

# Industrial Heritage and Regional Identities

In many heritage sites, non-spatial forms of identity are interlinked with spatial ones. This book provides the first global survey of how regions of heavy industry grapple with their industrial heritage and what it means for regional identity. It explores how region-branding seems to determine the ultimate success of industrial heritage, a process that is closely connected to the marketing of regions to provide a viable economic future and attract tourism to the region.

Drawing on international case-studies from coal- and steel-producing regions, the chapters explore how heritage has developed powerful links to regional and local identities, from class, gender, religion, ethnicity, race and culture. It highlights both the commonalities and differences in the strategies employed towards a regions' industrial heritage, and draws a range of powerful conclusions about the path dependency of particular forms for post-industrial regional identity in former regions of heavy industry. This book will appeal to students and scholars in the fields of heritage, tourism, geography and cultural studies.

**Christian Wicke** is Assistant Professor in political history at Utrecht University.

**Stefan Berger** is Professor of Social History at Ruhr University Bochum and director of the Institute for Social Movements.

**Jana Golombek** is a doctoral student and a research associate at the German Mining Museum in Bochum and is working as a researcher and curator at the LWL-Industrial Museum in Dortmund.

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*Arizona State University, USA*

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# **Industrial Heritage and Regional Identities**

**Edited by Christian Wicke,  
Stefan Berger and  
Jana Golombek**

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## 2 Looking back

### Representations of the industrial past in Asturias

*Rubén Vega García*

Located on the north coast of Spain and currently populated by just over one million inhabitants, Asturias has been one of the focuses of Spanish industrialization, after Catalonia and the Basque Country. Throughout the 20th century, Asturias has been a mining and industrial region. It is on this foundation that its economic prosperity and social structures, as well as the power of its labor movement were built. Coal, steel and other industries held sway over most of the employment and acted as locomotives of the regional economy. Moreover, miners' and metal-workers' significance for the regional identity was even greater given their social, political and cultural influence.

The decline of the Asturian industries has been a long-term process, but the hardest moments of dismantlement have taken place since the mid-1980s. In 1980, when industrial decline was already apparent but the traditional sectors had not yet been restructured, there were 32.030 Asturian miners and 42.177 metal-workers, representing 20 per cent of the total labor market of 370.061 people.<sup>1</sup>

Job losses and adjustments of industries caused intense social conflicts. At the same time, paradoxically, the weakening of the mentioned workers' position on the labor market was accompanied by a strengthening of their union's power, to which fell the management of the economic decline. To a significant extent, young people's educational opportunities and living standards were little affected by these developments. This is due largely to the negotiations and struggles carried out on the part of their parents (or even grandparents), over wages, pensions and public funds for economic recovery and social protection.

The labor and industrial past, which casts a long shadow over present generations, acts as a 'territory' of memory, a source of identity and an origin of collective traumas.<sup>2</sup> The cultural transformations have been fundamental and dramatic, but many traces of the past remain – and retain relevance for both generations, the one who lived it and the one who grew up in a different context but lives with the memory of it.

The fact that identities and references to industrial work and working culture remain testifies to the retained importance of these industries for social structures, even after these industries themselves have disappeared. The importance of these industries can therefore be verified by examining the ways in which they have been preserved in collective memory. Asturias has a long history and a strong

identity. Some myths about its indomitable nature rests on historic episodes like the resistance against the Roman, Muslim and French conquerors. 20th-century workers' struggles, and particularly the 1934 revolutionary uprising, which have added to this self-perception in the consciousness of Asturian people and also in the external image they project of themselves to others.<sup>3</sup>

In the realm of cultural expression, the memory of the industry and work is kept alive. In collective imagination, it configures a rich, intangible heritage that acts as a source of inspiration for artistic creation in many different ways. For many of these artists, who are rooted in a social environment marked by the working culture, the experience of industrial decline becomes an explanatory key to their own artworks.

Growing up in the mining area or in a working-class neighborhood often becomes the reason they offer for the issues treated in their pieces of art and also their ideological positions as citizens. These two issues are in fact often closely linked. Frequently, this personal origin in the industrial social context is present in writers' texts, or the lyrics of songs. In this regard, workers' struggles play a role of fundamental reference in society.

While these lines were being written, an Asturian newspaper started a survey asking about which song (apart from the regional anthem) could best represent the feelings of Asturian people. A group of 30 musicians (singers of very different ages and genres, from opera to hip-hop, composers and directors) voted first for "Asturias", a song that is a proletarian chant. The second one, "Santa Bárbara Bendita", is the miners' hymn. Among the 20 songs proposed for voting, there are four mining songs, three more include a reference to the mines and three further songs have a vindictive aim, expressing demands rather than feelings of revenge, regarding past labor movements or the current social crisis. In a subsequent vote through the web, more than 46 per cent preferred "Asturias". It is not, of course, a rigorous test, but it shows the strength with which the old industrial era and working-class symbols still exert an influence over people and their self-perception.<sup>4</sup>

## **Industrialization and deindustrialization**

From the 19th century onwards, Asturian economy proved to be poorly diversified as well as highly dependent on protection given by the State. Its population grew around coal mining and the steel industry at the core of the region and this frame gave shape to a society and underpinned many of its social and political organizations and social conflicts. At the same time, the image of Asturias remained closely tied to its condition as a working-class fortress, personified in the combativeness of the miners, who participated in a revolutionary uprising in 1934 and throughout the Francoist period became the reference for all opposition to the regime. This tradition of strong working-class movements came to fruition when traditional industries started to show symptoms of weakness to which the state reacted by purchasing those companies, which in time turned the state into the main entrepreneur in the region. One great state-owned company managed



most of the coal mining industry through the creation of HUNOSA in 1967 and the same happened in 1973 with the merging of all private steel companies into the also state-owned ENSIDESA. This disappearance of all private entrepreneurs in both sectors is related to different causes in its origins: coal was no longer profitable since the state reduced its protection (subsidies and duties) in 1959 and mine owners solved their resulting problem of diminishing revenue by selling their pits to the State. However, in those years, 1967 and 1973 respectively, the steel industry was still on the rise, and the bankruptcy of these companies was not so much caused by crisis as by massive debt provoked through their investment plans. In both cases, that of the steel factories and that of the coal mines, the State acted as a lifeguard for private interests.<sup>5</sup>

Consequently, when the effects of the international crisis that began in 1973 became evident, employment in the state-owned industries surpassed figures of 50.000 workers, which was more than a third of all industrial employment and amounted to 12 per cent of the employment in the entire region, considering all sectors. As the impact of the crisis translated into companies going out of business and the destruction of jobs in the private sector, the presence of the state-owned companies, safeguarded from the harshness of the market, grew until the moment in which, with some delay, the government finally faced their major restructuring.

Direct involvement of the State as an entrepreneur in economic sectors with long-standing traditions of working-class movements means better conditions for those workers who lose their jobs, ranging from a majority that becomes simply unemployed and other sectors, such as textile or shipbuilding, which become the subject of restructuring plans including social measures such as compensations for job-losses, increases in unemployment coverage, voluntary contract terminations, early retirements, relocation in different companies etc. Nevertheless, the reach and coverage of these different measures will prove to be unequal, improving only due to workers' ability to exert pressure on the government. Organization of workers and their tradition of class struggle will become, at this point, determining factors. The ability shown by workers of certain companies and sectors to put their labor troubles in the avant-garde of all social mobilization and their social leadership whether local or even regional will widen the political dimension of the conflicts. It will also give working-class organizations a major role in the management of the industrial decline which was reinforced by the weakness of the business class and the public agencies that was evident in a few and weak company owners, regional public institutions with little prestige and power, as well as a lack of strategies for future projects.<sup>6</sup>

Roughly, troubles related to industrial decline in Asturias during the last quarter of the 20th century are typical of industrial regions dominated by ageing sectors (mining, steel, shipbuilding) which are no longer competitive. In the given case, this is exacerbated by the concurrent opening of the country to world markets and Spain's membership in the European Union. Social repercussions were delayed or softened in the short term by the presence of state-owned companies and the strength of labor unions, but in the long term they will be much stronger, although workers' resistance and social mobilization gave way to a serious attempt by the

state to buy social peace via huge public funds for infrastructures, re-activation plans and unemployment benefits, the majority of them through the form of early retirements.<sup>7</sup> In perspective, the strength of the working-class movement did not prevent de-industrialization, but it ensured many public funds that softened immediate social effects. In exchange, the State avoided major social disruptions and managed to withdraw as an entrepreneur through the closure or privatization of the public industrial companies: just 1.407 employees remain today in HUNOSA, the only state-owned company still active in the region. Its definitive shut-down is scheduled for 2018. This date will most likely also see the disappearance of all coal mines still in operation, putting an end to a period of two centuries of mining activity.

The disappearance or the drastic reduction of the foundations of former prosperity, together with the spread of unemployment or underemployment among the youth, has given way to a phenomenon of cross-generational solidarity. Family structures have played a key role in this regard, facilitating processes of income distribution from elder generations (mining or factory workers and former workers) towards their children or even grandchildren, who managed to subsist with precarious jobs or even gained access to university degrees thanks to family aid. This way, the huge transfers from the State both to the workers who were directly affected by restructuring policies and indirectly to the territory have played an important part in preventing further deterioration of living conditions, which otherwise could have translated into increasing problems of marginalization and crime.<sup>8</sup>

The beginning of the 21st century has brought drastic changes in the scenario previously characterized by working-class and industrial identity: once the traditional sectors were reduced in size or disappeared entirely, the traditional working-class organizations were weakened and discredited. Work in this sector has become precarious employment. Compensations for restructuring of the labor market (public investment, European funds, social subsidies etc.) will not continue unlimited. The transmission of the cultural codes and experiences of the workers, the memory of their struggles, together with the legacy left by mines and factories, have entered a process of transformation and reassignment of meanings that is still open. A migratory flow commenced two decades ago and thousands of young people have seen themselves forced to leave the region year after year. This exodus introduces an additional difficulty into the preservation of this memory, although some of these young migrants, by looking to the past, adopt mechanisms to compensate the perceived feeling of a loss of roots. Quite often, the uprooting experience of emigration is compensated by a reinforcement use of and attachment to symbolic references (flag, music etc.) and testimonies or self-descriptions in which they consider themselves economic exiles.

### **Regional identity and industrial heritage**

Mining and industrial activities have shaped a notable part of the identity of the social environment in which mining pits and factories were inserted. First of all,

this has meant local identities marked by a specific economical basis: mining in those towns that grew around coal basins, steel in those towns that developed thanks to the factories, as well as other activities in smaller villages. From this mosaic emerged a working-class identity that relied upon the strength of the class unions and the transcendence of several episodes of struggle performed by workers.

This working-class component has been incorporated into the collective portrait of Asturian society. The image of the miners as a collective subject has been permanently attached to the image of the region itself, and, along with the idea of the left as the main political trend and rebellion as the most prominent attitude, the miners' prominence owes a lot to the leadership of the working-class movement throughout the 20th century.

Historian Francisco Erice refers to the “almost legendary tale” linked to the “archetypal image of the Red Asturias or the Revolutionary Asturias” and whose main characters are mostly miners.

The History of the working class movement and social struggles in Asturias is plenty of resounding episodes with great power to project themselves as images and myths. From these real struggles has emerged a whole imagery, rhetoric and epic narration that has permeated the collective consciousness of all the Asturians, projecting itself beyond regional borders. Asturian working class is the focus of this narrative, but, above all, there are the miners, identified as its symbol, quintessence or militant *avant-garde*.<sup>9</sup>

However, the region had an old and strong identity which has merged – sometimes harmoniously, contradictorily at other times – with this new ingredient of the Red and Working-Class Asturias. The name of the territory comes from the populations which settled before the Roman conquest and, somehow, the region has preserved distinguishing features and a distinct identity over more than 2.000 years. Mines or factories are usually placed near megaliths, pre-Roman villages, Roman ruins or medieval churches. Over the course of two centuries (722–925) at the beginnings of the so-called Reconquest, there was an independent Asturian kingdom, and its local language (‘Bable’ or ‘Asturian’, which derives from Latin just as Castilian) is also millenary. In the epic of regional history, the resistance against the Roman conquest, the role of the region as initial focus of the Christian re-conquest after the Muslim invasion of the Iberian Peninsula and, less commonly, the uprising against Napoleon’s army in 1808, are counted as widely popularized milestones. In fact, when Asturias gained political autonomy in the process of decentralization that accompanied the transition towards democracy, the two dates that were proposed as regional holidays were 25 May (uprising against French invaders in 1808) and 8 September (Battle of Covadonga against the Umayyads in 722). The debate was solved in favour of the second option.

Working-class epics have connected with that tale, since it provides rich episodes of struggle such as the 1934 proletarian revolution or the strikes that challenged the Francoist dictatorship. These situations are consistent with the idea

of a rebel, fighting and untamed people as it is frequently expressed in popular speeches in the form of a never-conquered or subdued Asturias. This has also been sung in different songs, building bridges between the most recent time and the remote past on the basis of a conductive thread of constant defiance of superior forces and an interpretation that emphasizes the will to retain one's own identity. One of the most popular bands in the Asturian music scene of the last 40 years, Nuberu, still plays in its concerts "Dios te llibre de Castiella" (God save you from Castile), a 1980 song whose lyrics begin with references to the war against Rome, to continue with the beginnings of the re-conquest and a medieval revolt against the Crown of Castile, to end with the 1934 revolution and the post-war strikes. More recently, the bands Gomeru and Skama la Rede have used the same references in two different songs ("Dos siglos de llucha" – Two centuries of fight – from 2005, and "Ye too mentira" – Everything's false – from 2010): the declaration of war against Napoleon and working-class struggles past and present, thereby linking episodes of a different nature and distant chronologies to appeal to the fighting spirit and the defensiveness of the Asturian identity, with its core elements of the language and a claim to independence. Nevertheless, these ideas are accepted to varying degrees among Asturians, mired in a long and unresolved debate on the status that the Asturian language should obtain. Although the claim to independence has not been advocated to great effect, pride of local history is kept alive, as it is explained in the sort of epic poetry represented by the two songs mentioned above. The same imagery can be found in a speech made in 1996 by the president of the Academy of the Asturian Language, an institution that lacks visible connections or even ideological affinity with the working-class movement:

This people, who fought against Rome beyond the limit of its possibilities, who did not admit the Godes, who created a kingdom, their own kingdom, who created a General Council without any means but their own, who declared, alone and fearless, war on Napoleon, who made alone a revolution in 1934, who made the first post-war strikes.<sup>10</sup>

But, at the same time, the incorporation of the working-class struggle into this historical sequence is vitiated as it offers a specific political interpretation as well as an indubitable class component which are hard to assume for the most conservative sectors. The remembrance of the miners taking Oviedo (the capital of the region) by assault in the harsh combats of October 1934 and again during the Civil War, or strikes led by Communists during the dictatorship cannot be a source for consensus. On the contrary, they are part of the heritage of the political left and, in some way, of the labour unions, whose image has deteriorated along with the advance of de-industrialization. Anyway, the miners' power and their ability to fight has shaped their image into that of an archetype of the proletariat and their perception as a courageous collective, always ready to fight, has persisted through time. The mining strike of the summer of 2012 – perhaps the last great mobilization of a sector on the verge of disappearing – highlighted how easily the mechanisms of sympathy towards and admiration of miners could be re-animated.<sup>11</sup>

The degree to which people made mining a cornerstone of their self-perception and identify and the lack of alternatives capable of substituting it as a source of pride and collective identification allows us to understand how inhabitants of the mining basins still see themselves as part of a community tightly linked to coal mining, even when only a few of them in fact still work in the coal pits. The political facet of this identity, added to the work-related conflicts of the past, plays a part in the survival of these identity markers and it seems to be fully compatible with other ingredients of identity without apparent relationship between them: the stall of the Municipality of Langreo in the International Commercial Fair (Gijón, August 2016) offered as a characteristic trait and attraction for possible tourists and visitors a mix of nature, landscape, heritage, mining and . . . maquis. The partisans' fight in the mountains after the Civil War is presented there as a substantial part of a memory linked to the geographical framework in which it took place, and the mining activity to which most of the fighters were connected by means of employment, i.e. most fighters came from the mining workers' milieu.

Meanings are controversial and those who fought for or have created powerful organizations may be faced with opposition, inscribing a political facet into the realm of employment. But it shows, at the same time, troubles related to the traumatic consequences of the defeats suffered in the attempts to stop pit closures and deindustrialization. The conversion of old working spaces into museums holds a bitter taste for those who fought for their survival as factories and pits, and the future is frequently perceived as some kind of 'tabula rasa' of their past that aims to get rid of these buildings and premises in order to put the spaces at the service of hypothetical (but unfeasible) new investments. In contrast to this, others react by appreciating the touristic potential of industrial heritage, so they see the remnants as an economical asset. And others find in that heritage is an element of identity to be preserved regardless of its material value or its economical profit. Some collectives and clubs of former workers have emerged as especially active in recent years in the defense and valuation of the memory of industrial work.<sup>12</sup>

In the Asturian identity, the rural element has always remained as the essence of tradition. So, although in the industrial towns it was confronted with factories, in the coal basins it merged quite well with mining. The class component represented by industrial workers and miners has never had to compete with nationalism and its inter-classist view of society. Regional identity is strong, but it counts on a weak political tradition. Nationalism and regionalism have always been lightweight in political terms in Asturias, which sets it apart from the other two regions of long-standing industrialization (Catalonia and Basque Country) where nationalism emerged from the late 19th century as a will to self-government and as an identity contrasted to the Spanish one, merging all class differences in a collective aim of national construction and struggle for sovereignty.<sup>13</sup> None of this has happened in Asturias, whose bourgeoisie has been traditionally weak and with interests close to those of the Spanish State. Thus, it has always kept away from secessionist temptations. Neither did the feelings of identity among popular classes result in differentiated political expressions.

The myth of a People who have never been subdued by any conqueror is a source of pride and differentiated self-affirmation, but it has not driven Asturians to pro-independence feeling. The link between the Asturian and Spanish identities does not represent an open political conflict as it does in the Basque and Catalan cases. In contrast to the Catalan and Basque cases, a twofold identity (Spanish and Asturian) combines without conflict, notwithstanding the strength of identification with Asturias. Only 7,7 percent of Asturian inhabitants do not feel Asturian at all, and the same percentage puts their Spanish identity in the first place before their belonging to Asturias, whereas 58,3 percent places both identities on the same level and 24,1 percent feel they are mainly or exclusively Asturians.<sup>14</sup>

On the other hand, industrialization attracted migratory streams of workers from other Spanish regions. The fact that a significant part of the Asturian working class did have foreign origins has not impeded people's self-identification with the region, as long as integration is complete. The only exceptions were those who came to Avilés in the 1950s and 1960s to work in the steel industry, whose adaptation and integration has had a slower pace. The mining basins, destination of huge quotas of workers during the years of the Great War (1914–18) and again in the Spanish post-war years (1940s and 1950s) have remained one of the spaces where the Asturian language has been preserved more vividly than in other places, along with some traditions and habits as well as cultural expressions of traditional roots. The cohesive powers of mining work and shared experiences have contributed to the preservation of these roots, as work and experiences compose a history of pain and struggle which acts as a source of collective pride. Regarding this, mining offers an especially powerful bond with a strong identity component. And the way in which human and physical landscapes are related (and sometimes merged) with the rural and peasant elements strengthens the semiotic ability of the coal basins to condense the (self-)image of Asturias even when both mining and agriculture have been reduced to their minimum. As an external observer (the North American P. Zimmerman) states:

At the end of the century, the combination of extensive deindustrialization and migration to the cities did little to alter the perception of Asturias as mainly inhabited only by the two extreme archetypes of industrial or mining workers and rural cowboys. This is reflected in the image Asturians give of themselves and in which those living outside the region receive (or perceive).<sup>15</sup>

Industrial decline came together with an effort to find alternative economical activities and sources for employment. Tourism – almost irrelevant in the heyday of mines and industry – has acquired an increasing importance. In 2015, the region received 6.775.000 visitors (only 14.6 per cent of them foreigners: mainly French, German and British) and directly or indirectly the sector provides 11 per cent of the employment: 40,724 jobs.<sup>16</sup> This fact has had consequences for the images that Asturians create of their own land and project outside. Given the fact

that the local climate does not allow for attracting the typical visitors in search of sun and beaches, the tourism industry has looked for different attractions. The beauty of the natural environment became the most prominent asset and 30 years ago, the Asturian tourism brand adopted the motto “Asturias, Natural Paradise”, which is not easily reconciled with the older image which is characterized by mining and industrial heritage. Along with nature and landscape, the rich historical heritage acts as another mark of identity. In this context of other rich and influential identity markers, the industrial and mining heritage has experienced difficulties in making its own niche in the scenario. The richness of the artistic and monumental *acquis* that left its footprints in Asturias from prehistory (Paleolithic cave paintings) to the Middle Ages (Pre-romanesque architecture) overshadowed industrial heritage, making valuing it more difficult.

For the society in general, the transformation of old facilities and working spaces into museums or protected buildings has also brought with it bitter feelings of defeat. In a satirical way, the movie “*Carne de gallina*” (in English: *Hen flesh*, 2002) featured a character whose catchphrase insisted in building a “Museum of the mining holocaust” as a need to reflect the death of the Asturian mines. Each closed pit or factory emerged, in the eyes of many people, as silent accusations of the industrial dismantlement. The ruins translated into something physical in the state of mind of the region. And their restoration for visitors was not always welcome, but frequently misunderstood. The creation in 1994 of the Asturian Museum of Mining was preceded by polemic, and similar debates have taken place since then. The Museum of the Steel Industry, which opened in 2006, occupies the space of the old factory of La Felguera, but almost all of its original facilities had been already demolished 20 years before. Consciousness regarding mining and industrial remnants as a valuable heritage is recent and not free from contradictions and weaknesses. Even with these setbacks, the range of museums, pathways and interpretation centers continues to grow. Apart from the mining and steel museums which have been already named, we must mention among the most important ones the Railway Museum (opened to the public in 1998), the Samuño Valley Museum and the Arnao Coalmine Museum (both in 2013) as well as the visiting program to a real coal pit, Sotón Mine, which started in 2015.

### **Cultural expressions and artistic narratives**

Throughout the 20th century, Asturias has developed an important cultural creation related to work and working class. Literature, painting and music have widely exposed this reality and have also reflected the struggles of the labor movement. The 1934 revolution itself is a section of cultural creation in its own right and the miners put themselves in a position of major players and were also put there by others.<sup>17</sup>

Far from reducing its presence, industrial decline has been accompanied by a strengthening of this subject in cultural and artistic creation. The beginning of the new century has produced a considerable amount of works inspired by the recent past or the loss of the foundations on which the life of previous generations rested.

Novels, poems, plays, fiction films and documentaries, songs, paintings, sculptures, installations . . . shift from vindication to nostalgia, trying to preserve the past and searching for new meanings. Cultural creativity has become even more productive in this regard after the material foundations that once seemed solid had revealed their fragility. These expressions (songs, books, plays etc.) often act as markers of identity or are used as stimuli to achieve mobilization, preferably aimed at the new generations and increasingly covered by criticism against the current lack of reactions.

The search for past references often mixes workers' everyday life with effort, sacrifices and fight. Political views fit easily in that kind of approach, but the idea is so commonly accepted that it forms a part of the collective imagination of the Asturians (and many non-Asturians) and allows uses with both purely literary intention or even for commercial purposes. As a result, an openly political text could, as the lyrics of the song "Asturias", become a sort of parallel unofficial anthem, which is usually sung by or provokes thrilling reactions in people who do not necessarily share its message dedicated to the proletarian struggle. The song, born from a poem of an exiled writer (Pedro Garfias) and popularized by a famous Asturian singer (V́ctor Manuel), asks the workers of the world to look at the Asturian silhouette, which was left twice "alone, in the middle of the Earth" after a revolutionary uprising and strong resistance against fascism. At the same time but to different effects, it is possible to use the image of a miner as a publicity stunt for the sale of Asturian products by a commercial firm such as Tierra Astur, specialized in food and regional products. The context in which that happened is significant: during the miners' strike in the summer of 2012, mass media and street advertisements of the company linked its food products to the image of a miner. With purely commercial purpose, the text referred to struggle, strength and pride associated to the image of a miner.

In other spheres like football, which are apparently unrelated (or even opposed) to the industrial history, we can also detect the strong presence of mining as a collective reference. During their most important match of the past years (May 2015), Real Oviedo's supporters unfolded a banner representing the players dressed as miners with a mine behind them and a slogan saying "after days of struggle and sacrifice, it's time to leave the hole", sharing the same idea about miners' attributes.<sup>18</sup>

When cultural creativity refers to the collective memory constructed of work, it is often understandable to a broad audience that shares the same representations. If they want to explain their motivations, the artists frequently just need to appeal to their roots in terms of childhood memories or social origins. The rock band Desakato (Disobedience) sings "Fŕu de xineru" (in Asturian language: January Cold, 2011), devoted to their parents who had to wake up in the middle of winter nights and go to work on the morning shift, trying to ensure a better life for their children.<sup>19</sup> Writer Pablo Rodŕguez Medina considers his father, a former miner and union militant, a hero, the mirror into which he likes to look. But this admiration includes a bitter feeling because the world his father once belonged to has disappeared: he played according to some rules (workers' pride and class consciousness)



without understanding the rules had already changed.<sup>20</sup> His novel “Los taraos” (The idiots) tells a story of betrayed fighters. The hardcore group Escuela de Odio (Hate School) recently released a new album, significantly entitled “We can only fight” (2015). Explaining the social and political content of their songs, they say: “We live in a workers’ village and were born between strikes”.<sup>21</sup> The film-maker Marcos Merino, director of a documentary about the miners’ strike held in the summer of 2012, explains the aim of his work as “a reencounter with my past”, back to his origins in a workers’ neighborhood and to his working class roots, far from “the world of appearances and escapisms” he lived in for 20 years in Madrid. So he felt the need of showing his children a different world by looking to a present (probably for a last time: the documentary entitles “Remine, The last workers’ movement”) that represents the past of several generations.<sup>22</sup>

Further, some issues or subjects in collective memory act as powerful markers that do not need such direct links to the people who refer to them. Mineworkers and their struggles reveal iconic potential, shared by many people outside the coal basins. For example, the young girls who make up the melodic group Filanda define themselves as “daughters of coal and barricades” in a song entitled “Enraigonaes” (in Asturian language: Rooted), but they are not from a coal town. Rather they live in a steel town and probably they have never seen a barricade close up if we consider their age and the neighborhood in which they live. Even if steel factories have played a main role, similar to the mines, in the regional economy, and these girls are more probably daughters of steel and smoke, the metaphor they chose proves the preponderance of mining over any other reference.

Occasionally, labor conflicts also find support from artists who put their creativity to the service of propaganda. With very explicit messages, murals and songs acted as reinforcement in long-term struggles, giving support to the miners, shipyards and metalworkers. But more frequently working-class battles are incorporated into a wider narrative about the Asturian people, their past and their present. In a depressive context in which employment opportunities and mobilization capacity decrease at par, the reference of the industrial and mining heyday as a much better time becomes almost obvious. In fact, the collective memory of workers’ struggles acts as a source of pride, basis for collective representations, links in a historical chain and arguments for criticism of the present.

Spanta la Xente, a young band that plays rock with a taste of folk, expresses an idea of Asturias based on that kind of roots. Especially their song “La mio Asturias” (My Asturias, 2015) opens with a critique of the present that leads to a definition of what Asturias is (or should be). This is completely marked by mining identity and workers’ struggles. “My Asturias is the black, proletarian and miner, the one of the social struggle. Mine is the one that bleeds under the coal ground.” The song describes the current Asturias mourning for the children who have to leave, pride of being a daughter of mining and standing tall in the face of adversity. “A coalfield of slagheaps, silicotic, retired. A graveyard of headframes that foghorns don’t guard anymore in the mornings”. But its inhabitants, as the example stresses, are not enslaved, have retained their dignity and are still ready to fight.

With a more acid attitude, the hip-hop singer Arma X uses the same references to the past in order to offer a deeply pessimistic view of the current situation. An industrial landscape of rusty headframes and abandoned factories serves as the backdrop of a ruin that is also social and moral: political corruption, trade unions' betrayal and people's loss of values, memory and identity, performing on a stage that is decorated to mirror a sense of defeat that has also done away with the will to fight along with images of drugs as instruments for numbing the youth. Almost obsessive in his lyrics after more than 10 years and four albums, the song "Zona Minada" (Mined Zone, 2008) is a good example of that criticism: a grey and brown Asturias, whose "headframes are witness today of yesterday's shines, drawing lines on wrinkles made of firedamp". Suffering those who buy, sell, steal and trick . . ." the pain of a betrayal is worse if it comes from your own litter". The young people strive in not believing what the past was, "mining gives way to the white powder business" and, without coal, the engine powering the country stalled while unions signed accords trying to 'cover their own asses'.

Often, memory is a key element of both collective identity and the ability to fight. Its loss becomes a source of concern. The rock band Dixebra turns their gaze to remembrance when they try to characterize the current situation in the song "Esto ye Asturias" (This is Asturias, 1997):

These are not the times to sing epics/when I was a child many were told/  
about a dignified people, armed to the teeth/who sold their souls for a hand-  
ful of ideas. . . . I tried also to sing these heroic deeds/I also willed to die in  
those battles/I can't see anybody, I can't hear voices but the air. . . . This is  
Asturias . . . where the deads light the ways/of those who are hardly still alive.

As for music, a huge amount of songs composed in recent years deals with past labor, the industrial crisis and the social problems of the present, especially among young people. Several themes are repeated insistently: references to past struggles, the defeat of the labor movement, the indictment to the unions and political leaders, the loss of old values, unemployment, emigration and drugs. With the exception of pop, that barely addresses social problems, no genre is foreign to these issues. Especially critical are punk, hardcore and hip hop singers, but these issues can be found under many other styles.

Maybe the highest quality expression of this feeling can be found in a multi-media product: the video clip for the song "Patria sin Sol" (Sunless Homeland, 2004), which combines the song of the same title performed by the group Stoned Atmosphere with images by filmmaker Gonzaga G. Antuña. With hip-hop sound and a setting of industrial ruins, workers' houses and a cemetery, these young people (barely 20 years' old) express anger and a feeling of collapse of old values in the mining area, with an absence of jobs and plenty of drugs for youngsters who are no longer able to fight as their elders did.

Leaving aside the large number of songs referring to the industrial past, the rest of artistic expressions also often deal with this matter. Theatrical plays (either comedy, tragedy or satire), novels, poems, films and documentaries focusing on

deindustrialization and the resulting current social crisis can be easily found. Only referring to theater, more than a dozen plays whose plot is related to the mine or mining areas have been brought to the Asturian stages in the past 10 years.

A radically pessimistic view of the future – closely linked to the loss of past prosperity – is offered in “Nenyure” (No place – Jorge Rivero, 2005), a short film featuring Mieres, capital of a mining area, as an uninhabited city turned into a dead landscape. A ghost town converted into a cemetery, resounding echoes of the miners who once worked and lived there show a futuristic dystopia of the Asturian coalfield. Other times, pessimism is softened by comedy. That is the case of “Carne de Gallina” (Hen flesh – Javier Maqua, 2002), a film whose plot is based on the critical importance of early retirements of former miners to sustain the living standards of the younger generations in a context of high unemployment. A family decides to hide the father’s death and freeze him instead of burying him in order to continue receiving his pension, which is the only means of living for them all.

Similarly, in recent Asturian literature the industrial past and the memory of the workers’ struggles cast a long shadow and influence how the present is perceived. Expressly or implicitly, the contrast between the prosperity linked to the mines and factories and the current decline never fails to appear, as well as the distance between the fighting capacity of previous generations and the impotence felt by young people today. A deep pessimism usually marks the stories that set the comparison between past and present. Nostalgia is the main feeling in the novel “Les ruines” (The Ruins, Xandru Fernández, 2004), describing the decline of a small town in the mining area. Similar pessimism is projected to the past in the novel “Los taraos” (The idiots, Pablo Rodríguez Medina, 2004), which narrates the gestation of a miners’ strike bitterly ended. Also “Dejar las cosas en sus días” (Leave things in their own days, Laura Castañón, 2013) tells a story that runs through several generations during the 20th century, developed in an archetypical enclave of industrial paternalism, a sophisticated project of social control in the mining area trying to create what one researcher called “The dreamed worker”<sup>23</sup> (from the business point of view). The novel recreates that atmosphere and travels through the years of the Second Republic, the Civil War and Franco’s dictatorship from the perspective of a woman who, many years later, embarks on a journey to the traumatic memory of her family, searching for information about victims of repression and political violence. Again and again, work, memory, rights and freedom appear linked, in the same form in which the memorial dedicated to the miners who died in mine accidents in the small town of Turón reflects every name beside a short text that reads: “In memory of those miners that underpinned the mines of this valley with their lives to safeguard to others, their freedom and their prosperity”.

Recent events in labor movement find new chroniclers among filmmakers who look for the latest links in a long chain. Several documentaries have noticed workers’ struggles in shipyards (Alejandro Zapico: “El Astillero” (The shipyard), 2007 and Ruth Arias: “Cándido y Morala, ni un paso atrás” (Cándido and Morala, no step back), 2007), automobile (Javier Bauluz: “Deslocalizados” – Offshored – 2013), metal construction (Lucinda Torre: “Resistencia” – Resistance – 2006) and mining (Marcos M. Merino: “Remine”, 2014). The description of the current social reality also looks to the industrial past and the effects of deindustrialization:

“Prejubilandia” ( – Land of early retired people – Jaime Santos and Vanessa Castaño, 2009) shows the problems of the early retired workers as living proof of the defeat of the labor movement and the loss of the economic network. “Lluvina” (Xuan Luis Ruiz, 2002) mixes testimonies and fiction contrasting the nostalgia for the lost values that once gave meaning to the life of elders and contrasts this with the pain caused by younger persons’ need to migrate in order to find work – always with the landscape of the coalfield as an essential part of a story that integrates industrial vestiges, the natural environment and the people who have given life and sense to this land and now have to powerlessly witness the disappearance of that world. The aim of “Remine” is not so different: a documentary that chronicles the last great miner’s strike of 2012, providing an anthropological look at the miners as human archetype and a bitter aftertaste of defeat and weaknesses or inconsistencies in their organizations. All are approached from the intention of recording a world that is disappearing for the children to know their own past. This is exactly the reason the director provides:

the film meant a reunion with a past closer to my working life nature rather than the life of appearances and vital escapism that had begun to dominate myself after 20 years living in Madrid. It was necessary to show my children another world.<sup>24</sup>

Urban environment, industrial ruins and natural landscape are usually part of every documentary, fiction film and musical video clip depicting Asturias. Even though the stories are not related to an industrial past, these elements seem to be part of a collective identity and often function as emotional references. Head-frames serve as especially powerful iconic symbols. Industrial spaces and their ruin are a recurrent topic in painting and photography to the extent that it becomes impossible to list and difficult to select from the amount of artworks.

### **Filling the absences**

The emptiness caused by closures of mines and factories also becomes a symbolic absence that some artists try to fill with works of remembrance and the creation of virtual spaces to replace those that have disappeared. Industrial areas serve as settings for the location of works, evoking the materials and the products of labor. All along the estuary of Avilés, beside the harbor and the steel factory facilities, a series of sculptures compose the so-called “Steel Route”. The shapes they take and the materials of which they are made are direct reminiscences of the products of the metallurgical industry. In Gijón, rusty metal has been used to mark the territory where once a steel factory was located: the “Tower of Remembrance”, erected in a park in a suburb of the city where the disappeared Fábrica de Moreda lasted for a hundred years. And in Mieres, located in front of the current university campus, on a ground that once was part of a mine, all the miners killed in accidents there are remembered by a sculpture of a male torso inside which burns an eternal flame. The same university campus is described in the dystopian film “Nenyure” (already mentioned above) as a funerary monument: the mine became a mass

grave where the echoes of the voices of the miners who once worked underground still resound and a giant pantheon of concrete, steel, glass and cement has been built instead, exactly on the spot where the miners used to face the police.

The desire to preserve the memory of spaces, facilities and workers also inspires conceptual artists in projects that refer to the absence. Avelino Sala has created several pictorial and multimedia series and led several exhibitions focusing on missing factories. The Museum of Fine Arts of Asturias held the exhibition “Darkness at Noon” (2014) which consisted of paintings depicting characteristic elements of closed factories. Each piece’s title was the name of the company and its closing year.<sup>25</sup> The disappearance and the consequential impression of absence create an emptiness that artists try to fill. In Gijón, taking the place of a former substandard housing quarter, a large group of artists have initiated an exhibition space and given life to an exhibition and creation space called “No Site” (2015). Their purpose was to combine art, heritage and collective memory in the same place that the poorest working people had inhabited. According to their definition, it was “an exercise in collective research of relations between the given territory, identity and belonging to a place” and a “use of uninhabited spaces as an alternative for the construction of a collective memory, a practical exercise in cultural empowerment”. The program included exhibitions of photography, painting, sculpture, audiovisual, industrial arts, conferences and a barter shop.<sup>26</sup>

Multimedia installations also create spaces linked to mining and industrial memory. In Laboral City of Culture, an exhibition entitled “Menhir” (2015) evokes traces of the past, interactively combining an atmosphere of lights, sounds, images and tactile sensations. In their words: the coal pieces act as conductors of sound and tactile stimuli and also connect the landscape to social, economic and ecological aspects.<sup>27</sup>

Trying to rescue the legacy of the mining and industrial heritage in symbiosis with nature, the architects Nacho Ruiz and Sara Lopez have experimented with a multimedia product called “Learning from the Basins” (2014).<sup>28</sup> Its object of attention is the coexistence of natural, rural, industrial and urban landscapes, with no defined boundaries between them:

Together, the basins are perceived as a magma of opposing but intermixed identities. This has led to the emergence of deeply heterodox building models that have inscribed in their genetic code the conflict on which they stand. It is a matter of hybrid architectures, mutant artifacts, which, despite the invisibility that gives them their inevitable marginal condition today are able to offer very interesting architectural lessons. The study aims to test new areas of opportunity in contemporary architectural thought and reconvert the conventional image that the coal basins have, a traditionally reviled place which, examined from an unprejudiced look, forms a unique environment in European urban structure.<sup>29</sup>

While these lines were being written, the experimental theater group La Xata la Rifa started a long-term project entitled “Industrial Music”, a work in progress based on interactive road shows that will tour old railway stations bringing to

mind the crisis and the difficulties resulting therefrom.<sup>30</sup> And simultaneously, the artist Fran Meana unveiled “Archaeologies of Future”, whose designs are inspired by hydroelectric plants designed by the painter, sculptor and architect Vaquero Palacios in the 1950s and 1960s. The installation is “an expanded file, a time capsule, which takes visitors to an indeterminate point in time” composed of reliefs, animation films and texts that “appear as remnants of an obsolete energy model inviting visitors to analyze and reflect the links between work, industrial technology, nature and society”.<sup>31</sup>

Conceptual artists usually do not need to insert any text, and, if they do so, they prefer Spanish and English. Many writers, however, and singers do not express their literature and music in Spanish. Rather, they use the Asturian language, which has no legal recognition as an official language the way that Basque, Catalan or Galician have. The insistence of the creators on using a minority and not legally recognized language is striking for two reasons: because it is new compared to the traditional use of Spanish by the Asturian labor movement<sup>32</sup> and also because it is much more present in these issues of industrial past and workers’ memory than in others. The Asturian language has traditionally been used to address issues related to the rural and peasant world. Only in recent years have the generations that lived through the decline started to use the Asturian language when dealing with mining, the industrial past and the present deindustrialization. It is difficult to say why, but there seems to be a willingness to strengthen one’s identity by combining the threatened identity of the old working class with similarly threatened local roots.

Representations focused on the industrial past and work-related memory are abundant and occupy an important place in the Asturian cultural production. Their meaning points directly to the need to reword the traumatic memory of the recent past. Much of the reactions that appeal to the industrial past are the result of the perception that this specific collective memory itself and its associated identity are threatened. Artistic creation largely revolves around recreation and redefinition of the past. It is linked to fights, the epics and values that are considered threatened or lost. But what is clear in terms of cultural creation must not necessarily be the case for Asturian society as a whole. The process is ongoing and presents vague constructions of memory that do not allow for final conclusions. We lack, in fact, research in this regard that would be able to shed light on the importance that the heritage of the industrial age can acquire for the identity of the Asturians. The heritage of mining and industry faces both negligence by authorities and a lack of resources. Among the affected populations, contradictory reactions combine, oscillating from rejection (as a symbol of defeat or due to a general perceived necessity to break with the past) to preservation as a core element of identity. The Asturian identity has other strong elements to be built on: nature and history provide powerful foundations that are less controversial than workers’ memory or vernacular language. The perceived past of industry and labor has not been constitutive in its origin and neither is essential to its survival. It adds to (and to some extent enters into conflict with) existing elements. But, on the other hand, it has often coalesced with language and music, allowing for the construction of bridges to the younger generations.



Figure 2.1 Graffiti Tenneco Strike (2014), street art supporting the workers' resistance to a plant closure in Gijón.



Figure 2.2 Tower of Remembrance (Francisco Fresno, 2000), placed on the site of a former steel factory in Gijón.



*Figure 2.3* The ruins (Xandru Fernández, 2004), a novel about the social and moral effects of deindustrialization in an unnamed village of the Asturian coalfields.





Figure 2.4 Grieska (Fight, 1990), album by Dixebra, the most senior rock band in Asturian language, showing industrial and working-class roots in Avilés.



Figure 2.5 Nenyure: a memorial to the miners (foreground) and a University campus (background) located at the former facilities of a coal pit in Mieres. The site is described as a funerary monument by the dystopic film Nenyure (2005).



Figure 2.6 Map of Asturias

## Notes

- 1 Source: SADEI (Sociedad Asturiana de Estudios Económicos e Industriales).
- 2 Although it was originally created to describe extreme experiences (e.g. the holocaust, slavery etc.), the concept of cultural trauma can be useful for collective uncertainties linked to industrial decline, as well. It does not refer to “the result of a group experiencing pain”. It is the result of this acute discomfort entering into the core of the collectivity’s sense of its own identity. “Collective actors ‘decide’ to represent social pain as a fundamental threat to their sense of who they are, where they came from, and where they want to go” Jeffrey C. Alexander, *Trauma: A Social Theory* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2012), 15. However, it is important to take into account that “the appeal to psychoanalytic concepts such as melancholia and mourning, acting out and working through, adds a necessary dimension to economic, social and political analyses but does not constitute a substitute for them” Dominique LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University, 2001).
- 3 Francisco Erice, “Entre el mito y la memoria histórica: las huelgas de 1962 y la tradición épica de la Asturias roja”, in Rubén Vega (ed.), *Las huelgas de 1962 en Asturias* (Gijón: Trea, 2002), 413–436.
- 4 *El Comercio*, February 5th 2017.
- 5 Juan A. Vázquez, “La minería del carbón (1940–1967). Expansión y crisis” and Oscar Fleites, “Expansión y ordenación siderúrgica”, both in *Historia de la economía asturiana* (Oviedo: Prensa Ibérica, 1994), 561–576 and 593–608.
- 6 Rubén Vega, *Crisis industrial y conflicto social. Gijón 1976–1996* (Gijón: Trea, 1998).
- 7 The Asturian de-industrialization process and policies applied to face the problem have been studied, coinciding with the most critical moments, by Holm-Detlev Köhler (dir.), *Asturias: el declive de una región industrial* (Gijón: Trea, 1996) and Manuel Castells (dir.), *Estrategias para la reindustrialización de Asturias* (Madrid: Civitas, 1994).
- 8 Asturias has finished 2016 with the second lowest crime rate in Spain according to Police statistics. *La Nueva España*, January 14th 2017.
- 9 Francisco Erice, “Hay una lumbre en Asturias . . . Notas sobre la imagen, el mito y la épica del movimiento obrero asturiano en el franquismo”, in Rubén Vega (coord.), *El movimiento obrero en Asturias durante el franquismo 1937–1977* (Oviedo: KRK, 2013), 585.

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- 10 In *Lletres Asturianas*, 62, 1997 (171).
- 11 Rubén Vega, “España: la última gran huelga de mineros”, in Salvador Aguilar (ed.), *Anuario de conflictos 2012* (Barcelona: Observatori del Conflict Social, 2013), 831–854.
- 12 In Mieres, some members of Santa Bárbara, a former miners’ association, have restored several heritage sites (two mine entrances, a Protestant cemetery) and in Gijón some ex shipyard workers promoted a memory recovery project focused on disappeared factories. Both have organized exhibitions and talks and created a digital photo archive. More information in [www.asociacionsantabarbara.com/actividades/](http://www.asociacionsantabarbara.com/actividades/) and [www.territoriomuseo.com/noticias/show/784-gijon-oeste-una-memoria-industrial-lainiciativa-de-los-barrios-por-salvar-su-historia](http://www.territoriomuseo.com/noticias/show/784-gijon-oeste-una-memoria-industrial-lainiciativa-de-los-barrios-por-salvar-su-historia).
- 13 Xosé Manuel Núñez Seixas, *Nacionalismos en la España Contemporánea (siglos XIX y XX)*, (Barcelona: Hipotesi, 1999) and Juan Díez Medrano, *Divided Nations: Class, Politics and Nationalism in the Basque Country and Catalonia* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995).
- 14 Francisco José Llera Ramo and Pablo San Martín Antuña, *II Estudio Sociolingüístico de Asturias 2002* (Oviedo: Academia Asturiana de la Llingua, 2003), 65.
- 15 Patrick W. Zimmerman, *Faer Asturias. La política llingüística y la construcción frustrada del nacionalismu asturianu (1974–1999)* (Oviedo: Trabe, 2012), 29.
- 16 Facultad de Comercio, Turismo y Ciencias Sociales Jovellanos, *El Turismo en Asturias en 2015* (Gijón: Sistema de Información Turística de Asturias, 2016), 58 and 66.
- 17 Benigno Delmiro, *La voz en el pozo. El trabajo en las minas y su presencia en la literatura* (Madrid: Akal, 1993); *Literatura y minas en la España de los siglos XIX y XX* (Gijón: Trea, 2004); “El movimiento obrero asturiano en la literatura de posguerra”, in Rubén Vega (coord.), *El movimiento obrero asturiano durante el franquismo* (Oviedo: KRK, 2013); “La huelga del 62 en la literatura”, in Rubén Vega (coord.), *Las huelgas de 1962 en Asturias* (Gijón: Trea, 2002). Albino Suárez, *Los poetas y la mina* (Pola de Laviana: 1995). Xana, *El son nos cantares de la revolución d’Ochobre de 1934* (Oviedo: Fonoastur, 1998). Francisco Zapico, *Evaristo Valle y Mariano Moré. Dos pintores ante la mina* (Gijón: Museo Evaristo Valle, 2007); *Hay una luz en Asturias . . . La güelga de 1962* (Oviedo: Fundación Juan Muñiz Zapico, 2002). Diego Díaz, “El movimiento obrero asturiano en las artes visuales y la música: ausencias y presencias durante el franquismo y la transición”, in Rubén Vega (coord.), *El movimiento obrero asturiano durante el franquismo* (Oviedo: KRK, 2013).
- 18 *La Nueva España*, May 24th 2015.
- 19 [www.entreaordes.com/entrevista\\_desakato](http://www.entreaordes.com/entrevista_desakato)
- 20 Juan Luis Ruiz, *Lluvinia* (Oviedo: Filmoteca de Asturias, 2002), 34–35.
- 21 *La Nueva España*, October 25th 2015.
- 22 Marcos M. Merino, *Remine. El ultimo movimiento obrero*, (Asturias: Freews, 2014) booklet accompanying the CD edition of the film.
- 23 José Sierra Álvarez, *El obrero soñado. Ensayo sobre el paternalismo industrial (Asturias, 1860–1917)* (Madrid: Siglo XXI, 1990).
- 24 Marcos M. Merino, *Remine. El ultimo movimiento obrero*, (Asturias: Freews, 2014) booklet accompanying the CD edition of the film.
- 25 A catalog of the exhibition has been published: Avelino Sala, *Darkness at Noon* (Oviedo: Museo de Bellas Artes de Asturias, 2014).
- 26 <https://juventudgijon.wordpress.com/2015/06/05/no-sitio-arte-patrimonio-y-memoria-colectiva-en-la-ciudadela-de-capua/>.
- 27 <http://www.laboralcentrodearte.org/es/exposiciones/menhir>
- 28 Sara López Arraiza and Nacho Ruiz Allén, *Aprendiendo de las cuencas. Hacia una puesta en valor del Paisaje Cultural de las Cuencas Mineras Asturianas / Learning from las cuencas: Towards Highlighting the Cultural Landscape of the Asturian Coalfields* (Asturias, 2014).
- 29 *Ibid.*, 12.

- 30 *El Comercio*, May 13th 2016. *La Voz de Asturias*, October 12th 2016.  
 31 <http://www.laboralcentrodearte.org/es/exposiciones/arqueologias-del-futuro>  
 32 Rafael Rodríguez Valdés, *Llingua asturiana y movimientu obreru, 1899–1937* (Gijón: Ateneo Obrero, 2004).

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