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Neoliberalism, left behind Middlesbrough and levelling up: an intractable policy task?

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ABSTRACT

Proposing to narrow spatial inequalities in one of the most unbalanced economies in the developed world, the Levelling Up agenda was a key driving force behind the Conservative Party obtaining their largest majority since 1987 at the 2019 general election. The agenda, though, has been beset by various problems and has all but fallen by the political wayside. One key problem was that it lacked a political economic understanding of left behind places, especially Northern post-industrial locales that were lagging particularly due to deindustrialisation under neoliberalism. Many of these post-industrial places have endured persistent deprivation and entrenched social problems for around four decades. This paper is structured as follows. It begins by exploring UK neoliberalism, before briefly discussing the emergence of left behind places and the Levelling Up agenda. Focussing on the experiences of left behind Middlesbrough, in Teesside, UK, the article explores the area's rise in light of the iron, steel and petrochemicals industries and its decline particularly in the neoliberal era. As the town's demise is intimately connected to neoliberalism, the paper closes by discussing why it is highly unlikely left behind places such as Middlesbrough will be revived under the UK's current form of capitalism.

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Introduction

Promising to remedy spatial inequalities and rebalance the UK economy, the Levelling Up agenda was the key policy initiative of the Conservative Party at the 2019 general election. This contributed to the Party achieving a historic electoral mandate at the 2019 general election, with traditionally Labour voting places from Wales to Northeast England voting Conservative often for the first time in their electoral history. Hailed as potentially the most important spatial policy document in nearly 90 years (Martin et al., 2022), the 2022 Levelling Up White Paper outlined twelve medium-term missions to achieve by 2030, supported by numerous funding streams (Atherton & Le Chevallier, 2023). The White Paper suggested that it contains the transformative steps required to address

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place-based imbalances and increase economic prosperity for all citizens regardless of where they live (HM Government, 2022). Given the UK possesses the worst regional inequalities out of the advanced industrialised economies (Fai & Tomlinson, 2023) – involving multiple and persistent problems in left behind areas (Houlden et al., 2024; Pike et al., 2024) – the policy mission of Levelling Up was responding to historic and entrenched issues within the UK's economic geography.

Nearly five years on from the policy formation, though, and little progress has been made on many of the White Paper's missions. The House of Commons Committee of Public Accounts (2024) claimed a heavily administrative, market-model of bidding for funds alongside unrealistic spending deadlines and inflationary pressures resulted in very little progress being made on many of the funded infrastructure projects; by September 2023 local authorities had only spent around 10% of the £10.47bn granted through the Levelling Up funds. As such, the Government Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities could not inform the Committee of any 'compelling examples' of Levelling Up in action. The agenda was also beset by other key issues, especially a lack of funding relative to the scale of the problem (Fransham et al., 2023); cash-strapped councils and their lack of capacity to both help address local issues and Level Up (Pike, 2023); and an inability to learn from past policy failures including continuing to put faith in market forces to address the very spatial imbalances that these forces contributed to creating (Coyle & Muhtar, 2023; Hudson, 2022).

This failure has been felt particularly in post-industrial places, with a recent BBC survey revealing that 73% of residents in old mining villages and towns believed they had seen 'little or no progress on levelling up' (Baynes & Miskin, 2024). Political, media and academic commentary of this ongoing failure to Level Up the UK is underway. Garnesh (2024), for example, asserted that 'the project to "level up" (I remember when the phrase was "rebalance") the UK regions is going to flop, again. But it does serve as a parable for something wider in the world. This is the era of the insoluble problem'. Martin Jones (2024, p. 56) also recently articulated that:

'Put simply, public policy failure is not a random or surprising phenomenon, connected to the peculiarities and particularities of British impositional agency; it is increasingly endemic to state intervention in economic life within advanced capitalism and its late-neoliberalism spatial forms'.

This article outlines how Levelling Up left behind places such as Middlesbrough is arguably an intractable policy task under a neoliberalised political economy. Middlesbrough[1] in Teesside (Tees Valley), Northeast England, provides a useful means to assess the plight of particularly the UK's deindustrialised locales and the difficulties in reviving them. Similarly to old post-industrial areas such as Barnsley, Burnley, Falkirk, Hartlepool, Mansfield, Salford, Stoke-on-Trent, Sunderland, Wigan and Wrexham, Middlesbrough has endured long-running economic decline and faces entrenched problems (Beatty & Fothergill, 2020). This paper is structured into four sections. It begins by outlining the shift from UK post-war capitalism to neoliberalism and the emergence of left behind places, while the second section sketches an overview of the Levelling Up agenda. The article's third section addresses Middlesbrough's historical development and reveals the scale of the Levelling Up task; the persistence of problems in places such as Middlesbrough appears to be an unfortunate price to pay for a neoliberalised political economy. The fourth section discusses how left behind Middlesbrough's social and economic

predicament is a systemic part of neoliberalism. Whilst this discussion encompasses how the electorate has generally voted to preserve neoliberalism and the plight of left behind areas over the past forty-five years, it also reveals how the tectonic and sustained level of investment required to Level Up is not forthcoming under this form of capitalism. Accordingly, the paper closes by arguing that only a historic and progressive shift away from neoliberalism is likely to necessitate the revival of left behind places such as Middlesbrough.

Post-war capitalism, neoliberalism and left behind places

It would have been unacceptable for war heroes to return home after World War Two and endure mass unemployment, widespread penury, and a socially intolerable gap between the rich and poor (Marquand, 1988). Three decades of relative affluence, stability and security thus followed the social and economic upheaval wrought by capitalist crises in the early twentieth century (Judt, 2010; Streeck, 2016). A political consensus was forged in the UK involving publicly funded mass council house building; securing full employment; increased power for trade unions; a generous welfare state and state control of the commanding heights of the economy (Winlow & Hall, 2022; Wistow, 2022). This form of capitalism contained a rigid and gendered division of labour, involving relatively well-paid jobs especially to men who possessed very few educational qualifications (Wolf, 2023).

Underpinning UK regional policy during capitalism's post-war phase was the 1940 Barlow Commission Report (Balchin, 2022; Martin et al., 2022). This stipulated that considering poor economic growth and high unemployment levels in the North during the Great Depression (1929-1939, whereby London and the South fared much better partially due to a more diversified labour market), post-war regional policy should hinge upon 'taking work to the workers' (Balchin, 2022, p. 65). Policy emphasis was placed upon the movement of capital, especially from the overheated Southeast to the lagging Northern areas (Balchin, 2022), with businesses encouraged to move to take advantage of cheaper rents and labour costs (Balchin, 2022). The 1945 Distribution of Industry Act legislated incentives to move, since government grants and loans were readily available to businesses who were locating within the 'development areas' to help facilitate economic development (Balchin, 2022). Employment in manufacturing, though, reached its high-point in the UK in 1966 at around 8.4mn individuals (Martin, 1988), engendering a perception in certain areas that it was relatively easy to obtain industrial work (Winlow & Hall, 2022).

Capitalist crises, however, emerged again in the 1970s as unemployment and inflation rose and economic growth stagnated (Hill, 2021; Hudson, 2017), providing space for alternative policies to harness support. As we will encounter, the electoral triumph of Margaret Thatcher in 1979 was a momentous event, signalling an epochal transition to neoliberalism. This political economy has been largely maintained by successive Conservative and Labour governments, particularly advocating primacy to the market, economic deregulation, the privatisation of key public services and the suppression of wages (Fine & Saad-Filho, 2017. Post-war regional policy was abandoned in favour of emphasis upon the values of individualism, competition, and entrepreneurialism to stimulate national economic growth (Martin, 1988).

Neoliberalism, however, is often contradictory and incoherent (Jones, 2019). Rather than it withdrawing the state in favour of 'free markets', neoliberalism is generally anti-state in the citizenry's economic interests but pro-state in the interests of market forces (Plehwe et al., 2020; Streeck, 2016). Although waves of industrial job loss have occurred throughout UK capitalism's history, the state driven shift to neoliberalism meant capital rapidly relocated many of its branch plants overseas to maximise returns on investment (Hudson, 2017; Varoufakis, 2011). This was only possible through 'institutional embeddedness' (Plehwe et al., 2020, p. 5), whereby state officials enacted and maintained neoliberal policies including the prioritisation of global markets (Davis, 2022). As Davis (2022) points out, intense deindustrialisation meant around 3.8mn manufacturing jobs were lost across 1979-2010, while throughout 1979-1989 alone investment in financial services catapulted by 320%. This aided the development of London into an international finance hub containing a concentration of highly paid jobs in finance and professional business[2] (Martin & Sunley, 2023), aggravating the UK's North-South divide (McCann, 2016). As a result, the level of spatial inequality increased by over 50% in the neoliberal era with Martin et al. (2021, p. 30) outlining how:

> It is in terms of this historic systemic transformation that today's problem of "left behind places", in the UK and elsewhere, needs to be situated and explained, and the immense scale of the policy challenge to "level up" those places must be appreciated.

There are different types of left behind areas including villages (Tomaney et al., 2024), coastal towns (Wenham, 2020) and post-industrial cities (Etherington et al., 2023), suffering from various economic, social, environmental, political, institutional and governance, cultural and infrastructure problems (see Pike et al., 2024). Such issues include poor quality employment (Pike et al., 2024); political discontentment (MacKinnon et al., 2024); economic decline (Rodríguez-Pose et al., 2023); and diminished social infrastructure (Tomaney et al., 2024). Given these problems some residents often migrate elsewhere (Hall et al., 2022), especially those that are highly qualified (Bailey & Tomlinson, 2021), though many other residents possess a deep-seated sense of belonging that keeps them rooted in their locality (Tomaney et al., 2024). Although there are similarities across different types of left behind places, what it means to feel left behind varies across place and is bound to local histories and current structural conditions (MacKinnon et al., 2024). It should also be noted that these types of localities are not confined to the UK; they exist across the world but particularly in mainland Europe and the United States of America (Hill, 2021; Houlden et al., 2024).

Whilst the term itself is a useful theoretical shorthand especially for academics and policymakers, there is no consensus on what a left behind place is (Pike et al., 2024). Recent analysis attempted to overcome this problem, conceptualising left behind areas largely as neighbourhoods that have endured deprivation for a long period of time, encompassing both *Entrenched Disadvantage* and *Fluctuating Disadvantage* (Houlden et al., 2024). These are persistently deprived neighbourhoods, with the former concentrated in core urban areas and deindustrialised and coastal towns. The latter involves neighbourhoods where persistent deprivation is less acute and there is more scope to transition away from being left behind. Most of these places are in post-industrial Northern England (Houlden et al., 2024), with many deindustrialised areas including Middlesbrough possessing some of the nation's worst employment growth records (Martin et al., 2021), often

leading to what Rodríguez-Pose et al. (2023, p. 954) cast as a sense of 'irretrievable decline'. The article now discusses the emergence of the Levelling Up agenda, before demonstrating how the rise and fall of Middlesbrough is tethered to capitalism particularly its neoliberal variant.

The policy mission of levelling up

Forming a central plank of the Conservative Party's 2019 electoral success, the Levelling Up agenda is the latest key policy in a lengthy history of governments attempting to spread opportunities more evenly across the nation (Fai & Tomlinson, 2023; Jones, 2019). The 2022 Levelling Up White Paper acknowledges that reducing the UK's spatial inequalities is a daunting task, positing 12 medium-term missions to achieve by 2030 as part of a long-term programme of *systems reform* (HM Government, 2022). This includes ensuring local public transport across the UK is closer to London standards; ensuring 90% of primary school pupils attain the expected standard in reading, writing and mathematics (in 2023 in England it was 60%); ensuring the gap in healthy life expectancy has narrowed between the most deprived and affluent places; and ensuring neighbourhood crime has fallen especially in the worst-hit areas (HM Government, 2022). Gray and Broadhurst (2023) usefully assert that the ideas that form the basis of Levelling Up are somewhat reminiscent of the ethos underpinning postwar regional policy. However, the process for allocating the funds to Level Up has often been contrary to that ethos.

The most explicit Levelling Up funding is the £4.8bn Levelling Up fund. It runs across 2021-24 and local councils must competitively bid against one another for funds across three Levelling Up funding rounds. This has occurred against the backdrop of the difficult financial legacy left by the austerity years following the 2008 financial crisis (Pike, 2023). One of local councils' core source of funding – government grants – were cut by 40% engendering a funding drop from £46.5bn to £28bn across 2009/10 - 2019/20 (Atkins & Hoddinott, 2020). Such an unprecedented reduction in expenditure, alongside a rise in service demand, resulted in a fiscal crisis for many local councils (Pike, 2023). Regarding the Levelling Up funds, though, the House of Commons Committee of Public Accounts (2024) ascertained that there has been a dearth of transparency on how these funds have been allocated, with Martin et al. (2022, p. 803) suggesting the funding allocation has involved 'more than a whiff of 'pork barrel' politics'. Moreover, Atherton and Le Chevallier (2023) explicated how the government has not provided a list of the other funds that are contributing to Levelling Up, creating complexity and ambiguity around the funding related to the agenda. Given many of the associated funding streams are short-term, contain different goals and are not intertwined with the Levelling Up missions, it is unclear how much money the state has invested in the Levelling Up agenda (see Atherton & Le Chevallier, 2023). As we will see, the funding available is vastly inadequate to the scale of the problem, while the investment required to significantly turn around the social and economic fortunes of left behind places such as Middlesbrough is unlikely to occur under the UK's current form of capitalism.

Regardless of the funding available, the agenda has been criticised with some highlighting that it rehashes old policy ideas as new ones (Gray & Broadhurst, 2023; Hudson, 2022). For example, original plans to relocate around 15,000 civil servants from London by 2025 as part of Levelling Up (the government surpassed this target as

16,061 had moved by December 2023) somewhat parallels how approximately 55,000 civil servants were relocated out of the capital across 1963–1975 (Balchin, 2022). Levelling Up also possesses similarities to John Major's Conservative Government Offices for the English Regions (GORs), which involved ten interconnected regional offices in England. Announced in 1994, GORs particularly pivoted upon regeneration through infrastructural, environmental and economic development (Mawson & Spencer, 1997). Moreover, Arnold and Hickson (2022) suggested the Levelling Up agenda is rather broad in focus, and if it is to mean something significant, it cannot encompass everything. Whilst others have pointed out that it fails to challenge the economic dominance of London, which acts as a vortex stymying other places of investment and economic growth (Martin & Sunley, 2023), Telford and Wistow (2022) claimed the agenda falls short of offering the *transformative changes* required to Level Up. The article now unveils how both the demise of Middlesbrough is a systemic part of neoliberalism, and Levelling Up the area is potentially an intractable policy task under this form of political economy. As Middlesbrough is the largest town in Teesside, the broader sub-regions development has also had significant implications for the area meaning the historical sketch often extends to Teesside.

The rise and fall of Middlesbrough

> Where alchemists were born below Cleveland's hills,
> A giant blue dragonfly across the Tees, reminds us every night,
> We built the world, every metropolis came from Ironopolis.
> (Ian Horn, Northeast Poet).

In 1801, Middlesbrough was a rural hamlet that contained 25 people (Briggs, 1963). Whilst the business partners Henry Bolckow and John Vaughan laboured collectively on various projects in the area in the 1840s, it was the latter's discovery of a huge seam of iron stone that was 16 feet thick in the nearby Eston Hills in 1850 that transformed the area into an industrial powerhouse (Briggs, 1963). Almost overnight, people migrated to Middlesbrough including from Durham, Yorkshire, Wales, Scotland, and parts of Ireland to heed the capitalists' demands for a large industrial labour force (Briggs, 1963), with companies often offering accommodation to rent at a relatively good price as a condition of employment (Yasumoto, 2011).

The area contained natural advantages for industrial development including its proximity to Durham (25 miles North of Middlesbrough) where both coking coal and limestone deposits were in abundance; flat land for the development of industrial plants; and the River Tees which was deep water dredged to ensure vessels had easy access to the North Sea to transport materials and particularly products including plates, rails and bars around the world (Appleton, 1929; Yasumoto, 2011). Such conditions enabled the area to develop at a pace that was without precedent in nineteenth century England (Briggs, 1963; Doyle, 2010). By 1871 there were over 100 blast furnaces in Teesside, while Middlesbrough's population had catapulted to around 40,000 (Warren, 2018). By 1873, around a third of the UK's total iron ore output was produced in the town (Briggs, 1963; Gleave, 1938). This meant Middlesbrough became defined by its manufacturing base, acquiring the nickname Ironopolis. Upon visiting Middlesbrough in 1862 William Gladstone, before he first became Prime Minister in 1868, remarked 'this

remarkable place, the youngest child of England's enterprise, is an infant, but if an infant, an infant Hercules'.

Place-making was rapidly underway as opportunities emerged for people to open new shops, retail outlets, pubs as well as boarding and lodging establishments (Yasumoto, 2011), with the population reaching 91,302 in 1901 (Bell, 1907). Living standards, however, were poor as inadequate housing, overcrowding and a lack of sanitation were prevalent (Bell, 1907). In *At The Works: A Study of a Manufacturing Town,* Lady Florence Bell – who was married to Sir Hugh Bell, the Director of the family firm Bell Brothers' steelworks in Middlesbrough – documented how rigid gender roles were the norm in the town as men were the breadwinner and provided the household's economic foundations and women ran the home, looked after the children and provided a degree of order to the backbreaking toil of labouring in the iron and steel works (Bell, 1907). Violence, alcoholism, gambling, and concerns about economic insecurity and ill-health were prevalent (Bell, 1907), with a blanket of black smoke from the works often covering parts of the town (Bell, 1907; Briggs, 1963). Industrial development continued apace, though, as Smith's Dock shipyard opened in 1908 in neighbouring South Bank – three miles from central Middlesbrough – and employed several thousand people (Williamson, 2012).

Periodic bursts of global economic turmoil alongside increased national and international competition impacted negatively upon the area. Especially after World War One, for example, Northamptonshire was able to produce better quality iron at a cheaper cost, contributing to production levels never returning to their pre-war heights (Appleton, 1929; Gleave, 1938). Around the same time, the steel industry developed a reputation for producing some of the finest steel in the world (Lloyd, 2013). Opening in 1932 and 1935 respectively, the Sydney Harbour Bridge in Australia and the Birchenough Bridge in Zimbabwe were made in Middlesbrough by the steel producer Dorman Long. The Great Depression heralded tumultuous years for the area, however, since the economic dependence upon a small suite of industries meant Middlesbrough suffered more than most (Warren, 2018). Indeed, unemployment in the town reached around 40% by the turn of the 1930s (Warwick, 2010).

The merger of four chemical companies in 1926 led to the formation of Imperial Chemicals Industry (ICI) which transformed nearby Billingham – north of the River Tees – from a quaint village into a one industry town (Beynon et al., 1989). ICI's demand for a large labour force meant men moved to the area from nearby Durham to escape unemployment in the coalfields and find work at ICI. The company fashioned a reputation for innovation and dynamism, founding the plastic Perspex in the 1930s. However, despair and destitution permeated Middlesbrough and much of the land in the first half of the twentieth century in light of the Great Depression and Second World War; there was a palpable sense amongst both the public and politicians that capitalism had to change to survive and provide social and economic security for the citizenry (Judt, 2010; Lloyd, 2013).

Post-war Middlesbrough

As mentioned, what followed the aftermath of World War Two were around three decades of relative security and prosperity (Streeck, 2016). Successive governments vowed to never return to the social and economic scorched earth of the 1920s and 1930s (Marquand, 1988), with Streeck (2016) suggesting the post-war decades were the first era in

capitalism's history that economic inequality narrowed. Unprecedented improvements were thus made to most of the citizenry's living standards. Although the key site of Middlesbrough's initial economic growth – the ironstone mine at Eston – closed in 1949 (Warren, 2018), ICI opened another plant at Wilton seven miles from central Middlesbrough shortly thereafter. Situated upon 2000 acres of flat land and specialising initially in ethylene production, 6,000 people were employed by 1958 involving another 3,000 workers in the local supply chain (Warren, 2018). This was one of the world's most innovative and largest chemical sites for both the production and research of petrochemicals, producing more ammonia than any other company (Telford & Wistow, 2020). By 1965 ICI employed 31,500 people across its two sites in Teesside and many thousands more in the local supply chain (Beynon et al., 1989). Parallel biographies were common as particularly sons followed in their fathers and grandfathers' footsteps and acquired work in either the steel or petrochemicals industries. Offering good working conditions including reasonable wages, opportunities for career progression and generous pensions, labouring at ICI was generally a positive experience for employees (Williamson, 2008).

The landmark Hailsham Report (HMSO, 1963) identified Teesside as playing a key part in the future growth and relative prosperity of the Northeast region. The report expressed optimism about the area's future, suggesting the abundance of work alongside a sprawling countryside meant it could meet peoples' economic and recreational needs in a way many other localities could not. This fed into how a consensus was obtained in the mid-1960s between the state, core industrial employers and the trade unions regarding the area's economic strategy. Evenhuis (2018) outlines how it included the modernisation of existing industry, further development of the locality's infrastructure and a need to somewhat diversify the economy and acquire employment in less heavy forms of industry, though Shildrick et al. (2012) claim the latter was met with a degree of circumspection by central government as it was feared it would stymie the readily supply of labour to the area's steel and chemical industries. Such a loose consensus, however, resulted in ICI utilising 60% of central government's Regional Development Grants to further expand (Foord et al., 1985), revealing how the area was a key beneficiary of post-war regional policy. Due to low unemployment – in Middlesbrough in 1965 it was around 2% (Warren, 2018) – and the prevalence of well-paid and highly skilled jobs, Teesside's Gross Value Added (a key metric of a locale's wealth) in the early 1970s stood third in the UK behind only London and Aberdeen (Shildrick et al., 2012).

Whilst particularly the area's chemicals and heavy engineering industries performed well in the post-war decades, steel was subject to differing forms of ownership (Warren, 2018). The industry was nationalised by Labour in 1949, the Conservatives marketised it in 1951 and then Labour renationalised most of the industry again in 1967 as the British Steel Corporation[3] was formed. Such frequent change created political complacency and uncertainty, resulting in a lack of investment in many steel plants (Evenhuis, 2018). Across 1969-1979, Teesside's steel industry lost around 10,000 jobs partially due to a significant decline in global demand (Beynon et al., 1989). Europe's second biggest steel plant, though, opened in 1979 at Redcar (eight miles from Middlesbrough) at the mouth of the River Tees in light of both predictions that demand would bounce back and the closure of smaller plants across Teesside (Beynon et al., 1989; Warren, 2018). Given the area's industrial prowess, there was a perception that Middlesbrough's future was one of further relative prosperity. This was substantiated by the sentiments of

prominent political figures including Henri Simonet, former Vice-President of the European Commission, who visited Teesside in the 1970s and remarked that 'the area can fairly claim to be Europe's most dynamic industrial site' (Beynon et al., 1989, p. 271). Such optimism, however, proved to be a false dawn.

Middlesbrough in the neoliberal era

Against the backdrop of two global oil crises (1973-84 and 1979-80), governments worked to control high inflation in the 1970s (Streeck, 2016). Based upon the idea that controlling the growth of the money supply is essential in stabilising the economy and controlling inflation, monetarism attracted political support (Keegan, 1984). The election of Margaret Thatcher in 1979 heralded what Keegan (1984) cast as a monetarist experiment involving, among other policies, an increase in VAT from 8% to 15% and a rise in short term interest rates to 17%. Thatcher's Conservative Government's 1980 Medium Term Financial Strategy also posited that the growth in the money supply would be considerably curtailed over the next four years, with government subsidies to industries significantly cut. Inflation rose from 10.3% in May 1979 to 21.9% in May 1980, and the exchange rate mushroomed from 118.4 in 1979 to over 140 across 1981 (Keegan, 1984). The impact on the UK's industry was profound. As Keegan (1984, p. 146) describes, by 'the end of 1980 British industry was competing against the other leading trading nations on 50% worse terms than in 1977'. In consequence, across 1979-83 unemployment increased from 1.3mn to over 3mn, impacting detrimentally on places such as Middlesbrough (Lloyd, 2013).

This sequence of policy developments solidified the transition from a productive to post-industrial economy, feeding into what Varoufakis (2011) cast as a historic and unique reversal of the global flows of trade and capital. Many companies moved their branch plants to the Global South to utilise reduced taxation rules and much lower labour costs, maximising their returns on investment. Evenhuis (2018, p. 13) outlines how across 1976-1984 approximately 35,000 employment opportunities were cut from Teesside's steel industry, while the 'decline in shipbuilding and related industries has been equally rapid, with the sector going from around 18,000 jobs to near 0 in just 5 years between 1982 and 1987'. Middlesbrough's unemployment rate catapulted from around 2% in 1965 to 22% by 1985 (Warren, 2018), and in some neighbourhoods it reached around 40% (Foord et al., 1985). Whilst around a decade previously many locals were accustomed to an abundance of readily available work, by the mid-1980s some residents had been unemployed for several years (Beynon et al., 1989). Responding to high unemployment rates, the local council enacted various initiatives including training centres to help aspiring employees attain new skillsets, though these were relatively small scale in comparison to the resources required to address the locality's pervasive joblessness (Evenhuis, 2018).

ICI also responded to increased national and international economic turbulence by changing its strategy, with a new focus on pharmaceuticals production (Evenhuis, 2018). As it announced its first loss in the 1980s, various rounds of workforce downsizing ensued with the number of employees dropping to around 14,500 by 1985 (Beynon et al., 1989). Although it managed to bounce back and became the first company in the UK to record pre-tax profits of over £1bn in 1984 under different leadership, a multi-billion-

pound investment in speciality chemicals failed to yield significant financial returns and led the company to ratchet up sizable amounts of debt. This led to further workforce downsizing, alongside parts of the company being sold off each year. As the Dutch firm AkzoNobel bought what remained of ICI in 2008, the famous company that provided employment to generations of 'Teessiders' was lost from the area.

The evisceration of Middlesbrough's key employers transformed the locale's labour market; across 1971-2008 Teesside lost around 100,000 manufacturing jobs and gained about 92,000 employment opportunities in the service economy (Shildrick et al., 2012). There are pockets of reasonably well-paid employment including within what remains of the petrochemicals industry, while the area has also witnessed a growth in public sector work particularly in healthcare and education (Evenhuis, 2018). However, there is a high concentration of non-unionised, poorly paid, and often insecure work which fails to provide industrial employment's sense of social worth and identity (Beynon et al., 1994; Lloyd, 2013, 2018).

The political mismanagement of the transition from an industrial to post-industrial economy resulted in both the emergence and persistence of social, cultural, and economic problems in the locality (Lloyd, 2018; Telford & Lloyd, 2020; Telford & Wistow, 2020). By 1999 in Teesside, for example, around one in 10 people were unemployed (the UK average was one in 20), while in one estate in Middlesbrough the unemployment rate for men was 27% (MacDonald & Marsh, 2000). Heroin arrived in Middlesbrough in the 1980s and quickly became known as the 'poverty drug', with some residents ensnared in a cycle of drug addiction and acquisitive crime including shoplifting to feed their habit (MacDonald & Marsh, 2002). As some young people could not find work, they turned to persistent recreational use of amphetamines to fill the void (MacDonald & Marsh, 2002). A cycle of poverty, unemployment, insecure and temporary work became the norm for many residents (MacDonald & Marsh, 2000; Shildrick et al., 2012). Moreover, educational attainment in some of the area's secondary schools were amongst the lowest in the UK by 1999, including three schools where below 15% of students left with 5 or more GCSEs classified at grade A-C (MacDonald & Marsh, 2002). Given the above, Lloyd (2013, p. 15) elucidated how:

> 'Whilst the infant Hercules grew up forging a strong working-class identity and reputation in the Promethean heat of the iron and steel industry, the town, over the last three decades, has suffered a decline and fall from prosperity worthy of Prometheus himself. Where the fires of industry once created a Hades-like dystopian skyline, the warning at the gates of hell in Dante's *Inferno*, 'abandon all hope, ye who enter here', seems apt for a town ravaged like Prometheus' liver.

Fast forward around ten years, and the imposition of austerity measures made many issues significantly worse. Middlesbrough Council witnessed a drop in central government funding of 46% from £81.2mn in 2013/14 to £43.5mn in 2023/24 (Middlesbrough Council, 2023), meaning the town endured some of the worst cuts in the UK (Gray & Barford, 2018). As the council spends a disproportionate amount of its budget on social care (83.9% compared to the England single tier authorities median of 66.3%), welfare reforms in the austerity era meant the council witnessed an increase in demand for its services. For example, across 2016/17 to 2022/23, the level of children subjected to child protection plans increased from 85.8 to 140.2 per 10,000 children (Middlesbrough Council,

2023). Such a disproportionate spend means the Council is limited in investing in other public services that residents view as important to their livelihoods (Middlesbrough Council, 2023). After various rounds of privatisation and workforce downsizing, the nearby Redcar steelworks also closed in 2015 with the loss of over 2,000 jobs (Telford, 2022).

Many of Middlesbrough's problems have persisted throughout the neoliberal era; they are not temporary issues but enduring features of the town. According to the Office for National Statistics (2023), 24.2% of households do not work (UK average of 13.9%); 6.6% of residents claim out-of-work benefits (UK average of 4.3%); 37.1% of residents are qualified at RQF4[4] and above (UK average of 47.3%); and wages are significantly below the national average with full-time workers gross weekly income standing at £554.7 (UK average of £682.6). Regarding crime, in 2020 the town possessed the highest level of adult recidivism, heroin consumption and drug-related deaths in the UK (Cleveland Police and Crime Commissioner, 2020). Recent research by the Centre for Cities (2024) also revealed how – out of 63 UK cities/large towns – Middlesbrough is 56th for the lowest amount of business startups; 60th for the lowest number of businesses; and joint last with Sunderland (30 miles North of Middlesbrough) for 'new

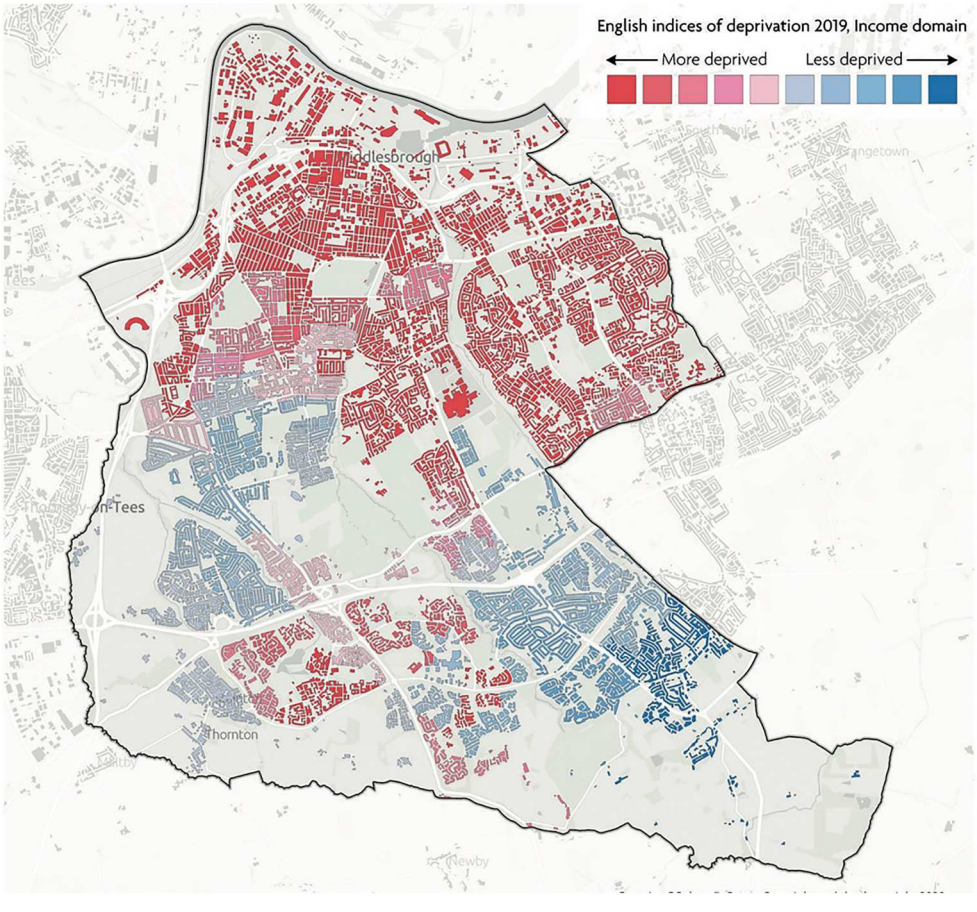

Figure 1. A map of the scale of deprivation within the unitary authority of Middlesbrough.

economy' employment in knowledge-intensive companies and advanced manufacturing. Middlesbrough also contains the greatest proportion (49%) of deprived neighbourhoods in England (Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government, 2019). Focussing on the unitary authority of Middlesbrough, Figure 1 reveals the spatial patterning and scale of this deprivation with the town of Middlesbrough (at the top of the figure) the most deprived, while the West and Southeast are amongst the least deprived and rather affluent[5].

Middlesbrough has been subject to a plethora of regeneration schemes that have had very little impact upon remedying its problems (Shildrick et al., 2012), though more recently Middlesbrough has received various forms of Levelling Up funding. In round 2 of the Levelling Up fund, Redcar & Cleveland Council submitted a joint bid with Middlesbrough Council worth £20mn that was successful. Whilst £15mn is earmarked largely for high street improvements in the town of Guisborough, 10 miles from Middlesbrough, around £5mn will be invested in the Newham Grange Highway Scheme in Coulby Newham to aid the development of 800 new houses. Along with Redcar and Cleveland in Teesside, in the 2023 Spring Budget Middlesbrough was identified as one of the nation's 20 Levelling Up partnership areas under the Levelling Up partnership initiative 2023-24. As such, Middlesbrough will receive £20mn in capital funding to address some of the most pressing local issues, including plans to try and revamp the town centre, tackle crime, and expand Middlesbrough College (Middlesbrough Council, 2024a). A related Levelling Up funding stream – the £3.6bn Towns Fund – is only available to 101 towns who the government has identified as possessing severe economic problems. Funding is allocated through a competitive bidding process (Atherton & Le Chevallier, 2023), and Middlesbrough was recently awarded £21.9mn from this fund (Middlesbrough Council, 2024b).

Arguably Europe's largest brownfield redevelopment site (Ridgwell et al., 2024), Redcar & Cleveland's freeport – Teesworks – is around five miles from Middlesbrough and opened in 2021. Forming part of England's eight freeports that were developed as part of the Levelling Up agenda, these are special economic zones where businesses are offered various incentives to invest (Hall et al., 2023). Cotton et al. (2023) outline how these particularly encompass forms of tax relief and could include: Stamp Duty Land Tax relief on land purchases in the freeport; enhanced tax relief for investments in new infrastructure e.g. plants and machinery on the site; and 0% national insurance contributions of a new employee's annual salary (up to £25,000) for a maximum of three years. Teesworks, though, has been somewhat controversial. Undertaken as part of its development, dredging has been linked to the mass death of marine life along the nearby coastline (Telford, 2023). However, an independent investigation by a Crustacean Mortality Expert Panel discerned that it is exceptionally unlikely that these mortalities were caused by dredging (HM, 2023). Accusations of corruption and illegality have also been levied against the 'Tees Valley' Mayor, Ben Houchen, who has played a key role in developing the site. This led to a government commissioned independent review into the freeport. Whilst the review ascertained no evidence of corruption or illegality, the panel asserted that a lack of transparency and governance concerns needed urgently addressing (Ridgwell et al., 2024). It is estimated that 2,295 direct jobs will be created once the planned sites are operational, alongside 3,890 jobs in the local supply chain (Ridgwell et al., 2024). Many of Middlesbrough's residents are thus yet to benefit from

this development. In fact, since Levelling Up was announced, YouGov research ascertained that in Middlesbrough only 10% of residents believed the area had 'generally improved', 40% believed it had 'generally stayed much the same' and 43% believed it had 'generally declined' (English et al., 2023).

Middlesbrough Council's financial difficulties also recently intensified. Following media reports that various councils were at risk of 'bankruptcy'[6], Middlesbrough Council recently became one of 19 councils to receive additional funding from central government. In January 2024, they successfully applied for around £13.4mn in 'exceptional financial support' for 2024/25; the council's reserves were at such a critically low level that they were at risk of not being able to afford any unexpected costs (Middlesbrough Council, 2023). The council's response package also includes further austerity involving the potential loss of 75 full time posts, as well as the transfer of various public assets such as Middlesbrough bus station, car parks and the derelict Crown pub to Middlesbrough Development Corporation[7]. Placed in the constitutive context above, the article now turns to how Levelling Up the area is highly unlikely under neoliberalism.

Discussion

Evidently, the policy task of Levelling Up left behind places such as Middlesbrough is long-running and complex (Fiorentino et al., 2024; Martin et al., 2022). This is an issue that has been congealing for nearly fifty years, meaning the scale and depth of the problem is profound. Middlesbrough once served a clear economic purpose, servicing the needs of industrialised capitalism and forming a central part of British capital accumulation throughout large parts of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Beynon et al., 1994). The locality was developed from scratch, expanding first in the shadow of the iron and steel industries and again through petrochemicals. Although waves of industrial retrenchment occurred throughout the area's history, neoliberalism's economic restructuring including the reversal of the global flows of trade and capital meant the area lost its raison d'être. Its importance to the national economy and economic growth faded and the locale became defined by persistent problems. The area's long-term predicament is thus an intrinsic and systemic part of a neoliberalised political economy; a *locked in* byproduct of neoliberal policy changes and an unfortunate price to pay for a more globalised and deregulated economy. As Houlden et al. (2024, p. 7) recently revealed, 'areas that are 'left behind' tend to stay behind' and large parts of Middlesbrough are archetypical examples of *Entrenched Disadvantage*.

Given these issues questions arise about why the electorate has generally voted to maintain this imbalanced economy throughout neoliberalism. Since 1979 the Conservative Party has been the key proponent of neoliberal political economy. Notwithstanding the problems with the UK's first-past-the-post electoral system, 11 elections have occurred in the UK since 1979 which has resulted in eight Conservative-led governments. Whilst there are geographical divides in England's voting patterns including a long-running North (historically Labour) vs South (historically Conservative) schism, England, in particular, has generally been more Conservative than the UK overall (Wistow, 2022). Throughout neoliberalism, the Conservative Party has been an ardent proponent of a meritocracy and its core value of competitive individualism. Based upon the idea that individual success is solely the product of talent, hard work and often persistence in

the face of adversity (Wistow, 2022), only those individuals willing to be ambitious will be able to achieve upward social mobility. Such ideas attract widespread support among the public; research by Duffy et al. (2021) revealed how hard work is viewed by a majority (76%) of the UK citizenry as being either 'essential' or 'very important' for 'getting ahead in life'. Winlow and Hall (2022) suggests this has fostered a cultural atmosphere that people are generally deserving of their place in UK society and that inequalities are inevitable. As such, individual responsibility is viewed as important in shaping social outcomes including the outcomes of place. In consequence, many people often blame themselves, rather than structural issues, for their individual predicament in a neoliberalised society (Winlow & Hall, 2022).

Such individualism is prevalent in cultural perceptions regarding the plight of left behind areas, with Telford and Wistow (2022) pointing out how they are often blamed for their difficulties. The stigmatisation, demonisation and mocking of residents who live there is common particularly in the media. Pattison (2022), for instance, suggests the UK's left behind ex mining communities are often held responsible for their economic woes, involving ideas by politicians, the media and often residents that cultures of worklessness and welfare dependency are the key problems. Rightly or wrongly, throughout large parts of neoliberalism the electorate has been broadly content with maintaining both the UK's deeply individualised society and uneven economic geography; there has been a long-running sense that there is no need to alter the spatially unequal configuration of society as people and places are where and how they should be in a meritocratic social world (Wistow, 2022).

It is, of course, debatable precisely how much popular support there is for neoliberal policies. For example, the Conservatives have previously won power on successive lower shares of the popular vote – 1979: 43.9%, 1983: 42.4%, 1987: 42.2% and 1992: 41.9%. At the 2010 general election, they were elected partially due to the opposition being split – Conservative Party 36.1%, Labour Party 29%, Liberal Democrats 23% and 11.9% for the other parties. There are also pockets of resistance particularly through trade unions and various activist groups, as well as voter dissatisfaction and apathy embodied most clearly through non-voting (Streeck, 2016; Winlow & Hall, 2022). However, as Wistow (2022) asserts, there has not been enough of a public demand to move away from neoliberalism; there has not been enough resistance to it electorally or otherwise. Ultimately, the electoral success of the Conservative Party would not have been possible without at least some public appetite for the idea of a meritocracy and its key value of competitive individualism. Accordingly, the plight of left behind areas is an inherent part of a neoliberalised society that values competitive individualism over collectivism and generates places that pull ahead and are cast as society's winners and other locales that fall behind and are deemed to be the losers (Martin et al., 2021).

Over the past forty years, the political consensus has also been to award primacy to the market and finance over the interests of left behind places (Hill, 2021). Whilst this has particularly benefited the Southeast region who witnessed increased investment, economic growth and rising wages and prosperity, other areas have been left to wither. Such a consensus is ingrained in the political, institutional, and cultural fabric of the UK (Jones, 2024). One key institution that is often overlooked in reproducing the predicament of places such as Middlesbrough and thereby forming a barrier to the types of changes required to Level Up is the Treasury. In the neoliberal era, the Treasury's economic lens has

pivoted upon neoclassical economics, which contains various monetarist ideas (see Davis, 2022). Indeed, throughout much of the post-war era, Treasury officials used to regard the theoretical models that underpin this economic paradigm as too narrow, deterministic, and not representative of reality (Davis, 2022). However, while the Civil Service previously employed hardly any economists especially in the 1950s and 1960s, by 2015 1,400 were employed including in senior positions (Davis, 2022). This meant different disciplinary insights and alternative economic frameworks faded from view. A focus on keeping inflation low achieved through an anti-state ethos in terms of cutting public investment and taxes (with tax cuts appealing to competitive individualism), primacy to the market and economic deregulation came to animate the Treasury. As Davis (2022, p. 4/5) points out:

> It has been the prime institution of government responsible for UK economic policy for decades. It has overseen every decision on taxation, financial regulation, privatization, government borrowing and everything else. Although a relatively small department of state, its power and influence has only grown stronger since the 1970s. It has moved beyond controlling government finances to slowly dominating wider economic strategy.

The Treasury's response 'has at best been lukewarm about Levelling Up' (Diamond et al., 2023, p. 361) since they have been cautious over administering the funding. Treasury scepticism towards Levelling Up was further revealed in 2023 when they banned the government Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities from financing new Levelling Up capital projects without their approval, especially in light of concerns regarding how the Levelling Up funding was being managed. Such scepticism is shaped by how key government institutions – the Treasury – lack an understanding of the scale of the Levelling Up problem and the bold policies required to address it (McCann, 2023). This filters into the lack of funding allocated to Levelling Up, which is profoundly underpowered relative to the scale of the problem (Fransham et al., 2023; Martin et al., 2021, p. 2022).

As Atherton and Le Chevallier (2023) suggest, it is difficult to determine precisely how much the state has invested in Levelling Up, often resulting in a lack of monitoring and evaluation and undermining the agenda's validity. Nevertheless, the Conservatives recently claimed it is around £13bn (Fiorentino et al., 2024). The sheer scale of the resources required to Level Up living standards between the UK's left behind localities and the more economically buoyant places can be compared to Germany's Aufbau Ost programme ('rebuilding East Germany') in light of German reunification. Some of the problems facing East and West Germany in the early 1990s mirror the UK today; in fact, in relation to productivity and prosperity the UK's interregional inequalities are worse than Germanys in 1990 (McCann, 2023). Following the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, it was clear that living standards between West and East Germany had been diverging for around forty years. As such, Enekel and Rosel (2022) outline how the state initiated the rebuilding East Germany programme, involving a long-term cross-party agreement that the state will do whatever it takes to Level Up East to West Germany's level of economic prosperity. According to Enekel and Rosel (2022), around £2 trillion was spent on 'Levelling Up' policies across 1990-2018, which equates to £74bn annually. The policy programme included mirroring West Germany's institutions through implementing democracy, a market-based economy, a federalist governance structure, infrastructure

investments including in transport and institutions such as schools and hospitals, as well as state subsidies for manufacturing firms to upgrade capital equipment (Enekel & Rosel, 2022). Spatial imbalances have narrowed in many ways. Whilst a significant reduction in the disparities in living standards and wages occurred, the discrepancy in life expectancy closed completely. However, even with these levels of investment over time, some divergences remain (Enekel & Rosel, 2022).

Under the UK's current form of capitalism, it is highly unlikely that these levels of public investment would be administered for Levelling Up policies. The current key forms of Levelling Up funding totalling approximately £46.9mn in Middlesbrough, for instance, is not significantly more than the £37.5mn Middlesbrough Council lost due to austerity across 2013-24. Such underfunding relative to the scale of the problem is bound to how the UK has been a low investment nation for many decades. Whilst public investment in the UK stood at around 4.5% of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) across 1949-1978, in the neoliberal era it dropped significantly (Chadha & Venables, 2024). As Odamtten and Smith (2023, p. 4) assert:

> The average OECD advanced economy has seen public investment of 3.7 per cent of GDP a year since the turn of the century, nearly 50 per cent more than in the UK. As with total investment, this low public investment norm is persistent: we have been in the weakest third of OECD countries for three in every four years this century (14 out of 19 years). Had we seen OECD average levels of public investment over those two decades, we would have invested around £500 billion more (in 2022 prices).

The Treasury possesses a high degree of control over these investment levels (Coyle & Sensier, 2020). Rather than focussing on the benefits of investment including its crucial role in growing the economy, the Treasury's 'fiscal rules' pivot upon reducing public debt as a percentage of GDP by five years' time (Tomlinson, 2024). This often leads to short-termism, with the Treasury cutting public expenditure rather than prioritising the future through increased investment (Odamtten & Smith, 2023). Such a lack of public investment deters private investment, with a recent report by The Institute for Public Policy Research revealing how the UK ranks 28th out of 31 OECD nations for private investment (Dibb & Jung, 2024). This has resulted in the UK possessing the lowest rate of overall investment in the G7 for 24 out of the previous 30 years (Dibb & Jung, 2024). Turning around the social and economic fortunes of left behind Middlesbrough, though, cannot be achieved without investment of a scale not seen in the neoliberal era and that is sustained over a long period of time. However, it is also debatable whether the UK public would find the level of investment required to reduce gaps in economic prosperity between struggling and relatively prosperous localities electorally palatable, not least due to the widespread belief in a meritocracy and its emphasis upon competitive individualism.

Ways forward

The Labour Party's recent victory at the 2024 general election brought an end to fourteen years of Conservative government. Within a week of their electoral victory, however, Labour axed the Levelling Up phrase which Deputy Prime Minister Angela Rayner described as a gimmick. Political rhetoric has thus shifted away from tackling spatial inequalities and towards achieving economic stability and growth through fixing the

foundations of the nation. Whilst a new government provides opportunities for new thinking and policies, the Party has committed itself to the Treasury's current fiscal rules (Tomlinson, 2024). As such, they have suggested they are financially constrained and will not turn on the spending taps. These fiscal rules are not unshakeable objective truths; they are moulded by politicians and change in light of political and economic developments. However, the Party's commitment to these fiscal rules means it is debatable whether they will challenge what Diamond et al. (2023, p. 367) cast as 'the historical reluctance of the 'imperial Treasury' to cede control over fiscal powers' and invest at the level required to Level Up. Indeed, as it stands, over the next five years the Labour Party will cut investment more than the Conservative governments across 2010-24 (Dibb & Jung, 2024). This would potentially ensure the continuation of low private investment, economic stagnation and the plight of left behind places including Middlesbrough. Consequently, it could be argued that, for the immediate future at least, 'Policy actors, politicians and business leaders are locked into the market model of delivery, neoliberalising modes of representation and subsequent failures in economic regulation' (Jones, 2024, p. 60).

History serves as a reminder, though, that transformational change is possible (Judt, 2010; Wolf, 2023). Although space precludes an explication of the types of policies required (see Fransham et al., 2023; Martin et al., 2021), Labour's commitment to an industrial strategy is a useful starting point since it will partially pivot upon making the UK a clean energy nation by 2030. This green transition provides opportunities to generate the highly skilled, well-paid and stable jobs of the future in left behind areas and rebalance the economy (Bailey & Tomlinson, 2021), not least as many low carbon industries are already located in Northern England (Tomlinson, 2024). New thinking to challenge established economic orthodoxies is needed, including potentially abandoning the Treasury's fiscal rules (Tomlinson, 2024). This would help to significantly increase public investment to local councils as well as on education, skills development and employment in left behind locales such as Middlesbrough. Various forms of increased taxation on wealth could also be enacted, which could aid a more redistributive political economy and help to address spatial imbalances (Wistow, 2022).

Conclusion

A product of the industrial revolution, Middlesbrough's industrial prowess was forged in the iron, steel, and petrochemicals industries resulting in people migrating to the area to acquire industrial work (Lloyd, 2013). Its identity became synonymous with its industrial base, branded as an infant Hercules. After the structural tremors of the first half of the twentieth century, Middlesbrough benefited greatly from the UK's version of post-war capitalism. Its petrochemicals industry expanded in light of generous Regional Development Grants, while policies involving governmental commitments to full employment, nationalisation of key industries and generous welfare provision also improved living standards (Judt, 2010). Although some level of industrial job loss has been a feature of Middlesbrough since the nineteenth century (Yasumoto, 2011), the neoliberal transition from the mid-1970s reversed the global flows of trade and capital (Varoufakis, 2011). Such intense economic restructuring meant Middlesbrough suffered more than most places.

The Levelling Up agenda emerged in light of rising concerns about spatial inequalities and the discontentment of left behind localities (Pike et al., 2024). Given the scale and embeddedness of problems in places such as Middlesbrough, the investment and ambitious policies required to turn around its economic fortunes are profound (Telford & Wistow, 2022). However, the UK especially England has largely voted Conservative for most of its recent history, involving a strong appeal to meritocracy and competitive individualism over collectivism (Wistow, 2022). This often results in the electorate voting to maintain the status quo and plight of left behind locales rather than their resurrection. Whilst the demise of Middlesbrough is tethered to capitalism's contemporary development particularly the neoliberal shift, it is also unlikely that the level of investment required to Level it Up will be administered under a neoliberalised political economy. The UK has suffered from persistent underinvestment in comparison to comparable nations throughout neoliberalism (Dibb & Jung, 2024), aided by the Treasury and a somewhat narrow focus on short-term economic goals (Odamtten & Smith, 2023; Tomlinson, 2024). Whilst the Labour Party's recent election victory provides new opportunities for bold policy changes, its commitment to the Treasury's current fiscal rules precludes the levels of investment required to significantly address the UK's spatial imbalances. These issues coalesce to lock in the UK's deeply unequal economic geography and the policy predicament of left behind places; only an epochal and progressive shift away from neoliberalism is likely to necessitate both the resources and transformative policies required to revive left behind areas such as Middlesbrough.

Notes

1. Focussing on Middlesbrough as the core town within the broader Teesside sub-region facilitates a more comprehensive analysis of the area's economic development.
2. London was a deindustrialising city in the early 1980s, but Thatcher's Big Bang economic deregulation of its financial district in 1986 enabled the city to rapidly reinvent itself (Martin & Sunley, 2023). As McCann (2016) notes, London's subsequent position as a global superstar city has also been enabled by other forms of economic development particularly the completion of the M25 (a 117-mile motorway circling the majority of London) in 1986; development of Canary Wharf in 1988; the opening of the Channel Tunnel in 1994 which connects the UK to mainland Europe and London Heathrow Airport's Terminal 5 in 2008.
3. The British Steel Corporation involved renationalising the UK's 14 key steel producing firms including Dorman Long (Evenhuis, 2018), equating to around 90% of the UK's production of steel.
4. The Regulated Qualifications Framework (RQF) is the system used for accrediting qualifications. RQF4 refers to Level 4 qualifications such as a certificate of higher education or higher apprenticeship.
5. Whilst there is not space here to explicate this matter, as Pike et al. (2024) recently highlighted it is important to point out how the overarching idea of the left behind conceals the granular breakdown of spatial inequality. As Figure 1 demonstrates, there are some affluent places situated close to deprivation and despair. These are what we might term *relatively contented places*; residents live rather different lives to those that reside in left behind neighbourhoods and are generally content with the preservation of neoliberalism. These individuals have an important stake in society and politics, yet they are given far less attention in scholarly, political and policy debates on spatial imbalances. These issues are explored more deeply in a forthcoming book (see Telford & Wistow, 2026).

6. Local councils cannot go 'bankrupt' since the law does not allow them to do so. Rather, councils issue a 'section 114 notice' where council members meet within three weeks to debate how to balance the financial books where they receive support by the state.
7. Set up in 2023 by the Tees Valley Mayor, Ben Houchen, the Middlesbrough Development Corporation is the planning authority responsible for regeneration in Middlesbrough town centre. However, it has been the source of a degree of controversy, with Middlesbrough Council raising several concerns about the transfer of assets (Manning & Morris, 2024).

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