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Resumen: El oeste de las Montañas Rocosas, rico en minerales – en el oeste de los Estados Unidos – ha sido durante mucho tiempo la fuente principal de recursos energéticos para los Estados Unidos. El desarrollo de ese recurso ha dado a la región de las Montañas Rocosas beneficios y también una descomposición de la comunidad. El autor se enfoca en un área de las Montañas Rocosas – Wyoming – y se centra en cómo la dependencia del desarrollo energético de este estado rural ha afectado a la cultura, los valores y la política gubernamental del estado. Los altibajos de la economía del mineral que Wyoming ha sufrido a través de los años se relacionan con otros auge y recesiones similares en el siglo XX que han tenido lugar en la región de las Montañas Rocosas. Las historias de carácter oral realizadas por el autor y otros en el American Heritage Center de la Universidad de Wyoming formarán la base de los materiales principales para este trabajo.

Abstract: The mineral-rich Rocky Mountain West—in the western United States—has long been a major energy resource provider for the United States, and the development of that resource has brought benefits as well as community breakdown to the Rocky Mountain region. The author focuses on one area of the Rockies—Wyoming—and zeroes in on how this rural state’s dependence on energy development has affected the state’s culture, mores, and governmental policy. The minerals-based economic boom-and-bust that Wyoming has endured through the years is put into context of other similar twentieth century booms and busts that have occurred in the Rocky Mountain region. Oral histories performed by the author and others from the University of Wyoming American Heritage Center will be the major source materials for this paper.
IT’S BITTERSWEET

“For me, it’s bittersweet because I can sit here with this gorgeous clinic. I have every tool. My pocket is full of change. But I really cry because we don’t have our sweet little quiet town.”¹ Nurse practitioner and Pinedale, Wyoming, native Leslie Rozier spoke those words in a 2010 oral history interview in which she reacted to energy development impact to her small community in western Wyoming. The minerals industry has been a blessing and a curse to the Rocky Mountain West, a land of vast amounts of oil, coal, uranium, and natural gas. On the one hand, the industry has brought great wealth, vigor, and employment to static communities with little commerce; on the other, it has brought environmental damage, unwelcome social changes, population growth that is often unplanned and uncontrolled, and a loss of whole town economies when industry pulls out and moves on. What makes a community a “boom town?” An examination of causes and reactions to a high rate of industrial development is helpful in defining why a community becomes a boom town.

ANATOMY OF A BOOM TOWN

The contemporary Rocky Mountain boom town is typically an already established small community, usually rural, agricultural, homogenous, and relatively static. Development of the mineral resources is done at a forceful pace to maximize profits of energy companies while the commodity prices are high. There is often a striking contrast between the size of these large development projects and the small host communities, especially in the construction phase; the project work force is often ten to twenty times larger than the indigenous population.² A boom town is born when the number of newcomers generates a population growth of at least 15 percent.³

The booms of the 1970s led a number of western-based sociologists to research and publish on the sweeping changes appearing in the towns. They noticed some repeating trends, such as stages of boom town impacts—enthusiasm, uncertainty, near-panic, and problem-solving⁴—and the belief that the boom would bring a wave of prosperity in which everyone would benefit.⁵ Indeed, there is a larger customer base for local businesses and an energizing spirit of entrepreneurship; more jobs are available for local residents as well as newcomers with higher pay resulting from competition with the nearby energy industry. This effect has been described by Boomtown Blues author Andrew Gulliford as “boomtown euphoria,” a time of perceived open-ended opportunity.⁶

Yet, because the incoming population arrives so quickly and in such large numbers, there are typical detrimental effects, including infrastructure shortages with accompanying revenue lag to remedy the deficiencies, law enforcement unprepared for crime rate increases,⁷ small businesses competing for workers with the better paying energy companies, and a new set of people coming into the community who are different in their beliefs, values, norms, experiences, and lifestyles. The latter can lead to “boomtown bifurcation,” which is marked by old-timer versus newcomer, rural versus urban, old versus young, and westerner versus easterner.⁸ Conversely, the immediacy of the problems can lead to a gratifying experience for some white collar community members, a situation Gulliford calls the “crucible effect,” in which old-timers and newcomers alike are forced to develop their professional expertise under stressful

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⁴Ibid.
conditions. Stressful, yes, but working in boom towns that desperately need their services can be both personally and professional rewarding.9

What role has industry played in mitigating boom town effects? In the 1970s, American sociologist John S. Gilmore saw a major problem as one of consistency. Some energy firms were leaders in community preservation and development.10 Partly as a result of 1960s and 1970s boom town fiascos, many of the larger energy companies realized by the 1980s—some reluctantly—that they must assume responsibility for repercussions their operators had on small communities. The industry’s public relations arm emphasized the vision of a vigorous, activated community and supported this vision by organizing and attending public meetings, encouraging corporate employees to quickly become involved in civic activities, and working with financial institutions and others to arrange business agreements to help insure strong political support among local businesses.11

21ST CENTURY ENERGY BOOM: THE SUBLETTE COUNTY EXPERIENCE.

Sublette County is located in western Wyoming in a scenic wildlife transition zone from high mountains to sagebrush steppe. Eighty percent of the county is public land administered by two United States government agencies—the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and the Forest Service, with some land held by private owners and by the State of Wyoming.12 Sublette County communities were built on the cattle industry since settlement began in the 1880s and the ranching ethos survives today.13 The two main towns are the “north county” community of Pinedale and the “south county” town of Big Piney, located about thirty-five miles (fifty-six km) apart.

A 21ST CENTURY BOOM BEGINS

Although Big Piney experienced a short-lived boom in the late 1970s, Pinedale remained relatively unscathed, retaining its small town culture of ranching, mountaineering, and frontierism.14 But a new hydraulic fracturing method introduced in 1995 was to unlock great stores of natural gas in subsurface Sublette County to a degree heretofore unseen. Hydraulic fracturing is a technique that creates fractures extending from the well bore into rock formations to allow gas to travel more easily from the rock pores, where the gas is trapped, to the production well. Typically, fractures are created by pumping a mixture of water, proppants (sand or ceramic beads), and chemicals into the rock formation. Most of the fracturing and natural gas activity in Sublette County occurred on BLM land, not privately held lands. By 2000, the largest of Sublette County’s gas fields, the Pinedale Anticline, was one the most productive fields in the continental United States. Gas reserves in that field alone are estimated at up to 40 trillion cubic feet. That is enough to serve the entire natural gas demand in the United States for twenty-two months.15

An initial excitement driven by anticipated revenue gripped a number of residents, according to Linda Baker, coordinator of a Pinedale-based environmental advocacy group. “It appeared that [Sublette County ranchers] really didn’t believe it could happen to us,” Baker stated, “and they really didn’t find it unwelcome, either. [They] kept asking, ‘How much money do you get from royalties?’ and ‘Gee, I wouldn’t mind having a well on my place.’”16 Gulliford’s “boomtown euphoria” was evident among some Pinedale residents, but more measured excitement mixed with apprehension existed within town administration. By 1996, then Pinedale Mayor Rose Skinner was receiving visits from industry representatives who were

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14 ERG, 2008.
“trying to establish a friendly attitude in the community.” At least one company representative warned her of the impending impacts. Despite the warning, Skinner found she could do little due to the characteristic boom town revenue lag. Severance tax returns from industry had not yet come in, and grants and loans from the state took time to write, process, and receive. Skinner submitted the town’s first one million dollar loan application for water line improvements, a controversial move that earned her criticism from community members. As native Laurie Latta stated, “This is a county that really prides itself on getting it done without any help from anybody.” Even when money began to arrive, the need was not known. Mayor’s assistant, Ward Wise, recalled, “... everybody was asking the same question, ‘How many people are coming in?’ And no one had the answer to that.”

**IMPACTS GROW**

The classic boom town impacts seen in other Rocky Mountain boom towns began to manifest themselves in Sublette County, mostly in Pinedale, by the early 2000s with large population increases and overburdened schools. Housing prices inflated by about $24,000 per year beginning in 2000; at the same time, rentals rose in price more than 90 percent. Newcomers inhabited hotel rooms, campgrounds, apartments, rented homes, and a former man-camp, or they parked their camper trailers at the homes of residents who charged an illegal fee for water and electricity hookup. Though traditionally a low-crime county, property crime rose 56 percent, violent crime increased 106 percent, and juvenile offenses rose 233 percent. The long shifts in the gas fields led to more stimulant use, particularly the devastating drug methamphetamine. Other effects typical of boom towns also occurred, such as the need for more law enforcement officers, pressure on medical services, a boost in building permits, and infrastructure strains. Sublette County changed from being primarily economically based on agriculture and tourism to being the largest gas-producing county in Wyoming, producing 44 percent of the state’s natural gas by 2006.

**BOOM TOWN TRAITS, SUBLETTE-STYLE**

Bifurcation showed up starkly when a natural gas field service company proposed a facility in Pinedale to house employees. “It was a huge issue in the community,” said Laurie Latta. “You’re talking about a man-camp in town. They felt there were going to be a lot of workers, and we were going to have problems with drinking and cruising by the high school, and everything that you worry about with a man-camp...And that turned out not to be the case.” Pinedale Mayor Stephen Smith added, “[The company] put in a lot of qualifications. No overnight guests. No alcohol. No drugs. So they really crossed their t’s in making it as acceptable to townspeople as they could. But, it was still controversial.” Yet, there was also a sense of satisfaction about the newcomers. Longtime Pinedale resident Cally McKee saw, approvingly, a “whole ‘nother group of people hanging around town in dirty pickup trucks. I don’t think in a bad way. I think some people might say in a bad way, but, for me, it’s this vitality and this change of who we are.”

Pinedale prized its reputation as the “Beverly Hills” of the county in contrast with less scenic Big Piney. Touristson their way to nearby Grand Teton and Yellowstone national parks were encouraged to pause in

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18 Ibid.
21 ERG, 2008.
23 ERG, 2008.
24 Ibid.
25 Ibid.
26 Latta, 2010.
Pinedale to enjoy the town’s picturesque surroundings. But Pinedale’s longstanding tourist appeal was butting up against the boom. Sublette County Chamber of Commerce Director Terrie Swift complained that “transient workers [were] staying in hotels so that presented a problem because how do we attract tourists when nobody has rooms available?” Outfitter Mike Wade put his finger on what tourists and residents alike expect from Pinedale’s environment: “We pride ourselves on the fact that we’re wide open spaces and clean air and just backcountry and wilderness and they come here and see industrialization on the scale that you might see in Houston. And so it’s really changed the concept, context, of what Wyoming means to a lot of people.”

The crucible effect was also in evidence in Sublette County. The prospect of fresh challenges inspired Stephen Smith to run for mayor in 2006 in the midst of the boom, because he felt the town was “behind the proverbial eight ball” due to boom impacts. Also, he relished the tasks involved in “working on it the best that we could.” Ward Wise went directly from being an overworked mayor’s assistant to being a school board member during the school district’s most demanding time. When asked if the boom had been good for the community, Wise provided a response that wholly corresponded to Gulliford’s crucible effect: “I think it was a great exercise for all of us to have gone through to expand ourselves...Push that envelope and do things and be involved in some decisions that we probably didn’t think that we were capable of doing at one point.”

Although rather late in the boom, a grass-roots group was formed in 2006 to meet impacts head-on. The county had already made an insightful decision to hire a socioeconomic analyst. The analyst’s findings translated into the first tasks of what would become the “Sublette Community Partnership,” a unique enterprise connecting Sublette County, the towns of Pinedale and Big Piney, the five major industry producers, and the University of Wyoming. The Partnership’s coordinator, Laurie Latta, expressed pride that the group “really did make some inroads,” especially in the areas of housing and an after-school program. In fact, Latta expressed a wish to improve on and advocate the Partnership model in future boom communities.

DOWNTURN

The communities of Sublette County experienced a slump when the worldwide economy declined in 2008. Although the county’s economic woes were not as drastic as those that hit Colorado’s Piceance Creek Basin, Pinedale still experienced troubles. Old-timers and newcomers alike found themselves stretched financially. According to Pinedale banker Bill Kleven, “People just got overextended in that they felt the good economy was going to extend for a longer period of time than it did. So they bought a house, or moved into a bigger house, but they also had a new [car] that they had to pay on and maybe they bought an all-terrain vehicle or a boat.” Surprisingly, however, the downturn provided personal and professional benefits to a number of Pinedale residents. Although Mayor Stephen Smith was saddened by the foreclosures, the town administrators “needed a chance to gather ourselves.” Office supply shop owner Clint Gilchrist lost thirty percent of his business, but he welcomed the slowdown as a time to hire a good employee instead of “worrying about we have to have a body.” Long-time resident Ann Noble, whose family runs a ranch and a bed and breakfast, welcomed the pause for community self-evaluation. The boom, she said, “...was a huge frenzy to make as much money as fast and as hard as possible. There was a

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33 Wise, 2010.
34 Latta, 2010.
35 Ibid.
36 Ibid.
38 Smith, 2010.
lot of greed in this community. Huge sense of entitlement that if the gas companies are here, they owe us this if they’re going to impose on us.” The downturn, in her view, allowed Pineda le to take a breath and reexamine community values such as friendliness to one’s neighbor and charity to those in need.40

BOOM EXPECTATIONS: NIOBRAZA OIL PLAY IN SOUTHEASTERN WYOMING

So far, we have examined a community that has already encountered boom-generating conditions. So, what is it like to experience a potential energy boom? How does a community prepare? As noted at the beginning of this paper, sociologists studying the 1970s energy boom noticed repeating boom town trends—enthusiasm, uncertainty, near-panic, and problem-solving—and the belief that the boom would bring a wave of prosperity in which everyone would benefit. We have seen how these trends identified more than thirty years ago manifested in Sublette County. Are there any differences today after all the lessons learned due to the continuous boom and bust cycles in Wyoming’s history?

In 2009, Wyoming newspapers began reporting a glut of landmen researching ownership of “mineral rights” in county courthouses in the southeastern corner of the state. Unlike Sublette County in western Wyoming, where land and minerals underlying it are mostly federally-owned, this part of the state is typically privately owned lands and minerals and, to a much lesser extent, state-owned. Landmen are individuals who research, negotiate, and secure acquisition or divestiture of mineral rights. Ownership of mineral rights entitles a person or organization to explore and produce the rocks, minerals, oil, and gas found at or below the surface of a tract of land; owners of mineral rights can sell, lease, gift, or bequest those rights to others. Mineral rights have primacy over surface rights, and, if good faith efforts fail with the surface owners, access to the minerals can still be gained through posting a bond. The surface owners can protest the amount of the bond, but cannot deny the right of entry.41 All of these factors can cause tension between surface owners and mineral rights owners, if they are not one and the same.

Southeastern Wyoming includes Platte, Goshen, and Laramie counties. Platte and Goshen counties are farming country and have been relatively untouched by oil and gas exploration. Thus, by Wyoming standards, they are poor cousins to counties where minerals are developed vigorously. Laramie County includes the City of Cheyenne, which is the state’s largest city, as well as the state capitol and home of local, county, state, and federal agencies. Comparing resident wealth in the counties, in the 2000 census, Goshen County had a median income of $32,228, Platte County $33,866, and Laramie County $39,607.42 Although not affluent, Laramie County residents have an edge on their Platte and Goshen neighbors. This income inequity played a part in reactions to a potential oil boom in this part of the state.

PLEASE GIVE US A BOOM—PLATTE AND GOSHEN COUNTIES

“…Platte and Goshen County are the two poorest counties in Wyoming. We’re appreciative of any kind of economic development that comes our way, so we’re not real picky,” said Thane Ashenhurst, farmer, business owner, and native of Platte County.43 Ashenhurst’s summation of Goshen and Platte counties’ reactions to potential oil development did not speak to every resident’s reaction, but it did speak to a number of viewpoints, which parallel Boomtown Blue’s author Gulliford’s “boomtown euphoria” trend. This area of the state is unfamiliar with the energy industry, as noted by Platte County Economic Development Director Dan Brecht, “…if it isn’t a hay truck or something like that, we just didn’t know what it was. So suddenly we were seeing these vehicles from Oklahoma and Texas and different parts of Wyoming where the energy sector had been for many years…we’re seeing them here in a place where it’s never been before.”44 Residents here have not experienced the sudden onrush of population that can lead

to detriments such as bifurcation, strains on infrastructure, alteration of town persona, or the benefits, such as accumulated wealth, all of which have consequences on the community psyche. It is not that they were totally unaware of these phenomena, but, like Sublette County residents during the early stages of that area’s natural gas boom, a number of Platte and Goshen county residents did not appear to internalize all of the potential outcomes.

The euphoria extended largely to their physical environment as well, although with a bit of caution. When asked for his thoughts about hydraulic fracturing on his family’s farmland, Thane Ashenhurst related assuredly, “We’re not bothered by it. The process creates, or widens, natural fissures down there to a distance of hundreds of feet, not thousands of feet. So my family is not concerned about our water.” Goshen County farmer and then County Commissioner Ross Newman sounded a note of concern, but, overall, felt comfortable with the state’s ability to monitor oil drilling, “I think the regulatory environment is actually pretty good in Wyoming to minimize the problems. I’m convinced that it can be done in an environmentally safe and sensitive way, but there’s no question there have been problems caused by fracking, primarily because somebody screwed up.” Same with Platte County rancher and commissioner Dan Kirkbride: “…the [Wyoming] Oil and Gas Conservation Commission will tell you that there’s never been a problem in the state, and I tend to be somebody who trusts government agencies like that. But, obviously the stakes are high.”

Most business owners in Platte and Goshen counties were of the same mind as Platte County realtor Mona Sherard and Goshen County restaurant owner Larry Grimes. To Sherard, energy development, with ensuing population and revenue growth, spelled an increase of amenities. Sherard noted, “Wheatland [in Platte County] is a small town, 3,500 approximately, a lot of agriculture. And we’ve not been able to enjoy some of the new infrastructure and the rec centers and everything that a lot of the other communities have been able to obtain because of the minerals.” For Grimes, the economy in Goshen County was abysmal and needed a boost. He said, “I was talking to another store owner and he said he had talked to a couple of different ones that they’ve done two or three days without even a customer walking in the door.” For Torrington [Goshen County] Mayor Mike Varney, the town of about 6,500 residents needed to move beyond its current dependence on agriculture, “…people have really changed their thinking because of the fact they know that we need to diversify.” For many citizens of Platte and Goshen counties, oil development spelled a step out of poverty and chance to play in the same league as Wyoming counties renowned for mineral income and its economic boon to their coffers.

Anticipation and excitement about potential oil development prompted quick action in southeastern Wyoming. Fresh in the mind of county officials and citizens were boom effects on Pinedale from only about five years ago. Unlike most Sublette County administrators, city and county personnel in southeastern Wyoming were anxious to learn from the experiences of others. Panels consisting of Sublette County officials, local geologists, oil company representatives, lawyers familiar with oil lease negotiations and contracts, and state experts in groundwater and surface water issues were quickly brought together by economic development personnel to offer educational seminars in Cheyenne, Wheatland, and Torrington. Southeastern Wyoming economic development director Anja Bendel was the main organizer of these seminars and spoke of their purpose. She said, “People left with more information than they came with,

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46 Ashenhurst, 2011.
49 Sherard, 2011.
and there’s still going to be concerns about my road, my water, my school. But what we wanted to do was get people educated up front so that it doesn’t blind-side them and...we can be emotionally prepared.”53

However, not all of Bendel’s attempts to prepare the southeastern communities for a potential boom were met with enthusiasm. Bendel and Platte County Economic Development Director Dan Brecht sought funding for a housing survey followed by planned subdivisions, but, with oil companies only performing exploration work and with no definite drilling in progress, residents of Platte and Goshen counties did not want the problems encountered by previous Wyoming boom towns that had overbuilt and dealt with unwanted infrastructure when the inevitable bust occurred. It was obvious that Platte and Goshen county residents were not oblivious to Wyoming’s boom and bust phenomena.54 This was apparently one lesson learned from previous booms.

Enthusiasm mixed with a dose of caution existed in Platte and Goshen counties as they faced a potential energy boom. Uncertainty was evident as well. Officials in these counties were in an awkward position. They received advice from residents of previous boom towns to prepare and prepare quickly, but they were not sure exactly what they were preparing for. No one knew if the Niobrara Oil Play—the name that it picked up based on the formation.................—in southeastern Wyoming would take off and, if it did, how soon and how many workers and others to prepare for.

**LARAMIE COUNTY—YOU CAN KEEP YOUR BOOM**

“You have more of a donut effect, and that’s around Cheyenne. As you get around Cheyenne, there’re fewer people that want drilling. They tend to be the more educated folks, the people who have moved here from out of state who have bought their five acres of heaven or forty acres of heaven, and they don’t want anybody doing anything to it,” noted one longtime Cheyenne resident.55 Unlike rural Platte and Goshen counties, Laramie County, especially Cheyenne, is largely urban. Subdivisions spiral around Cheyenne’s city limits as more affluent residents seek peaceful surroundings and better viewsheds than can be found within the city itself. Also, unlike Platte and Goshen communities in which three or more family generations may reside, Cheyenne is a city of transplants who come to the city as professionals employed in the many government offices and as military personnel who work at the nearby U.S. Air Force base.

As news of a possible oil boom spread in 2009, Laramie County officials, unlike their Platte and Goshen counterparts, reacted more commonly with “near-panic” than with enthusiasm. Although having a larger base to absorb incoming workers, there was a real concern about city aesthetics. For example, as in Platte and Goshen counties, Laramie County economic development personnel and business owners were very interested in welcoming the oil industry to their backyard, but they ran up against resistance from a Cheyenne city planning office more interested in visual appeal and long-term use than relatively quick profits from oil development. An idea for an industrial park near the Cheyenne city limits was met with resistance from the Cheyenne city planner. While the developer of the industrial park sought a place for oil-related companies to park heavy equipment, the city planner saw an opportunity to improve the land for future use by including sidewalks, a thoroughfare, landscaping, and picnic tables. In the eyes of City of Cheyenne Planner Matt Ashby, “To make sure we’re adequately planning for the future, we need to look at what could happen to this property and this area should the energy economy change to something else. And so these parcels of land, while maybe considered today for oil-serving industry, very easily could convert in the next few years to some other type of business that may have more needs for pedestrian

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54 Bendel, Brecht, 2011.
access.” The industrial park’s developer saw it differently, "Who wants to sit and have a picnic with their family while gravel trucks are driving by?"\textsuperscript{57}

Also apprehensive were surface land owners in Laramie County who did not retain mineral rights. Because many of these residents were new to the area and unfamiliar with Wyoming’s split estate laws separating mineral rights from surface rights, they had never thought to buy mineral rights when purchasing their land. Consequently, people owning the mineral rights sold leases for the oil underground, while surface rights owners found themselves with the undesirable prospect of having an oil well drilled in their vicinity without their concurrence. A homeowners group formed in one of Cheyenne’s rural subdivisions to create a unified front when dealing with the various companies seeking access to their land. The president of the Laramie County Surface Owners Association, Jim Ruby, recalled, “Most of us were caught totally unaware with what was going on. It wasn’t until sometime in late 2010 that homeowners in our little subdivision were approached by landmen to discuss surface agreements. It became evident to the subdivision that there are people out there who might think drilling on a 10-acre lot might actually be worth their while.”\textsuperscript{58} The homeowners’ concern was not only with loss of privacy, but also with hydraulic fracturing and its potential effect on their groundwater. Ruby related, “…in our subdivisions, you have no water, that house you just built and put all money into, it’s worthless. Unless you can get the City of Cheyenne to start running pipes out there, somebody contaminates the water that we’re using for our domestic supply, we’re hosed.”\textsuperscript{59}

Although this paper provides a snapshot of the propensities discerned in Platte, Goshen, and Laramie counties and cannot capture every nuance of the communities’ experiences, it does provide a general trend for resident opinions and worldview. It would be surmise to say how a fully developed oil boom would adjust the attitudes of officials and residents in Laramie, Platte, and Goshen counties. The Niobrara Oil Play is currently in a lull in southeastern Wyoming. If an oil boom does develop, however, the trajectory indicates it would be similar, at least in Platte and Goshen counties, to trends already identified by sociologists. The more interesting case would be Cheyenne, a city with a stable economic base. More oral history interviews are anticipated if an oil boom comes to southeastern Wyoming.

**CONCLUSION**

The already well-grooved pattern that American sociologist John Gilmore outlined in 1976 was in evidence in the 21\textsuperscript{st} century Wyoming boom areas or prospective boom areas: enthusiasm, uncertainty, near-panic, until, finally, in the case of Sublette County, problem-solving. The root cause of the boom impacts, a forceful pace of development, does not seem to be a point of discussion—the pace is simply an expected part of the development scenario. An energy industry employee explained the philosophy as, “You can’t dink around and drill one well a year. That doesn’t make anybody any money. So, if you’re going to develop it, you’re going to develop it and it’s going to be a big deal.”\textsuperscript{60} Government policy, such as the implementation of the 2005 Energy Policy, which advocated U.S. energy independence, exacerbated the situation in Sublette County. High natural gas prices also drove Sublette’s boom, as high oil prices drove mineral leasing in southeastern Wyoming.

As in the past, the number of workers expected to arrive was hazy. Industry did not seem to have the answer, especially in southeastern Wyoming, which has only experienced the mineral exploration stage of the process. The State of Wyoming, although knowledgeable of boom effects, appeared to leave it up to the individual counties to handle the issues. Overall, in Wyoming, it appears that the boom commonalities of overwhelmingly rapid pace of development and large influx of quickly arriving population, or prospect

\textsuperscript{57}Graham, Brad, interviewed by Leslie Waggener, 2011. University of Wyoming’s American Heritage Center’s Wyoming Energy Boom Niobrara Oil Play Oral History Project, Accession Number 12578.
\textsuperscript{59}Ibid.
\textsuperscript{60}McKee, 2010.
thereof, appear to produce commonalities of community reaction, no matter where the boom occurs or when. This is not to say unique reactions do not exist, but a more urbane Pinedale of 2003 and Cheyenne of 2011 react in the same general manner as a rough-and-tumble Rocky Mountain boom town of 1975. The tension between the thirst for mineral development revenue and the need to look after community well-being and the natural environment still exists in Wyoming, and probably will until the state’s economy diversifies. Pinedale resident Ward Wise sums up the state’s boom ambivalence: “We’re holding our cowboy hats in one hand and our fist-full of dollars in the other. We’ll be asking ourselves, ‘Were we better off?’”61

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The Politics of Producing Silk, Owning Gold, and Interacting with the State in a South Indian.

Nithya Joseph  
(India):

Resumen: Este documento se basa en entrevistas sobre historias de la vida real con inversores en una ciudad que produce seda en el sur de India, que fueron reunidos mediante el trazado de adquisición, tenencia y liquidación de oro. Las entrevistas se han resumido para crear un relato narrativo de una historia particular de continuaciones y los cambios en la precariedad del trabajo en dicha ciudad en el período posterior a la liberalización de los mercados de la seda.

El objeto material, el oro, fue elegido porque es a la vez una importante reserva de valor en la India, y un material que se valora de múltiples e interconectadas maneras. Además de tener un papel funcional como un depósito de valor, las políticas de necesidad que motivaron la adquisición y el intercambio de oro, para las ceremonias religiosas y eventos del ciclo de vida, le dan un valor espiritual y relacional. Por lo tanto, estos objetos son vistos como indicadores que evocan recuerdos, y finanzas con el tiempo, que están incrustados con los detalles de los contextos socio - políticos en los que se producen.

Las hipotecas del oro forman una gran parte del capital de trabajo de una empresa de gestión familiar, la economía de la seda basada en la industria casera que ha sido estudiada - y una proporción significativa de los activos del capital y trabajo se llevan a cabo en forma de oro, a menudo regulados por las normas sociales. La variación de los niveles de activos absolutos y de la compleja política de propiedad explicada en estas historias reales basadas en el oro rompe las categorías polarizadas de trabajo y el capital, revelando en cambio un espectro - desde personas que trabajan en condiciones muy vulnerables a los que su inversión se traduce en la acumulación de riqueza. Además sugieren que el bienestar es el resultado de una relación triangular entre el acceso a los recursos, incluidas las necesidades básicas como el agua, desde el estado local; la estabilidad en las relaciones sexuales y otros tipos de relaciones reproductivas; y la capacidad de acumular capital; y los cambios correspondientes a cada uno han interactuado con el otro desde la liberalización.

Abstract: This paper draws from narratives of lives of stake-holders in a South Indian silk producing town—which were gathered by tracing the acquisition, ownership, and divestment of gold—towards telling a particular story of the economy of the town in the period following the liberalisation of the markets for silk.

Gold serves as an aid to remembering personal histories, and the nuance of the narratives of memories around gold evoked is seen to contextualise the politics of gold ownership, embedding it in the context of everyday life and offering insight into the complex ways in which social institutional affiliations interact with each other and regulate the economy. The gold-based stories are seen to offer a prism-lens which, by revealing how intersections of affiliation relate to capital accumulation, break down categories of labour and capital, the state and citizens suggest that it’s more useful to think about the economy as a spectrum of social, political, and economic power. This spectrum allows us to
appreciate the diversity of the impact of the opening of the market for imported raw silk on domestic raw-silk producers and that historicity and narrative allows understanding of the complexities, continuities, and changes in the sector.

The suggestion is that this approach – of understanding the materiality of objects and sites of capital accumulation in relation to the spatiality of a socially regulated economy – allows an understanding of urban space in terms of everyday expressions and negotiations of power that is crucial to understand the lives of the majority of citizens of the Indian democracy who are both outside the formal regulative space of the state and very much embedded in it.
Tall green and white boards that read, “Welcome to the Silk City of Karnataka” line the approach to Ramanagaram, and indeed the activity of the silk-processing industries, which have grown with the town over two centuries, spreads across the town, involving at least half of it’s hundred thousand residents and contributes to the pulse of the town - but with little of the grandeur that the name conjures.

On the main road into the town from Bangalore, the capital city of the state, is lined with numerous sericulture department offices, including research units, cocoon testing units, and a regional silk board, occupying the stretch between the Kendra Bhavan which houses larger town administration and the state run cocoon market. From the city bus-stop at the central crossroads of the town, the trucks, private-buses, three-wheel Tempo-Travellers all carrying silk cocoons to nearby cocoon market are visible. Cocoon supplies come from nearby villages but also from all over the state and even from the neighbouring states of Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu and Maharashtra earning it the moniker ‘Cosmopolitan cocoon market’ and making it the largest cocoon market in Asia, with an average of forty tonnes of cocoons being traded there every day in an open auction. From the tall gates of the market, it’s possible to discern the mounds of yellow and white cocoons and the groups of silk-reelers waiting to make their bids; the all male gathering is proliferate with the white prayer caps and long beards of Muslim entrepreneurs. Outside the market are another set of transporters waiting to carry cocoon loads to the production unit by which they’ve been bought. Some transporters load the gunney sacks, each holding thirty to forty kilos, into three-wheel rickshaws but the majority hoist the sacks on to their heads and backs and make their way through the town on foot or on a bicycle. Balancing two or three sacks, the transporters negotiate the crowded fruit and vegetable market, crossing the long cement bridge that the Arkavati river once flowed under, passing the narrow central shopping area - where a few south Indian restaurants serve meals, a cluster of twenty to thirty small jewelry shops sell ornaments and give credit against pawned gold, and others sell steel vessels, bright salwaar khamzees - and turning off on to the arterial roads. Here they cross the colourful two-storey houses, with facades that are built onto the edge of the road, from which the whirring of silk-twisting machines can be heard, and the garage-turned-godowns where various forms of silk waste are sorted and processed. Shortly after this stacks of firewood, used to power the furnaces used to boil the cocoons, appear on the streets indicating that they’ve reached the silk-reeling units. As they continue further, the two-storey buildings give way to squat one-storey structures, many of which now have high piles of fire wood at their doors and skeins of knotted silk-jute drying on their roofs.

They may move out of the central town area to the Dalit settlement on the western side of the town - or they might continue passed the pocket where chai and samosa stalls share walls with mechanic workshops manufacturing and repairing silk-reeling machinery, beyond the building that houses the Youth Urdu library and the Beedi Workers Welfare association, down the road leading to the railway station and across the tracks to Yarabnagar and Rehmaniyanagar where again there are numerous reeling units. Further on towards the outskirts of the town are a hand-full of factories that produce spun silk from the reeling waste but these transporters don’t need to go so far. Once they drop of their load they return to the market to collect another and between them cover over a thousand small home-based reeling units that cover the southern half of the town, spreading across the region from the main road along which the cocoon market and other state sericulture departments are located, almost to the edge of the ring of hills that surround the town. The majority of the thousand or more production units are run by Muslims – under a hundred units are run by either Tamilian or Kannadiga Scheduled Caste entrepreneurs whose firms are located in two pockets on in the east and another in the west of the town. Labour also lives in these areas – often segregated by community.

These reeling units may employ any of three types of technology exist for silk reeling the region - the hand charka which was extensively used in the early days of the industry in the 19th Century but has now remerged in the town; the filature or cottage basin set up, which was introduced and promoted by the state and the World Bank from the 1960s to the late 1980s; and finally the new automatic units imported from China also subsidized by the state. Each of these units differs in terms of capital investment, labour requirements, volume and quality of output, and energy consumption.
The hand charka requires the reeler to turn the spindle by hand – and the rough yarn produced is used to make raw silk cloth. The cottage basin consists of a water tank heated by a furnace, which has a series of open points - reellers are seated on the tank at the open points. Reellers put cocoons into the boiling water, separate silk threads and direct them to a reel located above the same water tank. A crude system of belts and motors turn the spindles and free up the reeler to be able to work with twenty or thirty cocoons at a time at a location further away from the very hot furnace, but they work with hands in warm water for long hours to separate threads out and produce a finer silk thread. In the automatic units – two presently function and fifty more have been sanctioned and are in the process of being set-up – the lifting of cocoons is done by machine arms and the work of directing cocoons by hand, which causes permanent cuts and blisters on the hands of those that do this work, is eliminated.

Silk-reeling entrepreneurs, silk-twisting entrepreneurs, and agents in the town, frequent each others’ homes on social visits as friends and relations, and also when they need to buy or sell silk. Typically the buyer will inspect the raw silk to determine the quality and buyer and seller will haggle to decide on a price that could be slightly higher or slightly lower than the market value. Once a sale is made the silk will be weighed and carried to it’s next destination. If it is bought by a silk twisting unit it will need to be further processed in the town on a series of machines which twist and combine silk threads to increase their tensile strength, the twisted silk is rewound and bundled into packages, ready to use on a loom – and buyers will take the silk to their factories for these processes. Often discussions of the state of the sector are a part of these meetings – and everyone echoes the sentiment that the plight of the silk-reelers is unenviable. On one occasion, a middle-aged raw-silk agent, a Dullali, from Bangalore and young man running his father’s silk-twisting unit were visiting the home of a silk-reeler. The middle-aged man gestured to the piles of cocoons spread out on the floor of the living room saying,  

“See how difficult it is, look at this couple, they’re waiting here with their cocoons ready to be reeled and it’s already five days after Eid but no one has come to work. One more day and the moths will emerge from the cocoon and they’ll be spoilt... which is a waste of about fifteen thousand rupees. This industry cannot survive anymore because of the labour problems!”

In fact, silk-reelers gamble every day that they invest working capital in the expensive cocoons and hope that they have adequate labour to reel the silk before the moths inside emerge and that they get a good enough price on the silk to make a profit. The difficult work of reeling – which is seen as polluting because it involves work with dead silk-worms – has historically involved vulnerable populations and the uncertainty in the sector has reinforced this vulnerability. However this vulnerability has been exacerbated since early 2001 after which the silk-reeling industry has witnessed dramatic fluctuations in price and demand following attempts by the central government to open the domestic market up to imports of raw silk, which come primarily from China. After 2001 large number of firms began to compete for good quality raw cocoons at auctions in the local market, pushing raw material prices up. Simultaneously demand for the finished product has wavered - sometimes very dramatically in response to changes in tariffs of imports in Chinese raw-silk- the shift from handloom to power-loom weaving makes the cheaper Chinese silk especially desirable because it is more suited to the new technology.

The cuts in the import tariffs on the better quality silk result in crashes in the price of locally produced raw silk. For example, in 2011 tariffs were cut from 30% to 5% and prices of domestic raw silk plunged overnight (Central Silk Board, Bangalore). Two years later the tariff was raised to 15% and prices returned to earlier levels. As a result profit margins have fluctuated widely and the volume of production varies constantly in an attempt to keep production at break-even levels.

Many families who lost assets during the two crashes associated with market liberalisation – in 2002 and 2012 – have not been able to recover them. A woman who has worked in her family silk production unit for over three decades said – “We’d bought expensive cocoons just before the crash, without knowing, and the silk prices suddenly fell to one-third of what we’d spent to produce it. We lost our capital. We had loans to
repay. We had no earnings. We didn’t eat for eight days. Then on the ninth day, my son took all our gold, made a knot of it, and carried it to the pawn shop – to pay old loans and take new ones. And to this day my daughter-in-law’s ears are still empty."

The market fluctuations have brought about deep uncertainty for labour and capital in the sector which influences their long-term decision making - not only as a calculation of changes in financial viability of the industry in the short-run but also regarding how the future of the industry is perceived. This uncertainty has a cyclical impact on the industry with labour market entrants seeking employment in other sectors and the shrinking labour force leaving capital more and more convinced that there is no future for the industry. Their decision-making, planning, and aspiration for their businesses are framed by the sense that they will operate production units until they can find an alternative.

The gloomy discussions of the future prospects of the industry are imbued with understandings of the complex history of the sector and the complicated politics of its markets – the consensus that the difficulties faced have magnified is universal. Yet the visual landscape of urban space is transforming, larger homes are being constructed everywhere, and particular increases in consumption seem to be visible. Shop facades are changing and a whole range of goods not previously available are appearing in the displays hung from door frames. For many years there was only one jewelry shop in the town – established in the 1950s, owned by someone from the north Indian business caste (Marwari), who still runs the biggest business in the town – there are now over forty shops in the area - provision stores and hardware shops have been converted by their owners to jewellery retail units - and individuals with other caste and religious affiliations have entered the industry.

The silk and gold economies in the town have been deeply linked for at least the last century and the links have deepened post-liberalisation- surpluses from silk production and savings from wages to labour are invested in gold, often mandated by social norms, and gold is divested as a source of capital for the silk industry and also by both labour and capital to manage unusual expenses but also often for subsistence. While the opening up for the market to Chinese silk has impacted the viability of the local industry, the national level opening up of the import market for gold has resulted in easier entry to gold retailing, and the broader influx of foreign investment and export-oriented production units and credit, including micro-finance, has lead to a shift of labour away from the silk industry and also to a many-fold increase in middle-class incomes which has pushed up demand for gold.

Gold shops offer diverse saving schemes- some allow clients to buy small amounts whenever you have money, at the market price that day, and claim jewellery worth the sum of those amounts at the end of a year. Individuals can also pawn gold at many of these shops. Banks and large private financial corporations which operate across the country are also present in the town now and offer express loans against gold; the gold cluster is as much a site for credit as it is for retailing, as much a site for dispossession or dis-accumulation as it is for accumulation.

A woman who married into a household with cottage basin factory, employing hired labour, before liberalization but now works a single hand-charka with her husband describes the transition –

"My father-in-law’s business was doing well when I first got married. There were six functioning reeling basins and he employed fifteen people. We used to have 25 kgs of sanna akki (fine rice) at any time, we used to cook for all the workers everyday. The women of the house never entered silk work, we had enough to do in the kitchen! ... Then when the prices fell we had big losses..."

Without having been asked about gold ownership, she explained:

"First my husband pawned my necklace for Rs. 20,000. Of that he spent 10,000 on cocoons, 8,000 for the delivery of my first child, and 2,000 for household expenses. Still he made no profits, so he pawned my thaali for 30,000 – we spent 25,000 of that on cocoons. So then how much was left? Five thousand - it went towards paying back other loans we had taken. Then a chit fund matured so he used that money to pay
back half the loan for the thaali – the necklace loan was too far-gone, the interest was too high, we decided to leave it. Then a second chit fund matured, for thirty thousand we were supposed to use the money to pay the rest for the necklace but I got dengue and was hospitalised – it cost 20,000 because they did a scan of my head, so how much was left? Ten thousand, we still needed five thousand more for the necklace so I took a gold loan from the bank for ten thousand – five thousand we used for the necklace, another thousand for interest to someone else, two thousand for my sons birthday and another two thousand when we had guests visiting…”

So in all as you can see we are making no profits from the business, only losses, and we are losing our gold in the process – not making new gold, not recovering gold we have, but owning less and less… I tell my husband he has no business sense, he keeps no accounts, I tell him to leave the finances to me and I’ll make him money, but he won’t listen!”

Across the street her neighbor, a distant cousin, tells a different story – of how her family lost gold after liberalisation, but is able to save, to accumulate, now while working as labour. She describes how her wedding gold was used to run a small reeling unit in which she and her husband worked until the liberalisation, after which they’ve both started working in other people’s units, but are now able to save –

“Soon after my marriage seventeen years ago my husband sold my thaali for capital for his hand charka unit. He made profits and bought it back for me, but then later when I had my daughter we had to keep her in the incubator for ten days, so we sold it again [we always sell gold, don’t pawn it, because my husband says why pay interest? You might as well get the full value for it and then you can always buy again later]. We haven’t bought another thaali – things were difficult because we stopped running our unit twelve years ago and started working as reeling labour. But my husband has been saving in chit funds and with that he bought me the earrings I’m wearing now, he’ll buy more for me, and my family in the times ahead.”

Another person in their neighborhood, a middle-aged man, who had sold his factory, which he earlier ran with hired labour, in the months following liberalisation, but has now invested in a new unit, which he runs with family labour, said bitterly –

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“Come and sit down if you like, and you can even have a cup of tea. But don’t come here to ask me about my filiature unit. I used to be a businessman, I employed ten people and fed them in my house everyday, but your people - the government - put me on the streets.

“After the silk prices fell in 2002, I was on the streets, I was forced to sell my six Rs. 16,000 cottage basins at Rs. 1,000 each and work as labour in some one else’s unit, I tried to make a business of selling onions on the street in Bangalore, I eventually ended up back here, bought another six basins at full price and am running my unit with family labour.”

“if I had one less teenage daughter I would move back to Bangalore, but I have three and what would I do with them there? I can’t send them out to work in public places, at least here they can work in the factory.

“I sold the earrings my wife gave her in 1996 when the prices were so low. I got 7,000 for them - and now they’d be worth more than one lakh. I went the other day to see if I could buy a tiny pair of earrings for my older daughter - nowhere as big as my wife’s - and they asked for 42,000!”

The paid labour force shrunk with the almost complete exit of child labour both as a result of enforcement by the labour department and perceived need for schooling - or at least to not expose children to the health damaging silk-reeling units, with young adult males traveling to nearby cities in search of work, and very much reduced in-migration as work in the sector is no longer as attractive. In the period following liberalisation financial difficulties have often resulted in more family members moving back to work in

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62 Gold chain given to a woman at the time of her marriage.
their units. In some units salary advances have been used to hold labour while maintaining this flexibility of output - keeping them in undesirable, low paid, and irregular work.

The narrative shared by a couple, who have both taken advances from employers, shows how reproductive pressures and health expenses can push labour to be very vulnerable in debt-based contracts. They say –

“Our five daughters were going to school, we wanted to educate them and let them move forward in life. Our first two daughters finished school and are married – but then my husband got this illness. After illness came to him he could no longer work as he used to, he becomes breathless easily and can’t do the strenuous work of winding (which pays better). Because he is earning less we had to take our three younger daughters out of school and send them to work in factories.

The doctor said I have lung cancer, and has given me some tablets. He told me to stop smoking and to stop doing reeling work because both are making things worse. But how can I stop working, who’ll repay my advance and feed my family?”

A middle-aged woman describes how reproductive stresses and reproductive capital can cause movements of capital to labour, and also reverse movements of labour to capital –

“We used to have two kai rattes (hand charkas) and produced dupion silk till fifteen years ago but we sold them along with our home before our daughter got married. At that time we used to sell the silk we produced to people in the area, agents whom we knew well, and they’d take it to Bangalore.

After that, since my husband still had his cocoon market license he started a business of buying cocoons and supplying them to others. I went to work in another factory in the town.

A few years later my daughter’s husband died and her in-laws brought her and left her on the street outside our house. She had two boys and was pregnant with a third. They put her on the streets, but could we, her parents, do the same? We decided to start a business to support her.

When our son got married we sold our daughter-in-laws jewellery and set-up this factory on land given by the mosque to my daughter because she was a widow. But now we’ve replaced her gold - double, more than double! We are doing well, thanks to Siva. Thanks to Siva we are doing well.”

With the profits from her production unit she is able to pay advances to one or two people, who work along with her family members who run the unit.

The increased ability of producers to offer advance credit can be linked to increases of asset holdings of individuals who were already more financially, socially, and politically powerful at the time of liberalisations and so were able to hold gold and the increased need to offer this credit can be linked to the withdrawal of labour from the silk-reeling workforce in search of alternate work.

The employers issuing advances are among the owners of production units who have relatively higher financial, social, and political power – and usually this allowed them to hold gold through the period following liberalisation or acquire it after liberalisation, because they have access to an accumulated surplus, or simply because they have more sons than daughters. The peak in gold rates in 2008, corresponding with the world financial crisis, means that stocks of wealth held as gold have multiplied in value so individuals who held gold have larger asset holdings while those who lost gold struggle to acquire it at current prices. These larger assets may be linked to the larger amounts of advances being offered to hold the shrinking labour force, the price of keeping their own family out of the workforce, and the dynamics of the institution of advances is considered in this context.
The end of the spectrum that has the ability to own their means of production, keep their families out of labouring, and offer advances to labour tends to correspond with the section of entrepreneurs who contest for local leadership positions. Their personal and financial histories have been connected with balancing the need to extract a surplus from labour, to maintain their socioeconomic status and to contest elections - to campaign and to bribe voters - and the need to maintain a respectable public profile, aided by the reputation of being a charitable person and a just employer. Paying low wages and using their role as gatekeepers to resources from religious governance bodies and the local state to grant access to welfare schemes which facilitated subsistence, and providing loans or access to loans when needed - often to buy gold as dowry for a daughter’s marriage or to avoid mortgaging gold or borrowing at high rates from other sources for healthcare expenses - has been a technique used to keep their vulnerable labour-force indebted in multiple ways and made it beneficial to labour to vote to keep their employers in power.

A woman who has worked in silk-reeling since her family migrated to the town when she was a child describes the support of her present employer, whom her husband has worked for since he was twelve, as the reason for her well-being. She also appears to be able to hold and liquidise savings in the form of gold -

"I didn’t get any dowry or gold for my wedding. Who could afford gold in those days? Nobody gave dowries, all that is only now."

The first time I owned gold was when I bought these earrings twelve years ago. The earrings - are gundus63 - the ones I’m wearing now. I bought them with my savings because they say your ears shouldn’t be empty. I wear them all the time now and I’d never pawn them.

I’ve also bought another bigger pair of earrings - about ten years ago with money from an MFI loan. They are at the marwadi’s shop at the moment because I’ve borrowed money to lend to a relative in the village who needed capital for rice planting. I gave him the money because he always brings us rice from the village and I know he will pay of this debt with village rice as well. I’ve pawned these earrings so many times for things like this - because someone needs money here or there."

This story explains how particular patronage relations between employers and employees can allow labour particular accumulation and financial stability that others labouring in their own production units do not have.

The ways in which narratives from the town explain the spatial and sectorial organisation of labour and capital in the town suggests that it’s useful to follow the advice of Jan Breman and Barbara Harriss-White, who suggest that studies of work in the informal sector in India are well informed by the understanding that the boundaries between labour and capital can blur in ways that would have surprised Marx (Breman 2013); that petty-commodity producers, entrepreneurs outside the formal sector, exist along a spectrum in terms of how much they labour in units that appear to be their own capital (Harriss-White 2014).

A similar spectrum of can be created for labour in the sector. Hearing their lifestories, following gold ownership, also allows a way of understanding their position along the spectrum of difficult work (Lerche 2013)* and how this position has changed over time. Labour contracts, formal and informal, described in narratives from the town are examined towards understanding how debt, gender and gender of children, health, age, caste, religious affiliations, geographic region of origin, their skill and education levels and those of their children, among other things, all interact towards producing or changing their location on the spectrum proposed.

Looking at the economy of this town through the prism-like lenses of gold stories suggests that rather than discussing clearly polarised categories of labour and capital, it’s more helpful to see individuals who are a complex of socio-political affiliations existing on a long spectrum between precariousness which

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63 Gold dome-shaped ear-studs.
necessitates selling labour in very vulnerable situations on one extreme and the control over means of production which enables significant accumulation on the other extreme.

The gold stories further suggest that the labour-capital spectrum ranging from vulnerable work to capital accumulation can be further nuanced. The suggestion here is that a triangular relationship exists between the ability to accumulate, stability in sexual and other reproductive relationships, and the ability access resources – for basic reproductive needs and for capital investment – from religious and state institutions. The idea of continuums can be extended to each of these aspects – and an individual can be located, through the multi-dimensional space of the story, in terms of how they relate to each of these axes.

A woman working as reeling labour tells a story that both relates an absence of accumulation in the form of gold to vulnerability, a vulnerability she associates with the loss of jewelry that symbolised her marriage –

"My family didn’t have to give my husband’s family any dowry when I get married - and my husband’s family didn’t buy much for me either. Just two sets of clothes and my husband bought me a silver thaali and silver anklets. We moved to his village after we got married and I lived like a princess for three years. I didn’t have to do any work. I had my first daughter there. But my husband was finding it hard to find work so we decided to move to Kanakpura. During the move I lost my thaali, it came undone and fell off somewhere - with that my fate changed.

In Kanakpura I needed to start going to work in a filature unit to support the family - so I brought my younger sister to look after my baby. My husband fell in love with my sister and took her as a wife. Since then it’s been hard for me because he doesn’t give me one rupee - I raise our four children on my own and I give him money from my earnings to help support the four children he’s had with my sister.

I haven’t bought any gold or silver for my three girls - the advance I’ve taken from my employer went towards capital for my husbands business and my earnings have been just enough for all of us to eat. But when my silver anklets broke I exchanged them for anklets for my oldest daughter. So at least she has that."

The tone with which she told her narrative – presenting realities, but stressing that she has found her way of managing her situation – raised questions about whether the lack of gold and the continued giving of money to husband, was a sign of deep vulnerability – or representative of exercising power in the situation – her lending to her husband giving her a certain control over him.

In fact the situation is complex and is similar to those faced by other women, who are married struggle to maintain large families on their earnings - and on advances from employers – and so face a particular vulnerability in their relationships with employers because they access fewer alternative sources of credit.

The owners of the small-scale production units in the industry have made up a high proportion of local leaders on religious governance boards and urban local body (ULB) and legislative assembly politics, which gives them access to employees of the local state in particular ways. However, though a large number of political and religious leaders are also entrepreneurs, many of the one thousand or so silk-processing entrepreneurs do not hold local leadership positions. The life-stories of local leaders need to be examined in order to understand how social, political, and financial affiliations have related to each other over time, defining and being defined by the political spaces and the geography of the place.

The next phase of story-gathering will focus on the lives of the fifty individuals who have made applications for the new reeling units - for which a huge subsidy has been offered by the state, but which is still very expensive relative to the assets of majority of silk-reelers - to draw deeper connections between gold holdings, capital, and broader social, political arrangements. The lives of these individuals who have the capital and land required by the state to be eligible for the subsidy will be examined to ask whether socio-political affiliations interact with and are influenced by the move by the state to support the new technology
which will greatly reduce the labour required to produce raw silk, and will allow the new firms to produce as much – in the fifty units sanctioned, as the one thousand units currently produce – creating new spectrums, changing the profitability of the industry for different production units and access to credit for labour and capital as a result.
Writing an Oral History of the UK North Sea Offshore Industry: How? And Why Now?

Hugo Manson and Terry Brotherstone
(UK):

Resumen: 2013 marcó el 25 aniversario del desastre Piper Alpha, todavía el peor de la producción mundial de petróleo en alta mar; y 2015 será de 40 años desde que el petróleo de un campo de RU del Mar del Norte se bombee primero en tierra. El aniversario Piper fue conmemorado por una conferencia de la industria en Aberdeen a propósito de la seguridad, la cual, mientras que celebraba el progreso, tuvo que reconocer la evidencia continua de peligros evitables. En 2012, dos tomos de la Historia Oficial fueron publicados, que ofrecen mucho material para el discurso histórico. Es importante que ese discurso incluye preguntas sobre el significado humano más amplio de fallas catastróficas de la industria, así como sus logros.

La industria jugó un papel crucial en el rescate del RU de la crisis económica post-imperial y por lo tanto en el mantenimiento de las relaciones de poder existentes en el RU. Pero también se ha escrito acerca de como un “golpe de suerte desperdiciado”, con los ingresos procedentes de ella utilizados para apoyar la agenda neoliberal del capital financiero (‘thatcherismo’) en lugar de financiar la creación de una economía productiva moderna para sostener políticas sociales progresistas. La crisis mundial en 2007-08 nos ha llevado a un nuevo punto de vista desde el cual evaluar esta historia.

Entre 2000 y 2006, Hugo Manson registra las historias de vida personales de casi doscientos participantes en la aventura (‘Vidas en la Industria del Petróleo’). Nosotros estamos de este recurso es fundamental para informar el discurso histórico más amplio y discutimos cómo la diversidad de la experiencia el archivo contiene se puede convertir en una “historia oral” para hacerlo.

Abstract: July 2013 marked the 25th anniversary of the Piper Alpha disaster, still the world’s worst in offshore oil production; and in June 2015 it will be 40 years since oil from a UK North Sea field was first pumped ashore. The Piper anniversary saw a major industry conference in Aberdeen about safety, which, while celebrating improvement, had to acknowledge ongoing evidence of preventable dangers; and, a year earlier, Alex Kemp’s two-volume Official History was published, providing much material for historical discourse as the 40th anniversary approaches. We argue that it is important that such discourse embraces questions about the broader human significance of the industry’s catastrophic failures as well as its heroic achievements.

In the 1980s the North Sea offshore oil and gas industry played a crucial role in rescuing the United Kingdom from post-imperial economic crisis (and near collapse) and thereby in sustaining existing power relationships in the UK. But it has also been written about as a ‘wasted windfall’, with the revenues accruing from it used to underpin the neoliberal agenda of finance capital (‘Thatcherism’) rather than to fund the creation of a modern productive economy and to sustain progressive social policies. The unresolved global crisis that began in 2007-08 has taken us to a new standpoint from which to assess this history.
Between 2000 and 2006, Hugo Manson, working on the Lives in the Oil Industry oral history project at the University of Aberdeen, recorded the personal life histories of almost two hundred participants involved in some way in the adventure. We argue that this resource is crucial for the broader historical discourse we think is needed and discuss how the diversity of experience the archive contains can be made into an ‘oral history’ that can inform it.
Dear Hugo,

You will be missed at IOHA in Barcelona, not least by me. We have worked together since 2000 on the *Lives in the [UK North Sea] Oil project* [LOI], but have been forced far apart by circumstance for the past several years. Your original aim was for the interviews to be used by others has been well met; and we have published a number of articles. But we planned to get together to consider planning and beginning to work on a book and that’s not now immediately possible.

Yet I think this is an opportune moment for the discussion – both for professional/historiographical and political reasons. As to the former, we have, as you know, presented together at many international conferences over the years – not least at IOHA in Pietermaritzburg, Rome and Guadalajara – but most consistently at the biennial European Social Science History conferences (ESSHC). Going to this year’s, I decided to look back over our presentations to see what themes were emerging from your interviews.

As to the political situation: in the *Grundrisse*, Marx remarks that ‘the anatomy of man provides a key to the anatomy of the ape’. It’s in the context of the development of political economy and, applied to history, will make some historians squirm. For them ‘objectivity’ is about freeing themselves from the present to enter the past on its own terms. For purely representational purposes this approach has merit: it alerts us to the *then-ness* of earlier times and allows for the study of documents on the basis of prevailing assumptions when they were written. But if historical work is to be part of the intellectual equipment that arms us to understand Marx’s thesis – ‘previous philosophers have explained the world in various ways: the point however is to change it’, we need, not to turn away from how things are now and from our present-day preoccupations, but rather to look more critically at what our society, and we within it, have become. We know from our lived experience what the past (whatever its might-have-beens) has produced; and being able to study outcomes gives us the advantage – while also making use of professional detachment to *reconstruct* – that we can better grasp the meaning for today of what has gone before.

I think these thoughts have a particular relevance to oral history. No serious oral historian thinks that interviews on their own provide the key to the meaning of the past. But, as you always stress, the interview is a thing of a particular moment, a relationship created in the present that exists into the future as a record of what was remembered, thought significant and said [and of how it was said] in a particular place and at a particular time. It relates to other forms of evidence not merely as an important *addition* of knowledge but also qualitatively as a methodological guide to critical study of meaning. ‘Oral history,’ Sandro Portelli writes, ‘is more than a profession: it is a way of life’; ‘it aims to make a mark.’ It should aspire, argues Paul Thompson, to ‘change the focus’ of history itself. It can do so, I think, by recognising that, by training its camera on some of the men and women who hold ‘a key to the anatomy of the ape’, the oral historian can gain a very particular access to the past as sensuous, lived experience, which – critically thought about – can teach us much about why we are where we are today and about the possibilities of escaping what John Berger calls the ‘prison’ [real, he says, not metaphorical] of the transitional times in which we live.64

Our particular ape is the UK – including the relationship between Scotland and the rest of the UK – before, and during the years when, North Sea oil and gas was being discovered and exploited. In coming back to the material you gathered we need, I think, to recognise that things have moved on and that an oral history of the UK offshore industry today will be different from what it would have been some years ago. On September 18 – the Scottish electorate faces a referendum that asks: ‘Should Scotland be an independent country?’ and, whatever the outcome, commentators recognise, the UK can never be the same again. The referendum would have been before 1969, the year oil was discovered. It remained only a seldom-considered possibility until the Scottish National Party [SNP] won an unexpected overall majority in the 2011 elections for the Scottish parliament [Holyrood]. But the party’s slogan for 1974’s two Westminster

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64 John Berger, *Meanwhile* [2008].
general elections, ‘It’s Our [or Scotland’s] oil’, was one of the factors in making the SNP look, for the first time, like a serious contender. The eleven seats it won pressured the Labour Party – then becoming dominant in Scotland – to embrace devolution (designed to kill independence but eventually boosting it). And it prepared the SNP, after a period in the doldrums, to re-emerge as a political force after the Holyrood parliament was established in 1997. Without this process, originating as the oil arrived, this September’s referendum would probably not be happening. In discussing an oral history of North Sea oil I think this is something we will have to take into account.

I begin by summarising my troll through our ESSHC presentations; then say more about Scottish politics now – not least because the prospects for Scottish independence (however tangential the link with the LOI project may seem) are likely to be of interest in Catalunya; and go on to reflect on oral history more generally. There follow some notes in conclusion.

II

In his *Oral History off the Record*65 ‘Afterword’ referred, Portelli points out that ‘[o]ral history deals with stories, and stories cannot be reduced to any single meaning.’ But ‘[g]ood oral history has a purpose, even a mission. It aims to make a mark in the world.’ One way of taking this – and certainly my point here – is to confront *as a productive contradiction*, on the one hand, the recognition that the LOI archive, with its variety of personalities and stories, certainly ‘cannot be reduced to a single meaning’, and, on the other, the aspiration for it ‘to make a mark’ in a way that can help to change how the history of the last few decades is understood.

For myself, I took on the role of ‘directing’ LOI with definite ideas in mind. I came to Aberdeen’s history department in 1968, influenced by ‘the spirit of the age’, joined an activist Trotskyist group, and lived in the city that became the centre of the ‘oil boom’ largely ignoring its significance for the UK economy because I was tied to a theory that the collapse of Bretton Woods in 1971 and the decadent nature of British finance-capital in the post-imperial period – together with serious militancy in the organised working class – put imminent revolution on the agenda. It required politically principled ‘leadership’ to realise it. As late as the offshore industrial actions of 1989-90 – which I *did* observe closely and which gave rise to an interesting trade union, the Oil Industry Liaison Committee (OILC)66 – I still had not fully disabused myself of this perspective. It was wrong but not, I would argue (though not here), irrational. By the turn of the century – in a world made by Thatcherism – I wanted to re-examine how I had got so wrong the potential of the ‘black gold’ being produced nearby, which I had not allowed substantially to interrupt the theory that the crisis in the UK was part of capitalism’s terminal crisis.

For you, on the other hand, the foremost concern was [I think] oral history *per se*; the importance of the stories (the life-stories) you elicited and the relationships you forged (which you’ve tried to maintain from half a world away) and the responsibilities they create; the democracy of different experiences, ranging from those of financiers, entrepreneurs, observers and politicians to mud engineers, caterers, roustabouts and trade unionists. Your material, rather than my preconceptions, must be the starting-point for how it is written about. Going back to the themes that emerge from our ESSHC presentations reminds us of joint decisions about what were the most significant themes – beyond the individual stories67 – that were emerging.

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67 Three of the most compelling stories took us to Smithsonian Institute (DC) in 2003 doing public presentations on oil in Scotland’s socio-cultural scene in 2003.
In 2002 we introduced the project, arguing its importance as a key development in contemporary British history. I certainly already had in mind the idea that the period since the 1970s in the UK required radical rethinking and that establishing the significance of the North Sea oil story should play its part. The outcome of this paper, several years on and much added to and revised, was our article in *Northern Scotland* (vol. 27, 2007) – ‘North Sea Oil, its Narratives and its History: an archive of oral documentation and the making of contemporary Britain’. This remains our most complete statement, with examples, about the archive as a whole. It also begins to address a question, the importance of which I have written about elsewhere: why had the great enterprise of the offshore industry – while it had of course received attention from specialist economic historians – been substantially ignored in more general interpretations of UK history in the years since the collapse of the post-war social-democratic ‘consensus’ in the 1970s.

The point about this, adumbrated in *Northern Scotland*, is that omitting the oil story allows for a deterministic orthodoxy in contemporary UK history which essentially endorses Thatcher’s jejune slogan, ‘there is no alternative’ (to neoliberalism), making it retrospectively into an example of historical interpretation from the school of Francis Fukuyama [1989-90 version]. The orthodoxy underlying much of the first generation of histories of the UK in the 1980s endorsed the idea that Thatcherism was the necessary and rational recognition that ‘history’ had come to its ‘end’ with the arrival of liberal capitalism – but that only with the terminal atrophy of the Stalinist system could this be fully recognised. To sustain this, the story of the how the windfall of North Sea oil was made to happen has to be played down.

Thatcherism, as some historians have begun to show, was much more accidental than its apologists acknowledge, and much less of a long-term solution to the crisis of the post imperial UK – as the 2007-08 world crisis revealed – than they can admit. Putting the men and women who created the most important UK industry of the second half of the twentieth century back into history is not only an important act of recovery: it can also contribute to a challenge to neoliberal orthodoxy. The life-stories in *LOI*, I’m arguing, demand that the offshore enterprise is properly considered as crucial in British history; and that the fact that Thatcher herself could write the story of her years in office virtually ignoring an industry that underpinned them calls into question the whole idea that she, with her much-exaggerated, ‘not-for-turning’ will of ‘iron’, was in some way an instrument of historical necessity.

In those early years of your work – and throughout the period you were interviewing – our underlying strategy was predicated on the idea that our Aberdeen colleague, the economist Alex Kemp, would be publishing his *Official History of North Sea Oil and Gas* around the time when you would have completed the collection. This would tell the story from official papers in a way we would never be able to do; but it would arouse interest anew in – and encourage a serious approach to – the significance of the human stories of the industry. In the event of course the official history did not appear until 2012] when you were in New Zealand.

By the 2004 ESSHIC in Belin in 2004, key themes were emerging from the interviews. One was that the single event that emerges as a pivotal moment – apart from the discovery of oil, the first landing and so on – is the 1987 Piper Alpha disaster. In human terms this – with its 167 fatalities – is still the worst-ever tragedy in the world offshore oil industry. We spoke about ‘Heroes or Victims? Commemoration, Documentary Art and the Piper Alpha Disaster’, drawing attention to the testimony of the sculptor [Sue Jane Taylor] who created the monument to the dead in Aberdeen; our photographer colleague [Owen Logan], who had secured a Research Council award to work with some of your interviewees on how digital image-making can represent, and deepen understanding of, social structures and crisis; a gardener [Johnnie Morrison whose interest in the oil began when, as an Aberdeenshire gamekeeper – and Scottish nationalist – he so resented what the pipelines did to his beloved countryside, and climaxed when he worked in the public gardens where Taylor’s monument was placed]; and a survivor of the disaster [Bob Ballantyne – whose story also had made an impact at the Pietermaritzburg IOHA two years earlier].
We re-contextualised the Piper story in 2006 at Amsterdam, speaking about 'Claiming the Memory of the North Sea: enterprise, tragedy and representation'. The disaster had been seen by many as a tragedy waiting to happen in an industry that had lost sight of everything except corporate profit and – egged on by a government desperate to restore confidence in its currency and its reputation as a major centre of world finance – the greatest possible speed of production. We were concerned to examine how the evidence in your interviews sat alongside a steadily forming approved public memory of the disaster. On this occasion we were able to add to the memories of our survivor and the sculptor, extracts from the stories told by the father of a victim (Gavin Cleland, who devoted his life after his son’s death to a campaign for the company to be prosecuted for corporate manslaughter); and a company spokeswoman.

Taken together, these papers, recalling how individual and collective traumas are remembered, allowed us to argue that – in the light of such painful testimony – there is no meaningful way to represent the tragedy in history that does not try to offer historical-political critique of its underlying causes. There can be no neutrality masquerading as dispassionate ‘objectivity’. The sculptor had been on the platform a year before the disaster, making sketches for a corporate-sponsored exhibition and she had to resist heavy company pressure (and a serious financial offer) to withdraw her work from public display. The survivor never worked offshore again and became the best-known representative of the victims and their families, both at the subsequent Cullen inquiry into the tragedy and elsewhere.68 The bereaved father was to be seen at every trade-union and political event he could reach, almost until his death a few years ago, campaigning for legal action against the Piper’s owners. You, Hugo, I think first met him with his banner outside Aberdeen University when the Scottish parliament met there for a peripatetic session in the years before the new parliament building in Edinburgh was built.

The photographer’s material became part of an internationally shown photographic exhibit excoriating the social impact of globalised capitalism (‘Thatcher’s notorious ‘there is no alternative’ – my own phrase is quoted in the text the presentation incorporates – ‘should be redefined not as a serious political proposition but as the defensive manifesto of a historically outmoded social system.’)69 The testimony of the corporate spokeswoman – as moving in itself as that of any from those who were not directly involved – draws attention to the Piper Alpha as the single event in the history of the industry which the great majority of your interviewees who were in or around the industry at the time remember, in their own different ways, with feeling.

The most effective North Sea image the photographer produced – his ‘Inverted Coalmine’ – was based on a remark of Bob Ballantyne’s, a worker from declining industrial Clydeside who migrated to the North Sea, to the effective that an oil platform at sea reminded him of pit winding-gear turned on its head. This allowed Logan to produce a tromp-d’oeil picture calling to mind the horrors of mining disasters; and in effect asking how in the technologically-advanced, late 20th century, a key industry could be allowed to develop in a way that so endangered life.70 Some of this work later went in to our article for an oral-history issue of the journal Scottish Labour History (2011) – ‘Voices of Piper Alpha: enduring injury in private memory, oral representation and labour history’.71

The contribution Catherine O’Byrne made with me in Lisbon put another theme from your archive (along with interviews of her own) into the public domain – the role of women in the offshore industry. Catherine subsequently gained a Ph.D. on the subject and has published some of her material. Then in Gent (2010), we talked a bit more theoretically on ‘Oral History as Democratic Critique’ elaborating some of points made above but working more explicitly on a theme I later wrote about in my ‘A Contribution to the Critique of

70 See the ‘Oil Issue’ of Variant (Glasgow, 2007) – ‘The Inverted Coalmine’; and Northern Scotland, 27.
Post-Imperial British History’ in *Flammable Societies*. The Piper Alpha disaster is central to the argument because it speaks loudly about the type of regime that prevailed, most particularly in the British sector of the offshore industry, where the anti-trade-union culture of the predominantly US companies dovetailed conveniently with the neoliberal values of the Thatcher governments to ensure that safety, and the empowerment of workers to oversee it, took second place to profit-making and speed of production.

My article also draws attention to a second impact of the UK oil experience – the boost it gave to the SNP. It was to this we returned at the ESSHIC in Glasgow (2012) speaking to the title ‘Were the 1970s the Last Chance for Scottish Independence and Did the Nationalists Funk it?’ We, correctly I think, pointed out – using a number of your interviews, notably one with Douglas Henderson (an SNP MP from NE Scotland from 1974 to 1979) that there was, as we now know, a financial basis for Scotland to go it alone in the 1970s and the UK Government had to deliberate conceal the full extent of the potential oil revenues to ensure that the Nationalist case did not make an even greater impact; but that some Nationalists at least feared that a kind of oil-based autarky might lead in socially regressive, even xenophobic, directions. (The SNP at that time was opposed to what is now the European Union, which the party now supports and seeks to enter as an independent country). Today, although the oil (and particularly the idea of a Norwegian-style oil fund to invest in future economic development and social services) continues to play an important part in the independence debate, no one thinks that it alone is an argument for breaking from the union of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. The past two years – and very recent months in particular – have, however, put the political discourse promoted by the referendum on a new basis, and I want to move on to some thoughts about Scottish politics now.

III

Lacking any new oral-history material on the Scottish referendum process – although this is a project ripe for realisation – and conscious of an impending word-limit, I want to quote from an article in a Glasgow newspaper at the end of the Nationalists’ last conference before the referendum, held in the ‘oil capital of Europe’, Aberdeen, in April (2014). Although I cannot claim this as an interview, I personally know the journalist – one of the more perceptive commentator writing regularly on Scottish politics – and am aware of much of the ‘life story’ an oral historian would elicit from him. And I have interviewed him in relation to another matter – our mutual experience working on a Scottish government advisory committee on the reform of Scottish university governance (the von Prondzynski Review). The piece he wrote after the Aberdeen conference was a personal reflection of the sort that might well form one starting point for an oral archive on the year of the independence referendum and its aftermath.

The journalist, Iain Macwhirter, was brought up in a nationalist-leaning family (his mother was an SNP national secretary in the days when this was still an unpaid post); had been briefly influenced by the student radicalism of the early 1970s; had then forged a successful career as a television social documentarist, a radio editor; and later became a political commentator both in London and Edinburgh. He returned to Scotland in the late 1990s specifically in response to the establishment of the Scottish parliament, believing, I think, that – in the political doldrums created by ‘New Labour’ (or Blairite) acceptance of the basic tenets of neoliberalism and the muting of the challenge of militant labour– this could be where the big story in UK politics would lie. He has written on the developing (or sometimes rather stagnant-seeming) referendum campaign since it began, but after the Aberdeen conference he stood back for some longer-term reflection.

‘watching the SNP at their Aberdeen conference,’ he wrote:

I couldn’t help thinking how extraordinary it is that this is happening at all. The party may be 80 years old but it spent most of that time in obscurity. It was Labour that led the drive to restore the

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72 See the Scottish Government website since February 2012.
Scottish Parliament in the 1990s ... [and] many of the measures that are now seen as SNP policies – free higher education, [free for the elderly] personal care – were actually the products of the Labour-led coalition [running the Scottish government from 1997 to 2007]... [i]n the ‘free stuff’ that Labour policy advisers ... now speak of with contempt...

The Labour Party in Scotland, he went on, has:

allowed the SNP to become the party of the [National Health Service], nuclear disarmament and free education, while it has become the party of immigration controls and weapons of mass destruction. I sometimes have to pinch myself to remember that this is the case. But ... [l]ast month, Labour MPs [in the UK parliament] voted for the [Conservative/Liberal-Democrat] Coalition’s [decision to put into law an] arbitrary welfare [spending] cap – surely a defining moment in British politics...

I have added the emphasis. Labour had been the party that set up the welfare state on the basis that – in the aftermath of the sacrifices of World War II and bearing in mind the lessons of the social deprivation of the post-World-War-I years – money must be found to do what is necessary to create a society secure for all. Now it has taken to its logical conclusion the formulation of its leader, the then prime minister James Callaghan, in the mid-1970s, that, whereas the assumption since the war had been that finance would be the servant of policy, the laws of capitalism – which the social democracy (the Labour Party in Britain) had come into being claiming it could bend to accommodate social need – now dictated that policy must be tailored to the finance available. Thus was the door opened to Thatcher’s low-taxation, public-spending-cuts policies, which New Labour failed to challenge after 1997, and which the Coalition government in office since 2010 is now pursuing with such enthusiasm – dragging Labour in its wake. This hits home in Scotland with particular force since it is still remembered that – in the same 1970s – the initial vision for North Sea oil was that it would bring in the finance to regenerate (rather than run down) manufacturing industry and to make the welfare state sustainable.

In 1974 one Labour MP said that the oil revenues would make welfare-state Britain great again, restoring the reputation lost at Suez in 1956 and in the sterling crises of the 1960s. The oil coming on stream, said the prime minister at the time, Harold Wilson, could be identified as the sort of historic ‘turning-point’ beloved by journalists but usually only identifiable in long retrospect. Wilson was right about the ‘turning-point’ but, himself committed to the renewal of social democracy, very wrong about the direction of the turn. By the early 1980s when the poet Al Alvarez went offshore to report for the New Yorker, he met a late-night fitness-fanatic who, gesturing towards the lights of oil installations all around, observed laconically that (far from being the key to a bright social future), the North Sea was ‘what keeps the country solvent’. Social vision had been replaced with crisis-management, preparing – as it turned out – for aspiration to be reduced, from post-war ideas about collectivity, cooperation and growing equality sustained by a manufacturing economy, to those analogous to a pre-welfare-state Social-Darwinism endorsing a social system based on the competitive individualism of so-called ‘human nature’: except that, a century on, it was founded in finance (albeit it still greatly influenced by inherited wealth) and ‘consumerism’ rather than industrial progress.

Christopher Harvie, an internationally-known Scottish historian – a Labour supporter turned Nationalist (despite holding a chair at Tübingen University he was an SNP MSP between 2007 and 2011) – who has written the only single-volume account of the offshore industry (Fool’s Gold [1994], soon to appear in an updated edition), recently gave a Scottish view of this transition. ‘[N]ationalists’ in the 1970s, he wrote [referring to economist Donald McKay’s Scotland 1980 [1977]]:

References in my Flammable Societies essay.
wanted to manage their North Sea ‘petropound’ windfall by pegging [it] ... through investment in English industry. Instead the referendum [of 1979] failed and Thatcher’s first shot at monetarism – an upward jerk in interest rates that (over)valued sterling at DM4 to the £ – plus the oil spike to $40 a barrel triggered by the Iraq-Iran war – cut exports and manufacturing by 20%: Corpach no more, Linwood no more, etc.

Corpach and Linwood refer to a pulp mill and a car factory but are used to symbolise Scottish manufacturing industry more generally. Their demise – this is Harvie’s point – is ‘[n]ot something to be forgiven by the Scots’.75

Or, it could be added by many English manufactures and workers, but – not least because of the ‘it’s Scotland’s oil’ idea – having a particular resonance north of the border.

The argument about Scottish independence no longer rests primarily on what happens to North Sea oil and gas. But the industry’s continued – if declining – potential has ongoing significance in sustaining the aspiration that, if the UK is finished as a welfare society, little Scotland could still be one, at least to the extent that some of the Scandinavian countries are. Without much more fundamental change within and beyond Scotland this is likely to prove over-optimistic. But the opponents of independence seem incapable of grasping that they are fighting against a continuing yearning for a reversal of the seeming inexorable trend towards the dictatorship of finance capital, the undermining of electoral democracy as meaningful in influencing decision-making and the growth of social deprivation and inequality. From this point of view the Labour Party has lost credibility. And the attraction of Scottish independence has much less to do with nationalism or ‘identity’ than with the social aspiration that Labour could still harness in the coming-of-oil years to a UK-wide political programme but can no longer.

IV

Oral history – and I now can only summarise – has a particular role in responding to the intellectual needs of this situation and restoring the UK North Sea story to a critical, useful narrative of the development of contemporary Britain. I took up the cause of what became Lives in the Oil Industry in the late 1990s because of an interest in the subject that had been intensified by the offshore workers’ struggle for a proper safety regime and trade-union recognition in the years after Piper Alpha. But I was converted to the possibilities of oral history by two things.

The first was reading Sandro Portelli’s essays on the Terni steelworkers – the outcome of the first of his three major projects about which he writes rather movingly in Oral History off the Record. The second was the much-agonised over ‘crisis of labour history’. This had been brought into the open by the challenge of postmodernism on the one hand and, on the other, the collapse of the political assumptions that had rested on the seeming immovability of the Soviet system and the idea that there could be no radical alternative to welfare social-democracy other than socialist revolution.

Portelli’s two full-length books, deriving from his other two projects – The Order Has Been Carried Out and They Say in Harlan County – in my view serve to dispel any residual doubts about oral history as an indispensable and uniquely innovative addition to the armoury of historical study. Both certainly make their mark in a wider historical discourse; and it is a discourse engaged with problems of contemporary political consciousness. The former is a key contribution to the enterprise of understanding the story of anti-fascist resistance in Italy in a progressive way that is compatible with critical historical work free from the sustaining myths that have served to provide credibility until recently to the country’s deeply flawed political establishment. The latter reads to me, despite its intense focus on one very particular place,

75 Harvie’s article spells out a six-point programme for Scotland as a northern European energy hub – see the on-line journal, Scottish Review; in April. His ideas may be utopian, but they indicate one of several ways in which the independence referendum is at last generating a serious debate about alternatives to Thatcherite/New-Labour Britain.
almost as an alternative people’s history of the USA over the past several generations – and a people’s history in the sense of what people thought, not what some top-down, radical historian thinks they ought to know.

But neither – and this is part of their strength – really provides a template for other projects. They are *sui generis*. Inspirational, yes. But not providing a set of rules, or a ‘model’, for doing other oral histories successfully. The spoken history of North Sea oil will have to develop its own approach compatible with the material you have created and how you created it. I have much catching up to do with important books that have been published recently on oral history theory and method. But I shall not expect to find in them the magic formula for our particular enterprise.

V
This brings me – also briefly and in conclusion – to the point about labour history and its relationship to oral history in the 1960s and early 1970s and why there is perhaps a historical moment in Scotland that can provide new intellectual opportunities.

The politics of the 1960s, in the UK (as elsewhere) were contextualised by social aspiration, a sense that welfarism was essentially a system of social control and of *possibility* that it could be superseded by a trajectory towards what Marx called ‘a truly human society’. Many young scholars turning to labour history sought, as much as professional recognition, the satisfaction of contributing to consciousness of the need for political progress by documenting the oppositional history of the essential agent of forward movement – the working class.

For some, oral history seemed to have an analogous and related role, though it also had roots in a wider social-anthropological agenda. But the two disciplines shared a sense of *engagement*, of the need to be involved in real life and the theoretical underpinnings of overdue political change. At recent IOHA conferences there have been a number of discussions about whether – in achieving increasing methodological sophistication and academic recognition – the radical, politically committed edge of the earlier decades has been blunted, even lost.

In taking forward our discussion about the oral history of the UK offshore industry since the 1960s, Hugo, I think there is a new conjunction of circumstances. First, we are now in a period (which will not end in September whatever the vote) when people in Scotland – where the idea of independence first became a practical proposal in the aftermath of the discovery of oil – are considering making a modest but meaningful change in the UK’s sclerotic political and constitutional system. And, for many, they are doing so because they believe such a change, while it will solve nothing in itself, could at least create a new arena on which challenges to ‘there-is-no-alternative’ neoliberalism can be mounted. Second, a considerable body of excellent oral-history literature now exists. It puts the discipline – still much resisted in the academic establishment when you set out on our project almost a decade and a half ago – in a position to encourage the regeneration of the sort of committed work that could facilitate the emergence of a new generation of historical researchers – historians who feel their commitment to a theoretical approach that aspires to contribute to not simply describing the world, but to changing it is as important as their career aspirations. I hope there are other major oral history projects taking place in Scotland that could contribute towards a discourse along these lines. Your work at Aberdeen means that the *Lives in the Oil Industry* already exists with the potential to do so.

I have had to abbreviate my final two sections substantially and will try to elaborate on them at the conference. My argument, put bluntly, is that the aspirational quality of earlier ideas about the importance of historical work that gave rise – in association with the rise of the new discipline of labour history (which is where I started out) – is in danger of being lost and that attention should be paid to their recovery in an enriched form.
I look forward to your critical comments (and of course those of colleagues in Barcelona). I hope we can resume the discussion soon.\textsuperscript{76}

As ever, with best regards,

Terry

\textsuperscript{76} In 2011 the Scottish Labour History Society celebrated its 50th year, with a ‘oral history’ conference and journal issue – see our piece on ‘voices’ from the Piper Alpha disaster. And some of the sessions at the 2014 ESSHC – and a conference on ‘Strikes and Social Conflict’ in Lisbon in 2011 (where I presented a draft of my article on the offshore workers’ industrial actions in 1989-90 in \textit{Workers of the World} – have alerted me to the revival of a ‘globalised’ labour history that suggests a revival of historical and critical analysis of the working-class (however redefined) as the agency of radical socio-political change.