

# **Schennum, Jill (2023) *As Goes Bethlehem: Steelworkers and the Restructuring of an Industrial Working Class*. Vanderbilt University Press.**

**Review by Chris Walley**

Some might ask whether we need another book on deindustrialization and whether we need one on the steel industry in particular? Twenty years ago, Jeff Cowie and Joseph Heathcott in their edited volume *Beyond the Ruins: The Meanings of Deindustrialization* suggested the need to move past what they described as “creeping industrial nostalgia.” However, when working-class studies scholars at a conference in 2014 debated whether it was time to “get past” the fixation on deindustrialization, the collective answer proved to be a resounding “no.” The conference debate over *why* that is so proved to be highly stimulating, helping lay the groundwork for Sherry Lee Linkon’s *The Half-Life of Deindustrialization* and the edited volume *The Deindustrialized World* among others, as well as the consolidation of “deindustrialization studies” as an emergent sub-field in its own right.

As Linkon’s work suggests, the effects of deindustrialization are long-term, inter-generational, and not always evident on the surface (even for those affected). Just as analysis of deindustrialization has expanded its temporal focus to include a more multigenerational perspective, the geographic range of such studies has also expanded. Deindustrialization has affected the former Soviet realm even more profoundly than avowedly capitalist countries, resulting in ongoing socioeconomic fissures that shape contemporary politics in both. Regions beyond Europe and the United States are increasingly central to accounts of deindustrialization. China, the epicenter of contemporary global industrial production, for example, has itself been grappling with deindustrialization. And, as anthropologists Andrea Muehlebach and Nitzan Shoshan argue, “post-Fordist affect” – or the loss of modernist dreams associated with Fordist imaginaries of industrial work -- has had powerful effects throughout the world, even in countries with no direct experience of Fordist/Keynesian welfare states or state socialist industrial planning.

Jill A. Schennum’s wonderful book, *As Goes Bethlehem*, which documents the slow demise of Bethlehem Steel in its namesake Pennsylvania town, gives us another reason to offer a resounding “no” to the question of whether it is time to move past our collective fixation on deindustrialization. In some ways, Schennum’s book harkens back to an earlier literature that explored factory closures in quintessential mill towns – in this case, honing in on the last generational cohorts to work at “The Steel,” as Bethlehem workers called it.

In Bethlehem, deindustrialization did not happen suddenly, but through a long, painfully drawn-out process of downsizings and corporate restructurings that extended from the late 1970s well into the new millennium. Schennum uses this long temporal span to underscore connections between deindustrialization and contemporary finance capitalism and the growing “flexibility” of

neoliberal labor models. This makes the book an invaluable bridge between older and newer literatures on work, class identity, precarity, unions, finance capitalism, and the relationship between industrial and service sectors.

The richness of Schennum's account stems from the striking number and depth of her interviews (conducted with 120 steelworkers and family members over a ten-year span) combined with an impressive command of a wide variety of literatures that provide key context for understanding industrial work and its loss, including sociology, working-class studies, labor and industrial history, anthropology, and geography. *As Goes Bethlehem* never romanticizes mill work or workers, and Schennum captures the perspectives of a wide variety of steelworkers, both men and women, from a range of ethnic, racial, and other backgrounds, capturing the divisions and exclusions found within "the Steel." What she does do is make relatable the social worlds that workers created in response to mill (and external) hierarchies in both their beauty and ugliness. In doing so, she offers a remarkably nuanced and empathetic understanding of those social worlds, the variety of ways workers conceptualized their work, and the "moral economy" by which they judged their relationships with each other and with management.

Schennum's account builds directly upon Kate Dudley's 1994 ethnography *End of the Line*, which examined how autoworkers in Wisconsin navigated auto assembly work. Like Dudley, Schennum is interested in how workers carved spaces of limited autonomy out of the hierarchical and dangerous world of industrial work. Like Dudley, she is also interested in the ways in which "skill" was understood, not as based on individualized paper credentials, but for steelworkers on a union-generated moral order based on seniority as well as experience among generational cohorts in which individuals were trained, mentored, and kept safe by co-workers. Although Schennum underscores that steelworkers held a range of views on steel work, she provides insightful discussion of how and why many were able to find meaning, pride, and, sometimes, even pleasure, in the work and social relations forged in the mills (social relations that workers repeatedly referred to as "like family").

By making this prior mill world a fully human and complex one, Schennum is able to contrast its moral economy with the one engendered by neoliberal models as mill work was transformed during Bethlehem's long-downsizing on the road to strategic bankruptcy and private equity buy-out. The "lucky" ones, those who were able to retain their jobs in the cohorts that Schennum followed, shared their difficulties in trying to "hang on" as the mill downsized. This included older workers experiencing revamped job assignments that challenged them physically, or the process of being transferred to other mills in distant geographic locations, profoundly disrupting family and social networks. For many, the pleasures that were to be found in prior mill work – buttressed by its union-grounded moral economy – now disappeared. Increasingly, workers sought to "hang on" simply for the benefits – desperately trying to maintain access to pensions and healthcare that they had contractually earned and put in decades of mill work for, but which most would ultimately lose.

With deindustrialization, the devil is in the details, and Schennum does a spectacular job of plumbing and making sense of those details in a way that helps us understand how deindustrialization in the United States has been what she calls an act of "accumulation by dispossession." In other words, the corporate restructuring associated with downsizing of steel

companies and the strategic bankruptcies of firms like Bethlehem were designed to deny workers what they had contractually earned – now renamed “legacy costs” – thereby “restructuring” the U.S. industrial working class in the process. In a chilling detail, Schennum notes that CEO Wilbur Ross’s profit on selling Bethlehem a year and a half after buying and “restructuring” it was \$267 million, roughly equivalent to the pensions and health care monies taken from steelworkers in the process. In short, CEOs and financial elites have accumulated massive sums – not from financial magic or Wall Street wizardry that creates money out of thin air – but from tawdry old-fashioned expropriation from those they deliberately marginalized.

Schennum’s final chapter explores the steelworker cohorts’ current lives in contemporary Bethlehem, a town that is an apparent deindustrialization success story with a “revitalized” economy that boasts a casino and arts complex in old mill buildings as well as a gentrifying professional middle class living in the historic part of town. Unlike other accounts of post-industrial sites that have “transitioned,” Schennum’s account is exemplary in sticking with the steelworkers and their families, tracing *their* fates, not simply the location’s. In reality, Bethlehem has been “revitalized” not because of a natural progression to a promised new economy but because it has been geographically integrated as a remote low-rent exurb for a New York City metropolitan economy. In contrast to boosters’ unfounded assertions, those who, after Bethlehem’s demise, lost most of what they spent their work lives striving for are not the ones who benefitted from the town’s post-industrial transformation.

Schennum ends by referencing the Steelworkers Archive Project and the remaining aging steelworkers who keep telling their stories. She recounts how a group of retired steelworkers protested a restricted land covenant created at the behest of billionaire casino owner Sheldon Adelson that explicitly prohibits speech about unions on the old Bethlehem site – a sacrilege given its prior moral economy.

In an odd quirk (presumably that of the publisher), the book has no acknowledgements, making it difficult to situate Schennum within a scholarly lineage, to know more about her research methods, or her own relationship to the Steelworker’s Archive Project (which is mentioned in passing in an endnote). However, the power of the voices in this account – both Schennum’s and those she interviewed – and what they convey for those trying to understand contemporary finance capitalism and its attendant labor regimes is starkly apparent throughout. A must-read for working class studies scholars, *As Goes Bethlehem* is a vitally important book in trying to understand on the ground what finance capitalism has wrought.

## Reviewer Bio

**Christine Walley** is a Professor of Anthropology at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. She is the author of *Exit Zero: Family and Class in Postindustrial Chicago* and co-creator (with Chris Boebel) of a documentary film [Exit Zero](#). She also is one of the creators of the [Southeast Chicago Archive & Storytelling Project](#) and is currently writing a book about historical objects saved by residents of a former steel mill community and the stories they tell about them.