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Report about my research stay in Strasbourg (January 15 – April 30, 2018)
“Changing Societies” WZB Berlin/FMSH Paris

My fellowship in Strasbourg began shortly after I completed my dissertation in December 2017 and enabled me to immediately start working on a new research project. This project is a social history of deindustrialization in Western Europe (Germany, France, and Great Britain) since the 1960s based on oral history interviews. The project aims at understanding the changing perception of political, social, and economic belonging at a moment when the inhabitants of industrial areas were stripped of their traditional focal point and identity constructed around the work in the coal and steel industries. The former workers had to compete for the same few jobs, the old narratives of sociability had lost their purpose. The social cohesion of the “industrial community” was put at risk. Politicians, employers, and workers alike searched for new ties that could bind the people of the deindustrialized regions together, once the infrastructure built around communal work in the coal mines and steel plants vanished. This development was all the more important because industrialized areas had been zones of immigration since the 19th century. The perceived atomization of the worker’s society had consequences for the debate around the integration of newly arriving immigration but also on the social cohesion of those who had arrived a long time ago.

The study thus combines two approaches, migration studies and the impact of deindustrialization, two of the most profound vectors for societal change in the last fifty years. Thinking those two concepts together aims at shedding new light on the contemporary so-called “migration crisis” in Europe and the “crisis of democracy” – notably the emergence of new right-wing parties, which were able to recruit many voters in the deindustrialized regions in Europe in the past years. Given its focus on analyzing the transnational transformation of work and employment, the changing nature of migration and integration, as well as the resulting crises of democracy in the context of deindustrializing from the 1960s, my project is well in line with the program Changing Societies.

The main goal of my research stay in Strasbourg was to thus prepare and to submit a grant proposal in cooperation with the research group around Professor Emmanuel Droit of Sciences Po Strasbourg and the interdisciplinary Unité Mixte de Recherche DynamE (Dynamiques Européennes) of Strasbourg University whose head, Professor Maurice Carrez, hosted me during my time in Strasbourg.

In the first weeks of my stay in Strasbourg, I met with Emmanuel Droit, Maurice Carrez, and members of the research group DynamE, and we talked about how we envision the shape of a collaborative research project and how to navigate the process of applying for a grant of the
French National Research Council (Agence Nationale de Recherche (ANR)). Furthermore, I discovered the many well-equipped libraries of the university of Strasbourg, which enabled me to get access to and to unearth the French speaking research literature in the field. Emmanuel Droit, in particular, introduced me to the researchers and graduate students of DynamE who work on similar topics, pointed out local libraries and archives as well as specific research literature within my new field of research.

In mid-February, we received notice from the ANR that a short pre-proposal of our collaborative project on experiences of deindustrialization in Europe had been successful and we were invited to submit a full grant proposal by the end of March. In close collaboration with Emmanuel Droit, we wrote a twenty-page grant proposal titled “Experiences of Deindustrialization in Europe (1960-2000): The Unmaking of the European Working Class?.” This project includes my above-mentioned project, which is based on case studies in the German Ruhr valley, Northern France, and British Yorkshire. But this collaborative project also entails case studies from other regions in both Eastern and Western Europe, such as Upper Silesia in Poland, the Tampere region in Finland, Eisenhüttenstadt in East-Germany, Lorraine and Alsace in Eastern France, and Wales. The researchers who will participate in our interdisciplinary and collaborative project are from France, Germany, Poland, Finland, and Great Britain.

My presence in Strasbourg facilitated the work on the grant application because it allowed us to schedule many spontaneous on-site meetings where we could work on the proposal draft together – cutting and editing the draft on one computer, discussing the overarching arguments and how the different projects would fit together. We submitted the grant proposal on March 27, 2018 and expect to hear back from the ANR in the early summer months.

In the remaining time of my stay in Strasbourg, I took advantage of the local archives in Strasbourg and worked at the local branch of the National Audiovisual Institute (Institut National de l’Audiovisuel (INA)), which collects all radio and national as well as private television shows broadcasted in France since 1949. In the INA collection, I could research the way deindustrialization in Northern France was portrayed in French audio-visual media, and I found a number of interesting documentaries, news magazines (for example one dedicated to mining families in Northern France), and debates around the coal mining region in the northern Hexagon.

My stay in Strasbourg was thus very successful in that I could build up a research network in Strasbourg but also with our project partners all over Europe. This network led to a collective grant proposal on experiences of deindustrialization in Europe submitted to the ANR during my time in Strasbourg. Furthermore, I was able to take the first steps towards my new research project and to complete the research in my first archive for this project.
I am very grateful for the support of the Changing Societies program, which not only made my stay in Strasbourg possible but the program also welcomed me into the Changing Societies “family.” I was able to meet the many participants of the program at the closing conference at WZB Berlin in April 2018, where I moderated a panel. A special merci to Lisa Crinon, who coordinated the program so well and had always an open ear for the Changing Societies fellows and their specific needs.