

Climate Change and Regional Identity in the Latrobe Valley, Victoria

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Introduction

The recent Australian federal election results suggested that climate change remained on the agenda of the Australian electorate even if it had slipped off the agenda of the major federal political parties. It is generally accepted that the Federal Labor Government, under the previous Prime Minister Kevin Rudd, after becoming a signatory to the Kyoto Protocol and proposing a Carbon Pollution Reduction Scheme, failed to implement policy or develop a new policy platform to address issues of climate change. The election results are believed to reflect this with the Green vote showing an increase of 3.97 per cent with Labour losing 5.41 per cent of the votes they held in the 2007 Election. The first Green member has been elected to the House of Representatives and the Green Party will hold the balance of power in the Senate from July 2011. The most significant election platform of the Green Party is in relation to climate change.

Equally significantly, the Green representative and two Independents have established agreements with the Labour Party in order for it to form government. Labour and the Coalition each won 72 seats in the 150-seat House of Representatives, four short of the requirement for majority government, resulting in the first hung parliament since the 1940 election. Six crossbenchers hold the balance of power. Greens MP Adam Bandt and independent MPs Andrew Wilkie, Rob Oakeshott and Tony Windsor declared their support for Labor on confidence and supply. The resulting 76–74 margin allowed Labour to form a minority government with the Prime Minister, government ministers and parliamentary secretaries being sworn in on 14 September 2010 by the Governor-General Quentin Bryce. The Australian Greens and the Labor Party have signed an agreement to ensure stability for Labor in Government. The Greens will ensure supply and oppose any motion of no confidence in the Government from other parties or MPs. Labor will work with the Greens to deliver improved transparency and integrity to Parliament and pursue policies that promote the national interest and address climate change.

The Greens are the only party with a public policy about climate change (<<http://www.greens.org.au/about/policy>>). The policy has 14 principles including the first three which establish climate change as 'the greatest threat to our world in human history' and claim the significance of Australia's position as ideally placed 'to lead the world in this challenge'. The remaining principles all deal with the need to reduce greenhouse gas emissions with a recommendation for early action, equity and social justice, and a 'plan for a future that does not rely on coal export and coal fired electricity'. To this end a new Climate Change Commission is being established and a carbon tax is again on the political agenda. According to the Garnaut Report, climate change will have differential impacts on different communities. Our interest in this paper is to explore the potential impact of policies to address climate change on the communities of the Latrobe Valley, Victoria, where 85% of the state's electricity is produced in brown coal-fired power generators, noted to be the most highly polluting of all forms of energy production.

Coal, climate, region: the Latrobe Valley

The adaptation of coalmining regions in Australia generally is of pressing political importance. On the one hand, it is claimed that Australian political culture is captured by the mining interest and dominated by a 'quarry vision' (Pearse); on the other hand, employment in some mining regions is seen as vulnerable to the impacts of schemes to reduce carbon emissions. The Latrobe Valley in Victoria presents an emblematic case study of the contemporary dilemmas of coalmining communities. However, its experience is by no means entirely unique. In this paper we examine the material and discursive production of the Latrobe Valley by drawing comparisons with the experiences of two coalmining regions in Europe: North East England and the Ruhrgebiet in Germany, which have adopted markedly different approaches to restructuring, with the former dominated by 'market shock therapy' and the latter undergoing planned economic change within traditions of 'codetermination'. We are particularly interested in the role of conceptions of local identity in shaping the range of political possibilities in such places.

The aim of the paper is to explore the capacity of communities, especially those in coal mining regions, to adapt successfully to new policy regimes associated with responses to climate change. Climate change is one of the most significant challenges of the present era, yet adaptive responses involving changes in attitudes and values are the most difficult to bring to account (Garnaut 14):

Every Australian will have to adapt to climate change within a few decades. Households and businesses will take the primary responsibility for the maintenance of their livelihoods and the things that they value. ... Adaptation is best seen as a local bottom-up response. (Garnaut 363)

Communities and regions whose livelihoods and identities are tied up with the production of energy through coal are critical sites for processes of economic, social/cultural and environmental transformation under conditions of climate change. These communities have been affected by previous restructuring, privatisation and retrenchment, resulting in high levels of socio-economic disadvantage, which potentially limits their capacity to effect any transformation.

In the debate about climate change, its impacts and the appropriate responses, while technological and regulatory innovations have received much attention, there has been comparatively little research into the ways that the values and identities of such communities and regions are formed under these conditions (Lynch). Deb Anderson has identified the need to 'shed light on the interplay of lived experience and scientific knowledge in constructing place- and identity-based responses to climate change' (68) in relation to community transformations in the Mallee region in north western Victoria.

The production of locality in an era of climate change

One approach to addressing these questions is to consider coalmining regions as a distinctive type of locality situated in the interplay of global economic, cultural and environmental processes. Such regions have been somewhat overlooked in current research on notions of place, which tends to focus more on phenomena such as trans-nationalism and hybridity, on global cities and border regions (e.g. Eade; Vila). Within Europe, however, some researchers with an interest in old industrial regions in Europe have theorised them as having discernible identities, related to local forms of economic production and associated social relations and thus as exhibiting material, cognitive and institutional 'lock-ins' that prevent their adaptation to new forms of economic activity (Hassink and Shin; Pike *et al.*). Such localities are often seen as consisting of marginalised, culturally introverted communities characterised by low levels of geographical and social mobility and recently have also been discursively constructed around the notion of 'dirty' industry. These are amongst the localities that are seen as the likely losers of climate change policies, although, of course, this story is only part of a much larger and more complex story about diverse inter-generational and intra-spatial identities (Massey, *Space, Place and Gender*; Kenway *et al.*). Thus, in this paper, we are interested in the fate of coalmining regions in the context of the production of locality and local identities within global discourses of climate change.

O'Brien and Leichenko seek to capture the assemblage of forces impacting on communities and regions in relation to climate change through the concept of 'double exposure':

regions, sectors, ecosystems and social groups will be confronted both by the impacts of climate change and by the consequences of globalization. Our point of departure lies in the widely recognized perception that there are 'winners' and 'losers' associated with both of these global processes. Climate change and economic globalization, occurring simultaneously, will result in new or modified sets of winners and losers. Double exposure has important policy implications, especially for those that are likely to experience the negative consequences of both globalization and climate change. (222)

Drawing on O'Brien and Leichenko, we consider both the material *and discursive* dimensions of these intersecting phenomena. McManus has shown, in the case of the Upper Hunter, that there is a complex mutually constitutive relationship between the material and discursive aspects of the region, while Cameron and Gibson ('Alternative Pathways') suggest that a significant part of the regional problem lies in the representations themselves: once communities and regions are designated as losers, they may become losers. At the same time, the local represents an important arena for social action and, according to David Harvey, there are dangers in the promotion of politics 'abstracted from the material world of experience in particular places'. In any event, such a politics

lost some of its credibility and appeal because the promotion of universal considerations drove out sensitivity to the particularities of environment, milieu, collective memory, community, myth built forms. While it is one thing to articulate a critical line against a politics based only on all of these, it is quite another ... to fashion a politics that treats the politics of place as nothing more than a numbing fantasy. (Harvey 314)

In this vein, Anderson's account of understandings of drought and climate change in the Mallee contends that 'the social decline Mallee communities were experiencing served not only to amplify nostalgia for the Mallee of the past but also heighten local identity-based responses to the contemporary experience of change in the Mallee and projections for its future' (74). We are interested, therefore, in local identity-based responses to climate change in the case of coalmining regions in Australia. Addressing these issues requires the use of ethnographic models to interrogate the assumptions of 'double exposure' and 'winners and losers' and explore the possibilities for identity transformations in the context of debates about the nature of the local.

The fate of the local in the age of the global has emerged as a key theme of contemporary social science research. Academic assertions are plentiful about both the 'unbounded' nature of the locality or region and about hybridized global networks in the formation of identities and communities (Amin). Yet many anthropologists, sociologists, historians and geographers have questioned such claims about the 'discursive erasure of place' (Escobar 141). They have suggested instead that (shifting) geographies, boundaries and multiple scales continue to matter 'as expressions of social practice, discourse and power' (Paasi 541), while others have called for detailed and grounded empirical studies of 'global change' (Burawoy *et al.*; Gille and Ó Riain) through the methodology of global ethnography. They argue that abstract notions of globalization, posited on globally networked forms of social life, risk overlooking the complex ways in which people continue to live locally, albeit in altered ways (Escobar; Kenway *et al.*).

Simultaneously, inquiries into 'place' are central to post-colonial, post development and feminist understandings (Escobar; Gibson-Graham; Pike *et al.*; Somerville), which suggest that storylines of place belonging and attachment remain central to the mutual constitution of identities and places (Somerville). Certain contemporary ethnographies are thus concerned with analysing 'the process whereby a space achieves a distinct *identity* as a place', albeit a place understood as 'an imagined state or moral location' (Gupta and Ferguson 8, 10; Entrikin), rather than a merely physically bounded territory. Places are historically contingent phenomena (Pred) and the locality/region is produced when 'People continue to *construct* some sort of boundaries around their places, however permeable, and to be grounded in local socio-natural practices, no matter how changing and hybridized those grounds and practices might turn out to be' (Escobar 147).

Storylines

Gieryn states, 'Place is thus remarkable because it is an unwindable spiral of material form and interpretative understandings or experiences' (471). We focus on this 'unwindable spiral' in the relationship between the physicality of material places and the people and communities in those locations. In her discussion of 'a global sense of place', Massey describes these place relationships as 'the event of place' (*For Space* 141). The concept of 'the event of place' suggests a sense of place and place identities as shifting and dynamic, with openings to new possibilities through the sets of relationships enacted there. Massey describes these features of place as presenting 'the unavoidable challenge of negotiating a here-and-now (itself drawing on a history and a geography of then and there); and a negotiation which must take place within and between both human and nonhuman' (Massey, *For Space* 140).

We take up this concept of the negotiation of place and expand it in our development of place-based global ethnography to focus on the relationships between locality, identity, economy, ecology and technology in the context of contemporary global discourses and material effects of climate change. The concept of the negotiation of place enables possibilities for transformation. A methodological focus on storylines of place as the locus of transformation of identities and places (Somerville) allows us to explore the concepts we discussed above. Story is here understood as a basic unit of meaning-making and the concept of story can be expanded to embrace visual and oral forms of representation as well as the stories of scientists, policy makers and other actors. The analytical strategy of storylines, as developed in feminist poststructuralism (Davies; Sondergaard), can be used deconstructively to analyse how stories function to shape identities and places: 'A storyline is a condensed version of a naturalized and conventional cultural narrative, one that is often used as the explanatory framework of one's own and others' practices and sequences of action' (Sondergaard 191). The concept of story and storylines can also be used reconstructively to articulate previously invisible place stories or to generate new stories about places. Storylines 'are realised and created/changed in the more or less fragmented ways they are taken up by subjects as they develop their own narratives' (Sondergaard 191). They are made and changed in community, and the task of generating alternative storylines 'that have the power to displace the old is extraordinarily complex' (Davies 79).

The Latrobe Valley—the Ruhr of Australia?

We develop these ideas through a preliminary analysis of some the storylines that have emerged in the process of regional change in the Latrobe Valley, in order to shed light on how the region and its communities grapple with issues of climate change identified in the Stern Report (2007) and further elaborated in the Garnaut Report (2008). The recent experience of people in the Valley has been marked by changing political ideologies and state strategies, including corporatisation, privatisation, and the resulting social, economic and environmental impacts. In the early 1990s approximately 8,000 people lost their jobs due to the privatisation of the state electricity power generators, transforming the region from a hub of proud industrial labour to a depressed region depending on government welfare support. The region retains a distinctive character and identity as a producer of non-export brown coal, but continues to be marked by storylines of disadvantage and despair (Cameron and Gibson, 'Alternative Pathways'; Fletcher). These trajectories will be examined in more detail within the broader historical and global context in the following sections.

The Latrobe Valley is a distinctive locality, within the region of Gippsland, in the state of Victoria, 160 km east of Melbourne. European settlement created a largely pastoral agricultural economy in Gippsland at the expense of the Indigenous Kurnai people, and led to the development of small farming settlements in the Valley (Watson). The development of the Valley in the twentieth century arose from the desire of the Victorian government to exploit its brown coal resources for the production of electrical power. The Victorian government commissioned an engineer, Charles H. Merz from Newcastle upon Tyne in England, to investigate the development of an electricity industry in the state. Merz produced reports in 1908 and 1912 and among his recommendations was the construction of a power station at Morwell in the Latrobe Valley to provide baseload electricity and supply the state's electric railway. These recommendations were acted upon in 1917. In 1918 a Bill was introduced to the Victorian parliament to create a public corporation, the Electricity Commission (which became the State Electricity Commission in 1921). Three Commissioners were appointed in 1919, and in 1920 Sir John Monash was appointed as general Manager of the new organisation. Monash, fresh from his role as head of the Australian forces in First World War France, delayed his return to Australia to visit Germany to oversee inspection of the coal industry in the Ruhr and elsewhere and to draw lessons, determined to reduce Victoria's dependence on coal from New South Wales (Searle). Industry developed in the Valley in the form of open-cut brown coal mines and co-located power stations and the electrical power was transmitted by cable to Melbourne, as the main economic population centre in the state. The co-location of power stations and mines reflected the particular economics of producing energy from brown coal, which requires much larger volumes to produce the same amount of energy as black coal, making mineral transport uneconomic.

The State Electricity Commission of Victoria (SECV) became the key institution in the development of the Valley, for instance constructing a new town for its workers at Yallourn—and later destroying it in pursuit of further coal measures (Fletcher). The provision of electricity by the SECV fuelled the industrialisation of the state in the twentieth century, ensuring the emergence of a relatively high income (largely male) labour force in the Valley and, in this respect, it became a particular expression of Victoria's distinctive state-led developmental agenda, which, according to Eggleston (1) constituted 'the largest and most comprehensive use of State power outside Russia'. Sir Henry Bolte, Victoria's Liberal Premier (1955-72) famously described the Valley as the 'Ruhr of Australia', a sobriquet which gained wider usage (McLaren). The growth of an industrial workforce provided the conditions in which the region developed a reputation simultaneously for labour militancy and for employer paternalism, reflecting the widespread role of the SECV in social provision.

The stable economy and society of the Valley were transformed in the 1990s with the privatisation and restructuring of the electricity industry by the Liberal government of Premier Jeff Kennett. Privatisation saw ownership of the industry pass into the hands of international companies and was followed by major job losses, with direct employment in the power industry falling from around 10,500 workers in the early 1980s to about 1,800 by 2002. These job losses were accompanied by rising unemployment rates and population loss, which, according to Birrell, transformed the Valley into the most disadvantaged location in regional Victoria by most social and economic indicators. The population of the Valley fell from 79,450 to 73,439 in the ten years to 2002 as skilled workers left (Birrell) and had fallen further to 72,905 in 2007 (Latrobe City Council 2). The Valley's external identity, according to one commentary, was transformed:

Perceptions that it was a poverty trap for a provincial underclass were highlighted when low-rent housing was used to house welfare dependants—anecdotally, at least, single mothers with boyfriend ... an unfair perception that 'the Valley' was an economic and social morass, a place of polluted air and broken homes, broken hearts and broken dreams. It is a perception that still lingers in the outside world. ('Renaissance in the Valley', *The Age*, 23 September 2008; see also Fletcher 219-222)

The Kennett government lost office in 1999, to be replaced by a new ALP State Government under Steve Bracks (later replaced as Premier by John Brumby in 2007), elected on a platform of addressing the perceived neglect of regional Victoria and ensuring that 'provincial Victoria' had a higher profile in state politics. For the Valley, a traditional a Labor heartland, the new political attention came in the form of a Ministerial Taskforce, which promised a \$100m plan to revitalise the valley focusing on investments in public housing, marketing, urban renewal of the town of Morwell including a new court house and college, and the development of an aviation-focused industrial park at the region's small airport (Victorian Government). Although Labor maintained a stranglehold over Victorian electoral politics, in the 2006 State Elections it lost its seats in the Latrobe Valley, and in the 2007 Federal election the National Party won the electorate against the national swing. The proximate cause of Labor's performance in 2006 appeared related to a dispute over the diversion of the region's water resources to supply Melbourne; but it probably also reflected a more general disillusionment in the region over the impact of the Ministerial Taskforce's revitalisation plan, which had failed to improve social and economic conditions in the Valley (Economou).

The importance of the Latrobe Valley's coalmining and power generation complex to the economic development of Victoria in the twentieth century

is hard to question. But the region was also constructed discursively during this period through official publications (Cameron and Gibson, 'Transforming Communities'), the influential promotional and other materials of the SECV (Fletcher) and political rhetoric such as that of Bolte. The dominant representation of the region tended to stress a distinctive identity that was mono-industrial and working class, mixing both militancy and paternalism.

The advent of more recent concerns about climate change has added a further dimension to the identity of the region as a 'dirty' locale. Thus, 'Victoria is the least climate friendly state—home to three of Australia's dirtiest power stations and none of the 12 biggest renewable energy plants. ... The Loy Yang A, Hazlewood and Yallourn W power stations were found to be among the highest-emitting plants in the country' ('Victoria proving the dirtiest state', *The Age*, 21 July 2009). The power companies and their proxies play on these associations: according to Alan Moran of the Institute of Public Affairs, a free market think tank on whose board are representatives of the Latrobe Valley power generators:

The Latrobe Valley's brown coal stations have been demonised because of their emissions of carbon dioxide. Using terms like 'notoriously polluting', some journalists echo green activists' Pol Pot-like descriptions of these electricity generators. In fact the Valley's power stations have allowed Victoria to benefit from electricity which is amongst the cheapest in the world and remains cheap. Low electricity charges have been a foundation stone for the state's economy. (Alan Moran, 'Dreaming of a Different White Paper', *Herald Sun*, 27 December 2008)

ETS and the future of the Latrobe Valley

Despite recent restructuring, power generators in the Latrobe Valley continue to supply 80-90 per cent of Victoria's electricity. According to research commissioned by Latrobe City Council, the industry continues to have an important place in the region's economy. Economic value-added revenue generated by the power industry was estimated at \$802.4m in 2008, representing 21.2 per cent of gross regional product, while every ten direct jobs in the coal and electricity sector were estimated to sustain a further eight jobs in the local economy (Latrobe City Council). Moreover, the region continues to support a significant engineering industry, including international companies such Bilfinger Berger and locally-owned small firms, which service the coal and power industries and markets elsewhere in Australia.

At the same time, there is wide acknowledgement of the inefficiency of brown coal as a source of energy for electricity which produces high emissions even compared to black coal. According to Senator Bob Brown, leader of the Australian

Greens, the brown coal-fired power stations of the Latrobe Valley (Loy Yang, Hazelwood, Yallourn, Morwell) which supply Victoria's power represent the worst form of carbon pollution:

When you look at it per unit of electricity, those brown coal-burning stations in Victoria go right to the dirtiest top of the league. Coal itself is a huge menace in terms of greenhouse gas production going into the atmosphere and the threat that's now creating for the world's environment and economy. But brown coal is 30 to 50 per cent worse in greenhouse gas emissions for the amount of electricity being produced, even than black coal. (ABC News)

It is in this context that the local impacts of any proposed Emissions Trading Scheme (ETS) were discussed during 2008. The Garnaut Review was commissioned by the former Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd, when leader of the opposition. An Interim Report was presented to the new ALP government in February 2008. It proposed a carbon ETS for Australia, but it specifically did not consider the distribution of the costs of this scheme between households and regions. A Draft Report was published in July 2008 and a Final Report in September 2008. The Final Report dealt, among other things, more explicitly with the regional consequences of an ETS. It argued that the long term future of coalmining regions relies on the commercial development of new and (as yet largely unproven) 'clean coal' technologies such as carbon capture and storage (CCS), but acknowledged that the shift to a low emissions regime would have uneven regional effects. In the main Garnaut rejected the case for structural adjustment support for affected regions (and sectors) arguing the market should determine allocative outcomes. However, he also concluded:

In considering the various impacts of an emissions trading scheme on different sectors, industries and regions, there is one geographic area the Review identified where such targeted transitional assistance may turn out to be warranted—the brown coal region of the Latrobe Valley. It will be a number of years before it is clear whether there is likely to be a regional problem. The Latrobe Valley satisfies the dual criteria in that:

Brown coal electricity generation is one of the most emissions-intensive industries in Australia, and the expected consequences may be severe, depending on the range of factors affecting future competitiveness, and concentrated in the region.

There would be limited opportunities for the employment of people who may be made redundant in the event of industry decline. (Garnaut 398)

In July 2008, the Energy Supply Association of Australia published a report warning that three of the four Latrobe Valley power stations would close by

2020 because of the heavy costs of running brown-coal fired plants under a carbon emissions trading scheme ('Power Plants in Danger from Emission Trading Scheme', *The Australian*, 25 July 2008).

Storylines

Confronted with the prospect of an ETS, the future of the Valley has been subject to much debate. The debate around the proposed ETS, therefore, dominated debates about the future of the Latrobe Valley in 2008, but must be seen in the context of earlier rounds of industrial restructuring. The news media has been an important forum for the rehearsal of the storylines that developed in relation to these debates. In order to investigate these we surveyed every issue of *The Latrobe Valley Express*—a twice weekly publication—during 2008 and sorted articles which addressed the subject of climate change and policy responses and their implications for the Valley. In the latter cases, we sorted for articles which addressed the development of the Valley. We regard the material produced by this survey as an element of the ethnographic record of the Valley. In the case of the *Latrobe Valley Express*, which has a very high household penetration, the paper sees itself as both a voice of the Valley and a platform for diverse views within the Valley. The key theme of the *Express*' coverage, as far as climate change is concerned, is the threat posed to the Valley by the potential impact of ETS (e.g. 'Trading Scheme Would Hurt', *Latrobe Valley Express*, 3 April 2008), while stressing the potential benefits to the region of solutions based on CCS (e.g. 'Clean Coal Support', *Latrobe Valley Express*, 12 May 2008; 'Commitment to store Valley's emissions: Carbon breakthrough', *Latrobe Valley Express*, 19 May 2008; 'There's beauty in the beast', *Latrobe Valley Express*, 10 June 2008). At the same time, the paper was the vehicle for a contest of ideas about the future of the region, notably during and after a Federal by-election which took place in June. Unsurprisingly, the Greens called for the replacement of coal by renewable energy, but Labour and Darren Chester, the eventually victorious National candidate, defended coal ('Coal industry must go say candidates', *Latrobe Valley Express*, 2 June 2008). According to Chester, 'We need to be viewing coal as an outstanding natural asset which must be used in the cleanest way possible to power our nation' ('Morwell unemployment double the national average: where are the jobs?', *Latrobe Valley Express*, June 2008).

For some, these debates overshadow and obscure other attributes of the Valley. For instance a business group formed to promote the valley as tourist destination 'were keen to prove to outsiders there was more to the Valley than the power industry' ('United bid to boost Valley's future', *Latrobe Valley Express*, 11 August 2008), reflecting a wider sense in which any new employment opportunities are likely to come through expansion of the service sector. But overall, the debate about climate change is viewed through the lens of the likely impact of the ETS

on employment and income. The region's power station owners presented the ETS in terms of threats, albeit the transitional arrangements for its introduction proposed by Garnaut removed that threat into the distance ('Power boss warns of price hike', *Latrobe Valley Express*, 21 June 2008). The trade unions also perceived the ETS in terms of a threat to employment. The Gippsland Trades and Labour Council 'warned thousands of power jobs could be lost, replicating the circumstances which surrounded the privatisation of the region's power generators in the 1990s', while the CFMEU Victorian mining and energy branch president argued,

There was no involvement from the Latrobe Valley community when the generators were privatised (in the 1990s) and it devastated our community, we don't want that to happen again. Yes things need to be done about cleaning the environment but we think the Latrobe Valley, community, union and workforce should be involved. ... Clean coal technology is the way forward so let's get on with it and start getting things done. ('Protect Valley Jobs', *Latrobe Valley Express*, 17 June 2008)

The connection between the threats to the Valley through the ETS and the trauma caused by privatisation of the power industry in the 1990s was expressed provocatively by a community activist writing in the paper:

The underpinning reason why Latrobe Valley voters turned their backs on local sitting ALP members at the last State Election is the lack of action by the Bracks-Brumby governments to ameliorate the destruction of our region's economy. ... As our regional community stares down the barrel of climate change impacts, the economic and employment consequences of a carbon trading scheme on the energy industry, and the manoeuvring of private power companies to force and capture government compensation without regard for the welfare of the Valley families, we have yet to hear how and if the Brumby Government intends to support our community through the anticipated tough time ahead. What is the Brumby government's 'brave policy action plan' that will guarantee the economic survival of the Valley beyond the pipe dreams of geo-sequestration, the hot air wishes of clean technology and the richly fertilising promises of a highly polluting coal-to-urea plant? (Cheryl Wragg, 'Reader's Say', *Latrobe Valley Express*, 30 June 2008)

The debates reported by the *Latrobe Valley Express* represent an element of the ethnographic record. It is a partial record, including and valorising some storylines and marginalising others, in ways that have implications for the future development of the region. It also disposes of complexity and nuance in articles of 200 words. Nevertheless, a number of themes emerge from the storylines presented in the local press. The first is that the internal and external

perception of the region is dominated by the fate of the power industry. Popular and negative perceptions of the ETS proposals and their implications for the Valley are heavily conditioned by the experience of the region during the privatisation of the power industry. Industry leaders reinforce this perception by continually emphasising the threat to employment embodied in an ETS. Clean coal technologies are seen as offering the most hope for the preservation of industry in the Valley, although the technological uncertainties surrounding them and the absence of significant investment in their development are given cursory attention.¹ The image that emerges is of a region beleaguered and threatened by powerful external forces: markets, globalisation, climate change and the ETS.

Home thoughts from abroad

The aim of this paper has been to explore the ‘unwindable spiral’ of material form and interpretive understanding of climate change at the local scale. The recent story of the Latrobe Valley, as expressed in local media coverage, exemplifies the difficulty of disaggregating the material and discursive aspects of regional change and the way in which this interplay shapes the structure of political opportunities. The dominant storyline of the Latrobe Valley has shifted from its centrality to the industrial growth of Victoria (‘The Ruhr of Australia’) to its definition as a ‘dirty’ region marked by a problematic working class culture. The region, however, continues to produce the vast bulk of Victoria’s electricity and with the prospect of an ETS, its fate will be determined by national and state politics as well as local action (see ‘State’s clean-coal gamble’, *The Age*, 4 November 2009).

The dominant storylines emerging through the local media largely focus on the threats to the region arising from the ETS. Views about the future are heavily conditioned by the experience of the past, particularly the impacts of privatisation on employment and social conditions in the region. The idea of the region as under threat is naturalized in the storylines which emerge from the local press and is one which employers (and unions) in the region are keen to promote. The only hope for the region is seen as lying in the possibilities of clean coal technology, notwithstanding the uncertainties that surround its prospects. We found scarcely any discussion of economic alternatives. In this sense, the region could be said to exhibit the functional, cognitive and political

¹ The main international investors ‘deferred’ indefinitely the main proposed clean coal technology project in the Valley in late 2008 (‘Shell, Anglo-American delay clean-coal plan’, *The Australian*, 3 December 2008). The Victorian government, however, continued to support the building of an additional power station in the Valley during 2008 and to stress its support for clean coal technology as a response to the ETS, including through the provision of funding for research and demonstration projects (‘Where to now?’, *The Age*, 4 April 2008).

lock-ins which have been identified in European coalmining regions, which are simultaneously material and discursive. In any event the region's identity is deeply tied up with assessments of the region's likely fate.

In reflecting on alternative economic futures it is worth looking beyond Australia to consider the restructuring of coalmining regions elsewhere, for instance Europe (see Hudson; Pike *et al.* 198-205; Tomaney, 'Restructuring', for overviews). The restructuring of coalmining regions has been much investigated in Europe as part of the economic study of 'old industrial regions', which provides the empirical foundations for alternative theorisations of regional economic change. Such studies reveal that regions do not respond simply to market signals but are influenced by past trajectories of development. 'History matters' and the region itself is an influence on the restructuring process and is not merely the effect of shifts in industrial composition. Many European coal mining regions, for example, are characterised by 'lock-ins': that is, industry and public authorities struggle to adapt to new opportunities and break their dependence on old forms of economic activity, remaining trapped in low growth trajectories. These difficulties can be linked to issues of community identity formations and transformations over time. A brief exploration of two regions with quite distinctive recent economic histories, the North East of England and the Ruhrgebiet in Germany, illustrates the significance of issues of identity transformation and the extent to which diverse trajectories of change unfold in coalmining regions.

A major phase of restructuring in the North East coalmining regions occurred in the 1980s following the defeat of the miners' strike of 1984-5, which proved a prelude to privatisation of coal and deregulation of the energy sector. Politically, state intervention on a large scale was eschewed by the Thatcher government, and the changes wrought in the coalmining regions were designed to have cultural as well as economic impacts. Indeed, the traditional identity of the region was seen as intrinsically and irredeemably problematic and unsuited to the 'new economy' based on service industries. Coalmining regions were regarded as over-dependant on state support and lacking in enterprise, compared with industries in which the UK exhibited global comparative advantage, notably finance. Policy emphasised the need to 'diversify' local economies, and old industrial sites were typically turned over to new activities such as leisure and retail. In part, these regeneration programmes were a self-conscious effort to eliminate the physical traces of the old industries. The region—especially its former mining communities—was marked by below average performance in relation to productivity, innovation, enterprise and educational attainment, while unemployment remained above the UK average. A larger problem is that

of 'worklessness'; that is, people not registered as unemployed but often in receipt of other benefits, and who would accept work if it was available (Beatty and Fothergill; Pike *et al.*; Tomaney, 'Politics').

The Ruhrgebiet provides a contrasting case where the emphasis has been on more active forms of restructuring aimed at developing existing industries as well as new ones and informed by a heightened cultural awareness. The Ruhr region is the major location for coal production in Germany. Like North East England the region experienced restructuring in the 1960s as a result of changes in energy markets and technologies, which resulted in the closure of 146 pits between 1960 and 1980. Restructuring in the Ruhr has been marked by efforts to develop new activities out of the old, to a larger degree than the case in North East England. Central to this process has been the assisted diversification of engineering supply and service firms, from traditional markets in the declining coal and steel industries into new environmental technologies (Hospers). There has been a strong emphasis on developing new eco-leisure and cultural industries. In addition to a major reforestation project, investment has been made in recycling old industrial buildings. Perhaps the best example of this is the listing of the Zollverein mine complex (designed by Bauhaus) as a UNESCO world heritage site. The government has promoted the Ruhr as Europe's 'Energy Region' and has created a new development agency to give focus to its efforts in developing new industries. For example, the world's first solar powered science park is home to the Ruhr Energy International Visitor Centre. The relationship between industrial and cultural change continues to be examined and *Ruhr 2010* is a year-long arts festival aimed at reflecting and promoting the identity of the region internally and externally. Clearly, in the case of the restructuring of the Ruhr, issues of culture and identity have been fundamental to ongoing economic adaptation and identity transformation under German traditions of cooperative planning known as 'codetermination' (*Die Mitbestimmung*) involving government, employers and unions (Hospers).

These contrasting cases draw attention to different approaches to restructuring coalmining regions. The first approach is largely market-driven and sees economic history and regional identity as problems to be overcome, rather than assets which might be developed. The second approach emphasises planning and consensus and the development of new activities based on existing assets and acknowledging the historic cultural identity of the region. Notwithstanding the likely longevity of the coal industry, a result of its strategic importance in the Victorian energy system, and the likely limited immediate impact of any eventual ETS, the example of the Ruhr raises some interesting questions to consider in the context of the Latrobe Valley—'Australia's Ruhr'. For instance, to what extent can existing economic assets be developed in relation to new more carbon neutral markets and technologies? How can existing skills be

adapted to any new opportunities? Thinking about the transformation of the region in this way would represent a departure from existing storylines and create space for the consideration of alternative economic futures. But it would do so in ways that avoid the denigration of all that has gone before and the ongoing abjection of the region. To what extent can a process of change be imagined, incorporating new and fresh developments and different actors, but which also respects existing cultural forms? How can the place itself play a part in the formation of its future? This debate has hardly begun in Latrobe Valley, but a sustainable future requires that it should.

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