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Tarique Niazi

University of Wisconsin - Eau Claire, niazit@uwec.edu

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## **Globalization, Deindustrialization and Identity: Discontents of Unfettered Capital and Accelerated Change**

*Review Essay by Tarique Niazi, Department of Sociology, University of Wisconsin Eau Claire, [niazit@uwec.edu](mailto:niazit@uwec.edu)*

Vaccaro, Ismael, Krista Harper & Seth Murray (Eds.). *The Anthropology of Postindustrialism: Ethnographies of Disconnection*. New York: Routledge, 2016.

Hylland, Thomas Eriksen & Elisabeth Schober (Eds.) *Identity Destabilised: Living in an Overheated World*. London: Pluto Press. 2016.

The Nobel-Laureate economist Joseph Stiglitz, in his highly acclaimed work, *Globalization and its Discontents*, gives a detailed account of how world finance capital is keeping the global South underdeveloped. He describes the ways and means by which international lenders clamp conditionalities on developing countries, which keep them depleted of growth. Among others, these conditionalities encompass the structural adjustment program, high-cost short-term loans to avert default, ending subsidies on such basics as food, spiking interest rates, privatizing state-owned enterprises, opening up domestic markets for foreign goods, and above all free trade. The latter, in Stiglitz's view, is recipe for keeping developing countries deindustrialized and flooding their domestic markets with international trade goods, which undermine their fragile industrial base. Stiglitz cites the Fund (short for the International Monetary Fund), the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (a.k.a. World Bank) and the U.S. Treasury as the architect of these conditionalities. He poignantly notes that capitalist core countries did not adhere to free-market theology in the early stages of their own development, and they don't hesitate to run through the red-light of free market fundamentals even today, should they have to shield key industries from competition, or subsidize the basic ones such as agriculture. Yet they want the global South to adhere to free-marketism, and end subsidies that support those on the margins of the economy. In Stiglitz's experience, globalization and deindustrialization went hand in hand in the global South. Although his firsthand account of globalization reads darkly of South's underdevelopment and its sources, its reality is hard to dispute. In this respect, *Globalization and its Discontents* makes for a compelling read on globalization and particularly neoliberalism (deregulation, privatization and trade liberalization), but to many of Stiglitz's detractors (see e.g., Friedman, 2002), it is saturated with pessimism.

### **Global Capitalism and Deindustrialization: Forces of “Disconnection and Connection”**

Anthropologists, who are cut from a different cloth than economists, offer an unusual insight into globalization, global capitalism, and deindustrialization. They tend to offer some hope in the face of gloom regarding the overreach of global capital. While citing hope, however, anthropologists do not necessarily contradict economic analyses of globalization or its discontents. If anything, they echo the critics of globalization. Editors and contributors of *The Anthropology of Postindustrialism: Ethnographies of Disconnection* are the most recent of anthropologists to do so. They recognize the discontents of globalization, which they

conceptualize as ‘disconnection’ (*i.e.*, from national, regional, or global markets). They diverge, however, from the most vocal critics of globalization, such as Stiglitz, when they introduce the concept of ‘connection’ (*i.e.*, with national, regional, or global markets), which, they argue, follows decapitalized deindustrialization (or disconnection). The economic and anthropological analytical approaches are not necessarily mutually conflicting. It is the disciplinary toolkit (*i.e.*, the ethnography of everyday life) of anthropologists that helps them search for hope in the midst of despair, for the proverbial needle in a haystack.

Ismael Vaccaro, Krista Harper, and Seth Murray, editors of the volume, do a commendable job of conducting the ethnography of postindustrialism to explain what they conceptualize as ‘disconnection’ and ‘connection.’ Their main premise is that global capitalism—and particularly the neoliberal economic regime—has unfettered financial capital from its sites of investment, making it no longer place-bound. It can now abandon far-off peripheries with as much ease as it can penetrate them in search of low-wage and less-regulated markets that promise high margins of profit. When invested, capital supposedly industrializes peripheries, creates economic boom, raises standards of living, and improves quality of life. When capital is disinvested (which the volume’s editors call ‘withdrawal’), it tears apart communities, triggers joblessness, reduces standards of living, turns vibrant communities into ghost-towns, and degrades the industrial landscape into industrial wasteland, (as seen in the US cities of Flint and Detroit, Michigan). To soften the harsh image of deindustrialization, volume editors substitute deindustrialization with “postindustrialism.” Their search for the genealogy of postindustrialism, or postindustrial society, is scholarly dense. They seem to be inspired by Daniel Bell’s (1973) concept of the ‘post-industrial society’ as a service economy, which purports to be an advancement on industrial society. Although the information revolution of today speaks volumes for Bell’s forward-looking idea of a post-industrial society, it does not necessarily align with what volume editors and contributors mean by postindustrialism or deindustrialization. Like Bell, volume editors and authors predict the potential for a post-industrial rebirth in some de-capitalized communities. Yet, given their enthusiasm to see the positive in postindustrialism, they risk over-stating the potential for the reindustrialization or redevelopment of de-capitalized communities (through industries such as tourism, for example). Nonetheless, this conceptual stretch does not detract from the ethnographic strength of the edited volume, which is firmly anchored in anthropology’s rich theoretical and empirical heritage. The authors define what they describe as the “anthropology of disconnection” as “the study of local impacts of the capricious unraveling of uneven transnational networks” of capital (p. 2). The anthropology of disconnection results in “the successive development, underdevelopment and redevelopment of given areas as capital jumps from one place to another, then back again, both creating and destroying its own opportunities for development” (p. 3). The fleeting nature of capital, according to volume editors, is busily making and unmaking peripheries and centers.

Volume editors and contributors truly shine when they take on the key question of how decapitalized (or deindustrialized) communities come to terms with the aftermath of their abandonment (*i.e.*, how they reconnect with national, regional, and global markets). Here, they dive into the anthropological repertoire of theoretical and empirical approaches to answer this question, which ultimately defines the volume. They borrow from Katherine Verdery’s (1996) ethnography of post-socialism and deploy the term “postindustrial” (originally coined by Daniel Bell) not to refer to “a predetermined development trajectory but as a way of imagining ‘what comes next’ in different places facing the social, economic and ecological legacies of prior industrial development that continue to influence people’s present-day lives” (p. 2). The volume

editors and contributors' theoretical eclecticism had them dipping into political ecology, which as a field of study is not far from anthropology (see *e.g.*, Wolf, 1972). Their apparent attraction to political ecology is seen in their choice of case studies, which invariably speak to natural resource economies and thereby ecological concerns. Deployment of political ecology helps contributors to "explore how industrialization and deindustrialization transform nature and landscape" (p. 2).

*The Anthropology of Postindustrialism* comprises ten case studies and an introduction that elegantly condenses the sweeping reach of literature on the subject of global capital and deindustrialization. Volume editors catalog four kinds of community responses to the hypermobility of capital or deindustrialization: ghost-towns, mobilization, reconnection, and the search for alternatives (to the industrial capitalist order. Ghost-towns grow like weeds from industrial shutdowns, depopulation, infrastructural collapse, and state neglect. Those who choose to remain in such depleted places "recast their economic and social relations" by turning to family support networks and living off remittances from relatives working in far-off places. The second kind of response is mobilization, which occurs when residents of deindustrialized regions come together to enlist state support for subsidizing local economies, and "revaluing [the] natural resources" that drive such economies. The third response is that of "reconnection," referring to the search for a commodity that can take the place of one that has been disinvested. The substitute commodity, if valued in the global capital network, can be productive of income and jobs. The fourth response is the search for alternatives to the capitalist economy model in the postindustrial moment. These responses are reflected, jointly or independently, in each of the ten cases that appear in this volume. These cases "show how communities that struggle after industrial abandonment cope with that dramatic contextual change and seek more just, hopeful and livable futures" (p. 16). Elena Rockhill's chapter, "The Afterlife of Northern Development: Ghost Towns in the Russian Far North" (pp. 56-72) describes the Soviet Union's efforts to develop the Russian North, especially its Magadan region, which created a boom of its resource-extractive economy by literally triggering a gold rush to mine such precious metals as gold and silver. As soon as the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, the decades-long Northern development program fell by the wayside. With the collapse of institutional support, the region was rapidly drained of its population. Recent private commercial investment, however, is reconnecting the area to global markets again. Vanesa Castan Broto's "Dwelling in a Pollution Landscape" (pp. 91-112) reassesses the case of coal ash pollution in Tuzla, Bosnia- Herzegovina and documents how Tuzla's residents come to accept pollution as part of their daily lives. This passive response appears in sharp contrast to what is expected in such situations: forcing the state and its institutions to pay for cleanup and make compensation to those condemned to live in a polluted landscape.

James Acheson and Ann Acheson's "Cycles of Industrial Change in Maine" (pp. 73-90) documents the 350-year history of industrialization, deindustrialization, and reindustrialization of the state. They discovered that each time an old industry died, it was replaced with a new one. Over three centuries, the state's industry switched from shipbuilding, to logging, to fishing, and its fortunes rose and fell with the ebb and flow in the value of each industry. Veronica Davidov's "Abandoned Environments: Producing New Systems of Value Through Urban Exploration" (pp. 147-165) is also emblematic of reconnection. As an urban ethnographer, she demonstrates how abandoned or de-commodified urban spaces in Detroit, Michigan have been recommodified for urban exploration, where Urbex (short for urban exploration) is an ethnographically rich subculture.

Perhaps the most hopeful of all cases is the contribution by Janet Newbury and Katherine Gibson, "Postindustrial Pathways for a "Single Industry Resource Town:" A Community Economies Approach" (pp. 183-204). Newbury and Gibson outline a model of the non-capitalist economy in which enterprises consist of workers' cooperatives or community enterprises; labor is unwaged in housework or volunteering; private property is swapped for open access natural resources, such as water and ecosystem services; transactions are non-capitalist in the form of household sharing and state allocations or appropriations; and finance is substituted with sweat equity, family lending, donations, or interest-free loans. The empirical site of the study is the City of Powell River, British Columbia, Canada, which is the hometown of one of the authors of the study, Janet Newbury. The city turned to alternative economic pathways when its main industry was downsized. Community members are currently exploring a range of economic possibilities outside capitalist alternatives. One such alternative is the city's development of its own currency: "Powell River Money," which is used not just for financial purposes but also as an "investment" in the community.

All of these community responses result from a cycle of disconnection and reconnection: industrialization, deindustrialization, and reindustrialization. Volume contributors are predominantly concerned with the local, community-wide impact of disconnection, and community struggles to survive them. A productive outcome of the anthropological study of postindustrialism is, nevertheless, the opportunity to observe new social and ecological formations that take root in the vacuum left by capital flight. When material conditions change and "the range of possible livelihood strategies and life trajectories are recast," a "crisis of social reproduction" is born. This crisis, according to volume editors, leads to reshaping "individual and collective identities." Although *The Anthropology of Postindustrialism* is primarily devoted to uncovering the relationship between global capital and deindustrialization on the one hand, and community struggles to adjust to these changes on the other, it has not directly addressed the impact of changing material conditions on the stability of individual and collective identities beyond alluding to them.

### **Identity in an "Overheated World"**

Thomas Hylland and Elisabeth Schöber in their coedited anthology on *Identity Destabilised: Living in an Overheated World* have engaged the issue of the destabilizing effect of "accelerated change" on identity and identity formation, which they define in the broadest possible terms as "social belonging" and "reflexive we-hood." They assert that while identity is personal, it has a collective dimension. In this view, people assume a given identity to allow themselves to link the past with the present, make sense of continuities and discontinuities (change), and see their relationship with place. In this broad framework of identity, volume editors do not privilege ethnic, national, gender, and religious identities over "other criteria of belonging."<sup>1</sup> As such, they refuse to take group identity for granted. Their case studies rather examine how groups are formed and contested, how boundaries are established or disestablished by exogenous and endogenous forces. They observe a fluidity of identity among both minority and majority groups, especially in Europe. European majorities and minorities, according to volume editors, tend to make or unmake boundaries, or even withdraw into primordial identities. Authors cite members of the "extreme Right" and adherents of "militant Islamism" in Europe as bearing "striking parallels" and present the rhetoric of these groups as evidence of how members of such groups are retreating into primordial identities. Ironically, volume editors downplay

modernity's transformative potential for eradicating primordial identities. Without such transformative potential, how else one can explain the transition of a premodern, fragmented, and fratricidal Europe to postmodern Europe, whose cultivated social sensitivity is so potent that even editors of this volume went to Falstaffian lengths to sound gender-neutral: "One woman's crisis may be another's golden opportunity" (p. 14).

Importantly, volume editors do not regard identity as a product but see it as a process (identification). This means identity is not fixed; it is rather fluid and always in flux. Compounding this state of flux is an "overheated world," which the editors analogized to "accelerated change"—which they argue is destabilizing individual and collective identities. They assert that group (shared) identities are particularly vulnerable to the fast-changing world and its unsettling impact. The cohesion of shared identities, in their view, is subject to shifts in order to adjust to the accelerated change or the overheated world. It seems that adjusting to the overheated world is what volume editors mean by their choice term "reflexive we-hood," which they use to refer to identity. To illustrate the fluidity of identity, they turn to the processes of 'creolization'<sup>2</sup> of group identity. Such processes of identity formation imply both cultural and genetic bases of identity. People intermarry (cultural) to reproduce and become "creolized" (genetic). In this spirit, the work asserts that "social identification" must be re-conceptualized to accommodate and account for its newly constituted elements (especially social and cultural). On this predicate, the volume poses the engaging question as to what can cause changes in social identification (*i.e.*, the process of identity-making). Among the likely causes are "traditionalism, willingness to adjust, resistance and loyalty, quests for purity and celebration of mixing."

As noted above, all of the volume's contributors steer clear of ethnic, national, gender and religious identities. They rather explore the processes of identification and reidentification that arise from accelerated economic change, leading to new class and social formations. These contributions are theoretically grounded in the assumption that accelerated change in the economy, politics, or the environment potentially leaves people with limited choices for social and cultural reproduction, disrupting their collective identities. The volume's contributions on boomtowns, for instance, document the gap between fast and slow change as a major source of destabilization of social identities; some areas or groups are 'left behind' by accelerated change or they 'opt out' of it, while others embrace it, engendering asymmetry or instability. A case in point is Elisabeth Schober's chapter, "Indigenous Endurance amidst Accelerated Change?" (pp. 135-152), which reviews the impact of the overheated world on the rural-urban divide and highland and lowland areas.

Similarly, Torunn Wimpelmann's contribution, "Too Many Khans? Old and New Elites in Afghanistan" (pp. 171-183), captures the impact of accelerated economic change on contemporary Kabul, the capital city of Afghanistan, and documents its new class formation and social reidentification. Astrid Stensrud's chapter, "'We Are All Strangers Here': Transforming Land and Making Identity in a Desert Boomtown" (pp. 59-76), looks at how fast-paced demographic, economic, and ecological transformations are destabilizing place-bound identities. Thomas Hylland Eriksen's essay, "Identifying with Accelerated Change: Modernity Embodied in Gladstone, Queensland" (pp. 77-98), also speaks to place-bound identities. Keir Martin's "'We Are Far Too Far Down This Road To Worry About Morals: The Destablising of Football Fans' Identities in an Overheated World" (pp. 205-222) is fascinating in its documentation of the impact of globalized commercialization on identification. Brunko Banovic's chapter, "Do Homosexuals Wear Moustaches? Controversies in the First Montenegrin Pride Parade" (pp. 184-204), investigates the tension between transnational homosexuality and the traditional view of

masculinity in the Balkans. Heike Drotbohm's "Frozen Cosmopolitanism: Coping with Radical Deceleration in Cape Verdean Contexts of Forced Return Migration" (pp. 42-58) details the Cape Verde islands and its emergence as a "frozen cosmopolitanism" for forced return migrants. Jeremy MacClancy, in his "Down with Identity! Long Live Humanity!" (pp. 20-41), advocates abandoning 'group identity' as an anthropological subject matter, and instead proposes exploring 'common humanity.' His unorthodox view (of a common humanity), no matter how welcome, may be taken by sticklers for disciplinary tenets as not so welcome.

MacClancy observes a fading nativist impulse in Clare County, in western Ireland, where the concept of a 'blow-in' (anyone not born in Clare) is giving way to MacClancy's common humanity. His bold claim is based on meager data, however, (such as conversations with a flat-mate and an undergraduate thesis). Even if this inadequacy is overlooked, one still cannot see the source of change identified, though a change has indeed ushered in a sense of common humanity and put aside the once nativist impulses in Clare, impulses that were marked by derogatory references to outsiders as "blow-ins." This shortfall is the common feature of this volume and its contributions as they assume an accelerated change (overheated world) but do not sufficiently specify the *source(s)* of this change, which are responsible for destabilizing identification. Joseph Stiglitz's main criticism of globalization also centers on "rapid change," but he locates its source in the global economic structure.

All of the discontents of globalization stem from the rapid economic changes that the capitalist core is imposing upon the global South. In *Identity Destabilised*, multiple changes are occurring at once and destabilizing identification, but destabilization is attributed to accelerated change, whose source remains ambiguous at best, although the volume editors name three general sources of change: economy, politics, and the environment, which should have provided an explanatory framework for case studies. In *The Anthropology of Postindustrialism*, editors and contributors offer a sharp explanation of how collective identities are destabilized, stating that "the reconfiguration of economic structures... occur[s] at a faster pace than the equivalent redefinition of local collective and individual identities" and that "these undigested transformations result in cultural 'disenchantments' or 'reroutings' associated with cycles of failed expectations" (p. 11).<sup>3</sup> In all fairness, editors of *Identity Destabilised*, are also aware of these two trajectories—of material and non-material cultures—which they describe as "accelerated change" and "slow change," respectively. Where their collection falls short of achieving their goal of identifying the forces that are destabilizing identification is the lack of specificity of the source of accelerated change. Is it the economy? Demography? Politics? Culture? Environment? While they profess to keep ethnic, national, gender and religious identities out of their anthropological concerns, one is left wondering what is then left of identity or identification to study. This search for the unsearchable further saps the quality of their arguments.<sup>4</sup> Yet the study nonetheless engages one of the most important topics of our time, a time at which the forces of nativism, racism, sexism (even misogyny), and xenophobia are rallying their adherents around common identity. Contributions in *Identity Destabilised* do address some of these concerns, but peripherally. In general, both volumes make an outstanding contribution, in fascinating anthropological detail, to helping us understand the microphysics of the macro-phenomena of globalization, industrialization, and identity and their causal chain.

### Notes

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<sup>1</sup> They however make a distinction between tradition and traditionalism. Tradition, to them, ‘recommends itself,’ while traditionalism is a ‘reflexive choice.’

<sup>2</sup> A ‘creole’ community refers to persons of mixed European and non-white heritage.

<sup>3</sup> Sociologist William Ogburn (1957) described this phenomenon by theorizing that material culture changes faster than non-material (or symbolic) culture. He calls the gap between the two “cultural lag.”

<sup>4</sup> A case in point is Jeremy MacClancy discussing ‘common humanity’ in Clare County—which is presented as part of everyday life—while steering clear of Irish national Identity. Does this mean Irish nationalists (or for that matter their rivals) are bereft of ‘common humanity’? If not, then what is the point of distinguishing between ethnic, national, gender, and religious identities on the one hand and what the volume editors call ‘criteria of belonging’ on the other?



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