

Capturing a Factory's Final Days

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Article:

Review of: CLOSING: The Life and Death of an American Factory Bill Bamberger and Cathy N. Davidson W.W. Norton & Company, 1998

It has been said that when your neighbor loses her job, it's a recession; when you lose your job, it's a depression.

We'd never hear this witticism in a world in which we care about our neighbors as we do ourselves. But in the world as we know it, perspective shades our interpretation of events around us. We are acutely aware of the human costs and benefits of events that affect us and those near us. Yet sound policy-making often requires a less-emotional outlook.

Therefore, when thinking about economics and society, it's important to retain both of these perspectives, the small and the large, the micro and the macro. Policy without humanity is heartless; humanity without policy is irresponsible.

I thought about this dichotomy as I read *Closing* by Bill Bamberger and Cathy N. Davidson, which chronicles the demise of the White Furniture Co. of Mebane. White's was sold to Hickory Manufacturing Co. in 1985 and then closed for good by Hickory in 1993. Bamberger, a photographer who lives in Mebane and teaches at UNC-Chapel Hill, spent four months documenting the passing of White's. Davidson, an English professor at Duke University, provided the verbal context for the project.

Bamberger's photographs already have received much media attention (*News & Record*, March 15, 1994), and I will say little about them here other than to agree with every kind word ever uttered on their behalf. The 61 black-and-white and 31 color photographs in the book are haunting and evocative and imbued with dignity. One sees both pride and pain in the eyes of the workers and both value and neglect in the rows of old equipment lined up for auction.

Davidson's task is to match, with words, the power of these photographs. On one level, the level of the small, she succeeds. She weaves a compelling narrative of White's history around the words of a handful of former White's workers who were interviewed for the project. The workers' accounts give life and poignancy to the photographs, and the loss the workers feel is palpable. On the strength of the photographs and interviews alone, I would recommend this touching and very human book to anyone.

However, Davidson takes matters one step further and attempts to extrapolate from the small to the large, and this is the book's weakness. The closing of White of Mebane was a shame, and Davidson believes it says something important about broader economic problems in post-industrial America. But while she raises important questions, she often falls prey to the logic of that witticism mentioned earlier: White's workers lost their jobs, so it must have been a depression.

Founded in 1881, the White Furniture Co. was for decades a model of both humane and innovative capitalism. The White family competed aggressively for new business and at the same time treated its workers well. In

response, the workers chose to work for the Whites even though many could have earned higher wages elsewhere. They valued their employment at White of Mebane for the job security, the satisfaction of a job well done and a feeling that they were part of something almost like a family.

When Hickory bought the firm, average salaries rose and some pay inequities were remedied, but Davidson's subjects seemed more concerned by their perception of declining product quality than thankful for the improved pay.

In a sense, the workers were parties to a pact with White's: job security and good treatment in exchange for quality workmanship and scant pressure for higher wages. The pact broke down with the company's sale, and it was the owners' failure, not the workers'. Over the years, White of Mebane slowly became less innovative and aggressive. The company's machinery and processes were in need of repair and modernization. Yet in 1981, company president Steve White said, "I think we're about as automated as it is possible for us to be." The resistance to changing production needs was aggravated by a failure to address changing consumer tastes.

Had the climate of business been more forgiving of such lapses, White of Mebane might have persisted in spite of itself. But the furniture manufacturing industry has been consolidating, in fits and starts, for years now, and nimbler management than White's was required to stay afloat.

Davidson claims that "it is far too easy to think that White's was first sold and then shut down because something went wrong, someone failed." But by and large, businesses fail for a reason. White's chances of survival would have been better if someone had been making the hard decisions to ensure the company's long-term viability, not just its short-term gentility.

Davidson doesn't blame individuals (though some of her subjects do), instead leveling her criticism at the economy as a whole, an economy in which factories close, operations are downsized and workers dislocated. However, the paradox is that these events, while disturbing in the small, should not always be prevented in the large.

The current economic crisis in Japan has been caused in part by a banking sector that won't let businesses fail, that supplies them with one cash infusion after another and ensures that workers are used in inefficient and unsustainable enterprises. Japan and its workers are only now paying the bill for that seemingly humane policy. In Europe, inflexible labor markets are at the root of what economists call "Euroclerosis," the combination of high unemployment and stagnant growth bedeviling much of the continent.

Davidson reports the number of jobs lost nationally in the 1990s without reporting the number created. She notes that less and less of our national income is derived from manufacturing without acknowledging that this is a natural outgrowth of an economy's movement from industrial to post-industrial. She expresses concern about increasing income inequality in America without mentioning that increased rewards for job skills are an important determinant of that trend. Or that incomes in general are rising as we continue through an astounding and prolonged economic expansion.

The concerns Davidson raises are important, and they should be addressed by a humane society, but with policy that targets the causes, not just the emotional consequences. It's essential that we be aware of the human cost of economic dislocations, and *Closing* does an excellent job of reminding us. But the reader should be wary of following too closely Davidson's voyage from the small to the large.