‘A Little Kind of Island’

Community engagement with intersecting crises in Doncaster, England

CHAPTER 5:

'A LITTLE KIND OF ISLAND': COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT WITH INTERSECTING CRISES IN DONCASTER, ENGLAND

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A sense of crisis is something that is particular to those experiencing it, building on and compounding existing histories, experiences and inequalities. Doncaster is a city in the North of England that is often seen from the outside as a place in crisis, with the origins of the crises varying across time and perspective. The origins of these perceptions rest on longer-term patterns of deindustrialisation that impacted many communities across the North. It has also experienced sudden and immediate crises, such as the flooding of the river Don that gives the city and borough its name. Moreover, it has stood in as an exemplar of wider social crisis, having experienced a high-profile local government corruption scandal, two UKIP (UK Independence Party) conferences and overwhelmingly voting in favour of leaving the European Union in the 2016 referendum. The sense that the city was in crisis was also expressed by the Mayor Ros Jones in 2019 when she said "We've started to recover since I came in, but that was 2013 and you don't turn the Titanic around in a day." This captures the sense in which the crises experienced by Doncaster are multiple and entrenched with lasting effects on the community.

Given the lived experience of crisis and the way shocks operate on different temporal and geographical scales, it is important to consider how the community perceives the city and its travails. Periods of crisis may be followed by signs of hope, as individuals and groups come together to affect change. As the Mayor herself suggests, change is possible. This chapter considers the recent experience of Doncaster from the perspective of engaged members of the community. As a medium-sized city in the North of England, it represents a relatively typical type of community in this region, and as a place affected by deindustrialisation, its developments also resonate with the changes in similar cities outside the UK. As such, it provides a useful lens with which to analyse community responses to long-standing, intersecting crises. The aim of the chapter is to identify how crises impact a community and examine the way these impacts may be viewed and challenged by community members. The chapter consists of four sections. The first section examines the meaning of crisis and outlines our conceptual approach. Doncaster is introduced in the second section, providing an overview of the city and the key crises it has had to weather. The

methodology is outlined in the third section. The fourth section 'Viewing Crises from Inside and Below' draws on empirical material to analyse how socially, culturally and/or politically engaged residents experience the crises affecting Doncaster.

Intersecting Crises, Temporalities and Spatialities

The term 'crisis' has not only become ubiquitous, it also has been attached to a wide variety of areas, from migration, to finance, to climate and Covid-19. The overuse of the term may have led it to becoming "an analytically crippled term, insofar as uses of the word have proliferated to the extent of eviscerating it of meaning" (Bryant, 2016, p. 20). Definitions of what crisis entails show significant variation. While Lipscy defines crisis in national and positivist terms as "a situation that threatens significant harm to a country's population or basic values and compels a political response under time pressure and uncertainty" (2020, p. 99), Roitman's famous work on crisis documents and interrogates "the claim to crisis and [...] the effects of this claim", i.e. the "practice of the concept of crisis" (Roitman et al., 2020, p. 773). In this chapter, we neither seek to reify the concept of crisis, nor evaluate whether each of the phenomena that is designated 'a crisis' warrants this label, nor what is politically made possible in the name of 'crisis response'.

Our point of departure is that certain places, sites and people, have been affected by significant shifts and ruptures, which have been called 'crises' (but may not need to be called that by the people who experience them). Secondly, we want to examine how different types of shifts and ruptures, which have been described as crises, interact in a specific site and shape the lives and responses of the people that live there. We draw on and expand Sarantidis' notion of a "crisis within a crisis" (2021, p. 58), to highlight the interactive effects of multiple, overlapping shocks and changes. As Sarantidis observes in his ethnographic study of Lesvos' local population's understanding of and response to the so-called refugee crisis, "the consequences of the enduring financial crisis were amplified during the years of the refugee crisis, which found the Greek society within a pre-existing crisis" (2021, p. 58). Importantly, this signals that a population may be less resilient to one form of crisis, because of a pre-existing vulnerability as a result of another crisis. Conversely, a community that has equipped itself to absorb the shocks of one crisis, may be in a better position to respond to another.

Thinking of the effects of the increased arrivals of refugees in Lesvos as a crisis within an already existing financial crisis, which had put social services under enormous pressure, does not only show us that different crises intersect, but also highlights that these interacting crises may have different temporalities. For instance, as Lipscy notes, while each crisis may display the "core features of crises—threat, time pressure,

and uncertainty", "the degrees of threat, time pressure, and uncertainty vary across crises, within the same crisis by issue, and according to specific phases of a crisis" (2020, pp. 99-100). Some crises are prolonged and recurring, such as financial crises, while other crises are singular events. Within a capitalist system that is based on shocks and can still revitalise itself, Antenas notes that "crisis no longer refers to this turning point towards different dénouements, but rather a moment when a given situation worsens" (2020, p. 315). Some crises may make their effects felt immediately, while other crises such as the climate crisis have long-term significant implications that are not instantly recognised or felt in some locations. Hence, there are variations in the temporalities of different intersecting crises, or in Antenas words, in a "multidimensional crisis, different discordant temporalities (and spatialities) are interwoven" (2020, p. 317).

Drawing on work on the study of hazards reinforces the notion that crises are not evenly distributed and instead are located in particular places. The concept of the 'hazardscape' can serve as a useful frame in this context, pointing to the way in which challenges interact and compound each other. Paul (2011, p. 44) argues that "The concept of hazardscape includes the interaction among nature, society, and technology at a variety of spatial scales and creates a mosaic of risks that affect places and the people who live there". Drawing out the connection between disparate sources of risk and investigating their relationships helps build a more complete picture of the particular situation. Within this broad space, it is also necessary to consider the distinction between rapid and slow-onset hazards. Where a hazard develops rapidly, the community necessarily has less time to prepare and can instead focus on recovery. In contrast, slow-onset hazards may present a more complex challenge, as they build over time without suggesting an obvious means to prevent them, making them more insidious and potentially harmful.

The ability of a single community to manage the threats posed by the configuration of hazardscape is restricted. The cross-scale nature of hazards means that the ability of impacted communities or spaces to prevent or mitigate the impact may be shaped by the decisions or actions of those at higher scales. In such situations, the belief that a hazard cannot be dealt with may lead to a sense of fatalism, meaning a loss of agency as individuals accept what is going to happen (Paton et al, 2010). Where the hazard or resulting crisis has persisted for a period of time these feelings will be further amplified. Guppy and Twigg (2013, p. 7) illustrate the challenge when they argue:

> The term 'chronic crisis' implies a situation in which at least one hazard or stressor has manifested with disastrous impacts, yet over years or even decades, there is no resolution or reduction of this hazard, stressor or combination of each to a level that is manageable by the community affected.

In such a situation the capacity of the community to respond is reduced over time, making it more susceptible to future shocks. Much of the work in this area focuses on hazards emanating from the physical environment, but it is important to recognise that social and economic shocks can have similarly damaging impacts. The loss of a source of employment or a local industrial base may represent a short-term crisis, while the effects on the community may unfold over a more extended period (Oncescu, 2015).

Moving from the hazardscape to more grounded spatialities can further enhance our understanding of people's connections to particular spaces and places. This is clearly illustrated by Yi-Fu Tuan (1979, p. 389) in his claim that "the space that we perceive and construct, the space that provides cues for our behaviour, varies with the individual and cultural group". The spaces that a community occupies are therefore shaped by the values of that group, adding an additional layer of complexity to the hazardscape. Repeated exposure to hazards and resulting crises may impact a community negatively but if there is a connection to the space, this may be tolerable. In cases where these spaces are stigmatised, leaving may result in new forms of stigmatisation and exclusion, without the support provided by an established and recognised set of norms (see Capusotti, 2010). These feelings are compounded where there are particular places or sites that are meaningful to residents. As Cheng et al (2003, p. 89) argue, place "meanings encompass instrumental or utilitarian values as well as intangible values such as belonging, attachment, beauty and spirituality… [which] acknowledges the subjectivity of people's encounters with places". In the next section, we will introduce the city and community of Doncaster.

Doncaster: a Northern City in England

Doncaster, colloquially called 'Donny' by its residents, is a city in South Yorkshire, in the North of England. The largest metropolitan borough in the country, Doncaster covers 219sq miles with a population of around 302,400 (Figure 1). Changes in the broader economic and political context of the United Kingdom over the past four decades have had considerable detrimental impacts on the city and borough. Processes of deindustrialisation and economic deprivation have been partially mitigated by support from the European Union, prior to the UK's exit. At the same time, the new leadership of the borough has sought to rebuild and develop the city in the face of continuing challenges, as evidenced by plans to reposition the borough to capitalise on the opportunities it does have. In addition, recent success in gaining funding through the 'Towns Fund', awarded in 2021 as part of the UK's central government's 'Levelling Up' agenda suggest that there is a sense of agency among some actors. This section considers the various challenges that Doncaster has faced

since the closure of the mines in the 1980s and 1990s led to a process of deindustrialisation.

Historically, the local economy of Doncaster relied heavily on mining, specifically coal, which has continued to shape the social and economic landscape long after the deepmining industry was shuttered. Gherges et al (2020, p. 901) also point to the impact of this industrial history on the social outlook of the residents. Unpacking this claim, they argue:

> the historical experience of industrialism has remained engrained in the local culture and persists through a locale-specific discourse that keeps the history of industrialism alive and contrasts with the new opportunities afforded by the locality's materiality.

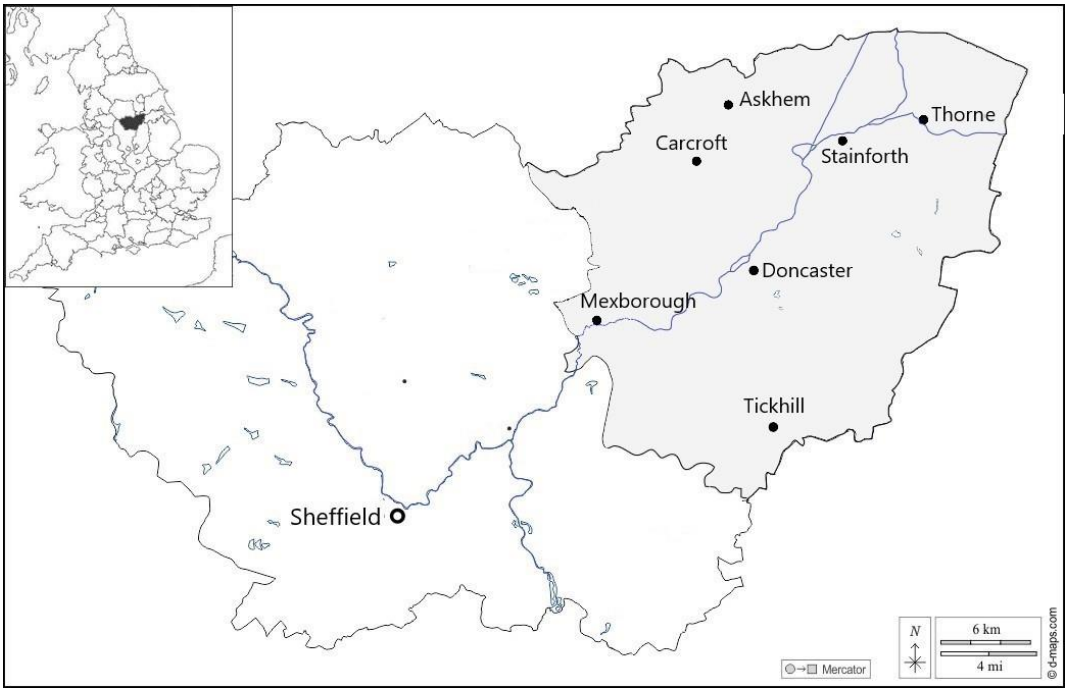

Figure 1 - South Yorkshire and Doncaster Metropolitan Borough
Base Map Source – D-Maps: England (https://d-maps.com/carte.php?num_car=5597&lang=en) and South Yorkshire (https://d-maps.com/carte.php?num_car=108725&lang=en) [accessed 11 January 2022]

These opportunities are embedded in the physical character of the borough. Describing the space, Batty and Hilton (2003, pp. 166-7) describe "'urban pockets" [that] are set within an agricultural landscape that… contains a number of historical sites that are of national significance". This challenges the standard view of Doncaster as a place of dereliction and abandonment.

The closure of the deep coal mines that proliferated across the borough had a considerable impact on the attitudes and identity of its residents. Turner and Gregory (1995, p. 151) note the scale of the change, as employment in 'British Coal-owned deepmining…. fell from 15,000 in 1985 to a handful in 1993'. The suddenness and scale of this shift meant that there were limited opportunities for alternative forms of employment, as the whole of the local economy was impacted. Examining the range of effects that resulted, Waddington et al (1994) pointed to economic, psychological, political and cultural dimensions. The first three are readily apparent in the loss of work, stress that resulted and the inability to challenge such a sudden and dramatic shift, based on decisions made far away. Perhaps most importantly in the longer-term were the cultural impacts, as the loss of a shared identity within pit villages (established to service a particular mine) and across the borough led to an erosion of social ties. Without a shared identity, the ability to provide support and identify other options was further restricted. This echoes Gherges et al.'s (2020) point about the inability of the community to make use of the opportunities that were available. They go on to argue that "those who moved to Doncaster from somewhere else or who were born there but went away for a period…. recognized the current opportunities within the locality". This points to the strength of local cultural beliefs and "temporal compressions found in memory work in Doncaster", which collapses multiple historical events into one sweeping reference to the 'good old days', as identified in Thorleifsson's study (2016, p. 562).

Political developments beyond the borough clearly had a significant role in shaping what was possible locally. Rather than simply representing the closure of an industry, Waddington et al (1994: 148) point to the way "the inherited political structures of union organization, communal solidarity and support by local government… [were] systematically undermined by concerted [central] government action". Although these political pressures abated with time, D'Silva and Norman (2015, p. 28) note that "the most [economically] stressed areas are those in which mines were located". They go on to argue that even in the mid-2010s, local government development planning made only "passing references to brownfield sites and coalfield areas… [that] tend to relate to physical screening or to features of habitat, rather than planning for socioeconomic improvement of areas in need" (D'Silva and Norman, 2015, p. 29).

This presents some interesting challenges in relation to the borough as a whole, creating differing levels of development and reinforcing notions of territorial stigma (Wacquant, 2007). These challenges also manifest at the regional level, as Doncaster

attempts to work with its bigger neighbours, particularly Sheffield. Attempts to develop the Sheffield City Region as an economic hub lead to concerns that Doncaster will be marginalised once again (Hoole and Hincks, 2020). Policies aiming to 'level-up' deprived Northern areas may represent another opportunity, although the benefits may be less than what is promised (see Jennings et al, 2021). In the short-term, success of Doncaster Town and Stainforth in securing resources through the Towns Fund does point to new prospects, but the longer-term trajectory remains uncertain (MacKinnon, 2020; Department of Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, 2021). This uncertainty is reflected in the failure of Doncaster North and Edlington to secure leveling up funding in a subsequent application round (Mower, 2023).

The fragmented nature of the borough "concentrated into a number of relatively small, urban pockets" (Batty and Hilton, 2003, p. 166) further complicates attempts to forge a united front. Flooding presents an important illustration of the difficulties this can present, as well as the potential opportunities. In her report on the 2019 floods, when 811 properties were flooded (Torr, 2021), Blanc (2020, p. 13) notes that "The Doncaster area is particularly prone to flooding from a number of sources, particularly fluvial and/or tidal flooding from the River Don, Lower Trent and their tributaries". Examining the effects of the June 2007 floods in Toll Bar (near Bentley), Easthope and Mort (2014) argue that they had the paradoxical effect of bringing the community together. As a relatively deprived community within the wider borough, there was a wariness of council officials prior to the floods whereby "if you were seen talking to a council worker it was assumed that you were a 'grass'" (Easthope and Mort, 2014, p. 137). However, the visible presence of the council after the floods, in a support role, created bonds and communication that opened space for a more positive relationship to emerge. In the context of a borough that is geographically dispersed, with each of the communities having its own character and a sense that the central urban space was seen as undesirable, the ability to build broader connections is limited. This is reflected in the suspicion of some Toll Bar residents that they had been allowed to flood to protect more affluent parts of the borough (Easthope and Mort, 2014).

Related to the difficulties associated with forming a collective identity are issues of governance and corruption. Doncaster has experienced several high-profile governance failures since the borough was incorporated in 1974. The reliance on mining played an important role in shaping its politics, potentially paving the way for the problems that emerged. Examining the functioning of the council from the mid-1990s, Batty and Hilton (2003, p. 168) argued that "Years of command and control had nourished some small pockets of greed and arrogance in a small number of councillors and officers". This was partially a legacy of the control exercised by National Union of Mineworkers' sponsored councillors, who dominated the Labour Party group (Burley, 2005). This control spilled over into corruption during the 1990s in what came to be known as 'Donnygate', as council officials were involved in "manipulating the Doncaster unitary development plan (UDP) and… manipulating

planning permissions" (Burley, 2005, p. 528). The scale of corruption led to "half of the serving councillors… [being] prosecuted for expense fraud" (Burley, 2005, p. 526). The repercussions of these events can be seen in the rejection of politics by the community, as represented by the election of far-right English Democrat Mayor Peter Davies in 2009 and the hosting of UKIP conferences in 2014 and 2015, prior to an overwhelming vote in favour of leaving the European Union in 2016 (Thorleifsson, 2016). These controversies have contributed to the sense of Doncaster being a place apart, somewhere that is distinct in a negative way from other places.

In a 2020 survey of residents of UK towns by the website *I Live Here*, Doncaster was ranked as the second worst place to live (Burke, 2020). The combination of challenges outlined suggests that Doncaster may well deserve such an honour, though the more recent survey result in which Doncaster dropped to 46th place in 2022 also suggests that change may be underway (Burke 2022). Periods of industrial decline, political mismanagement, and flooding have combined to create a sense of crisis when viewed from the outside. Drawing on the concept of hazardscape, it is clear that there has been a compounding effect, as challenges have contributed to the creation of a sense of crisis and decay. As Gherges et al (2020) note, the effect of this sustained sense of decline has been a form of demoralisation and depression among the residents. Yet, at the same time, success of Doncaster Town and Stainforth in obtaining regeneration funding in 2021 and the broader prospect of levelling up present opportunities that may assist the borough in improving its position. To fully gauge whether this is the case it is necessary to consider the perspectives of residents to understand how they experience these challenges. Before moving to this analysis, we will briefly outline our methodology.

Methodology

The research reported in this chapter draws on a series of interviews conducted with residents of Doncaster. These interviews are part of an ongoing project examining community responses to compounding crises in Doncaster. The topics covered in the interviews included participants' connections to the borough, representations of the borough to and by outsiders, change in the social, economic, and political dimensions over the previous decade, community activities and initiatives, and possible futures. The interviews were structured to allow the participants to identify areas of significance from their perspective and experience, with the authors using the topic guide to prompt reflections.

Participants were recruited through a combination of unsolicited emails sent to politically, socially and culturally engaged members of the community, subsequently supplemented using a snowball method. There was no a formal sampling frame,

rather the approach was to reach as many people active in various community endeavours as possible. The result has been participants active in the arts, local government, and community initiatives (charity and social enterprise). There were a total of 12 recorded interviews, including one group interview, conducted between November 2020 and August 2021, ranging in length from 60 to 140 minutes. All interviews were conducted over Zoom and professionally transcribed afterwards. Both authors took part in ten of the interviews, while two interviews just involved one of the authors. Two more research participants, both community activist-artists, who preferred to write their own story rather than being interviewed, were commissioned to write a reflection on their community engagement in Doncaster. This brings the total of research participants to 18 persons.

In addition to the interviews, the chapter also draws on field notes made by the authors during visits to Doncaster in September 2020 and October 2021, where travel was possible under the constraints imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic. These visits involved an exploration of the city, to get a sense of the physical space and pre-arranged meetings with residents, most of whom had not been interviewed. These freer flowing discussions supplemented and expanded on what had been gained through the interviews and desk-based work. Finally, the authors employed two interns during the summer of 2021 to survey the grey literature and official documents concerning Doncaster to build an archive of materials. This archive and the fieldnotes were used in conjunction with the interview transcripts to map and develop the analysis that is set out below.

Viewing Crises from Inside and Below

Compounding and Intersecting Crises

While 'crisis' may not be the explicit term through which the residents of Doncaster made sense of their experiences of the city, listening to those engaged in different communities in Doncaster shows a strong awareness of how the city is impacted by a range of developments that together created a negative spiral. Sarah Smith, who is an artist, local councillor and researcher in her early 30s, for instance, contrasts the Doncaster she experienced growing up, with the Doncaster she returned to post-financial crisis:

> *"I don't think austerity had fully got hold of us until around about 2015 to be fair. And since then it just seemed to get more dire. [...] Things like foodbanks, homelessness, domestic violence, all of these have like gone super duper up and it's all a hundred times more noticeable. [Y]ou might have seen it when you were in Doncaster Town Centre; [...] if you get there early there's a lot a'*

people on Spice. [...] And you know, that's, that's new, you didn't get that about five years ago. [A]ll of that can pretty much be traced back to policy changes at national Government level".

In Sarah's account, the austerity policies following the financial crisis have had compounding or cascading effects, with economic pressures and the hollowing out of the welfare state's safety nets, pushing people into deprivation, homelessness, violence and addiction.

Whereas in Sarah's account, it is the one crisis (financial) that has several social effects, community photographer Les Monaghan describes Doncaster as a site where different negative trends come together. As he poignantly puts it:

> *"You know, we've got three prisons here as well. You know, the industry for Donny, [...] it's got the things people don't want. It's got warehouse distribution centres, it's got your crappy cake factories. We used to have the big disgusting meat rendering place that made the place smell."*

Doncaster here appears as the node where the national rise in prison populations, low-paid jobs in multinational profit-making companies and industrial food processing comes together. Rather than cascading or compounding, different events and developments can be seen to intersect here. Rachel Horne, another community activist-artist, argues that Doncaster is affected by a combination of regional and global forces. On the one hand, it is facing the *"post-industrial era [which] was like an earthquake"* typical of Northern regions, while at the same time being impacted by *"outside global issues, such as the drug wars and climate crisis, which Doncaster has been impacted by more than other places".*

It is useful to turn to black feminist scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw's influential account of intersectionality to describe the experiences of black women. While written in a different context and for a different purpose, the metaphor she employs in her account of gender and racial discrimination powerfully renders how people can be subjected to multiple forces, shaping their experiences. As she explains: "Consider an analogy to traffic in an intersection, coming and going in all four directions. Discrimination, like traffic through an intersection, may flow in one direction, and it may flow in another. If an accident happens in an intersection, it can be caused by cars travelling from any number of directions and, sometimes, from all of them" (1989, p. 149). Importantly, the effect on the person hit by several or all cars cannot be reduced to the sum of its parts, but is distinct.

We argue that in the same way, different crises are not simply additive but interactive. Community activist Phil Bedford who is a parish councillor and manager of a local charity, recounts how two separate crises, one financial and the other environmental, interacted to create a distinct effect. As he explains:

> *"Without austerity, we would've been able to respond to the floods much more efficiently. There's hard figures on that, about how many [local authority] staff responded in the floods in 2004 or 6, pre-austerity, and there was like 90 staff, including weekend cover, compared to when it happened last year [in 2019]. [...] [I]t was so interesting to see, it started on a Saturday morning and we had no local authority help until Monday morning. Now, I thought that was just 'cause they were struggling to react, but fair enough, it came up to the following Friday and obviously we were still doing round-the-clock kind of relief effort, and that weekend there was no local authority staff again, 'cause they're paid staff and they weren't working weekends [laughs]. Now, under the old system, they had about 90 staff who responded to the floods. This time they had something like 30, so a third, and that didn't include very much cover for evenings and weekends."*

We propose that thinking about crises as intersecting can also help to conceptualise some community responses to crises. Olivia Jones provides anti-racism education in schools in deprived neighbourhoods in Doncaster. These are characterised by three to four generations of unemployment and limited spatial mobility, with some children never having seen Doncaster town centre and its train station. While Olivia Jones was warned that the parents are likely to take a negative disposition towards anti-racist training, she instead suggested to "ask the parents if they wanna come in because they've been cut out essentially". Refusing to follow a logic in which class and race are pitched against each other, Olivia emphasises the resonances between the experiences of different marginalised groups: "when they're saying that some a' the parents weren't happy I'm always saying to them, 'just bring them in because they've been let down by the state too at some point.'" Instead of viewing these members of the community as irredeemably racist, she views racist responses through the lack of opportunities to be exposed to and engage with diversity differently. As she argues:

> *"It's not fair to continue that by just punishing them for the things that they don't understand. And yeah I'm sure there's a lot of hatred and, and stuff that's going on in the world but I just think that's such a really, a really, really bad way to look at it because ultimately we're being polarised and what we need to be doing is, is community building and engaging with and building those coalitions because we're stronger as a community if we understand each other's differences."*

In her own understanding of her community activism, Olivia works from the principle that people have been marginalised in different ways which may often pitch people against one another but could also foster mutual understanding, hence providing a basis for intersectional solidarity politics.

Temporalities and Crises

As outlined above, there are objective variations in the temporalities of crises, with some being slow burning and others acute, some being coeval and others being diachronic. We suggest here that it is important to recognise the subjective temporal experience of crises. With crises prompting people to reflect on the future and present in light of the past (Knight & Charles Stewart 2016, p. 2), what constitutes people's understanding of the past will impact how they make sense of crises. In Doncaster, in order to make sense of the present, the main reference point for socially, politically and/or culturally engaged residents is the industrial past when Doncaster was thriving. As activist-artist Rachel Horne, who is in her 30s, recorded in a piece solicited for this research:

> *"For most of my life, I have tried to analyse what was lost from the boom industrial days when jobs were plentiful and the high street shops were full. I learnt from a young age that the pit closure program also took with it a culture and social fabric that no longer exists and we'll never see in Modern Britain again. However, like an ancestral bloodline, its DNA lives on. This can be seen through the work of myself and [her collaborator] Warren and the new younger generation who feel an urgency to do things differently."*

For Rachel and others, on the one hand, the past constitutes a framework for comparison with the present, in which current times get negatively assessed due to their association with loss of various things: a stronger community, more social cohesion and a vibrant culture. On the other hand, the past provides the community with a positive approach to the present as it gives people the confidence that the potential for a better future is there, even if currently dormant. There is also a sense that the past achievements of the community provide an imperative for new generations to take responsibility for Doncaster's development.

As Bryant has suggested, crisis "brings the present into consciousness, creating an awareness or perception of present-ness that we do not normally have" (2016, p. 20). The narratives of several of our research participants paint a picture of a present that is squeezed between a past that was more glorious and a future that may bring better living conditions. The present is marked by intersecting crises, which separate it both from the past and from the future. Local community journalist Laura Andrews, who is in her late 20s, captures this as follows:

> *"My parents say [Doncaster] used to be very different. And if you look, we've got loads of pictures in our [local newspaper] archive of how it used to be back in the day. But really from the 90s onwards, the dereliction - oh that's the wrong word - degradation, the 'downhillness' kicked off and I've never known it as a nice place to be. There's always [boarded] shop fronts; like the high*

> *street has never thrived. [...] If lockdown hadn't happened in a magical non-COVID world...like there's [now] a new library, a new cinema. [The council are] trying to sort the Silver Street [a notorious nightlife area] problem out. So it really felt last year that it was going in the right direction. And unfortunately due to COVID a whole new swathe of businesses have closed."*

Laura's account represents a common pattern in which Doncaster residents contrasted the present with the past, with the present - in crisis - appearing as a shadowy version of the past. While the temporal demarcation between the past and the present was clear, when exactly a 'better future' would start, felt much more uncertain. In most stories, the post-crisis future was just beyond the horizon, not quite within reach, giving the present a sense of suspended time. Doncaster residents were hence caught in the liminal space between a past time of non-crises and a future time of re-emergence from crises. The crisis-struck present is not a very pleasant place to reside and figures as a period to be overcome. In Lipscy's words: "To put it bluntly, a crisis is a bad situation. A good crisis is a crisis that is over" (2020, p. E111).

This raises the question, when are crises considered 'over' and by whom? And who is able to carry the current moment to the post-crisis realm? For its residents, there was an acute sense that young generations need to play a role in creating a better future for Doncaster. However, at the same time, there was a strong realisation that people born in Doncaster often try to build a better future for themselves by moving away from Doncaster (de Jong and O'Brien, 2021). Victoria Whittemore, a city councillor and community wellbeing officer at a local community centre, who is in her early thirties, emphasised how important it was to reach young people to initiate change. "You've got to get in with the youth to make changes going forwards because the changes that you make now are the ones that they've got to follow on. And if you don't get 'em to follow it on, nothing's gonna progress, nothing's gonna get better. You're gonna carry on with the deterioration of communities in the way that we've got right now."

Akeela Mohammed, Deputy Lieutenant South Yorkshire and Independent Community Consultant on issues of diversity and inclusion contrasted her own experience of Doncaster with that of her now student-aged children, who had grown up in Doncaster.

> *"Oh, don't wanna be negative [laughs], but it is slow, it's slow, but we are trying to do it. There's quite a few people now that have got this kind of agenda that, you know, you're saying things, but let's see it happen. Yeah, and there's lots of good things going on in Doncaster, there is, but then there's still a lot of improvement to be had. Like my children would say, 'We don't wanna live in Doncaster.' My boys both went to uni in London and said, 'We're not coming back. What's there to come back for?' My daughter's in London Uni at the minute and [...] she didn't wanna come back for the holidays. [...] 'Oh,*

> *Doncaster's so boring.' And that's kind of what our youth are saying, they're not wanting to come back. It's not like a city, you know, we don't have that sort of stuff. So yeah, so a lot needs to change, and it's getting better. It is getting better."*

Akeela's repeated phrase 'it's getting better', turning it into a mantra, reflected a common sentiment among our respondents. Acutely aware of the present stigma of the city, those who wished to keep alive the dream of a better future for Doncaster were concerned about reinforcing negative discourses. As community activist Warren puts it: "Yes, there are very real problems in the region, but these are made a lot worse by the negative stories we tell ourselves and the stereotypical attitudes towards Doncaster from outside the region." Hence, engaged citizens of Doncaster felt that in order to make it better, one had to believe it could be better and say it will be better. On the one hand, this demonstrated that the future was still just beyond reach and that the present was marked by crises. On the other hand, this reflected a proto-prefigurative politics against crisis, one that is still nascent and has not yet grown into a fully-fledged collective effort, but which nevertheless had the potential to create momentum for change. As Maeckelbergh (2011, p. 4) suggests, "practising prefigurative politics means removing the temporal distinction between the struggle in the present and a goal in the future; instead, the struggle and the goal, the real and the ideal, become one in the present".

None of our interlocutors believed that change would come by itself and hence each with their own smaller or larger political and social acts formed a "rejection of the politics of deferral" (Swain 2019, p. 55). The work of community activists Warren Draper and Rachel Horne illustrated this effectively. As they explained:

> *"Much of Warren's work and mine has been about building a resilient DIY culture to explore how things could be different. Can we innovate our own jobs and how we live? This started with Doncopolitan [a print magazine and citizen-led journalism movement, promoting local artists] and then [community-led] Bentley Urban Farm. Our mantras are 'Fake It Till You Make It', 'We See Things Very Differently' and 'There's a Better Way'. The most important and immediate thing we had to do was change our town's narrative. Doncaster's perception of itself was so negative that the premise of Doncopolitan felt like an urgency to do something at a time when national news was in decline and the town's self-esteem was at rock bottom."*

In the next subsection, we will continue to explore how the experience of Doncaster as a place reflected the spatialities of crises.

The Spaces of Crises

Space plays an important role in shaping the borough, how people conceive their place in it and their ability to respond to potential crises. A point that was often made by our participants was that Doncaster is a 'community of communities'. Rather than a unified space, Doncaster was viewed as a collection of smaller communities, often based around historic pit villages, meaning identities remained tied to historical social and cultural practices. This fragmentation had the additional effect of rendering the town centre a space apart. Describing this perspective, Sarah made the point that 'when you speak to people you would think that Doncaster is like five hundred villages because people don't really go into the town centre'. Les' response pointed to the challenge this antipathy toward the centre presented, when he said: "How could you pull these communities together which are essentially just a bunch of villages and then a very big ugly village [the town centre] in the middle?". These attitudes were reinforced by the belief that the Council was focused on the centre, paying little attention to more peripheral areas of the borough. This echoes Easthope and Mort's (2014) finding that some residents of Toll Bar felt that their community had been sacrificed to protect the centre. This perception of fragmentation demonstrates the ways in which spatial differences can present challenges to the formation of a collective identity and common cause across the borough.

The local's political leadership strives to model Doncaster after other successful Northern post-industrial cities, launching a fourth attempt to obtain city status for Doncaster in 2021 (BBC, 2021). It was finally awarded city status in November 2022 (City of Doncaster Council, 2022). Embedded in the messaging is the idea that the bid:

> will improve our community's life chances, attract investment to the area and provide future generations with better opportunities, encouraging them to stay in the area and continue to shape Doncaster for many years to come (Doncaster Council, 2021).

The complicated geography and the sense of being a community of communities, is also represented in their claim that:

> From Bentley to Bessacarr, Mexborough to Moorends, Stainforth to Sprotbrough and Tickhill to Thorne we know that Doncaster would be a unique city, made up of proud communities and made special by the people who live and work here (Doncaster Council, 2021).

In contrast with this centralized, top-down approach, several residents suggested that resources would be better used to help the borough deal with its locally specific challenges before looking to achieve city status.

The strength of connection to particular places within the borough leads to stigmatisation of some areas that are seen as problematic. These are fluid and subject to change, dependent on shifts in circumstances, resources and residents. This can clearly be seen in the divergent experiences of Bentley and Hexthorpe. Both are relatively deprived areas in the borough, close to the town centre. Describing Bentley, Laura noted that it had been a place "where your parents would be like 'don't walk there in the dark' type of thing", that had been transformed through investment. This was echoed by Sarah who noted "they're closer to town so… it feels like more's going on 'cause its closer". Drawing this point out, it could be that proximity to decision-makers has resulted in positive change, highlighting the significance of geography. The experience of Hexthorpe complicates this picture slightly, as it has seen a different trajectory despite being similarly close to the town centre. Discussing the experience of the urban village of Hexthorpe, charity worker Carmelle Harold pointed to it as an area of high immigration, where people "have all been put in a tiny village…. that's absolutely caused havoc" and there are "clusters of different ethnic groups not necessarily mixing or getting on". Migration Yorkshire, a local authority-led partnership which works across the whole of the Yorkshire and Humber region, notes that a large number of Roma had moved into Hexthorpe from 2014 following changes in residence rights for EU countries Bulgaria and Romania. This was linked to an increase in anti-social behaviour, requiring Doncaster Council to introduce a selective licensing scheme in 2015 (Migration Yorkshire, 2017, p. 7; see also Doncaster Council, 2020) that required:

> landlords to apply for a licence showing that properties they rent are of the required standard, and requires their tenants to sign documentation relating to waste management and anti-social behaviour.

The predominance of migrant residents in Hexthorpe has, according to Les, led to a sense that it is a "really transient place", not known by those outside and therefore subject to forms of territorial stigmatisation.

The size of the borough also presents other spatial challenges and opportunities, further entrenching local communities and identities. Discussing her experience, local councillor Sarah made the following point:

> *"So Adwick and Carcroft is where I am… it's only… six miles on my bike into the centre of town but like if I said to somebody like, "oh should we go into town to see an art show or something", people would be like, "oh no, it's a bit far"*

Issues of distance and transport were identified by several participants, adding another dimension to the fragmentation of the borough and the sense of a collective identity being limited to small subcommunities. Positive assessments of the opportunities for Doncaster were often linked to the ease by which residents could

travel away from Doncaster. In the words of retiree Paul Fitzpatrick who is from Glasgow but has lived in Doncaster for 40 years and is active in Doncaster Conversation Club, which supports refugees and asylum seekers: "it's got good railway links, it's now surrounded, it's like a little kind of island Doncaster now, in the middle of a motorway system".

The realities of distance are also reflected in the fact that as Les noted, Conisbrough has a Rotherham (neighbouring local authority) phone area code, while Phill argued that "Mexborough who just have such a chip on their shoulders they've got their own councillors, Mexborough First". At the other extreme, communities such as Bawtry and Tickhill were described by Olivia as having "a bit of money… [and] doing that like lemonade millionaire kind of thing" and distancing themselves from the stigmatised narrative around Doncaster. These differences can also manifest in different ways, as when residents of the deprived Stainforth community helped wealthier Fishlake residents during the 2019 floods. As Phill from the charity *Stainforth 4 All* noted:

> *"We had people from Stainforth who are probably unemployed, no money at all, bringing their big shop…. for a community that they knew looked down on them…. it's kind of mended and built some bridges."*

These intersections reinforce the strength of the local identities associated with different communities, as the stigmatisation of Stainforth had led to a distancing by its more prosperous neighbour. With the reality of a crisis affording the opportunity to temporarily overcome community divides. In line with Wacquant's (2007) notion of territorial stigmatisation, residents are willing to identify areas within the borough that are no-go areas, overrun with crime and poverty. Yet, they are also conscious that as a city in the North, Doncaster is viewed from the outside as a homogeneous space, receiving indiscriminate stigmatisation.

Conclusion

This chapter has offered both a conceptual and empirical contribution. We proposed that an analysis of the changes affecting communities that could be deemed 'crises' needs to recognise that multiple crises can be compounding and intersect with one another to create a distinct interactive effect. We suggested that to capture the complexity of crises, attention needs to be paid to the different temporalities underpinning crises. We draw from the literature on hazards to distinguish slow and rapid onset crises, and recognise that these can combine to create a sense of permanent or chronic crisis. The result is that it is beneficial to consider the interaction of hazards and the crises they can precipitate in a broader manner, highlighting that the impacts may not be fully realised in the short-term as legacies persist. Viewed from the perspective of the hazardscape, we are able to map the ways in which a

rapid-onset hazard may be amplified when impacting a space that is already struggling with a slowly unfolding set of hazards. Hence, it is important to move beyond the abstract space of the hazardscape to concrete place-based studies of crises to reveal how crises are situated and lived in specific locations.

Empirically, we situated our own study of the lived experiences of crises in Doncaster. By foregrounding the voices of socially, politically and culturally engaged residents we have sought to go beyond homogenised outsider accounts of de-industrialised cities such as Doncaster. Attention to the stories and perspectives of Doncaster's community members reveals the intricacies of the socially constructed nature of place, which further compounds the sense of attachment in ways that may not be recognisable by those from outside of the community. It also demonstrated that residents had an acute sense of the ways in which one crisis could have several cascading long-term effects and how their home communities turned into a hub where several crises collided. While this presented multiple challenges, engaged members of the community also saw how shared experiences of parallel and intersecting crises created the potential to bridge differences between otherwise divided communities. Finally, we have shown how subjective understandings of past, present, and future shape understandings of crises, with Doncaster residents feeling that their present is wedged between a concrete pre-crisis historical past and a hopeful post-crisis future that is only faintly visible on the horizon. Yet through their own affirmative engagement with the city they seek to bring this future nearer and give it concrete shape.

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