

# Re/dis-membering industrial histories in the British North

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## **Nostalgic cities**

The two iconic blue cargo cranes that once loomed over the dockside in Salford, Northern England were demolished by the municipal authority in 2013. Dating from 1966, the loss of the cranes was lamented by local campaigners on aesthetic, heritage and political grounds. This was Salford! A city alert to its scars, where Engels, the Chartists and a radical literary canon populate the cultural memory. And yet there had been a slow-motion takeover. The docks were now 'Salford Quays' – a prestige private development of media, hospitality and real estate – and the cranes had begun, said local politicians, to 'distract from the Quays vista' (Salford Star, 2013). Any nostalgia for the cranes was misplaced, implied the authority, it was time for the city to move on. Moreover, all was not lost: those interested in accessing recreations of the cranes could now do so digitally, via a new smartphone app.

This vignette is illustrative of how planning and development decisions in post-industrial cities like Salford navigate a temporal, spatial and affective landscape produced by industrialism and a political economy which emphasizes financialized, privatized – entrepreneurial – approaches to urban growth (Harvey, 1989). Among the constituents of this complex urban scene are local people with longstanding roots in the city who wish to forge and respect particular heritage imaginaries. In the cities of Northern Britain, more often than not these are working-class communities who feel their histories being gradually expunged, sanitized or institutionalized and their identities traduced by a city government with dreams of elsewhere. How the remnants and ruins of the industrial urban past are manicured and struggled over offers an interesting case study of contemporary nostalgia and the remembering / dismembering of difficult histories.

It is said that nostalgia tends to involve smoothing over uncomfortable and unpalatable aspects of the past, being "*essentially history without guilt*" (Kannen 1991 cited in Boym 2007: 9). When we 'remember', we represent, reconstruct and forget the past in ways that have "*strategic, political and ethical consequences*" (Hodgkin & Radstone 2005: 1), for both present and future. The remnants and ruins of industrialism are an inescapable, exhilarating and ambiguous presence in the British urban North and cultures and memories of working-class life are hugely resonant. As these intersect with conditions of late capitalism and the financialization of urban development, we see nostalgic struggles unfold around dynamics of demolition, gentrification and rights to place.

According to the competitive, urban 'entrepreneurial' logic which has shaped urban develop-

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ment from the 1970s onwards (Hall and Hubbard, 1996), the materialities and histories of industrialism could not be allowed to retard capital's ability to restructure and remake the city. Municipalities responded by finding ways of either 'staging the invisibility' (Engelend et al. 2016) of those remnants, or confronting and deploying them. To smooth out these edges, nostalgia was put to work. Sometimes, demolitions and removals were the order of the day, invariably to support the next killer 'vista', whilst abandonments were engineered, moving whole swathes of cities into unruly abeyance. Typically, however, industrial infrastructure was put to work and a set of nostalgic images and narratives circulated. And so it was that many of the mills and warehouses of Leeds, Manchester and Sheffield become studios, lofts and workshops, whilst messy spaces such as Castlefield (Manchester) Kelham Island (Sheffield) and Holbeck (Leeds) were scrubbed down and recycled as 'destinations' for middle-class consumers or as hubs of 'creative' or, latterly, 'craft' production (see Aiello, 2013; Madgin, 2010). At the scale of the urban region branding, Sheffield even took the recent step of claiming industrial heritage as embedded "in the city's DNA" in promotional materials for its 'Year of Making 2016' (Sheffield Year of Making website, 2016).

It is clear that the "heritage patina [of] industrial objects, signage and built form" (Mathews and Picton 2014: 338) is firmly entrenched in the imagination of urban planners, designers and developers, both as a strategy for central-city place making and for wider city branding. The contemporary city is one that is comfortable with looking back, as long as that history acts as a springboard to the next development and growth opportunity. This, of course, invites reflections on the ramifications of a 'nostalgic city' and what is missing from its imaginaries of the past and what this tells us about a politics of urban growth so concerned with authentication. This is not to suggest that every city or urban region can (or does) mobilize and makeover its industrial heritage. The ways in which nostalgias are put to work across the urban centres of the British North reflect and underline the uneven economic geography of the UK. Appeals to industrial heritage are uneven, not least because for some areas, such as Teesside in the English North East, the process of deindustrialization is still ongoing. Meanwhile, the regional economic dominance of cities such as Manchester and Leeds leaves nearby towns with a limited ability to profit from 'remembering' (which might explain Salford City Council's willingness to remove its dockside icons).

In response to the unevenness of post-industrial development, we have seen in recent years nostalgia also infiltrating economic strategy at regional and national scales. Not all local state actors can effect nostalgia, but most are drawn into nostalgic imaginaries whether they like it or not. For example, the British government's 'Northern Powerhouse' initiative draws explicitly upon the English North's industrial past to try and inspire economic growth through targeted investment and training agendas whilst asserting a particular diagnosis of the North's pathological deficits: poor transport infrastructure, a low skilled workforce, welfare dependency and a lack of entrepreneurship. Similarly, post-Brexit, it is clear that the casting off of the stranglehold of Euro-bureaucracy is conceived by many senior politicians beset with postcolonial melancholy (Gilroy, 2005) as a moment of 'national' renewal whereupon the UK 'rediscovers' its buccaneering spirit of old, exemplified and embodied in the canals, docks and mills of Northern England; an infrastructure made possible in part by numerous colonized elsewhere.

### **Nostalgic absences**

It hardly needs to be said, then, that when industrial districts and buildings are cleaned up

and sold on, they are rarely aimed at the class which laboured in those spaces. The idealized bourgeois urban figure who can move smoothly through, between and beyond the palimpsest of urban space is fetishized, emblematic of an *amnesiac city*, which seeks to forget the foundational legacies of empire and industry – slavery, environmental contamination, exploitation, and industrial disease. Lip service is sometimes paid, of course, in a panoply of festivals, trails and memorial plaques, but a striking gap emerges between the version of industrial culture which is materialized in gentrified urban development and the complex material reality on which it draws.

As urban centres are redeveloped and industrial memories selectively heralded, in the peripheries people still live with the tumult and agony of industrial decline: redundancies, wage depression and ill health linked with heavy industrial work (musculoskeletal problems, and chronic diseases of the lungs and skin). We know now about the widespread social effects of these seismic shifts in work which undermined established social structures and mechanisms of mutual aid, disrupted shared timetables of paid and unpaid work, and fragmented social experience. In deindustrializing settings, we often see the proliferation of social problems like substance misuse, domestic violence and mental health problems, all of which are intensified by the parallel dismantling of social welfare institutions. The (often urbanized, often stigmatized) neighbourhoods in which these various processes were most keenly felt have subsequently been

the targets of successive interventions and policies aimed at addressing perceived pathologies (poor levels of ‘social capital’; a lack of ‘resilience’; cultures of worklessness; low aspirations and criminality). Local authorities struggle to find ways of tackling the ‘problem’ of the urban poor, particularly under the pressure of severe funding cuts from central government, creating a need for communities to be able to draw more effectively on their existing assets, and for interventions to do ‘more for less’.

*Amid the processes of marginalization, amnesia and elite technocracy, many who live in the post-industrial city live with an endemic sense of rupture and uncertainty*

Simultaneously, then, the post-industrial city is one that celebrates, sanitizes and marginalizes working-class and minority experience, drawing communities into a disorienting negotiation of inclusive talk and exclusionary logics. They find themselves heralded as embodying the spirit of the city (‘People Make Glasgow’ shouts that city’s latest branding effort) whilst all the while being so often rendered ‘out of place’ by the city’s planners and managers (see for example Mooney, 2009 on the relationship between capital, state and class in Glasgow).

Of course, the spatial and symbolic marginalization of working-class experience in the city is one that is repeated in non-urban contexts and can be situated in the broader structural marginality of industrial culture, history and impact. For example, it was only in 2015 that former employees of British Coal and British Steel were granted the right to make a group legal challenge for compensation for severe health problems they developed as a result of their work in dangerously dusty and fume-filled environments (South Wales Argus 2015).

### **Nostalgic communities?**

Reconstructing and remembering the industrial past often draws out unresolved antagonisms and contestations. If the practice of nostalgia within urban planning (via the reimagining, repurposing and redevelopment of industrial infrastructure) is largely driven

by commercial and aesthetic considerations as defined by developers and approved by local authorities, local people and communities have little opportunity to access and influence these systems. Grassroots campaigns to save or secure ownership of infrastructure which has both meaning and utility for local people requires the careful development of business proposals, which struggle to compete with the visions of professional developers. In any case, in the UK, urban heritage is governed by a system of 'listing' which is notoriously opaque and whilst local neighbourhood planning offers some opportunity to protect community assets, groups are well-known to be dominated by middle-class 'usual suspects' and plans must be approved by officials and deemed not to threaten strategic planning objectives such as house building.

Amid these processes of marginalization, amnesia and elite technocracy, so many who live in the post-industrial city live with an endemic sense of rupture and uncertainty (e.g. Wallace, forthcoming). Whilst nostalgic urban projects rolled out in some cities would seem to try and create a sense of continuity with history, there are many people for whom the loss of traditional industries has disrupted the reality of intergenerational continuity symbolizing disruption and loss. In response, nostalgia can be mobilized by local communities as they seek to develop their own readings of history and culture. Populations who have most fully experienced the consequences of the loss of industrial work have often been seen themselves to be nostalgic for these lost industries, evidenced for example by the lingering of industrial identities ('former mining communities') in certain neighbourhoods, and the continuing coalescing of life around the social institutions (social clubs, working men's clubs) which emerged from shared work. Rather than necessarily being attached to a particular type of work, what people appear to be nostalgic for, in an era of insecure, low-paid and precarious service sector work, is the availability of 'decent jobs' with fair terms and a degree of longevity (Shildrick et al. 2012; Wright, 2016). More often than not, those who remember the problems caused by traditional industries are highly aware of, and glad to have left behind, the kinds of negative environmental and occupational health issues that they caused, but often feel an acute sense of loss when to be working class used to be seen as making a relatively valuable contribution to family and community (see McKenzie, 2015).

In Salford, there is a sense that the municipality has a "casual disregard for the history, personality and culture of its city" (Wallace, 2014), symbolized not only in the destruction of the cranes, but in a broader agenda which appears determined to precaritize working-class communities (Wallace, forthcoming). A grassroots fight back has emerged of sorts, with various campaign groups starting to organize in the city around issues of cuts to welfare rights and 'fracking'. If nostalgia plays a role here, it appears to be for a time where 'ordinary' people had space in the city – space to work, live and rear families. The sanitization and demolition of the city's heritage landscape is simply another front in an ongoing struggle not to be evicted from the urban scene.

In general terms, perhaps it is possible to argue that working-class people continue to draw on memories in ways which lend meaning and coherence to their own lives, their social solidarities, and their current predicaments. It might be a defence against stigmatization and perceived dependency or enabling identification with a more 'respectable' identity and history. The vibrant housing activism community in the UK is perhaps an example, where after decades of defamation and residualization, a debate about the value of public housing has struggled into existence with a range of tenant activists claiming their 'right to the city' (see Watt, 2016). However, as Harvey (2013: xviii) notes, the urban working class is increasingly "fragmented and divided, multiple in its aims and needs, disorganized and fluid rather than

solidly implanted”, so perhaps lacking in the organizational/collective capacity to address shared problems or to effectively challenge marginalization. In developing their own political strategies, working-class and minority communities also have to contend with the nostalgias that are imposed on them which seek to (re)construct class and race divisions (for example, the popular conflation in the UK and US of ‘white’ with ‘working class’ and the erasure therefore of not only colonial exploitation in the ‘great’ eras which these countries are allegedly ‘returning’ to, but also the mere existence of a BAME (Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic) working class). There are a set of burgeoning *malign nostalgias* being put to work, in other words that any grassroots reading of history, culture and political change must address.

## Conclusion

If there are ethical consequences to how we represent and remember the past: what consequences result from the omissions and absences from the forms of urban nostalgia identified here? The nostalgic treatment of some industrial heritage tends to gloss over the story of industrial decline and the concomitant unravelling of the social structures which had built around them, and the economic shocks that decline unleashed on particular populations. It also fails to fully acknowledge the exploitation of workers that preceded their abandonment. In these ways, contemporary forms of urban nostalgia help to keep hidden some of the causes of the poverty and marginalization which persist in the present day, whilst adding little to our understanding of how people need to cope in the face of change, or how to meet the needs of deprived urban populations. Instead, communities are advised to draw inspiration from their collective experiences of resilience in the face of hardship to help them cope in the present day, even though they are being asked to do so in a very different context and with diminished collective resources. These forms of nostalgia also help to suppress critical engagement with contemporary forms of labour which characterize the contemporary city.

Potentially, the infusion of industrial nostalgia across urban life provide the middle classes with a sense of connection to civic and regional heritage. However, there is a failure to examine or acknowledge how marginalized groups are so often excluded from the new spaces created from industrial infrastructure and also lose out from the new forms of economic life envisioned in urban strategy. The past is excavated to uphold the urban ‘heritage patina’ whilst structures of exploitation, death and abandonment are obscured. We would argue this goes beyond an argument about better representation and voice – we don’t need more apps, museums and walking tours – and reflects a deeper disregard for subaltern urban experience. As decent work and respectful welfare disappears, the struggle to remember and make sense of the histories, materialities and relations which constitute that experience within the city is now here.

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