Deindustrialization Without Borders: Political Cultures, Identities and Generational Trajectories

Presentation of the conference

Turin (Italy), 5–7 May 2027 – Final conference of the INTRA project (Industrial Transition: Research and Archives), promoted by the Fondazione Luigi Einaudi ETS in collaboration with the Department of Historical Studies of the University of Turin and the IDHES laboratory of Université Paris Nanterre.

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Over the past two decades, deindustrialization studies have established themselves as an autonomous field of research, capable of moving beyond a purely economic reading of industrial decline in order to analyze its long-term social, cultural and political consequences for the communities and territories concerned. The conference *Deindustrialization Without Borders* is conceived as the concluding event of the INTRA project – Industrial Transition: Research and Archives, promoted by the Fondazione Luigi Einaudi, devoted to the comparative study of the phenomenon in Italy and France through an interdisciplinary approach that brings the historical sciences into dialogue with the social and territorial sciences.

The conference seeks to take its place in an international landscape already shaped by major initiatives. The DePOT project – Deindustrialization and the Politics of Our Time, through its research strands *The Politics of Industrial Closure* and *Race, Populism and the Left*, has brought to light, on the one hand, the political economy of plant closures and the union and institutional responses to decline and, on the other, the intertwining of race, immigration and class resentment in deindustrialized areas, with particular attention to North American and European contexts, as shown by its recent annual conferences in Sydney (Nova Scotia, 2023) and Paris (2025). In Italy, the *Atlante della Deindustrializzazione* project (edited by G. Bigatti, M. Doria, R. Garruccio and G. Zazzara, Mimesis, forthcoming) is producing a first systematic mapping of the processes of industrial decline, their geographies and their demographic, social, environmental and memorial effects. On the French side, the same effort to build a distinct historiographical field around deindustrialization was marked by the thematic issue “La désindustrialisation, une histoire en cours”, coordinated by Marion Fontaine and Xavier Vigna for the journal *20 & 21. Revue d’histoire* (no. 144, 2019/4). This special section helped shift historians’ gaze beyond the classic opposition between the triumphant growth of the Trente Glorieuses and the crisis that followed the first oil shock,

stressing the discontinuity and temporal depth of the process. The issue also opened up avenues directly relevant to the themes of this conference, notably on the role of government choices (see M. Tracol, "Le gouvernement Mauroy face à la désindustrialisation : de la crise économique à la crise sociale et politique", *20 & 21. Revue d'histoire*, no. 144, 2019, pp. 65–79), a question also at the heart of "1983, un tournant libéral ?", *Vingtième Siècle. Revue d'histoire*, no. 138, 2018.

Drawing on these references and placing itself in critical continuity with them, the conference aims to focus specifically on a knot that Italian historiography has so far explored little: the political and social consequences of deindustrialization at the moment when the factory loses its centrality as a place where identities, representation and conflict are produced. While the international literature has long studied the link between industrial decline and the rise of right-wing populism in Anglo-Saxon contexts (Cowie, 2010; Ford and Goodwin, 2014; Thorleiffson, 2016; McQuarrie, 2017; Hazeldine, 2017; MacKinnon, 2017; Berry and Giovannini, 2018; Dawson and Goodwin-Hawkins, 2020; MacKinnon, 2020; Makin-Waite, 2021; Jäger, 2021), the Italian case, where industrialization and large-scale industry have not always been synonymous, and where regional trajectories of decline are deeply heterogeneous, deserves in-depth analysis, in comparison with the French case.

The aim is to grasp the political consequences of deindustrialization not only through changes in parties, systems of representation and voting behavior, but also through the legacies and memories that industrial decline leaves in individual trajectories, families and territories, and through their transmission from one generation to the next, which help shape political cultures and forms of belonging. In many territories, industrial growth relied on the arrival of workers from other regions or other countries, whose descendants now face the decline of a system around which their families' settlement was built: deindustrialization thus also calls into question their belongings and their relationship to politics.

The fundamental question concerns the long-term effects of deindustrialization on post-industrial societies:

- What happens when the factory loses its function as a social institution, beyond its productive dimension?
- How do political cultures, collective belongings and forms of participation change?
- What legacies does deindustrialization leave in territorial identities, and how do these legacies shape political attitudes and commitments?
- How do these processes affect the generations that have not directly experienced industrial work, but inherit its economic, cultural and symbolic consequences, including in their relationship to politics?

Thematic strands

The title of the conference invites us to question the borders, in both the literal and the figurative sense, that deindustrialization shifts, blurs or brings to light. The conference is organized around three thematic strands:

1. **Political cultures and the reconfiguration of cleavages**: the transformation of parties, systems of representation and political cultures in regions affected by industrial decline, with particular attention to long-term trajectories running from the crisis of traditional working-class cultures to today's electoral realignments.
2. **Changing affiliations and belongings: class, migration and generations**: the recomposition of class belongings, community ties and identity narratives in territories where the factory has ceased to be the main organizer of social and symbolic life, with particular attention to the impact of deindustrialization on the descendants of migrants who came to work in major industrial areas, now marked by decline (second and third generations).
3. **Worlds of work, industrial cultures and territories in transition**: the effects of deindustrialization on firms that remain in operation, work practices, the evolution of skills and know-how, relations with unions and the political sphere, and workers' relationships with their territories; the transformation of spaces marked by industrial decline (industrial basins, single-industry towns, working-class neighborhoods, brownfield and repurposed sites) and the resulting territorial inequalities, between centers and peripheries (real and perceived), between global metropolises and declining territories. Particular attention will be paid to the transitions that deindustrialization sets in motion (productive and urban reconversion, tertiarization, ecological and energy transition) and their effects on local territories and communities.

While giving priority to Italian and French social and political history, the conference welcomes contributions that broaden the comparative perspective to other geographical contexts and other disciplines (sociology, anthropology, geography, political science), in keeping with the interdisciplinary vocation of the INTRA project. The aim is twofold: first, to help bring Italian historiography and social sciences closer to the international debate on deindustrialization; second, to provide a space for exchange that connects the most recent research carried out in Piedmont and Italy with the conceptual tools developed within the major comparative international projects now under way.

How to participate

Proposals should be submitted as an abstract of 200 - 250 words, together with a short biography, to intra@fondazioneeinaudi.it by 31 December 2026. Proposals may be submitted in English, French or Italian. Results will be communicated by 31 January 2027. The organizers will arrange the booking of travel and accommodation for selected participants.