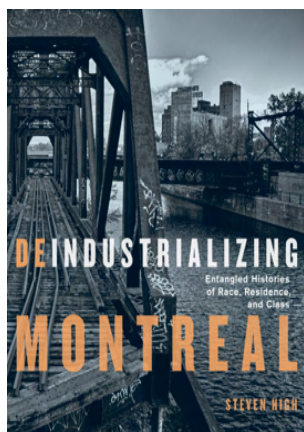


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# Book Reviews

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**Steven High 2022: Deindustrializing Montreal: Entangled Histories of Race, Residence, and Class. Montréal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press**



Deindustrialization studies usually focus on company towns with one major industrial firm that leaves, taking away good union jobs and community spirit in its stride. But what happens to neighbourhoods when several factories close within the same multifaceted metropolis? To study the urban consequences of deindustrialization, Steven High uses the case of two Montréal neighbourhoods, both demarcated by the Lachine Canal, which was the hotbed of Canada's industry until it closed down in the 1960s. Point Saint-Charles, located south of the Canal, is historically White, specifically Irish and French Canadian. On the north side, Little Burgundy—as it has been called since the urban renewal campaigns of the 1960s—is a multiracial area that used to host

Montréal's Black anglophone community, which at its peak represented 15% of the neighbourhood's population.

The book is divided into three parts which analyse the lives of ordinary people before, during and after deindustrialization. This extension of history into the present is relatively uncommon in historical scholarship. It is therefore refreshing that the author doesn't stop short of analysing burning contemporary issues in his account—displaying the analytical benefits of linking history with urban studies and enabling him to incorporate urban renewal and gentrification within the same discussion as deindustrialization.

High is able to bring the past into conversation with the present in large part thanks to the numerous interviews collected by himself, his students and colleagues in these neighbourhoods over more than 35 years. *Deindustrializing Montreal* thus displays an exemplary use of oral history. The testimonies from aged residents about industrial and post-industrial life in Montréal endow the work with tremendous texture. These are supplemented by flawless archival research as well as countless photographs, many taken from personal collections. Another strength of the book is the personal touches and anecdotes. Far from being an objective and removed collector of evidence, High is also one of the characters in this narrative, as he shares personal anecdotes involving neighbours and family, stories about interviews, and local experiences in his adopted neighbourhood of Point Saint-Charles.

Although the causes of deindustrialization do feature in the book, they are not its primary concern. Financial and state actors are similarly almost absent. The

book's main interest lies in the social consequences of industry's presence—and then defection—on urban communities. If the Black anglophone community of Montréal established itself in Little Burgundy, this is because of the neighbourhood's proximity to major downtown train stations, where Black men found work as porters, and to affluent Westmount, where Black women were hired as domestic workers. Although Montréal's Black citizens were excluded from most trades, including industrial work, these occupations allowed the community to establish itself spatially and create institutions such as the Negro Community Centre, whose archives are frequently mobilized in the book.

However, the post-war transition from trains to cars for personal and commercial transport had profound consequences for Little Burgundy: job losses in the railway sector and highway construction through the middle of the neighbourhood undermined community institutions and set the stage for social crisis in the 1970s and 1980s, wrongfully blamed on racial predispositions. By positioning race as a central component of this story, the author clearly fills a gap in the historical scholarship on Montréal. Nonetheless, although testimonies from women do feature tremendously in the book, the author does not employ a gender frame, which would have been welcome to problematize the male breadwinner ideal of the industrial era and the labour market changes that accompany deindustrialization.

Since both these neighbourhoods are rapidly gentrifying today, the author is critical of most of the initiatives that emanated from the deindustrializing era, seeing them as complicit in—if not directly responsible for—the expulsion of working-class households and culture from the very areas to which they gave life. He is particularly tough on Parks Canada—a federal agency tasked with preserving Canada's heritage—since it was under its watch that the Lachine Canal, useless for industry since the 1970s, was turned into green infrastructure for pedestrians and cyclists. This paved the way for the conversion of massive factories into luxury housing after they were shut down by their owners who displaced production to other cities and continents.

High is also critical of community activism in Point Saint-Charles, an area traditionally celebrated as a hotbed of social innovations that were then replicated across the province of Québec. In contrast to the unions, community groups did not predominantly fight against the factory closures. Instead, they generally picked up the pieces from a withdrawing welfare state that was happy to subcontract its responsibilities from the 1980s onwards. This is where the micro lens of this study reaches its limits. The book comes across as placing much of the responsibility for gentrification on the shoulders of community groups and Parks Canada, while real estate investors and developers feature far less in the account.

*Deindustrializing Montreal* cannot be accused of glorifying the industrial past, because it does document the precarious housing conditions and livelihoods that prevailed. Nonetheless, I couldn't help but feel a sense of nostalgia when reading this monograph. It suggests that before the factories shut down, industry was forced to offer stable jobs to male breadwinners thanks to the watchful eye of the trade unions. This fostered a working-class spirit and institutions that favoured community and a sense of neighbourhood belonging. Plant closures, the greening of the Lachine Canal, and the ensuing gentrification broke all of this up.

What are the implications of this story if we are to look for solutions to our contemporary problems (which this book stops short of doing)? If we follow the

theme of its subtexts, we might argue for reindustrialization by bringing industry back to the Lachine Canal. But this would have tremendous environmental consequences that should also remind us of the benefits of removing industry from the cities. Putting aside concerns with the future, this extremely stimulating monograph will interest both urban historians and urban scholars interested in the long-lasting legacies of industry in Western cities and their complex effects on urban lives.

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