that pessimism predominates the atmosphere of Asturian society. Images of past prosperity contrast with fears of an uncertain future. While older generations have seen the collapse of industrial foundations that had previously seemed to guarantee wealth and security, young people have become used to precariousness and emigration. Working-class identities have quickly entered a phase of crisis in response to the radical transformation of local realities. For many, the dissolution of old loyalties and solidarities has meant dramatic loss. This feeling is most intense in the coalfields and affects different generations who have had varying relationships with class culture and class-consciousness. The retired miner José Luis Soto (59 years old and a union activist) explains: "I'm proud to come from a mining family, and now so more than ever, because in a way we're losing that ability to make demands and to work collectively […] And, if there's something I regret, it's that this was never transmitted to the younger generations".[18] Likewise, the graphic novelist Alfonso Zapico (35 years old and winner of the National Comic Award in 2012) expressed his desire that "[…] the people like me don't lose their identity. The greatest risk in the coal valleys is this, much more than the effects of deindustrialisation and the coal crisis".[19]

In a context of long-term decline, however, no alternative identities have been capable of replacing those in crisis. In this way, while day-to-day behaviour and experiences move inexorably further away from past reference points, collective identification continues to be closely related to inherited frameworks. Paradoxically, the rapid reduction in the number of working miners has not led to a change in the understanding that people belong to a mining community. As the anthropologist José Luis García observed,

> [t]his phenomenon is even more interesting if we take into account that the causes of such an identity are completely contrary to what they were at the end of the past century. Before mining meant the future, now it means the past, before the prosperity of the mines was a determining factor […], now its decline, which is coming to an end, has not been able to change this identification [with mining].[20]

17 NEI: La industria siderometalúrgica en Asturias, Oviedo 1971. Manuel Castells (ed.): Estrategias para la Reindustrialización de Asturias, Madrid 1994. Holm-Detlev Köhler: Asturias. El declive de una región industrial, Gijón 1996. Translated into German as *Asturien. Der Niedergang einer industriellen Region in Europa*, Essen 1998.

18 Irene Díaz: Mineros, Gijón 2014, p. 31 (translated by Matthew Kerry).

19 La Nueva España, 15 April 2015.

20 José Luis García: Mineros alleranos: De los diferentes segmentos sociales a la construcción de la comunidad, in: José Luis García et al. (eds.): Los últimos mineros. Un estudio antropológico sobre la minería en España, Madrid 2002, p. 103 (translated by Matthew Kerry).

Amongst some minority groups, nostalgia for the past and the memory of struggles, repression, community solidarity and class-consciousness have not disappeared. The 2012 mining strike demonstrated that repertoires of mobilisation still survive and also highlighted the continued strength of evoking past struggles not only in the coalfields but also beyond, which was evident in the mass welcome in Madrid and widespread coverage in the media. During this particular conflict, the self-described 'Mujeres del Carbón en Lucha' ('Coalfield Women Fighting the Struggle') took up the baton of previous generations of combative women and reinterpreted it, adopting independent forms of organisation that allowed them to maintain their class and gender identities on top of a platform of community-based demands. Born as a direct result of the strike, it is difficult to imagine the existence of the group without the memory and cultures of mobilisation they have inherited. Such inspiration is present in their speeches: "We have been shown that nothing can be won without hard work and a fight".[21] A miner expressed himself in the same way during the 2012 strike: "My grandfather fought in the 1934 revolution, my father in the strikes against Franco, now it's my turn".[22] The history of strikes, repression and victories is a source of legitimacy for current demands: the whole country is indebted to the miners for their contribution both to the national economy during the hard times of the post-war period and to the struggle for political freedom and social rights.

Despite the increasing difficulties in reproducing repertoires of past collective action, the memory of the workers' struggles continues. It still serves as something that can be invoked in appeals for solutions to problems. This is a widespread discursive strategy that links sacrifices and past efforts to a community that supposedly still rests on past ideals and with which the majority can identify. Thus, for example, the goalkeeper of Sporting de Gijón used a metaphor linked to the mine workers' capacity for sacrifice and struggle in order to express his hope that Sporting would gain promotion to the First Division: "This [the league] is backbreaking work, [but] we're from the coal valleys".[23]

These memories are particularly present amongst groups of young artists and those active in social movements. However, the effects appear to be contradictory. The past is a mythologised idealisation and a reference point for the present but also the source of a sort of inferiority complex among people who employ this reference point in their reflections upon their own life, as those living in the present often cannot live up to such expectations. This combination can both encourage and discourage action, as

21 An announcement read out during a demonstration after the end of the strike and which can be seen in the documentary by Marcos M. Merino: Remine. El último movimiento obrero, Freews 2014.

22 El País, 17 June 2012.

23 El Comercio, 23 April 2015 (translated by Matthew Kerry). In fact, the footballer is not Asturian and Gijón does not form part of the coalfields, which only serves to underline the symbolic importance of the reference to coalmining.

they are unable to reproduce inherited repertoires in a context that has profoundly changed. Remembering the great struggles of the past offers many possibilities for epic comparisons but also leads to a feeling of impotence and defeat.

The described profound transformation of socioeconomic structures has been closely linked to a shift in the union organisations and a crisis of the values of working class consciousness, in a process where continuities are intertwined with ruptures. The past continues to be a point of reference, but the conditions in which twentieth-century workers move offer few opportunities to reproduce past frameworks, generating contradictory responses and dissolving links of solidarity and collective identities.

Both the memory of working-class struggles and feelings of nostalgia for the past are more intense in the coalfields than in the rest of the region—as are the critical attitudes towards those workers who accepted early retirement in exchange for allowing their jobs to disappear. In Asturias, there is a social image of the 'early retired': former mine workers who are still young but removed from the job market and who benefit from generous pensions. The 'early retired' are portrayed in a hostile manner as a privileged group and held responsible for the defeats and closures. The role that they play in supporting local businesses and redistributing income within different generations has not mitigated this criticism. A sense of reproach hangs over them for not having been able to defend their jobs (their generous pensions were, in truth, the way the state bought social harmony) and those who have not managed to obtain similar conditions feel resentment towards them (their pensions are seen as privileges that create unfair advantages).

All of this appears to be directly related to the roots of the working-class movement in the coal valleys and the strength of the unions, in a context in which the foundations of this lost world are collapsing. The non-mining industrial areas and the steel industry do not have to endure the same weight. But the strong community-based identity of the coalfields means that those who have been able to retire in favourable conditions have a social responsibility towards the youngsters who are inheriting a dismantled industry and lack alternative employment at their places of origin. Frequently, those who retired early are accused of having sold their jobs and betraying the future of younger generations. Beyond the coalfields, hostility is also related to the marked identification of the miners with working-class struggles, which has always made them unpopular amongst conservative sectors of society and now provides the opportunity to belittle the workers and their history of struggle. Negative stereotypes emphasising high indices of alcoholism, domestic violence and excessive levels of income are prevalent in public opinion, despite a lack of evidence. In fact, the media appear to have played an important role in the creation of this distorted portrayal of working-class communities.[24]

24 José Luis García: La intervención política y la construcción de las categorías colectivas. La prejubilación de los mineros como problema social, in: José Luis García (ed.): Prejubilados españoles. Ajustes y resistencias ante las políticas públicas, Buenos Aires 2009.

Attitudes amongst the Younger Generations

The prolonged decline the Asturian economy has suffered has caused a marked tendency towards the ageing of the population, even as social policy has reinforced dependency on the older generations. There are few young people in Asturias, most of whom take a long time to leave the family home or opt instead for emigration. In 2005, three out of four young people (74.8 per cent) lived with their parents. The percentage was even higher in the coal valleys, reaching 77.8 per cent. The figure was still 62.4 per cent amongst those aged between 25 and 29.[25] This situation has become more acute in recent years as the economic crisis and unemployment amongst the young have hit hard in the wake of government cuts and the world financial crisis of 2008. Since job opportunities are leading Asturian young adults to migrate, the majority of those who remain in their homeland stay between unemployment and underemployment.[26]

The flipside of the lack of opportunities for young people is overprotection by their parents, who distressingly observe the sharp contrast between the high levels of (often university) education their sons and daughters possess and the difficulties they face in using these academic qualifications in the job market. This situation causes the attitude amongst the majority to tend towards passivity. Young people are accustomed to depending on the older generations, who can pay for their subsistence and leisure needs, given that their parents have retained their purchasing power via pensions. Again, the coalfields are the most developed expression of this: "The youth of the Asturian coalfields are, in many ways, a youth without plans or influence, a youth that hides from a very uncertain future in a present that is relatively pleasant".[27]

In this context, it is very difficult to apply the organisational guides and repertoires of collective action that were effective in the past. There is a widespread tendency towards nihilism and despair, which corresponds to an image of a society without a future, due to massive youth unemployment with emigration as the only (and undesired) option. This image is often accompanied by criticism towards the unions and the networks of power around publicly financed aid and corruption. The result is a rupture with associational traditions and activists firmly rooted in previous genera-

25 Holm-Detlev Köhler/Vanessa Martín: Una mirada a la juventud de las comarcas mineras asturianas, Oviedo 2006, p. 58.

26 In 2017, the Asturian emancipation rate between 16 and 29 had fallen to 15.2 per cent and up to 72.1 per cent of those between 25 and 29 remained non-emancipated. Consejo de la Juventud de España, Observatorio de Emancipación. Principado de Asturias, Segundo semestre 2017, http://www.cje.org/descargas/cje7517.pdf (last accessed 10 June 2018).

27 Holm-Detlev Köhler/Vanessa Martín: Una mirada a la juventud de las comarcas mineras asturianas, p. 124 (translated by Matthew Kerry).

tions. In general, the young adults do not participate in these associations: "The loss of economic citizenship also means the loss of social citizenship".[28]

Under these circumstances, the memory of a working-class past continues to operate but in a contradictory manner. Only a minority of young people feel directly connected to it. This is particularly true if they are involved in some kind of activism, which is often due to belonging to families with party or union activist traditions in the first place. In these more politicised youth contexts, nostalgia for the past generates radical discourses, which draw their strength from epic accounts of past mobilisations (commemorations of the 1934 revolution, memories of the Francoist repression, the guerrilla [*Maquis*], and strikes against the dictatorship). Their rebellious attitude continues to express itself through the language of class and they give their immediate support to labour disputes that escalate into clashes with the police, which are their favoured scenarios. The presence of young people on the barricades, road blocks and battles with the police was notable in the 2012 mining strike, as it was—though to a lesser extent—at certain points during the Naval Gijón shipyard disputes.

This identification with workers' struggles, which includes fascination and mythologisation, is particularly patent in music. Using the language and aesthetics of youth culture and through diverse musical forms and genres (rock, folk, hip hop, hardcore) numerous songs have used episodes from the history of the working-class movement as a source of inspiration. Not only is there an epic that makes direct reference to the revolutionary uprising of 1934 in the Asturian songbook[29], there are also frequent allusions to recent conflicts.[30]

Similarly, the effects of decline on young people are a frequent subject of these songs, which describe the traumatic collapse of a world based on industrial labour and working-class culture, and tend to reflect the feelings of the most conscious and discontented. Their lyrics express rebelliousness and also reveal the existence of a memory that they have not yet managed to reinterpret, and with which they inevitably compare themselves. Probably the most artistically and musically accomplished expression of this (it has an excellent music video) is *"Patria sin sol"* ("Sunless homeland") by the rapper Arma X, a hip hop artist originally from the coalfields with a communist family background. The lyrics transmit rage and frustration at the loss of values and the

28 Ibid., p. 103 (translated by Matthew Kerry).

29 Rubén Vega García: Mémoires d'Octobre aux Asturies, in: Jean-Pierre Amalric/Geneviève Dreyfus-Armand/Bruno Vargas (eds.): Huit ans de République en Espagne. Entre réforme, guerre et révoluition 1931–1939, Toulouse 2017, pp. 137–150.

30 To cite some examples: "Díes de barricá" by Spanta la Xente (folk-rock), "Nun llores" by Dixebra (rock), "Asturies arde" by Escuela de Odio (hardcore), "Tuerques y torniellos" by Gomeru (punk). All of these songs are also sung in Bable (Asturian language) and not in Castilian, revealing a certain tendency to seek solace in regional identity combined with that of class, now that the latter is in crisis.

destruction of the old world of mining culture, class pride and struggle, while attacking the present situation and lack of hope for the future head-on: "It's the coalfields that are dying / I'm dying in them".[31] Although statistics do not suggest that drugs are a greater problem in the coalfields than in any other area of the country, they are a frequent concern in music. This is probably because they function as a means of escape and self-destruction for the individual, representing the disarticulation of collective values and the willingness to resist.[32]

Another of the main issues that preoccupy youth is emigration. The absence of their homeland or the loss of relatives and friends who emigrate leads to a feeling of anguish.[33] Such individuals are well qualified, thanks to the policies that allowed their parents to retain purchasing power. Often, the problem is being overqualified for low-skilled and precarious jobs, which means individuals are faced with the prospect of emigrating far from their homeland. The uprooting caused by emigration is compounded by a crisis in cultural values. Taught the importance of the collective and the value of struggle, they are now pushed into searching for individual solutions. Brought up in times of security and comfort—in contrast to their parents and grandparents who experienced the harsh times of poverty and repression—they appear to feel a debt with their origins.

The narratives of a minority who are active in social movements, artists and the many who have emigrated for economic reasons show notable similarities. All seem to bear the weight of the past and share the sense that they do not measure up to the struggles and sacrifices of previous generations. In this way, the question of identity inherited from their working-class origins is both central and a source of unease. The photographer Naomi Soto contrasts the loss of mining, which configured the lives of the entire community, with the current situation: "We were marked by that integrating cultural element [mining] and now we cannot find a model to replace it; there is no unifying factor that provides social cohesion".[34] Marcos M. Merino, director of a documentary about the 2012 mining strike titled, significantly, "The last working-class movement", justified the choice of the subject both in terms of his own background and the need to transmit particular values to his children. He spent his childhood in a working-class neighbourhood in Gijón where the industry that had given it life was in agony, and he wanted to "show a different world to my children"[35]. To do so, "the best

31 "Es la cuenca que se muere / Soy yo que me muero en ella" (translated by Matthew Kerry).

32 Drug addiction is a constant presence in the lyrics of Arma X ("Patria sin sol", "Zona minada", amongst others). It is also the central theme of "La cai del viciu" by Anabel Santiago (who has moved away from a traditional Asturian singing style towards pop music).

33 Two good examples are "Un asturiano en Madrid", by Dark la eMe (hip hop) and "Lleenda urbana", by the rock band Dixebra.

34 El Comercio, 28 December 2014.

35 Ibid.

way forward possible was to document a present which represents the past of several generations".[36] The prestigious graphic novelist Alejandro Zapico, who has published a book on the 1934 revolution, considers the objective of his graphic novel to be "that the people like me do not lose their identity. The greatest danger that the coalfields face is this, more in fact than the effects of deindustrialisation and coal crisis". Now living in France, he recalls that when he lived in Asturias he drew far-off conflicts and "now that I am in a different country I cling to my identity".[37] The exhibition Delirios de la herrumbre ('Ravings of Rust'), which combined poems and photographs of industrial ruins, explained that the exhibition was the expression of a moment in which "an identity is diluted without another to replace it". One of the poems summarised the effects of deindustrialisation in its title: "The past is a valley and the future an esplanade".[38] Between these two extremes lie the industrial strength and the conquest of rights that are now under threat.

Despite their conspicuousness, these attitudes represent minority sections of youth: those most directly connected with the working-class past in mining and industrial areas. The majority have lost the reference points according to which their grandparents and parents were socialised during the dictatorship and the emergence of democracy respectively. Neither their experiences nor their expectations match those of their elders. At the same time, family structures have become, thanks to intergenerational solidarity, the main protection against the harshest social effects of the decline. The strength of the working-class movement in primary industrial sectors (mining, the steel industry, shipbuilding…) has obtained high pensions, thanks to mobilisation. For the past thirty years these pensions have allowed levels of consumption to be maintained and prevented sons and daughters—and even grandchildren—from falling into poverty and social exclusion even when they are condemned to unemployment, emigration or insecure working conditions in an adverse labour market.

In this way, the main mitigating factor for the social consequences of a hostile present continues to be the inheritance of a past of plentiful and well-paid work, with strong unions able to gain early access to retirement and high pensions in accordance with the salaries of the jobs that were disappearing. Pensions were the main source of income for almost a quarter (24.2 per cent) of Asturian families in 2013.[39] In a context of extremely harsh cuts introduced since the unleashing of the generalised crisis in 2008 and mass unemployment, the pensions of the ex-miners and ex-metal workers still act as a barrier against increases in poverty and social exclusion. Whether they live

36 Marcos M. Merino: Remine (translated by Matthew Kerry). Citation taken from the documentary booklet: Marcos M. Merino: Remine (Freews, 2014).

37 La Nueva España, 15 April 2015 (translated by Matthew Kerry).

38 Ángel Cuesta/Francisco Izquierdo/José María Aladro: Delirios de la herrumbre (Centro de Cultura Antiguo Instituto, Gijón, January 2015).

39 Fundación 1º de Mayo: Observatorio Social de las Personas Mayores, Madrid 2014, p. 19.

with their parents or whether they have left home, young people often continue to receive help. And the possibility of returning to the family home is always an option when an individual loses their job or housing, whether due to unemployment, eviction or divorce.

A Sketchy Hypothesis

Several initiatives exploring the memories of an industrial past have emerged from the fabric of Asturian institutions and wider society as this text was being written. In 2015 and 2016 the main museums and cultural centres of the region have hosted exhibitions on the subject ('Portus' at the Centro Niemeyer in Avilés, 'Menhir' ['Standing Stone'] at the Laboral Centro de Arte in Gijón and 'El vaciado de la huella belga' ['Hollowing out the Belgian Footprint'] at the Museo de Bellas Artes de Asturias in Oviedo). Other spaces have also housed exhibitions engaging with memory and identity ('No-Sitio' ['No-Place'] at the Ciudadela de Capua, a working class slum in Gijón). Photographic exhibitions that deal with the same issues of memory, identity and the mining and industrial legacy have travelled between the Museo Barjola, the Ateneo of La Calzada, the Museo del Ferrocarril y de la Industria, and the 'Semana Negra'—a literary and cultural festival—in Gijón and the Archivo Histórico de Asturias in Oviedo. At the same time, two new projects investigating oral history have taken their first steps. These have run parallel to two separate series of talks and seminars on industrial heritage, developed respectively by ex-shipyard workers and collaboration between the University of Oviedo and the municipal authorities in Langreo, Mieres and Oviedo. The state-owned mining company, HUNOSA, has also opened a real mine—the Sotón pit—to visitors. The mine is also now protected after being declared Heritage of Cultural Interest [Bien de Interés Cultural]. The municipal council of Laviana is putting the finishing touches on a route similar to others elsewhere in the coalfields that will allow visitors to guide themselves around the traces of the area's mining past.

This proliferation of initiatives, along with the number of cultural projects exploring the mining and industrial legacy and the emphasis activists place on the feats of the working-class movements previously mentioned, can be interpreted as a reaction to the progressive disappearance of old values and the material and symbolic foundations of past prosperity and progress. In fact, these projects, which often consciously pursue the creation of *lieux de mémoire* to guard against forgetting, are a response to the perceived increasingly rapid loss of identity. It is possible that these endeavours also help us to understand why the musical and literary creations produced by younger generations are expressed in Asturian language rather than in Castilian. Historically, the written language of the Asturian working class has been Castilian, with Asturian

only used orally.[40] Asturian lacks the status of an official language, unlike Basque, Catalan and Gallego, which are legally recognised as official languages. Nevertheless, Asturian has become increasingly prominent in reminiscences of a working-class past. It seems plausible that both working-class and Asturian identities seek to mutually support one another in a context in which they both feel threatened.

However, the multiplication of these initiatives of cultural and political expression can be deceptive in a wider context in which the overall tendency is towards decline and oblivion. As the structural conditions have undergone profound transformation, so the references to an industrial past are reduced to the realm of nostalgia and only serve to mask the processes they try to resist. In this way, forgetting is much more difficult to measure than memory as it does not leave a visible trace. Rather, it reveals itself through its absence, creating empty space instead of memories. Due to a lack of studies, we do not have a full picture of the situation in Asturian society. It is a great deal easier to highlight the attempts to preserve the industrial past in terms of heritage, culture and identity than to actually measure their effectiveness or even to gauge the extent to which they are resignified in a way removed from the original intentions of the memory activists. Traditional agrarian society, language and narratives woven around a two-thousand-year history are fundamental ingredients of Asturian identity, but it remains to be seen to what extent the recent past will be incorporated into this. For want of sociological research or reliable polls of public opinion, the process of identity building appears contradictory and ambivalent. To understand it fully would require separating cultural expression—produced by a minority and generally addressed to a minority public audience—from social attitudes that are more widely spread and more diffuse, and about which we can only currently grasp at fragments.

Rubén Vega García is Professor at the Oviedo University. Responsible for the Oral Sources Archive for the Social History of Asturias. He has worked on the francoist and democratic periods, following research lines focused on working cultures, labour unionism, social unrest and de-industrialization processes, he has also paid attention to testimonies and memory of repression. He is currently responsible for the project *Sociocultural Change, Memory, Heritage and Identity in contexts of Deindustrialization*.

40 Rafael Rodríguez Valdés: Llingua asturiana y movimientu obreru (1899–1937), in: Folletos del Ateneo, Cuadernos de Historia, Nº XXI, Gijón 2004.