



**TRANSATLANTIC
DIALOGUE ON THE
INDUSTRIAL
HEARTLANDS**

MOVING FROM “RUST BELT” TO “TRUST BELT”

Why the language we use matters

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The 2016 US presidential election rocked the world when several dozen counties in three US midwestern swing states of Pennsylvania, Michigan, and Wisconsin— still pejoratively described as the Rust Belt — flipped from supporting Democrats in prior elections **handing Republican Donald Trump, very narrowly, the Presidency**. Early that same year Brexit in the UK saw voters in similarly once-reliable Labour strongholds among the industrial redoubts of England’s North (known there as the “Red Wall”), voicing their frustrations and anger at being ignored in the national discussion – driving Britain out of the EU. These seismic events **set off a global scramble** to sort what was making voters of many struggling industrial heartlands within our western democracies so angry and alienated, and **what could be done about it!**

Given the link between the economic conditions of industrial heartland regions and support for polarizing, sometimes anti-democratic populist movements (the “Geography of Discontent” **in this EU analysis**), there has been growing interest and efforts **to identify and share strategies** on how to attack the root cause of these discontents: the real and perceived economic decline of once-proud and mighty industrial regions.

While doing so it is essential to choose our words carefully, because there is a high risk to make things even worse by assigning or reinforcing images about these regions and their residents that we actually want to overcome. The language we use reveal our views. They also shape the way we are heard, and how people think about the subject we are talking about. If I call a region “rust belt” it betrays my condescension and at the same time adds to it, compounding the alienation and widening the gulf between heartland region residents and well-intentioned “elites” seeking to help. Think of the reaction to Hilary Clinton’s famous description of Trump supporters as “deplorables”, or then-candidate Barack Obama talking about rural Pennsylvania voters “who cling to their guns and their religion?”. Anyone who sees themselves as the target of these remarks, recoils at this demeaning of their own self-image. When language like that is used the “targets” feel humiliated, disregarded and without perspective and opportunity.

This is the dynamic we are looking to help correct in the **Transforming Industrial Heartlands Initiative**: That this feel-

ing of disregard and being left behind undermines the confidence and belief in democracy.

We are trying to learn ourselves the impact of language on mindsets. This is a field with a lot of attention and research, research that is being translated into action in various fields. For example, when we try **to establish a gender fair language**, or make sure we are not repeating racist stereotypes by using certain terms. It is a good time to apply these insights and to the actions we are taking to nurture new economic opportunities in transitioning regions, and to get in the habit of using respectful and constructive language.

Right now, too often we don’t. The term “Rust belt” is just one example that illustrates the damage language can inflict. It claims that a region is in decay, that it had a past that we can look back to, but no future its residents can look forward to. It suggests only a faded present – conducive to feelings of depression, self-contempt and nostalgia. The term might justify a call for new investment and subsidies, but will not offer any glimpse at a positive transformation.

An aspect of the challenge is that whoever says “Rust belt” can conjure a lot of factual evidence of decline— population loss, job loss, out migration; while anyone who wants to talk about a “region of opportunity” has to conjure a yet unrealized, imagined future. Yes, people can invent their own future, and arguably they must invent a new future and story of hope – before heading towards it. This requires a form of personal reinvention, which as long as they will be seen as “rust belters”, is almost impossible to do.

And the vocabulary of discouragement and demoralization, particularly as applied to communities and regions reeling from de-industrialization, is sadly rich. Many, again well-intentioned, wanting-to-be-helpers, use the term “post industrial”. The words are problematic in many ways, because industry doesn’t vanish, it just goes somewhere else, often to parts of the world where the products we need are being produced without environmental, social or political obligations that would have to be observed back home.

But when heard by residents of the region described, “post-industrial” sends a message that it is over. The glory

of the past will never come back. “Post industrial” is taken to mean post opportunity. Anyone who wants to support a positive economic move forward has to counter each “post”, with a “pre”. “Pre research, technology and innovation center”, “Pre-lifestyle and amenity driven community”. We have to turn our heads and minds from looking backwards to looking forwards.

There are also terms that seem to condemn regions and their citizens to passivity, like “left behind”, or “underserved”. As if it is completely up to those who are leaving others behind, or neglecting in decision-making—to revise their decisions, or take mercy to reintegrate those “left behind” into the economic mainstream and the march of progress. If, as today is the case in the UK, a complete policy strategy is termed “levelling up” regions, it sends a clear message of who is active and who is passive, who is up and who is down, who is the beggar and who the benefactor. And while the term “structural change” — used commonly in Europe and Germany — is better; the regions targeted for structural change are also classified as “structurally weak” - which stresses the need to be “helped”.

To add one last category of unhelpful terms, there are some that not only claim a certain region is at risk, but that it poses a risk for others, like “region of discontent” or “stagnant region”. These tags don’t look at the challenge, namely supporting a positive transition. “Discontent” stresses a negative feeling that can easily turn into a destructive one, like political radicalization, which would shift the perspective of the “uplevelling” benefactors from granting a compensation for earlier losses to paying a kind of ransom so the region stays calm. And “stagnant” has connotations of unclean water or even contagious disease, as if it was better to avoid contact with such a region.

An ex-miner’s wife in the BBC series “Sherwood”, written by James Graham, summarizes all this quite well: “They didn’t care about us then and they don’t care about us now. They just use us. I mean look at what they still call us - look at what we call ourselves. A former mining town. Why? Post industrial. How the hell are we meant to move on from that when even the way we talk about ourselves is by what we aren’t any more. How are my grandkids meant to imagine a future beyond that?”

Obviously, nothing in this discourse contributes to a constructive turnaround. The coal regions in the UK show how miners’ strikes can be crushed, and economic restructuring forced, but that doesn’t answer the question of how such a region can reinvent itself. The hollowed out factory towns in the US Midwest didn’t appear as a burden on the US economy, just not today’s economic engines as they once were — but the people who feel deserted might identify ethnonationalist, anti-democratic populists as their best allies, with political results that affect us all. And while the exit from coal mining and steel making in Germany’s Ruhr region was carefully planned with an accompanying social policy so that no workers would fall into the void, that by itself cannot be a substitute for a forward-moving change policy around the region’s future. Careful use of language alone cannot result in a positive development. But it can help to change perspectives. The two most important features of a constructive language, touch on the direction—the arrow of the timeline and communication: Look forward instead of backwards. Talk about the future instead of the past. Replace nostalgia by ambition. And let the region and its citizens make the decisions, speak to them at eye level instead of about them, don’t try to do anything for them, but do it together with them.

In many cases this won’t happen by itself. When a state or federal system has taught a region that those towns will get the most money who are able to portray themselves in the darkest shades of grey, it discourages creation of a positive, local asset-based business plan and investment offer. A crucial precondition for forward movement is for heartland residents to first win back self-respect, and then the respect of others. The magic word here is participation.

Someone — preferably coming from the broader community or region itself — has to organize a platform involving as many citizens as possible. Why do they still like to live in that region and why would they recommend others to move there, too? What do they think their region has to offer to the national economy? What could their unique selling point be? Why should investors bring their money? Where do the citizens want to go in the future — in the fields of culture, research, mobility, education, sustainability, recreation, quality of life, social cohesion? What do they think is needed to get there? And is there

reason to believe that chances are higher to get there jointly, as a region, rather than the cities and municipalities splitting up and doing it on their own?

Such concepts could be drawn by a few experts in an office meeting room someplace. But as in any change process this would be a wasted opportunity: First, the people concerned, if included, always come up with ideas that no experts would have. Even if ultimately this adds only ten percent to the blueprint, it is of great value. Second, change is always about a change of minds, and working on a turn around plan opens the minds of all involved for future opportunities. It adds to self respect and will eventually color the perception of the region from outside. Participation seems to take longer, but it is a shortcut.

Of course, this is happening in many regions already. The **Ruhr Conference**, for example, an initiative by the then Minister-President of North Rhine-Westphalia Armin Laschet, in 2018 developed its plans under the motto “people make the metropolis”. They termed the Ruhr as a “region of opportunity”, focussing on potentials rather than problems, asking for ideas first and only then talk about money, developing plans fit for investing public money in projects such as green infrastructure, research centers and urban art.

These investments must be for the benefit not only of the region but of the whole state and country in line with the claim “if it’s good for us it’s good for you”. It is crucial to define “us” and “you” in an inclusive manner. The overall aim has to be benefits for all citizens in the transforming region, including those who have lost their jobs and perspectives when economic change began. To keep them out and turn around the region without them would just be a kind of gentrification. Whatever will be achieved has to be rooted in what happened earlier. Or, as William Faulkner put it: “The past is never dead. It’s not even past.”

Any approach to reinvent, redefine and reposition a region in a positive way can only be successful if it is trusted. There is no point in suggesting state of the art research laboratories, and exclude the housing problems in certain areas. If a turnaround program is perceived as “success-washing”, as in “greenwashing” of certain products or companies, it is bound to fail.

The message must be: Yes, there are shortcomings that will have to be taken care of, but let’s at the same time get a process started that will help to prevent such shortcomings from emerging in the first place. Let us use the power of our minds to see what our region can be 30 years from now. We (the residents) are experts in change. Transformation is our specialization. We are pre-prospering, embarking on a journey to success; we are a vivid region of confidence, an asset for ourselves and the state. Instead of your “Rust Belt” we are your “Trust Belt”.

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