

Winant, G. (2021). *The Next Shift: The Fall of Industry and the Rise of Health Care in Rust Belt America*. Harvard University Press.

Review by John Lepley

In 1976 the University of Pittsburgh Press reissued the Thomas Bell novel *Out of This Furnace*, which had originally been published in 1941. The multigenerational story chronicles the struggles of Eastern European steelworkers in the East Pittsburgh borough of Braddock from the non-union era to the halcyon days of the CIO. It takes place in steel mills and saloons and in row houses crowded with boarders, children, and laundry; it concludes with Dobie, a rank and file steelworker and Steel Workers' Organizing Committee organizer, patting the stomach of his expectant wife Julie, saying 'Okay kid. Any time you're ready.' The baby on its way is a sign of a bright future for Dobie, Julie, and thousands of other steelworkers.

Bell's (né Belejcak) upbringing in Braddock in the early 1900s inspired *Out of This Furnace*. During this period the steel industry was ubiquitous in and around Pittsburgh, from soot and ash on porches to the domestic labors of housewives that revolved around their husbands' mill shifts. This way of life helped cement the archetypal image of a white working-class patriarch toiling in heavy industry. However, as Gabriel Winant explains in *The Next Shift*, it was partly illusory and already well into its long decline when *Out of This Furnace* reached new readers in 1976.

The Next Shift intervenes in multiple questions. Its thesis is that Pittsburgh's health care industry expanded in the latter decades of the 20th century as it came to manage the social and economic fallout of the steel industry's decline. Numerous studies have documented the devastating impacts of mill closings. Winant contributes to this literature by showing how 'class relations of the postwar period were undergoing dramatic disintegration and recomposition in deindustrializing cities, a process that manifested itself in expanding social reliance on the health care system' (p. 224). In other words, the working class did not disappear with the steel industry; rather, a new one—more female and more Black than its steel predecessor—formed in Pittsburgh's hospitals and nursing homes.

A major strength of *The Next Shift* is how it locates the origins of Pittsburgh's health care system in collective bargaining between steel companies and the United Steelworkers of America. In 1948 the Supreme Court ruled that health care was a mandatory subject of bargaining, and the USWA gained employer-provided insurance the following year after a 42-day strike. Winant limits his study to the United States, but it's instructive to note that the United Kingdom's National Health Service also began operating in 1948. In the absence of a comprehensive national welfare state, American unions negotiated private ones at the enterprise level. It's hard to overemphasize what these benefits meant to steelworker families. As Winant tells us, 'health care became a source of empowerment and social support for many working-class people' (p. 162). Had *Out of This Furnace* been published in 1961 instead of 1941, for example, its closing scene may have taken place in a maternity ward at Braddock Hospital instead of in Dobie and Julie's home.

Employment in the steel industry peaked at mid-century, and it slowly contracted from the 1950s to the 1970s. Black people were often the first affected because of contractual provisions that organized seniority by department instead of overall plant employment. Rising economic precarity and changing populations in steel communities (white flight in some areas; Black and white people co-existing in others) led to racial conflict. Women played key roles in organizing mutual aid that tried to mitigate the impacts of the hardship. Here, Winant shows how residential patterns shaped the structure of these resources. '[W]here much of the process of mutual support for white working-class people flowed through communal institutions built up over time—church, school, hospital, ethnic club—it flowed more directly from person to person and family to family in Black Pittsburgh,' he writes (p. 119). The difference between Pittsburgh and cities that experienced upheavals like Watts, Newark, and Detroit in the 1960s was thus one of degree rather than kind. Just as in the latter cities, Black Pittsburghers waged individual and collective struggles for access to jobs and housing while the material basis for whites' economic security receded.

One of the primary questions Winant asks is why so many of Pittsburgh's health care workers haven't gained the social citizenship that steelworkers won in the postwar era? Race and gender are major factors. Necessity compelled Black and white women to enter this field at different points during the steel industry's decline, but the work was always pitched as public extensions of their domestic duties. Federal and state policy also contribute to the low wages and stressed working conditions in health care, especially the Medicare reimbursement formula. It's an industry with bad actors, too. In August 2022, a federal judge found a mother and daughter who operate an in-home care service for seniors in Pittsburgh's Greenfield neighborhood guilty of cheating 345 workers out of \$2.4 million in overtime pay. Workers with little bargaining power are vulnerable to multiple forms of legal and illegal exploitation.

'Eds and meds' is a common description that residents of the Pittsburgh-metro area apply to the region's economy. Although it's not the subject of this monograph, it's worth considering how the city's colleges and universities compare with the evolution of health care. While higher education is not embedded in the steel industry like health care, its stunning transformation over the last several decades is related to the same economic and social changes that Winant discusses. As readers of this journal will recognize, job polarization is pervasive in academia. Many schools have lopsided ratios of adjunct-to-tenure track faculty, top-heavy administrations, and large custodial, maintenance, service, and clerical workforces. Adjunct professors have little hope of landing tenure-stream positions, while custodial and service workers experience another form of precarity since schools often contract that work out to service providers like Aramark and Sodexo. In October 2021, after three unsuccessful organizing attempts since the 1970s, faculty at the University of Pittsburgh voted 1511-612 to become Steelworkers, and as I write the university's staff was underway with their own campaign to unionize.

Pittsburgh's steel industry inspired writers from Thomas Bell to William Attaway (*Blood on the Forge*, 1941) to Phillip Bonosky (*Burning Valley*, 1953) to Phillip Meyer (*American Rust*, 2009). These works are common readings in labor history and working-class studies courses because they depict people who made, and whose lives were molded by, steel. Health care workers are now writing about their experiences on the job. Theresa Brown, a nurse (B.S. in Nursing from the University of Pittsburgh) and English PhD, has written about her experiences as a worker and patient in Pittsburgh. In April 2022 she discussed her recent book, *Healing*, with Winant.

Reflecting on how undergoing cancer treatment led her to reassess her own role in patient care, she commented that ‘over the past few decades health care has changed from people-centered to profit-centered.’ It’s a notion that’s echoed widely, and Winant’s remarkable book is an excellent way to learn how it happened.

Reviewer Bio

John Lepley is a labor educator in Pittsburgh and a member of United Steelworkers Local 3657.