
MYPLACE



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Deliverable 2.1: Country based reports on historical discourse production as manifested in sites of memory (United Kingdom)

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Page Contents

3	1. Introduction
3	1.1. Context
5	1.2. Theoretical framework
9	1.3. Historiographical outline
13	1.4. Note on Methodology
17	2. Research Findings: Living memories of de-industrialisation and urban decline
20	2.1. The Herbert Art Gallery and Museum: ‘People of Coventry at work and play’
26	2.2. Politics of ‘social history’: Diversity, inclusion and engagement with community
34	2.3. The Blitz: Coventry as a mnemonic community
39	2.4. Working-class memories of de-industrialisation: Protests, strikes and riots
47	2.5. Cultural hybridity of urban life and intergenerational transmission of (anti-) racist attitudes
61	2.6. The ‘ghost town’: Narratives of places and (im)mobility
67	2.7. Council estates: Emplaced memories of ‘urban decay’
73	2.8. Generational split between nostalgic memories and oblivion of ‘the communal past’?
84	3. Conclusions
88	4. References

1. Introduction

1.1. Context

The 1970s-80s is a period in British history of radical transformations in the social, political and economic life of the country and one associated in the public mind with Margaret Thatcher (leader of the Conservative Party, in opposition, from 1975 and Prime Minister from 1979-90). Against the background of economic recession, the Conservative government attempted a restructuring of industry that led to the closure of many factories, plants and collieries. Its individual-centred ideology, neo-liberal in its core, underpinned a raft of policies that aimed to roll back the state and envisaged ‘individuals’ rather than ‘society’ as the target of policy. The tenants of council houses were encouraged to buy their homes in pursuit of an ideal of a ‘homeowners’ democracy’. The remaining council estates came to be seen as pockets of poverty, antisocial behaviour, criminality and other social ills associated with what came to be dubbed the ‘underclass’ in the 1990s. Social tension rose resulting in the deterioration of inter-racial relations and the rise in visibility of far-right groups and movements such as the National Front, and street violence (in which the police were actively engaged) in the course of race riots and the miners’ strike in the early 1980s. The Falklands War (1982) was employed by the government to revive a certain ‘imperial nostalgia’ and assuage public discontent with the economic and political climate. Hence, Stuart Hall defines this period as one of ‘authoritarian populism’ (Hall, 2011).

In the UK, WP 2 research activities have been carried out mainly in Coventry (although some fieldwork was conducted also in Nuneaton, see the note on methodology below) in collaboration with the Herbert Art Gallery and Museum (hereafter, the Herbert). Both Coventry and Nuneaton underwent substantial

economic and socio-demographic changes as a result of de-industrialisation and restructuring of local economies during the 1970s-80s. Historians of Coventry's car industry describe the city at this time as 'a microcosm of de-industrialisation' when between 1975 and 1982 the fifteen largest firms in the city shed a total of around 55000 jobs (Thoms and Donnelly, 2000: 166). Thoms and Donnelly write, 'The rate at which labour was declared redundant was remarkable, amounting to a drop in employment of 46 per cent between 1974 and 1982, compared with 27 per cent for Britain as a whole and 32 per cent for the West Midlands' (ibid). With the city's economy dominated by interrelated manufacturing firms, Coventry was severely hit by the recession of 1979-1981. As a result, over the decade up to 1981 Coventry's population fell by 6.5 per cent while unemployment rose to nearly 17 per cent of the labour force (ibid: 164). Although the car manufacturing industry in the region saw some signs of recovery in the late 1980s and early 1990s, in the course of the last 30 years Coventry has been transformed from a major centre of manufacturing industries - and one of the birth places of the British automobile industry - into city with employment opportunities mainly in the service sector. The number of people employed in manufacturing almost halved (from just under 40,000 to less than 20,000) in the space of the ten years between 1998 and 2008.¹ The population of Coventry also declined through the 1970s and 1980s; it reached its lowest point (301,700) in 1994. Although since then the population has increased gradually, nonetheless to the 2010 census shows that Coventry's current population of 315,700 remains less than in 1971 (338,300) before the process of de-industrialisation had started (Coventry City Council, 2011b: 1).

¹For more information about employment by industry in Coventry, see: <http://www.facts-about-coventry.com/uploaded/documents/Employment%20By%20Industry%20II.pdf>

Arguably urban decline that began with the 1970s recession and subsequent de-industrialisation has become endemic in Coventry is manifest today in high levels of social deprivation. According to the 2010 English Indices of Deprivation, the proportion of the city's population living in the most socially deprived 'neighbourhoods' (Lower Super Output Areas, or LSOAs) places Coventry 52nd out of 362 Local Authority Districts where 1 is the most socially deprived. The city is ranked especially highly (i.e. most deprived) in two domains – income deprivation and employment deprivation. Within Coventry 18.3 per cent of the city's population (57,860 people) in 35 LSOAs are living in the top 10 per cent of most deprived neighbourhoods in England; about one third of city's population 32.1 per cent (101,349) in 61 LSOAs, are living in the top 20 per cent of most deprived neighbourhoods in England and half of Coventry's population (157,900) live in 34 per cent of the most deprived neighbourhoods of the country (Coventry City Council, 2011a: 4).²

1.2. Theoretical framework

The complex relationships between social memory, history and identity have been at the core of the social investigations carried out in the interdisciplinary field of memory studies (Pine et al, 2004). The concept of 'social memory' suggests the understanding of memory as a socially constructed phenomenon, which is an aspect of the present and, therefore, different from history that is preoccupied with the past (Halbwachs, 1992; Olick and Robinson, 1998; Connerton, 1989). Moreover, social memory is understood as a process of representation and active construction of the past by the members of a given group (Linstroth 2002: 161). In order to describe this

² For more detailed statistics, see: <http://www.facts-about-coventry.com/uploaded/documents/Quick%20Stats%202011%20-%20update%20Dec%2012.pdf>

process some commentators have employed the concept of ‘memory-work’ which implies active and conscious engagement with the meanings of past events in an attempt to make sense of present conditions or even to trace possible trajectories for the future. Thus, Hamilakis and Labany (2008) by ‘work of memory’ understand ‘the conscious effort and labour that goes into producing mnemonic effects, into creating the material conditions for the sensory and bodily enactments involved in remembering, whether through daily routines and practices or through momentary, often staged performances’ (12).

For Cappelletto, historic memories exist – that is they are (re-)produced and (re-)interpreted – in the intersection of autobiography and ‘semantic memory’ about the past (Cappelletto, 2003: 256). Thus the members of a particular community not only share a common identity but they also have collective memories, into which they as individuals are socialised. Therefore it is possible to talk about ‘mnemonic communities’ (Cappelletto, 2003). Socialisation into mnemonic communities is part of on-going memory-making in society. It is also a manifestation of memory’s intersubjective nature – that as a social construct emerges in the process of interaction between social actors (Boyarin, 1994; Cappelletto, 2003; Pine et al, 2004). Young people are members of their mnemonic communities and their interpretations of the past are shaped by particular social, cultural and political conditions. The aim of our research is to access young people’s memories of a particular period of British history within the context of the contemporary social, cultural and political processes that characterise present day Britain. Given the selection of Coventry and Nuneaton as the fieldwork locations for the UK, the Herbert Art Gallery and Museum (Coventry) is an important access point to both the historical memories of the period in question and to

young people who have engaged with these historical narratives through their involvement in the museum's activities.

Museums represent a particular form of memory-work; they are sites where collective memories are represented and transmitted through textual and sensorial materials that are organised and re-arranged in order to convey a particular interpretation of past events (Radley, 1990). For observers like Nora (1989), museums are an example of sites of memory (*lieux de mémoire*) where memory becomes established and fixed as historical narratives. In other words, following a process of objectification, re-ordering and emplacement in accordance with the established discursive representations of the past, lived experiences of memory become history in museums (Scott 2002). Nora (1989) contrasts such sites of memory with embodied experiences of memory, which are, for him, a real environment where memory continues to be part of everydayness (*milieux de mémoire*).

In our approach to young people's memories of the 1970s and 1980s - a period, for the reasons outlined above, that is identified as a 'difficult' or 'problematic' period of recent British history - we adopt this understanding of social memory as a dynamic process. Following other sociologists of post-industrial Britain such as Mah (2010), we utilise a concept of 'living memory' that emphasises de-industrialisation and subsequent urban decline as legacies of that period that have lasted into the present. In her research into industrial ruination in Newcastle upon Tyne, Mah uses the notion of 'living memory' in order to capture the varied experiences of people living through the process of de-industrialisation. The memories of the shipbuilding industries for them are lacking closure with the past since some of the shipyards are still in

operation despite the years of gradual decline. At the same time, they do not promise them any future security (Mah, 2010: 402). In the case of Coventry, the decline in motor-car industries since the late 1970s has had the most profound impact on the city's working class communities leaving many unemployed. Currently, there is only one car-manufacturing plant in operation in a city that was once famous as one of the birth places of the British automobile industry.

Charlesworth (2000) portrays working-class lives in de-industrialised society as characterised by fragmentation of community relationships, poverty, violence, growing crime and substance abuse, and poor health (including mental health problems). Thus living memories of de-industrialisation are manifested through embodied practices of urban decline. At the same time, the industrial past of British cities is often remembered nostalgically not only by older generations of working class people but by society in general. Nostalgia, as some observers like Davis (1979) and Shaw and Chase (1989), tells us more about the present than the past (cf. Mah, 2010: 402). As people experience living through the socio-economic transformations of post-industrial society they continue to express their present concerns through socio-cultural idioms rooted in the past.

Nostalgic memories of past communities are also an example of how the past might be collectively misremembered or even forgotten. Embodied signs of urban decline such as council estates or ruins of working-class social clubs are, in Hamilakis and Labanyi's words, 'fragments evoking absences and loss' (2008: 12). They imply both the oblivion of communal solidarities of the past and the possibility for living memories of de-industrialisation and urban decline.

1.3. Historiographical outline

The proposed focus on the period of the late 1970s-early 1980s has particular resonance at the current time of economic recession and thus offers great promise for the understanding of generational transmission of historical memory. However, current historical narratives related to this period tend to be structured around few key events – the miners’ strike of 1984 (Richards, 1996), race riots in a number of cities (Bristol, Brixton, Toxteth and Moss Side) in 1981-82, and the Falklands War of 1982, - while other aspects of political activism (such as CND - Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (Hudson, 2005) and the Green movement (Veldman, 1994) as well as the growth in popularity of the radical right parties like the National Front) are not so prominent in the public historical narratives through which this period is represented and historical memories are constructed.

The period in question is generally presented essentially as the ‘Thatcher era’, characterised by the restructuring the country’s economy, social tension and poverty. For critics of the Left, Thatcherism successfully captured the dynamic moment due to its clearer recognition of changing times characterised by ‘the break-up of the post-war settlement and emergence of more fragmented and variegated society and culture’ (Hall and Jacques, 1989: 15). Hall and Jacques write:

‘As a result, Thatcherism has sought to appropriate that new world for itself, ideologically (‘socialism is dead’, ‘the market determines everything’), materially (giving it shape, a Thatcherite inflexion through policy and practice), and culturally (the attempt to promulgate a new entrepreneurial culture)’ (ibid).

In his recent article Stuart Hall critically scrutinises neo-liberal policies implemented by British governments over the last 40 years. Hall demonstrates how privatisation and marketization as essential elements of these policies since the Thatcher period leads to the fragmentation of civil society and imposition of consumerism as a dominant culture in Britain. The article provides a convincing analysis of political, economic, social and cultural developments in the country tracing current social conditions back to the social transformations of the 1970s-80s.

The discursive presentation of ‘Thatcher’s epoch’ is often framed in terms of ‘conflict’ and ‘disintegration’. For example, the Channel 4 documentary released on the 20th anniversary of the miners’ strike was entitled ‘Strike: when Britain went to war’ (2004). The devastating impact of de-industrialisation as a result of the economic policy of the Conservative government in the 1970s-80s often is encountered as the backdrop to many British feature films produced in the 1990s and 2000s, e.g. ‘Billy Elliot’, ‘Full Monty’, ‘Brassed Off’, ‘This is England’ (the latter also raises the issue of growing nationalism and racial violence set against the background of economic recession). In this way, the period has become an important theme in British cultural history and, as our research findings demonstrate, often young people have been socialised in the historical narratives through which the Thatcher era is remembered through such classic British films.

Memories of the period, arguably, are particularly traumatic for working-class communities, which were the main victims of de-industrialisation and economic restructuring. Trauma is also associated with the impact the labour disputes of the

time had on the social fabric and identities of working class communities. The miners' strike of 1984-85 has the most iconic place in collective trauma of the British working class since not only did it constitute a major defeat for the trade unions and workers, but also resulted in internal conflict and division of miners' communities between those who went on strike and those who did not (Waddington et al, 1991).

The working class experience of living through these transformations is often described in sociological literature in terms of social fragmentation, poverty, violence, as well as increase in crime and anti-social behaviour including alcoholism and substance abuse (see, for example, Charlesworth 2000). In his research, Charlesworth emphasises the devastating impact which de-industrialisation has on working-class identities and community relations by opposing the older generation's nostalgic memories of social relations based on the working class ethos and community solidarity to younger people's experience of living with the realisation that they are perhaps never going to be in employment (ibid).

The deteriorating life conditions of working-class communities have become enclaved in council housing estates on the outskirts of British cities. For sociologists and historians these estates represent the embodiment of urban decline and the impact that changes in the economy and social fabric of life have on working-class culture in Britain (Hanley, 2008; Ravetz, 2000; Watt, 2006). Arguably the council estates in Britain represent an example of how the Welfare State attempted to manage and solve the problems of 'the poor' through providing them with the modern housing. This vision, sometimes utopian and often socialist in its ethos, of working-class social housing has been undermined by the shortcomings in planning of many such estates

in the 1960s, which became overcrowded with houses and virtually without space for social facilities. Moreover, the re-housing of working-class families in new estates broke existing networks of extended families and neighbours that were not always possible to recreate in new locations (Ravetz, 2000). By the 1980s, with growing unemployment among estates' residents caused by the closure of factories and plants in localities where council housing was provided, many suburban estates had turned into ghettos of 'underclass' (Henley 2008). The Thatcher government took the opportunity to launch a major assault on public housing provision (as part of a wider curtailment of the public sector) by adopting 'right-to-buy' legislation (the 1980 Housing Act). This was a policy inspired by the neo-liberal idea of creating a 'home-owners' democracy' but that resulted in reducing the stock of council accommodation, increasing the number of homeless and further ghettoizing remaining council estates (Watt, 2006: 781).

The memories of the 1980s uprisings - which were effectively the racialised riots of Black (and Asian) youth against the violence perpetrated by the police - are significantly less central to the historical narratives about this period. However, memories of these events have been reignited recently following the riots in London, Birmingham and some other British cities in August 2011. The August riots were also sparked by the actions of police who were targeting allegedly criminal elements among Black youth in North London. The government's reaction to these violent events - casting blame on 'broken society' with its culture of criminality and anti-social behaviour - echoed, for some observers, Thatcher's speeches made after the race riots of Spring 1981. In contrast, Stuart Hall argues that the very consumerism fostered during the Thatcher years was evident in the behaviour of looters in August

2011 and calls for a deeper analysis of the problems which society faces at the structural level than provided by the coalition government's interpretation of the events as a criminal outburst of 'broken society' that does little more than blame working class families for bad parenting of their children (Hall, 2011).

1.4. Note on Methodology

This report draws upon ethnographic research conducted in the Herbert Art Gallery and Museum. The Herbert has become a main access point to young people who have been involved in its outreach programmes. The research methods consist of (participant) observation of events (exhibitions, family open days, launch events, etc.) and outreach activities with young people (workshop sessions); expert interviews with the Herbert staff members; focus groups and individual interviews with young people involved in the museum's outreach work.

The participant observation was carried out from October 2011 until November 2012. In addition to regular visits to the permanent History gallery, Godiva gallery, and Peace and Reconciliation gallery a number of temporary exhibitions and special events were observed (such as, exhibitions 'I woz 'ere' (including the exhibition's launch event), 'City of Sanctuary', 'From Highfield Road to Wembley Way', the teachers' preview event 'Collecting Cultures: Caught in the Crossfire', and the open day events 'The Great British Story' and 'The Blitz'). In the course of the fieldwork visitors' reception and reaction to some of these events and exhibitions which have direct relevance to the project's focus on the 'difficult past' was observed. Moreover, in the case of the I woz 'ere' and 'From Highfield Road to Wembley Way'

exhibitions copies of visitors' feedback and testimonies were provided by the exhibitions' curators.

Ethnography has included participation in and observation of a number of workshops with local young people from Coventry and Nuneaton. In October 2011 – March 2012, we observed 23 sessions of the 'Getting Involved' (18 sessions) and 'Memories of Tile Hill' (5 sessions) workshops run by the Herbert outreach as part of their inclusion and community engagement programme. These workshops were part of 'The Esmee Fairbairn project' that aimed to engage with 'hard to reach' young people (e.g. young homeless people, young carers, leavers of care homes, students with special needs, etc.) and 'disadvantaged' communities in Coventry.

In July 2012, four sessions of the workshop with young people from the Art Alert group in Nuneaton were observed. This workshop was organised in partnership with the Herbert and co-funded by the University of Warwick.³ The project directly focused on the memories of the 1970s-80s as a 'difficult period' in local and national history.

Social history of Coventry and/or Nuneaton was a central theme of the workshops, which had been structured around learning media skills such as photography, photo-editing, filmmaking, music-making, podcasting, etc. Altogether 25 young people aged 14 to 24 were involved in the workshop activities observed.

³ The project 'Community memory and young people's civic activism: Mining communities of West Midlands in times of socio-economic transformations, the 1950s, the 1970s-80s, 2008-12' was funded from the impact fund of the Institute of Advanced Studies and the Connecting Cultures global priority programme of Warwick University.

Five expert interviews were carried out with members of the outreach and curatorial teams of the Herbert museum. Three experts were members of the museum's Learning, Diversity and Inclusion Team, including its head (UKE1), a diversity officer (UKE2), and a learning officer (UKE3). In addition interviews were recorded with two senior members of the curatorial team – an exhibition and programme manager (UKE4) and a keeper of collections (UKE5) who also happened to be curators of two big exhibitions observed (i.e. 'I woz 'ere' and 'From Highfield Road to Wembley Way').

Three focus groups were conducted with 14 young people.⁴ One focus group discussion involved 5 young people (2 female and 3 male) aged 18-24 who took part in the 'Getting Involved' workshop in The Herbert (UKFG1). These young people were homeless residents of one of the youth hostels in Coventry. All of them were White British originating from the Midlands region (one from Coventry). They had spent at least four years living in Coventry.

A focus group discussion was organised with 5 young members (3 female and 2 male) of the Art Alert group from Nuneaton aged 16-21 as part of the workshop about community memory in the town (UKFG2). The participants of this focus group can be characterised as young activists who had been engaged in several community-oriented activities, they expressed their interest in history and art. All members of this group came from Catholic families, were White British and identified their family background as 'middle class'. At the same time, most of them stressed the 'working

⁴ All focus group discussions were co-moderated by Anton Popov (AP in the text of the report) and colleagues from the University of Warwick (Khursheed Wadia facilitated UKFG1 and UKFG2), Manchester Metropolitan University (Graham Smyth was a co-moderator of UKFG3) and Herbert Art Gallery and Museum (Robert Nolan helped with UKFG1 and UKFG2).

class' upbringing of their parents. Five individual interviews with members of this group (UKR1, UKR2, UKR3, UKR4 and UKR5) were recorded using a photo elicitation method; the participants were asked to comments on photographs of the town taken by them as representations of different important aspects of community memory in Nuneaton.

Finally, in our analysis we use data produced in the course of a focus group conducted at the earlier stages of preparation for fieldwork (in October 2011), as part of Work Package 3 (UKFG3). That focus group discussion was with four young people (all female) aged 16 to 22 who volunteered at a community radio station, Hillz FM in the Hillfields areas of Coventry. Although the focus group was not conducted following the usual interview scheduled designed for WP2 focus groups, it touched upon a number of issues directly related to the theme of local historical memory. All its participants had visited the Herbert museum recently and were able to comment on representations of the city's social history there. Importantly, that focus group differs from other two since its participants had non-White ethnic backgrounds (one members was Afro-Caribbean and three were mixed White British and Afro-Caribbean). This group expressed their interest in taking part in another more history- and memory-focused group discussion later in the course of the fieldwork.

All interviews have been anonymised and extracts from them are referred to in the report using codes attached to each respondent as above. All personal names used in the report have been changed.

In the course of the fieldwork the main challenge we faced was recruiting participants for focus groups. A number of factors contributed to this difficulty. Despite a very busy outreach programme of the Herbert museum targeting young people, for example, the age of young people taking part in most workshops and school visits was below 16 years old and, therefore, they were outside the project's target age range. Moreover, on one occasion the school did not consent to the continuation of the research activities with a group of its students aged 14-16 beyond participant observation. In addition, a number of workshops, which would have involved young people of our target age group, were cancelled due to changes in the Herbert's financial situation. These changes reflect the current government policy of cuts in public spending, which such institutions as local and regional museums are heavily dependent on. Reflections on the impact of funding on the way history and memory are represented and used as an instrument for social inclusion, promotion of cultural diversity, and engagement with community came to constitute one of the key findings of our research.

2. Research Findings: Living memories of de-industrialisation and urban decline

In the course of our research in the Herbert Art Gallery and Museum we came to realise that in the course of investigating the memories of the 'difficult past' we had been documenting a widespread atmosphere of the 'depressing present' of contemporary life in de-industrialised urban centres. Such a finding is not surprising; after all memory is as much about the present as the past (Mah, 2010). People are involved in on-going memory work when they re-interpret the meanings of past events in order to make sense of the present and, perhaps, project possible trajectories for the future (Hamilakis and Labany, 2008). This feeling of the 'depressing present'

arguably is a lasting legacy of the 1970s-80s socio-economic transformations and political upheavals. In a way, the more traumatic memories of de-industrialisation in such industrial centres as Coventry are continuing to be lived in by an increasingly marginalised working-class population of the city. These memories are 'living memories' for many in Coventry partly because the closure of the manufacturing industries which provided the majority of work places in Coventry and surrounding area has continued right up until 2006 when the Peugeot plant was closed. At the same time, the future of the LTI plant that manufactures the popular 'black cabs' and is the last car-manufacturing plant remaining in the city is uncertain (Waddington, 2012). De-industrialisation has resulted in what Watt (2006) calls 'urban decline' in the working-class areas of British cities. Therefore, for many of our respondents 'the depressing present' is experienced as living memories of urban decline which constituted the everyday experience for at least three generations of working-class people in Britain. This feeling of living through difficult times has been clearly articulated by one of our experts at the Herbert Art Gallery and Museum:

'I think it's a bit depressing, but I think you reach an age where you start to see things repeating themselves so, you know. I'm somebody that as a child in the 70s was... I think I'd have found it difficult to articulate it at the time, but I was very aware that this...I was growing up in a time of depression. You know, all the strikes and the power cuts, I was kind of aware of those things going on and then to be a teenager in the 80s during the Thatcher years. You know, I come from a very socialist background, from a socialist family and so this was an absolute disaster for me and all that kind of decadence that went on in the 80s, so as a teenager I grew up in an environment that I felt was politically hostile to

my own... values... As I became a young adult there was this great hope and future of New Labour and it just feels that politically things have merged so much that there isn't this contrast now between left and right and I feel like we've now re-entered this age of people where poverty is being used as a judgement. You know, people have, because of the economic crisis, they've lost their jobs. They're suddenly finding themselves in a financial position that they never thought they would. There isn't that stability for their future...' (UKE4, 4 April 2012)

In our analysis we look at the representation of the historical narratives and discourses about the 'difficult' or 'problematic' periods and events in national and local history in the Herbert in the context of such living memories of urban decline. Ironically, in its attempt to make Coventry people proud of their historical heritage by making their expositions as focused as possible on the 'ordinary lives' in the past and the groups which are usually under-represented in the national history, the museum conveys a historical narrative which concentrates on the positive vision of the past even if it largely remembered as 'difficult' and 'problematic'. As the leader of the museum's outreach team stated in her interview:

'I suppose in a sense that is something that we have tried to address in the history gallery to give people something that in terms of the quality of the product, it gives them something to be proud of, but also telling a story that also comes from them in the first place of something that they can be proud of. And kind of reflecting that back to them I suppose and trying to address that issue of almost collective low self-esteem...' (UKE1, 13 January 2012)

The sections which follow the historical narratives and memories of the 1970s-80s are examined as part of the dynamic process of memory work (and/or forgetting) which involves institutions, individuals, communities and the state.

2.1. The Herbert Art Gallery and Museum: ‘People of Coventry at work and at play’

The Herbert museum was founded as a ‘museum of people of Coventry’ with a mission to serve to the city’s population. Until 2008 the museum administratively was part of Coventry City Council, which determined to a great extent its character as a public institution. Importantly, the Herbert occupies a particular niche in the city’s cultural landscape. It is less known for its historical sections rather than as an art gallery that has collections of ‘old masters’ (from the 16th – 19th centuries) and modern (mainly the 20th century) art. The history gallery has constituted, however, the core of the museum since its foundation. Its relative marginality in the Herbert’s public profile can be explained by the fact that Coventry is famous for its big Transport Museum which is dedicated to the history of motorcar industry in the city. Given the reputation of Coventry as one of the birth places of the British automobile industry, the Transport Museum is seen by many as the main history museum in the city. At the same time, the history of the car industry is notably absent in the Herbert’s history gallery.

The current permanent historical expositions in the Herbert consist of three galleries: The Godiva Gallery represents how the legendary character of Lady Godiva has been developed through modern history. The Peace and Reconciliation Gallery is dedicated to memories of the Blitz in Coventry during WWII but also reflects on more recent

conflicts and their humanitarian consequences across the world. The main focus of this report, however, is the History Gallery.

The expositions of the History Gallery in their present form were opened to the public in 2008. They are a result of the redevelopment of the Herbert funded from a number of sources including the National Renaissance in the Regions Scheme. The new exhibitions are an embodiment of the Herbert team's new approach to the representation of the city's past through social history of the local community(s). The expositions contain not only original artefacts but also objects and audio-video materials which facilitate visitors' engagement with the historical information. Thus the visitors are invited to experience sounds and smells from the different periods as well as touch the replica objects representing historical artefacts. In the 20th century sections of the gallery, there are several screens demonstrating short films with archival footage or life history materials.

The experts characterise the way the history of the city is represented in the gallery as a 'thematic' one (UKE1, UKE2, UKE3, UKE5). They oppose this approach to a more 'linear' one that dominated in the gallery before its renovation (before 2008). The thematic approach means that only certain periods of history are represented in the gallery in a more or less detailed way. The History Gallery concentrates on three main periods which, according to the Herbert's conception are central to the history of Coventry. It starts with the medieval period when the city was founded and became a regional and religious centre. The emphasis there is on medieval artisans and the city is presented as a centre of trade. This is followed by expositions of the Victorian period when the industrial revolution brought to the city the fame of an industrial

centre. Exhibitions consist of different examples of machinery and their products from that period (e.g. ribbon manufacturing) as well as some artefacts representing different lifestyles and some forms of entertainment, focusing on the lives of ordinary workers (rather than the upper classes of society). The representation of the contemporary period starts with WWII, the Coventry Blitz and rebuilding of the city, followed by exhibitions of modern lifestyle from the 1950s. The 1970s-80s displays represent popular music related to Coventry – bands like The Specials – Afro-Caribbean audio systems, sporting victories associated with the city (the Coventry City FC victory in the FA cup, etc.). There are three main themes in representations of the late 20th century: 1) multiculturalism and diversity (a big display representing different migrant communities living in the city but mostly focused on South Asians and Afro-Caribbean communities); 2) protest movements of the 1970s-80s (miners' strike, anti-racist movement, etc.); and 3) changes in women's lives (represented through experiences of women from different ethnic communities).

The experts maintain that the representation of particular historical 'themes' and periods partly reflects the material content of the museum's collections (UKE5). More importantly, the thematic approach, with its emphasis on social history, has reflected the Herbert's mission as a local museum that serves the local population. This means that, on the one hand, the museum's expositions have to be relevant to the experiences and histories of the local community. The head of the Inclusion, Diversity and Learning team explains this in her interview:

'I think the decisions that were made in a moment in terms of what would be covered in say, the history gallery was that obviously it's influenced by what

we've got, because you can't put on a good display if you haven't got the material, but it was equally driven by, well what do people want to see? Whereas you do go in some places and you think, well there's a whole gallery here full of, I don't know, clocks or a whole gallery full of sort of traditional prestigious objects and it's there because that's what perhaps curators have traditionally thought that people ought to be interested in, rather than because they actually are..." (UKE1, 13 January 2012)

On the other hand, by situating the local community(s) in the centre of the historical narrative the museum makes them a useful tool in promoting the principles of social inclusion and cultural diversity. The public institutions such as museums and libraries had been seen by the previous New Labour government as key actors in their policies of social cohesion that were intended to be implemented through engagement with deprived and marginalised groups and communities as well as through the celebration of cultural diversity and the promotion of social integration (see discussion below).⁵ At the same time, social history as a way of engaging with community has been seen by many members of the Herbert team as an expression of a particular political position (namely, left from centre, and pro-Labour, if not socialist):

'I think Coventry has always been a little bit of I suppose a slightly leftwing city a lot of the time. I mean I don't think we're representing something that nobody else thought for that sort of thing. You know, I think it chimes in with a lot of people's views...' (UKE5, 6 July 2012)

⁵ The New Labour government attempted to tackle the problems of social deprivation and social exclusion in the increasingly marginalised neighbourhoods in de-industrialised British cities and towns by implementing a new Deal for Communities regeneration programmes (see, Wallace, 2010).

This approach to history through a focus on communities and lives of ‘ordinary people’ is rooted in left-wing opposition to Thatcherism’s assault on ‘society’. At the time it would have constituted a radical alternative to the dominant ‘high culture’ approach; it has, since, become a rather mainstream approach in British museums (UKE1). This change was reflected in the experts’ answers. The keeper of collections who has been working as a social historian of working class communities in a number of regional museums since the 1980s characterised the Herbert’s approach to history as ‘an alternative’ (UKE5). In the opinion of one education officer, representative of the next generation of museum staff, however, the social history approach is ‘a mainstream one since it is trying to appeal to the majority of people’ (UKE3).

The pyramid-like Coventry Sculpture by Peter Laszlo Peri was commissioned for the opening of the Herbert in 1960 and occupies a central place in the museum’s Sculpture Gallery. It shows the people of Coventry at work and at play depicting different productive and recreational activities which lead to the triumph of the creative spirit of the city’s working people (see Plate 1). The artist allegedly was inspired by Soviet monumental art. This composition vividly embodies the political pathos and social mission of the Herbert.



Plate1: The Coventry Sculpture by Peter Laszlo Peri in the Herbert Art Gallery and Museum.

The Herbert is a museum of the people of Coventry and its represents a particular vision of these people and their city's history and culture. Thus, the social history of Coventry is shown there mainly through the examples of lives of working class people (as the main social actors in this industrial centre), ethnic minorities and migrant communities. This reflects a particular selection strategy in relation to the museum's expositions, which convey a particular interpretation of the historical narrative in representations of 'everydayness'. For example, religion as an aspect of the 'ordinary' and 'everyday' is not present in any explicit way in the Herbert permanent exhibitions. On the one hand, this is partly explained by the fact that the Herbert is situated just next door to the famous Coventry Cathedral and, as one expert suggested, the representation of the religious side of everyday life seemed to be naturally delegated to the cathedral (UKE5). On the other hand, religion seems to be not a prime subject of the social commentary which the Herbert's curators focus on. This is a point that the curator of the George Shaw's exhibition (I woz 'ere) made in her interview when explaining how her initial vision of the exhibition as critical

commentary on social deprivation epitomised by the working class council estates had been changed when she realised that, for the artist, these works had more religious connotation reflecting his Roman Catholic upbringing:

‘I thought the interpretation of the exhibition and when I talked about it, it would very much be about the political, social, economic...you know, all about the growing up in a council housing estate and very quickly I realised that there was a real shift there when I started to talk to George about the work and the way he talked about it, so he had a very strong Catholic upbringing. He went to the Catholic primary school in Tile Hill and to the Catholic secondary school and you know, his family went to church. They went to a Catholic church. He was confirmed. So that’s a very strong part of his upbringing and as I say, this reference to the 14 Stations of the Cross, that’s very deliberate through these title scenes from the Passion and there are often other biblical references in the titles’ (UKE4, 4 April 2012)

In this respect the representation of social, political and economic transformations of the ‘Thatcher era’ (the 1970s-80s) in the Herbert’s permanent and temporary exhibitions is an example of how historical narratives and public memories are constitutive parts of the political process.

2.2. Politics of ‘social history’: Diversity, inclusion and engagement with community

The adoption of policies promoting social inclusion, cultural diversity and multiculturalism by the New Labour government in the late 1990s was an attempt to

address the challenges of an increasingly culturally diverse and multi-ethnic Britain.⁶ The government directed substantial financial resources towards the implementation of its programmes of social inclusion and cultural diversity. One of the priority areas funded from these grants had been outreach activities directed towards widening participation in society targeting such disadvantaged groups as ethnic minorities, disabled and young people. Small and medium sized regional museums like the Herbert became key beneficiaries of this policy. In the spirit of the neo-liberalism that became the driving force behind many New Labour reforms (Hall, 2011), the local museums entered competition for government money by designing social inclusion and diversity programmes and submitting proposals to the main funding bodies that were the repositories of government funds. Our expert characterised this situation in her interview:

‘You know, say the people who work in the city, like the Herbert, in these places tend to be the kind of people who love museums, who see their value in terms of what they can do to engage the community, have that moral responsibility for engaging communities and all communities, right? What happened is the money came in for us to do it... And this was New Labour, new narrative of Britain.’ (UKE2, 16 January 2012)

With the Herbert becoming an independent Trust in 2008 new marketing strategies were employed to attract a wider audience and better access the target groups within inclusion and diversity programmes mainly run by different agencies or departments

⁶ These policies have been significantly altered with the shift towards ‘community cohesion’ approach to multiculturalism after the 2001 riots in Oldham, Burnley and Bradford (Thomas, 2011). A critical analysis of ‘myths’ of race and migration which at least partly have underpinned the ‘community cohesion’ policies and similar rather xenophobic initiatives of the previous and current governments can be found in Finney and Simpson’s (2009) research.

of the City Council. For several years, for example, the Herbert had worked in partnership with the Adult Education Service contributing to their adult literacy and English Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) courses (UKE1). The museum started 'selling' its services to Coventry City Council. Thus schools had to pay for their study visits in the museum (something that was free of charge when the Herbert and local schools were parts of the same municipal structure). Therefore in planning its temporary exhibitions, events and outreach activities the Herbert started to pay more attention to the needs of public bodies as potential users. For example, an effort has been made to correlate the time and content of some temporal exhibition (such as 'Collecting Cultures: Caught in Crossfire') with the curriculum requirements and timetables of local schools and colleges (UKE3).

In their interviews the experts reflected on these developments as a significant change in the public profile of the Herbert which serves the public not only by promoting ideals of social inclusion and cultural diversity but also by answering the needs of the diverse groups of the local population:

'You know, you've got veiled Muslim women coming in, in burqas and we would never have seen that a few years ago and you think, well yes that might be the result of somebody coming in on an ESOL group visit. Well in fact, we know that some of it is because there was one...there was an ESOL group in here and a couple of ladies when they were here with the group said, "Oh we need to pray. Is there a room that we could pray in?" and so we made a room swiftly available for them... So people are obviously talking to each other about the fact that we're trying to make ourselves accessible and to accommodate

people's needs... Even if they're just in the city centre and they haven't been coming primarily to visit the museum, but even if they're thinking, 'Oh that's all right because I might go and do some shopping first, but then I'll go to the Herbert and then I know that I can say my prayers.' You know, so it wouldn't have even crossed my mind, I have to admit, but something like that that could be a key thing for somebody in terms of accessing a cultural facility.' (UKE1, 13 January 2012)

The Herbert became part of the West Midlands hub for social inclusion programme (together with Wolverhampton, Birmingham, Stoke-on-Trent and Ironbridge museums). A strong 'learning, diversity and inclusion team' was established there in 2003. It was successful in securing a number of grants from the government's Department of Communication, Media and Sport (DCMS) via the Museums, Libraries and Archive Council. The Herbert's focus on social history has paid off and a number of social history projects carried out by the museum staff since 1999 were funded as part of the broader policy to promote social inclusion and cultural diversity. One example is 'The Millennium project' on Coventry oral histories, which was conducted in 2000 and produced a collection of memories across generations from children and young adults to old people. To a great extent the promotion of the principle of a multicultural society has been carried out through projects that have highlighted the contributions of different ethnic minorities to the vibrant and hybrid contemporary British culture.



Plate2: A 'Moving in, Mixing in' section of the Herbert's history gallery represents Coventry as a multicultural city.

In the Herbert, the multicultural theme became central for the 'Coming to Coventry' project. Drawing on the oral histories of the first generation of migrants from South Asia and the Caribbean islands who moved to Coventry in the 1940s-60s, the 'Coming to Coventry' project provided the narrative materials for a number of permanent expositions in the History Gallery. The 'Moving in, Mixing in' stand is dedicated to gendered experiences of people from different ethnic minority communities living in the city (see Plate 2).

'Because of Coventry's diversity and because people have come here for such a long time, because it is quite an important city for especially the South Asian community, we did need a special section on that, but it wasn't to ghettoise it like you do get in quite a lot of museums, or you used to get in museums; 'Oh here's just the section about diversity' just to add it on. So, our approach to it was that and to show people having holidays, having hopes, having fears, having yes some differences, but trying to break down those barriers and Coventry's history has been that story of, you know, the 2-Tone story of people

mixing in and are moving in and mixing in and I think that was a nice phrase really...’ (UKE2, 16 January 2012)

At the same time, such focus on the visibly ‘different’ ethnic and migrant communities makes other groups rather underrepresented in the museum’s exhibitions. For example, the history of the Irish community that has been one of the largest migrant groups in Coventry since the 1940s is virtually absent in the new History Gallery, although it was much more acknowledged in the old exposition. Partly this is explained by the fact that descendants of Irish migrants have become assimilated being less ‘visible’ in terms of cultural differences from the majority of the local English population (UKE2).

In general, young people didn’t comment on the representation of ethnic minorities in the museum’s exhibitions. However, a member of the Hillz FM group noticed the absence of information about the history of slavery in representations of the Afro-Caribbean community in the Herbert:

Interviewer: ‘They have the history exhibition display dedicated to black Afro-Caribbean music...’

UKFG3R14: ‘I’ve seen it but personally I don’t think it’s represented that well. Just for example, if you ask somebody about the culture of black people, straight away they’ll go to slavery, and I don’t feel like it’s really shown that well. Certain stereotypes, if you say a rasta for instance, it’s known for dreadlocks and drugs. But that’s not a rasta, you know, certain things like that...’ (UKFG3, 25 October 2011)

This respondent was referring to the established historical narrative in representation of Afro-Caribbean people in modern Britain that traces the presence of the Black African from time of English involvement in the Atlantic slave trade and colonisation of Americas. In the course of our research this respondent was the only one who made direct reference to the school programme as a source of historical and sociological knowledge about issues related to ethnic diversity, probably because of her particular interest in the Afro-Caribbean history and heritage. This, however, demonstrates the role of a national curriculum in promoting multicultural education:

‘I think if you’re around black people and things like that, you’re more likely to understand, but it’s just my experience from school, the teaching wasn’t that good. All we learnt about black people in school was the KKK. And that’s not the only thing that black people were known for. They do a lot of good things, black people, I don’t think it’s talked about a lot.’ (UKFG3R14, 25 October 2012)



Plate3: A poster from the 'Everyday People' exhibition based on one of the Herbert's inclusion outreach projects (June 2012).

In a way, the Herbert Museum, with its open and proactive promotion of values and principles of cultural diversity, stands in opposition to the current critique of multiculturalism (see, for example, BBC, 2011). Thus the Conservative politicians in the government initiated a public discussion criticising New Labour's policies in support of multiculturalism that perhaps makes the sort of activities the Herbert is proud of look less favourable to funders. Our experts have already started noticing a tendency for funds to be directed more towards 'social inclusion' (the 'Getting Involved' project is a good example here) rather than 'cultural diversity' projects (UKE2). Incidentally, the current policy of economic cuts implemented by the coalition government resulted in the reduction of funding available for the public sector in general and those directed to social policy in particular. This leads to increased competition for funding in the museum sector. The Herbert was unsuccessful in securing their funding in January 2012 as a result 17 members of staff mostly from their learning, diversity and inclusion team became redundant or were redeployed in other capacities (outside the outreach team) and with reduced working

hours. Partly due to this situation a number of outreach projects with ‘hard to reach’ young people and other members of ‘underprivileged’ communities were cancelled.⁷

2.3. The Blitz: Coventry as a mnemonic community

In our interviews with young people and experts the WWII destruction of Coventry in the course of air raids of 1940-42 by the Luftwaffe (also known as the Coventry Blitz) was the most instantaneous answer to the question about events in the local history that might be defined as ‘difficult’ or ‘problematic’.⁸

UKFG2R9: ‘Like obviously the war. [Laughter in group] It was quite problematic, I think it was probably quite hard for Nuneaton because we were a mining town, and Coventry as well was, it looked like ...Leicester, huge industrial, the Midlands were so, there was obviously a big overload of ammunition for here, and stuff, so I guess that would have affected quite a lot of people.’

UKFG2R8: ‘Yes, well, Coventry got blitzed, a bomb went through the Cathedral [laughter]. That was problematic.’ (UKFG2, 26 July 2012)

‘Well, I suppose there are different kinds of ‘difficult’ aren’t there, because I mean obviously, the whole thing around the Blitz is difficult in the sense that it was a very traumatic experience for the city, but I suspect that in some ways it’s less difficult in the sense that there is almost like a kind of agreed narrative of that and what it meant and that Coventry, I suppose, kind of sees itself as a bit

⁷ The cancelling of new workshops and the fact that members of a smaller outreach team became increasingly stretched in order to carry out planned programmes in the museum had a negative impact on our recruitment of focus group participants (see Methodology note above).

⁸ As a result of the air raid more than 1,200 people, mainly civilians were killed in Coventry in 1940-1942.

of a survivor city and obviously that was an incredibly traumatic experience for those involved, you know, quite a few of whom are still around. But it's acquired a sort of symbolic value in relation to how the city sees itself, so it's probably not a very sort of disputed narrative I suppose...' (UKE1, 13 January 2012)

Being an undoubtedly tragic event in the city's history, the memories of the Blitz, however, play an important constitutive role for Coventry people as a 'mnemonic community' providing them with a common ground of a well-established historical narrative. As one of our experts pointed out, for the older generation the Blitz became a sort of extreme traumatic experience against which all other 'difficult times' are measured:

'I think now even to do with things like the cuts in the public sector in particular people mostly just seem to be buying the line that, "Oh well it's just one of those things. There's nothing we can do about it. We have to accept it," kind of thing... It might seem irrelevant, but I think actually it ties in with that narrative of the Second World War and Britain, that idea of "Oh well, mustn't grumble and we've all got to pull together and it will all sort itself out in the end and keep your chin up and just kind of get through it," and I mean obviously at the time that was in response to something external that people couldn't really do anything about, except do their best to kind of get through it and win the victory and so on. But I have felt that that was the same kind of attitude that came out during the Thatcher years and is coming out again now of, "Oh well, stiff upper lip" and all this sort of stuff. I feel like saying sometimes, but it's not

the same. It's not the same as the Blitz narrative because actually, this time you can do something about it and I think that those...it's just occurred to me that that idea of kind of difficult times; I think that sometimes people conflate difficult times that actually are quite different, but they perceive that the same qualities are needed to weather all of them, when that might not actually be the case.' (UKE1, 13 January 2012)

The memories of the Coventry Blitz, emplaced in the iconic ruins of the Old Cathedral, make the city an important national commemorative site of the British Second World War history. The Blitz also marks an important threshold in the city's history – the devastating bombing eradicated old Medieval Coventry and gave birth to a new modern city. The informal title of Coventry as a Phoenix city directly refers to its rebuilding after the Blitz – the city raised from ashes as a legendary bird.

In the city's historical narrative the trauma of the Blitz had been followed by the hopes of building a new model modern city and society (see Plate 4). Coventry became a huge building site with massive job opportunities which in the late 1940s attracted many to move there (the emergence of a large Irish community is dated back to this period), the boom of car manufacturing and other industries in the 1950s and the 1960s attracted more migrant workers from as far abroad as South Asia and West India. The industrial workers and their families had been provided with council accommodation, often new council housing estates were built in in the city's suburbs. This time is remembered by the older generation of Coventry people as 'a golden age' as a time when the 'community' was born (Tile Hill fieldwork diary, 21 January 2012). For our experts it is a formative time for local working-class identities:

‘...Certainly in the 40s, 50s, 60s, work was such a central part of people’s lives and not just the work itself, but these big engineering factories were the focus of the social life. I think it had more to do with people’s identity perhaps than it does today, so I think that is one of the two sort of driving forces in the way we’ve looked at it sort of post 1939, the other one being the experience of the Blitz and the way the city was rebuilt. They seem to be the two things that sort of then coloured everything that happened after that. It was this idea of this new city being rebuilt and the very successful industries paying good wages, which meant that that’s what people were coming here for and you get the impression there was an excitement about the place in the 50s and 60s that came from, I think those two things, you know, the economic success and the excitement of the post-war rebuilding.’ (UKE5, 6 July 2012)



Plate 4: An exposition dedicated to the rebuilding of Coventry in the 1950s-60s. The film representing Coventry as a modern city is demonstrated on the screen in the Herbert’s History Gallery.

The representation of the Blitz and rebuilding of Coventry in the Herbert makes it a classical ‘site of memory’ – a site where ‘memory turned into history’ (Nora, 1989).

The visitors are socialised into the Coventry’s mnemonic community through learning

about the social history of the Blitz and by extension the WWII experiences of local communities. For example, introduction to the history of the Blitz as ‘the narrative of city’ is an important part of the Herbert’s inclusion programmes with new migrant communities, as the diversity office explained in her interview:

‘It’s that idea of including people and like, the narrative of the city is very important – the Blitz, the Godiva. If you’re going to move here and fit in, which migrants are enthusiastic about and learning about and my kids are going to know, “This is the city I’ve come to and this is what we do,” and also like you just feel a bit more comfortable. Yes, I know about the Blitz. I know about this stuff. I know about Coventry, you know and it helps you to feel like you fit in. It will give you confidence...’ (UKE2, 16 January 2012)

Since WWII has an important part in the national curriculum, the Herbert’s Peace and Reconciliation Gallery and stands dedicated to the Blitz in the History Gallery are frequently attended by local students on the school visits (UKE3). The Herbert’s outreach team actively uses the Blitz, and wars and conflicts, in general, as a thematic focus for its inclusion and diversity programme. For example, the museum’s programme for ‘gifted and talented pupils’ had been based on materials presented in the Peace and Reconciliation Gallery and archival documents from the History Centre related to the history of Blitz (UKE1).

In November 2012 the museum organised the Blitz family open day when families could learn about the everyday experiences of local people during the war. Such activities demonstrate that although the Blitz retained its tragic meaning in British

national and local history it is increasingly becoming a safe theme for families to spend a day out in the museum. Traumatic connotations were completely absent during film-making sessions of a Getting Involved workshop. Young people chose the Blitz as a rather 'fun' topic which they associated with the jokes about Hitler, war films, and television sit-com series (The Herbert fieldwork diary, 10 October 2011). For them the Blitz was not a living memory passed through generations; it had become a distant history.

2.4. Working-class memories of de-industrialisation: Protests, strikes and riots

De-industrialisation and its socio-economic consequences for British society in general and such industrial centres as Coventry in particular is arguably one of the most long lasting legacies of the Thatcher period of the 1970s-80s (Mah, 2010). This period is identified by our experts as the 'difficult past' but in contrast to the Blitz its interpretations continue to be disputed:

'The more difficult things I suppose relate to actually a slightly later period with probably the collapse of the big industrial base of the city and the reasons for that because, you know, I mean we've talked about sort of having a bit of a left leaning perspective, but I think something that is quite common from a right leaning perspective now is the perfection; the sort of saying, "Oh well of course the collapse of British industry, of course it was all caused by the unions and Margaret Thatcher. It was a good thing that she took them on." You know, and you do hear people saying these things, but I think that quite often people are a bit superficial about how they interpret what happened at that time and they see the industrial unrest at the time sometimes as a cause of the industrial decline,

rather than a response to it, so I suppose that that is quite a difficult thing in a sense and obviously a very traumatic experience for a lot of people at the time. You know, tens of thousands of jobs being lost and I have read that the outward migration from Coventry at that time of a lot of people of younger working age trying to seek opportunities elsewhere has had a continuing influence in terms of the demographics of the city, because a large chunk of a generation moved away and never came back. So the population of Coventry, although it's increasing again now, is still about – I think about 20,000 or 25,000 lower than it was back in the 70s, so that is obviously a very significant thing, so that whole experience of that industrial decline, you know, I think has kind of marked the city in some way and I remember a former departmental director when we were still within the city council talking about Coventry as having a sort of collective loss of self-esteem and confidence...' (UKE1, 13 January 2012)

The 'Thatcher era' has been also mentioned as problematic by young people taking part in the focus group discussions:

'I think it probably was a difficult time because like, Thatcher's Britain and stuff like that. I think that really created a divide between, like people who were previously Labour were starting to think "oh, we need to change everything," because not everything was going that well back then, obviously...'

(UKFG2R10, 26 July 2012)

Young respondents from the Nuneaton Art Alert groups that might be characterised as 'activist' were more articulate in their critical assessment of that period and some of

them seemed to be socialised into the traumatic memories of it through stories of their politically active parents.⁹ This critique of Thatcherism was also indicative of their leftist political views that were also passed from older generation family members:

‘I always find my memory, like, if I were to think about the eighties and stuff, I just think “oh it must have been horrible then,” because my mum’s like a massive socialist and she’s always like “oh, that bloody Thatcher” and things like that. So, and my dad’s pretty much the same, and they both, it’s not a particularly happy view of the time. Like they just seem to think that everything was a bit crap for everyone.’ (UKFG2R10, 26 July 2012)

‘My dad’s told me about, I mean it was Coventry, growing up in Coventry, I mean it does seem like every kind of stereotype you do have, with like just a lot of young people kind of feeling hopeless and on the dole, just going, a lot of drinking, a lot of fighting. That’s kind of my dad’s kind of perception of growing up in Coventry really. Like, the way he’s told us, and yes, like the eighties, like, yeah my parents kind of would have been my age in like the eighties and stuff.’ (UKFG2R9, 26 July 2012)

In the following extract from her interview a member of this group who is also an open supporter of the Labour Party clearly articulated the idea of living memory of de-industrialisation in terms of continuity in undermining the ‘pride in working-class heritage’ between ‘Thatcherism’ and New Labour:

⁹ Some of WP5 semi-structured interviews also indicate the disagreement in interpretation of the Thatcher’s time between politically active and left-wing orientated young people and their conservative parents.

‘I think things like Thatcherism and things like New Labour, when they said like fifty per cent of the population should be going to university, that’s a thing, that, it kind of created an expectation of, Labour went from this old, really proud kind of working class, like, be proud of your heritage, try and work for the people, and it moved completely into this more, more the right of politics and more of, independent Labour and less about the community and less about class. And that, I think that was a massive thing in the disintegration of class, Thatcherism into New Labour, I think if that hadn’t happened there’d be no, there’d be, that is the reason that class is integrated I think, because the way that people's attitudes, it was, it wasn’t seen as “you should be proud of your heritage” it was, like, “why aren’t you, why are you working in a mine, you could be reading books.” (UKFG2R9, 26 July 2012)

This period is represented in the Herbert by several permanent expositions which present this period through stories of cultural and social changes and political upheavals. The central position in the expositions is occupied by the stand entitled ‘Standing up for your rights’ that already implies the left-wing political interpretation of the history of that period (see Plate 5). The stand contains textual information and artefacts related to the protest movements and local political activism from the period. The artefacts range from the mugs in the shape of Margaret Thatcher and John Major’ caricatures, anti-fascist leaflets, badges of CND activists and posters from the time of the miners’ strike (1984-85). This exposition in fact is dominated by the large banner of the Coventry Miners’ Wives Support Group which was active in the Keresley mining village – one of the areas of Coventry.

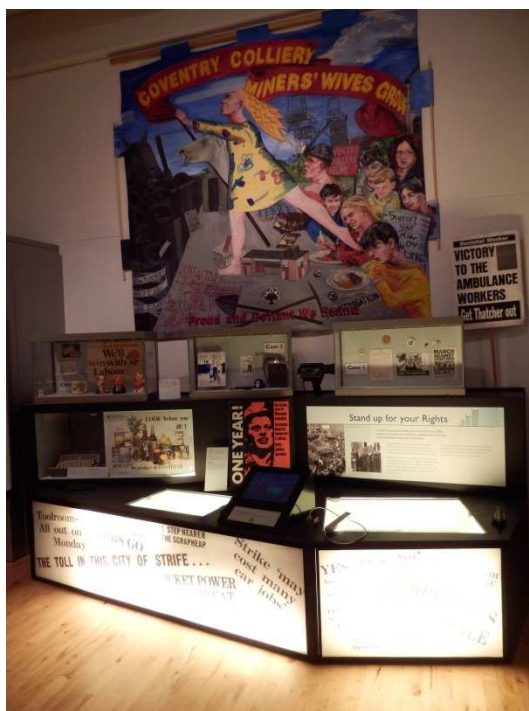


Plate 5: The stand 'Standing up for your Rights' in the permanent exhibition of the Herbert's History Gallery.

In the opinion of one of our experts the mining heritage is largely forgotten in Coventry (UKE5), which is better known for its motorcar industry. The miners' strike of 1984-85 is regarded, however, as the most heroic yet traumatic event associated with the Thatcher period. In a way it epitomises the socio-economic changes in the British society from that time and has acquired an iconic representation in contemporary British popular culture. For instance such classic films as *Billy Elliot* and *Brassed Off* are set against the background of the strike.

Interviewer: 'What do you remember, what do you know about this?'

UKFG2R7: 'Well, it's mainly from *Brassed Off*, but they closed the mines around the coal towns, so people were out of work, so from images then, you can see them picketing the, picketing the mine closing, and on the Hovis advert it's got, as he runs by you can see them, you can see a load of people who've

just been, what's the word, made redundant, about to brawl with the police.'

(UKFG2, 26 July 2012)

The focus group interviews with young people also reflect that the miners' strike occupies a central place in the discursive representation of the Thatcher period as a 'difficult past':

Interviewer 1: 'For example this miners' strike, how would you say it is perceived today, positively, negatively, neutrally?'

UKFG2R9: 'Positively.'

UKFG2R7: 'Positive, because they stood up for it.'

UKFG2R9: 'Yeah.'

UKFG2R7: 'But negative because it was shut down, that they destroyed the business of it.'

Interviewer 2: 'Who destroyed it, sorry?'

UKFG2R7: 'The Conservatives I think, Margaret Thatcher?' (UKFG2, 26 July 2012)

That 'problematic' period (at least from the perspective of the working-class memory of de-industrialisation) is represented in the Herbert expositions generally in positive terms of ordinary people's unity in their struggle for their rights, even though sometimes they were defeated. For example, miners lost the fight and many pits were closed, including those of the Coventry Collieries. One of the outcomes of the miners' strikes became the internal conflict and division of miners' communities between

those who went on strike and those who did not (Waddington et al, 1991). This part of the story somehow is not emphasised in the Herbert's expositions.

In the focus group interviews, the miners' strike and other protest movements from the 1970s and 1980s became an invitation for young people to reflect on the present protests. Some young people found more meaning in past protests when compared with contemporary online activism:

'Well we were looking at the sort of flyers and leaflets that were handed out for various protests and I got to thinking about how effective they were back then. They obviously were, because there were pictures of these rallies with thousands of people at them and you compare that level of effectiveness with today. I mean it's much easier to get a protest going now because of the advent of computer technology. I mean a good example is the current battle going on against the Stop Online Piracy Act in America... So there are hundreds of thousands of people that want to protest about it, but because it's so easy to just start up an online petition it lacks that sort of personal touch now and I think the effectiveness of it has diminished quite significantly as a result because anybody can start one of these things up now.' (UKFG1R1, 8 February 2012)

The parallels were drawn between the violent clashes between the police and miners as well as race riots in the 1980s and violence erupted in British cities during recent student protests and riots in August 2011. Talking about the August riots our participants expressed sometimes conflicting opinions ranging from the reproduction of the government's discourse about a criminal outburst of a 'broken society' (see,

for example, Stratton, 2011) to more a critical view that the underlying reason for the riots is urban youth's frustration with inequalities in contemporary British society:

UKFG2R10: 'Back then, like, rebellion and stuff, it seemed like a more intelligent movement. But now it's like the closest you can come to rebelling is being a chav and like joyriding and stuff like that. And it's like the whole, like idea of it actually, like, instead of rebelling for a cause, you're just doing it "cause you like... it's become like a really hedonistic society, and it's, everything's just all in it for yourself and stuff.'

UKFG2R9: 'But maybe, at the time, that was how it was portrayed within the media, and within newspapers and through, like, the cultural, kind of, general thought about it. But now we're looking back it's like "oh that's such a brave thing to do"... Like the people in 30 years might look back at the riots now, and apply more social meaning and more, more actual reasoning to them than they actually had, because I think people tend to do that, and events that I don't think need that much attention paid to them get paid loads more... And I think things like that have happened to things in the '70s and '80s and I think things like that will happen to things that we have today...'

UKFG2R8: 'It's only a minority of the actual people in the riots were doing it for a cause, a lot of the people were just doing it because other people were doing it and, you know, so it's all, they're all just sheep.'

UKFG2R7: 'Well because they're just scumbags' [laughter].

UKFG2R8: 'Yeah, because obviously, yeah exactly, but a lot of the people just saw an opportunity to get free things.' (UKFG2, 26 July 2012)

UKFG3R12: 'It was, I think it was their frustration. I think it was just the fact that they don't get money, they don't have jobs and if they get an opportunity like that. They just used it to get free stuff... Well some of my friends were happy because maybe after this people are going to understand that young people need jobs and things.' (UKFG3, 25 October 2011)

It is symptomatic perhaps that more critical comments by young people were made by situating the August riots within historical perspective through comparison of them with the protests of the Thatcher era.

2.5. Cultural hybridity of urban life and intergenerational transmission of (anti-)racist attitudes

The 1970s and 1980s as time of economic recession and de-industrialisation was also associated with growing racial tensions in British urban centres. These would include violent attacks against ethnic minorities perpetrated by members of fascist organisations such as the National Front, and the race riots of mainly Black (to a lesser extent Asian) youth against police discriminatory actions and violence in a number of English cities (Bristol, Brixton, Toxteth and Moss Side) in 1981-82. Our experts make a direct link between the racial tensions and economic problems of that period:

'I do think, you know, in the 70s with the skinheads, with the race issues, with the economic...which you know, it is history repeating itself with this recession, with the hopelessness for young people, the prospects, you know all of this? I think yes, that is probably the difficult time... So I think in that sense, definitely

yes, the recession. The thing it had on race relations, you know, the prevalence of skinheads, of getting battered, of not coming into town and the like, racist and violent nature of the city centre. Or not even the racism then, just say the out and out violent nature of the city centre. You know this masculine, angry...? The 70s and 80s, yes. I'd say those were probably the most difficult times.'

(UKE2, 16 January 2012)

Arguably, there is a direct link between racial violence of the 1980s uprisings and that of the miners' strike are linked; the brutal tactics used by police officers against miners created a public perception of the police as aggressors that in turn fed Black youth hatred of the police fuelled by the latter's disproportionately use of stop and search powers against these young people.

As our focus group discussion with young people of non-white backgrounds shows, the memories of the racial discrimination and violence associated with this period have been passed down within families, sometimes contributing to negative attitudes towards the police:

'Going back to police, my brother got slapped in the face by a police officer, for wearing a coat they said he shouldn't have been able to afford and that he must have stolen it. This is back in the 80s, but my mom was a bar maid at the time and she used to have stay-backs where all the CID and police officers would come and drink, so she knew a lot of them and she knew that the way – so she's experienced a lot of stuff that they do when they're not on duty and things like that. So a lot of issues that I've heard in terms of my family, my mom getting

attacked on the train because she's holding a black baby, "Nigger" getting written down the road, things like that, my brother getting slapped across the face. Issues like that have stuck around in my family, get brought up from time to time and things like that.' (UKFG3R15, 25 October 2012)

In the Herbert's History Gallery the direct reference to the racial tensions of that time is the stand dedicated to The Specials and 2 Tone (Plate 6). The Specials is perhaps the most famous Ska band, originating from Coventry, which was central to the 2 Tone scene in the late 1970s and early 1980s. In their music The Specials captured and opposed that atmosphere of poverty and violence. Perhaps their most famous 1980 song 'Ghost town' (it is sometimes seen as a song about Coventry) raises the issue of the growing violence in the fragmented society of increasingly deindustrialised British cities. As a true 2 Tone band, The Specials were driven by both white and black music heritage and British working class culture. They were essentially for revival of the traditional skinhead scene in the late 1970s and early 1980s. A monitor in the 'Standing up for your rights' exposition demonstrates a short interview with members of the band from the early 1980s in which they made a connection between de-industrialisation, poverty and growing inter-racial violence in British cities.



Plate 6: A '2 Tone' display in the Herbert's History Gallery.

Interviews with young people and participant observation of their activities in the Herbert museum demonstrate that apart from family memories their main source of knowledge about that time is popular culture (e.g. television programmes, films and music). The period in focus (the 1970s and 1980s) is remembered in particular as a time of the emergence of the musical and subcultural styles which became the most influential for contemporary youth culture in the UK (the most often mentioned are punks and skinheads). Perhaps in this culture-focused perspective the period in question is often seen in a positive light; as stylish and even fashionable. For example during the Getting Involved group's tour into the museum's collection store where they were allowed to handle some artefacts from the past, the 2 Tone outfit (a black jacket with the movement's characteristic black and white checker badges and pork pie hat) was very popular with young people. Several participants said that they would like to have things like these to wear. The member of staff perhaps in order to relate these objects to young people's cultural experience drew a parallel between the Ska music of the time and the contemporary rap scene. Interestingly, Sean, who was a rapper himself, recalled that at home he had the same The Specials badges (The

Herbert fieldwork diary, 30 January 2012). The Specials was mentioned by young

people particularly often as a phenomenon from that time probably due to their local connections to Coventry. Moreover, for some young people these memories were part of their intimate family memories:

‘I’ve got an air raid shelter in my back garden – The Specials used to rehearse there; my mum used to babysit one of their children.’ (UKFG3R15, 25 October 2012)

‘[The Specials] It’s just my Dad used to listen to it, so I was brought up on it and that’s the only reason I can relate to it. It just reminds me of my Dad.’ (UKFG1R3, 8 February 2012)

Despite this relative familiarity with the culture of the period young people demonstrated little reflection on the context within which 2 Tone or punk had emerged. Among the problems they acknowledged racism as an on-going issue but somehow saw the period in question as less racially prejudiced (bizarrely using the emergence of 2 Tone music as an argument to support such statements) than periods before and after. Tess’s acknowledgment during the focus group that only now had she got the anti-racist meaning of the 2 Tone’s black and white checkers is indicative in this sense (UKFG1R3).

A couple of activists from the Nuneaton group, however, were able to situate bands such as The Specials within the political and socio-economic perspective of the period (UKFG2R9 and R10). Moreover, in their narratives they were critical about the superficial understanding of that music by the majority of their peers:

‘I don’t really know that much about, like, the movement, I know about, like, I know quite a lot of, like, Ska music and that, but I wouldn’t know that much about the actual, like, movement behind, I know it’s quite like, it was like a socialist kind of youth, trying to create another way, but I don’t know that much about the specific politics of it, no. Around that time it was like the rise of like the National Front really, wasn’t it. Which is, like, I guess, again in times of desperation, in times of recession I think people can grab out for anything to cling onto, as a reason or as a blame. But I mean immigration brings more money to this country than we lose, and people don’t seem to realise that.’
(UKFG2R9, 26 July 2012)

‘I feel like the music of the time sort of makes everyone feel really romantic about the period, because whenever I, like I’ll listen to like Joy Division or something and I’ll be like “oh yeah, this is brilliant,” but then when you actually listen to the lyrics and stuff, you just think “bloody hell, he must have been depressed!” Well obviously, because of what happened [laughter]. Yeah, but, but, I think, it, like, the way they’ve put it and stuff it sounds really, like, oh that’s lovely, but when you really think about it, it’s not, it’s horrific really.’
(UKFG2R10, 26 July 2012)

To an extent, this nostalgic perception of the period was at least partly the result of them being exposed to a rather ‘positive’ representation of such cultural developments in the Herbert with its focus on civic and political activism, diversity and inclusion.

Representation of formation and changes in contemporary British subcultural and

music scenes and its cultural hybridity plays an important role in the Herbert's on-going work to promote cultural diversity and principles of multiculturalism. Popular culture and music have been the main themes for such projects as 'Vibes' (about urban music) and 'More than 2 Tone' (about rock bands from Coventry).

During focus group discussions, young people reflected on the hybrid and multicultural character of contemporary British urban life by referring to music styles, fashion and history of subcultural scenes in Britain.

'We brought the music. We brought music here. Yeah, from there we brought music here. Like dub and rock, the baseline, everything like...sorry I'm a musician and I got taught that reggae is the base of any type of music.'

(UKFG3, R13, 25 October 2012)

UKFG1R2: 'What about caucasian people supporting, I suppose traits of other...say black people for example, like dreadlocks?'

UKFG1R3: 'You mean like a white person with dreadlocks?'

UKFG1R2: 'Would it be fair to say that that represents a bit more equality because we're almost supporting each other's fashions or beliefs?'

Interviewer: 'When you say 'that' are you talking about 2-tone?'

UKFG1R2: 'I'm talking about sort of 2-tone in a way because it's...' (UKFG1, 8 February 2012)

Rap and hip-hop seem to become an important resource for cross-cultural communication of British urban youth (Back, 1996). Several sessions of the Tile Hill

Memories workshop took place in the local youth centre the walls of which were covered with very artistic graffiti painted by young people themselves; quite a few of these graffiti depicted 'non-White' young people dressed as stereotypical rappers. However, as the youth worker present at the workshop said there were very few Black or Asian families living in the area and most of the young people attending the centre can be described as White British (Tile Hill fieldwork diary, 21 January 2012). In acknowledgment of the appeal of hip-hop to young people the Herbert's outreach and media teams run a Rap Academy inclusion programme targeting youth from deprived and marginalised groups who, according to our expert, happened to be mainly white working-class (UKE2).

In interviews young people from all three focus groups condemned racism and expressed their disapproval of the activities and political ideology of subcultural groups such as skinheads, or far right movements and political parties like the EDL (English Defence League) and BNP (British National Party):

'What I got from the [*This is England*] film is like, because like that's just when people like integrated – like black and white people were integrating, if you get what I mean? I got the feeling that these skinheads didn't like that fact, so they were like trying to get rid of them – rid of black people... I don't agree with that, but back in those days they did.' (UKFG1R3, 8 February 2012)

'What I was going to say when you said it is a lot of the reason people vote for things like BNP is because they blame the situations that are going on in their communities on the people that were coming into the communities. Things like

no jobs and no housing and things like that were getting blamed on people that were coming into the country and into their communities. And whether they're actually right or not, it's not really for me to say, but I think if there's a job up for grabs and you're not willing to take it, give it to someone else. Why keep someone else from that opportunity just because they don't come from this country. I'm yet to see somewhere a law that says just because you're from Jamaica, Africa that you can't move and you can't leave for a better life somewhere else. I don't think anyone should be deprived of that opportunity. Everyone deserves to bring up their children. Just because you come from a poor country doesn't mean you should stay there.' (UKFG3R15, 25 October 2012)

Not surprisingly, perhaps, some 'activist' participants referred to a family tradition of being actively anti-fascist:

'My Mum went along to one of them [AP - EDL marches in Nuneaton] and she got like a firework lobbed at her and stuff like that. It's like, they're really weird because they seem to be sort of hypocritical at times, because they'll be like "oh we hate other people coming in," but then they'll like hold a support thing for Sikhs, yeah, something like that, and it was like, well you, [sighs], and they're trying to act like they're not racist by pretending to like one certain group, and stuff like that.' (UKFG2R10, 26 July 2012)

However, participant observation data show a more complex situation with the production and transmission of xenophobic stereotypes and/or (anti-)racist attitudes

among young people. Thus rather rude racist and sexist comments were made by young people sometimes during workshop sessions observed. On one occasion, a female participant of the Getting Involved workshop told a degrading sexual joke with a strong racist connotation as an anecdotal story attributed to her father (The Herbert fieldwork diary, 1 February 2012). The non-White participants despite being very direct in their condemnation of 'White racism' were rather puzzled and perhaps less critical when they told stories of racist attitudes within ethnic communities:

'I've been bullied for something that I'm not. I would get picked on by mixed-race Jamaican guys, and they'll go, "Oh you're a paki" I'm like "No, I'm not, I'm mixed-race Jamaican actually." You look paki so you're paki. No, I'm Jamaican, honestly. And they'll honestly make me think that I actually wasn't what I am because of how much they'll say that, and I thought, "Fine, whatever, you think what you think." (UKFG3R13, 25 October 2012)

At the same time, the discourse of Whites being victimised by 'non-White racism' was used by one of white participants uncritically partly as her defence for having racist attitudes in the past:

'Like, my Dad was in the police force and in the police force it was very racist within that sort of working sort of career base thing. You weren't allowed a black policeman. It always had to be white. That's what I found from what my Dad spoke about. But yes, I don't agree with racism. I never have. I've been racist – curse me, I've been racist myself, but I don't agree with it because black people are the same as white people. White people are the same as black people,

but black people can be racist to white people as well. Yes, a certain person who I... I live in a hostel and there's a member of staff who was incredibly racist to me.' (UKFG1R3, 8 February 2012)

The Nuneaton participants seem to be convinced that 'gypsies' were responsible for stealing a bronze war memorial a few years ago in the town:

'I don't want to sort of be prejudiced or anything, but most probably the gypsies and that lot, because they tend to go round taking what they deem as scrap metal, so it's happened on railways as well, where they've taken the copper, so.'

(UKFG2R8, 26 July 2012)

The production and transmission of xenophobia and racial stereotypes among young people seem to have an intergenerational dimension. People of the older generation have been sometimes identified as sources of such stereotypes (as in a couple of examples mentioned above), whereas young people are acting as recipients or, as in the following extract from the fieldwork diary, being resistant to such attitudes:

'Talking about the memories of the place, we arrived at the theme "how much Coventry changed" mainly in negative economic terms... Vickie said that economic difficulties were caused by the growing population who were taking out the jobs... Toby gave his example that a few days ago while being in the Coventry Sports Centre (where he was doing some sort of voluntary work) he saw a class of children entering the building – "there was no one single white face among them, they all, even boys, were having some kind of head scarves

on, covering their heads. I counted about 50 of them and none of them white. I felt myself a minority.” I think that quite a few people felt uncomfortable with such a comment. Sue said that perhaps most of these children are second or third generation British. I said that it might be some religious (perhaps Sikh) community school that was on their day out in the Sports Centre, so you cannot expect many white students there. Interestingly, Jim supported me and said that recently their class was on a similar outing and there are no “non-white children in our class, I mean all are like us.” The conversation moved on. I think Toby also felt a bit uneasy that his comments received such an unwelcome reception.’ (Tile Hill fieldwork diary, 21 January 2012)

This extract demonstrates how older generations’ (both Vickie and Toby were in their seventies) memories of the less ethnically diverse Coventry become part of the racialised anti-migrant narrative used in an attempt to make sense of the current economic difficulties. Significantly, though, younger people, a youth worker, Sue (in her late twenties) and Jim (14 years old) opposed to such views were much more comfortable with the contemporary multicultural city. Observers, like Watt (2006), note the racialization of ‘community’ in the older generations’ narratives of ‘urban decline’. Along the same lines we might interpret Archie’s (19 years old participant of the Getting Involved workshop) comment that the popularity of the BNP is on the rise in the country but mostly among people of the older generation ‘who actually remember the time when British traditions were there’. Before the conversation during which this comment was made, Archie had been checking the BNP website. Reflecting on this he said that in general he liked their idea to preserve ‘the British

traditions' but abhorred all anti-migrant rhetoric there (The Herbert fieldwork diary, 8 February 2012).

A young member of the Labour party from the Nuneaton group expressed her concern about the alleged popularity of the BNP among older generation residents of rather deprived areas of town. She explained such electoral switch of life-long Labour supporters to the far-right party by working-class people's frustration in the current situation of economic crisis but also linked it with the noticeable 'influx' of new migrants from Eastern Europe (Poland, in particular) in the town:

'We did have a BNP candidate who didn't do that badly, like to be honest he got a lot of support. I know a lot of Polish people have been immigrating in recent years over to Nuneaton and I know the only reason that I feel it is because I went to a Catholic school and Poland is a fiercely Catholic country, so a lot of children are going to a Catholic school and there has been like a massive influx of Polish people into Nuneaton in recent years. They are starting to have – I feel like I'm sounding racist, but there's now sort of like an area of Nuneaton that's got a large influx of Polish people with a lot of Polish shops and a lot of cake shops and Polish supermarkets that weren't there five years ago, so that would be I'd say the level and influence of the Polish community in Nuneaton, which would be quite a significant change within the last few years really since they joined the EU. It's been a massive change in Nuneaton, the Polish community has.' (UKR9, 26 July 2012)

The Herbert diversity officer in her expert interview also pointed out that the crisis of white working-class identities led to their ethnicisation (sometimes as a response to the presence of minority communities) that often has a racist or xenophobic undercurrent:

‘I think in Britain for white British society, it is the more secular it has become, this like sense of fragmentedness, the family – the breakdown of family, divorce, the living away from your grandparents, the living away from home, not staying in the same place, the moving modern life. These toils have taken their effect on...so this community now, what can it say that...? “What am I? What do we do that makes us the way that we are?” Whereas everyone else is making themselves say, “We’re the Muslim community. We do this. We celebrate this. This is what we believe.” When someone is standing in front of you saying, “This is what I am. This is what we do. This is what we believe,” it makes you think, “Well what do I believe? What do I do? We don’t do anything. We don’t this, we don’t that,” and so you’ve got that far right, “This is what we are. We’re World War. We’re this, we’re that. We’re Christian,” you know, but only because you’re calling yourself a Muslim, am I calling myself a Christian...’ (UKE2, 16 January 2012)

By contrast, our non-White participants from Hillz FM group were more positive about religion and race as foundations for community solidarities (UKFG3R12 and R14).

2.6. The ‘ghost town’: Narratives of places and (im)mobility

The very positive modernist vision of rebuilt Coventry as it is featured in the Herbert expositions (see section 2.3) contrasts with the general attitude towards Coventry as a ‘depressing place’. For generations rebuilt Coventry, the Phoenix city, has been associated with the ‘concrete jungles’ and ‘ghost town’. In their 1980 song ‘Ghost town’, The Specials captured that atmosphere. The participants in our research are familiar with this song and share such attitudes towards the city as we noticed during our observation of the Herbert’s workshops with young people and Coventry residents:

‘I noticed that Tess was looking on YouTube for The Specials’ “Too much too young” and “Ghost Town” songs... She was going to use The Specials music for her photographs. Later I saw that Tess attached a “Ghost Town” song to the photo of the empty square in front of the Transport Museum. She explained that this band is from Coventry and that the emptiness of the square in the busy city centre reminded her of this song.’ (The Herbert fieldwork diary, 30 January 2012)

‘At some point [during the Getting Involved group trip to the Black Country Museum] Sean and others start reciting some rap about Coventry with verses about “concrete jungles” – “this is Coventry, there is nothing to inspire me here.”’ (The Herbert fieldwork diary, 1 February 2012)

For some older participants Coventry city centre was also associated with the ‘concrete jungles’ but this expression was used at one of the Tile Hill memories

workshop sessions by Toby to contrast his more nostalgic memories of Coventry before the Blitz:

‘[Toby] said that he actually did not like Coventry city centre, although he had lived almost all his life in Coventry’s suburbs. Later in the studio I asked him whether he liked the old city centre before its destruction during the Blitz. He said that the old town was nice. It had green parks with a statue of Lady Godiva in the middle; buses were going around; there were beautiful houses. “And what did they do to it – they built concrete jungles”.’ (The Tile Hill fieldwork diary, 28 January 2012)

Young people from Coventry (Getting Involved) and Nuneaton groups talked about their towns as transition sites. They appreciated their experience of growing up there but aspired to leave these places as soon as they had the opportunity:

UKFG1R1: ‘Today Coventry is very drab and very grey to me. It’s a shame really.’

UKFG1R3: ‘Yes.’

UKFG1R2: ‘Coventry to me is a halfway point at the moment.’

UKFG1R1: ‘How do you mean?’

UKFG1R2: ‘Well it is isn’t it?’

UKFG1R4: ‘Yes. I don’t think anyone in Coventry wants to stay here for the rest of their lives... When I’m on about Coventry I’m very proud of my city and everything and like, I’ve met a lot of different people during like living here and everything... It’s sort of one of those places where you allow it to sort of teach

you and it lets you become the person that you want to be but like, I don't know, it's just somewhere that you'd be glad to get away from later on in life.'

(UKFG1, 8 February 2012)

'I love Nuneaton, it's my home town. Like, I do like it. I don't mean to be so negative about it. I think it's a good place to grow up... Like, I've had a really good experience of Nuneaton really, but I think it's just growing up and going to other places.' (UKR9, 26 July 2012)

These attitudes have also been captured in works of artists from the 'new migrant communities' shown in the 'City of Sanctuary' exhibition (January-February 2012). The exhibition presents an example of how the Blitz and the history of WWII as a dominant historical narrative in the construction of Coventry's mnemonic community have become linked and opposed to the living memory of urban decline. The exhibition was part of the Holocaust commemoration programme taking place in the Herbert every year. On this occasion, however, the museum invited members of the communities who survived genocidal experiences similar to the Holocaust. All paintings there were about conflicts; the legacy of the Coventry Blitz was highlighted there as a common ground since some artists themselves fled from war zones. The series of paintings by a Polish artist, Kasia Dzikowska, was slightly different in its approach. In her paintings she pictured the city's famous landmarks (e.g. the ruins of old cathedral) inside the Coventry train station (Plate 7). One might say that these iconic architectural structures looked so out of place at the modern train station as if they were 'ghosts' from the old times. In her comments, the artist explained that the idea of the series came from a conversation which she had had with 'one of her

students'. When she had just arrived in the city, she asked the student what the best places in the city were and they had responded, 'the train station', because you could quickly get out of Coventry from there to somewhere else. The artist found this comment sad because so many local, talented people 'bought a one-way ticket' leaving Coventry unappreciated (The Herbert fieldwork diary, 18 January 2012).



Plate 7: A painting from the 'City of Sanctuary' exhibition, The Herbert Art Gallery and Museum, (February 2012)

Such comments on the issue of mobility, the prospect to come to and leave places (like Coventry or Nuneaton), have to be read as complex relationships between (em/dis)placed identities and memories associated with them. Coventry and Nuneaton used to be the aspirational places to come and live in the past during the 'golden age' of the 1950s-60s when manufacturing industries were booming in the West Midlands. With de-industrialisation and the decline of manufacturing in the 1970s-80s and changes in the labour market, working-class identities formed in decades when full-time employment in manufacturing industries was an expected and respected life trajectory for working-class men and women became unsustainable. Sociologists often describe the social processes in de-industrialised working-class communities in

terms of identity crisis (Charlesworth, 2000; Cowie and Heathcott, 2003; Mah, 2010; Watt, 2006). Our experts in the Herbert refer to the same term when they discuss the conditions of the white working-class majority in Coventry. Importantly, they also situate such working-class experiences within a complex and changing multicultural environment of the city.

‘I mean without work, you’ve kind of got no identity. You know, one of your identities as a person has disappeared and then there’s the financial problems involved in that as well, so I think that’s a big change that’s affecting us.

Definitely immigration has changed the country, you know, the number of people that have come in and the cultures that they’ve brought in has changed things and is continuing to change things.’ (UKE5, 6 July 2012)

In fact, in terms of human mobility, Coventry continues to attract people and ‘new migrant communities’ have been forming in the city. Mobility is also prevalent in the case of young people from more affluent (middle class) background as in the case of several Nuneaton group participants who either have moved out of the town to study at university (UKR9) or have plans and (significantly) resources to do this (UKR8, UKR11). At the same time, marginalised groups such as homeless youth from the Getting Involved workshop describe their experience of being in Coventry as if they are not in control of their lives – ‘ending up in Coventry every time when things are desperate’ (UKR2) being ‘stuck in there’ (UKR1), and ‘planted in there’ (UKR5). Whereas, some residents of old working-class neighbourhoods may feel trapped in their council estates with limited employment opportunities (or with no access to jobs that are considered respectable and therefore acceptable in accordance with a

traditional working-class ethos) surviving on social benefits sometimes for generations. During the Tile Hill workshop session, this sense of entrapment was conveyed by Derek, a local historian in his sixties, in his ironic comment on the different generations of working-class families living close to each other in the Tile Hill housing estate:

‘Both families of Joe and Jim are local to Tile Hill, their grandparents and other members of extended families live nearby in the neighbourhood. Most of the families of the elderly people attending the session also live locally. According to Derek this is the pattern common for the neighbourhood: “despite the reputation of Tile Hill as a place bad to live nobody is leaving it.” Derek explained that Tile Hill became a suburban neighbourhood in the 1950s, before it was a village, when council housing estates were built by the principle of serving the whole life circle “from cradle to grave...” As a result several generations of the same family were living next to each other. All this stopped when council houses started being sold off and private tenants appeared (around the Thatcher period).’ (The Tile Hill fieldwork diary, 21 January 2012)

The council estates of Tile Hill became the main subject of works by a 2011 Turner Prize nominee, George Shaw, presented at the exhibition ‘I woz ‘ere’ held in the Herbert museum from November 2011 and until March 2012. The cross-references between the George Shaw paintings and The Specials music are not surprising. Growing up in the 1970s-80s, George Shaw could directly relate his experience of living on a working class housing estate on the outskirts of Coventry to The Specials’ songs. Some of his early paintings from that period (before he did any formal fine art

training) presented at the exhibition in the Herbert depicted young skinheads and punks as well as scenes of street violence. In fact George Shaw mentioned The Specials and the impact which this band had on people of his generation in some of his interviews.¹⁰ At the same time, during his appearance on Radio 4 Loose Ends programme in November 2011, Jerry Dammers (The Specials) talked about George Shaw and how his art (the paintings from 1990s-2000s rather than the earlier works) visually represents what The Specials expressed in their music.¹¹

2.7. Council estates: Emplaced memories of 'urban decay'

The exhibition 'I woz 'ere' by a 'Cov kid', George Shaw presented another good opportunity for the Herbert to celebrate someone who 'put Coventry on the map' (UKE4). Therefore, a Coventry accent in the title of the exhibition was particularly important. The exhibition featured the artist's urban landscape paintings representing his memories of growing up on the working-class council estate in the Tile Hill area of Coventry in the late 1970s-early 1980s. In the paintings, without being expressed as an act, decay is a constitutive part of the urban landscape (broken-in garages, violent graffiti on the walls, secluded paths, and old furniture piled up on the edge of the wood). Shaw had worked on these paintings over the last 15 years, but in the exhibition they were framed with the drawings made by the artist as a teenager and a series of very recent watercolours commissioned by the Herbert especially for the exhibition. Thus the exhibition acquired its historical context which linked the artist's biography with Coventry's history.

¹⁰ See, for example, <http://blogs.coventrytelegraph.net/privateview/2011/11/excusive-turner-prize-nominee.html>.

¹¹ http://www.bbc.co.uk/iplayer/episode/b0171yiw/Loose_Ends_12_11_2011/



Plate 8: The George Shaw exhibition's poster and one of the paintings, The Herbert Art Gallery and Museum (January 2012)

Among other reasons to hold such an exhibition in the artist's home town, our expert mentioned that the organisers hoped that it would attract local working-class audience and residents of Tile Hill in particular (UKE4). Indeed the exhibition was attended by many present and former Tile Hill residents and became popular among the 'regular folks' as one visitor stated in his feedback (South Coventry (CV3) resident, Comments, George Shaw: I woz ere, 26 December 2011).¹² Visitors' comments also demonstrate how the exhibition provided the space for local working-class people to voice their identity by relating themselves through memories of similar places to those depicted by George Shaw:

'The paintings could be of any UK city but to me are instantly Coventry. I'm a Stoke boy so I should know!' (South Coventry (CV3) resident, Comments, George Shaw: I woz ere, 4 December 2011)

¹² The visitors' comments are referred to by the area in, or outside, Coventry the person resided in, or came from, and the date when the comment was left.

‘It’s refreshing to see something that speaks to me of my culture (AP - underlined as in an original). (North Warwickshire (Bulkington) resident, Comments, George Shaw: I woz ere, 8 January 2012)

George Shaw’s paintings being contextualised within a particular historical and cultural perspective became an invitation for reflections on why and how society has changed. For local politicians the exhibition contained an important social and political message. At the launch event, a Labour representative of Coventry City Council formulated the purpose of the exhibition as to ‘bring the people of Coventry together at this difficult time’ (The Herbert fieldwork diary, 17 November 2011). Some of the visitors’ comments made a critical connection between the emplaced memories of working-class housing estates and the present conditions of ‘urban decay’:

‘Delighted. Reminding one of urban decay and abandonment but also of the gentle melancholy of growing up...’ (Coventry (Tile Hill, CV4) resident, Comments, George Shaw: I woz ere, 3 December 2012)

‘The exhibition captures the decay of modern society, the isolation, the despair and the insecurities of the community. Fabulous.’ (Coventry (Baginton, CV2) resident, Comments, George Shaw: I woz ere, 2 February 2012)

‘Although George is painting about his past, you get the impression that these paintings may be a shape of things to come?’ (Coventry resident, Comments, George Shaw: I woz ere, 1 December 2011)

Such a political reading of the artist's works had been anticipated by the Herbert. In her interview the curator explained that in preparation for the exhibition she had researched the social issues associated with council estates in contemporary Britain. She referred to Lynsey Hanley's book *Estates: An Intimate History* (2008) which represents a critical analysis of changes in British working-class culture since the 1980s (UKE4). To some visitors, council estates and their depiction by George Shaw represent the emplaced memories of the changing condition of their working-class residents. The following heated exchange of comments between two Coventry residents reflects the shift in social meanings attached to council estates that has occurred since the 1950s-60s when they were built:

Coventry (Coundon, CV6) resident: 'Am I missing something? Why be reminded of dirt and deprivation? If these paintings serve a purpose, it is a reminder to tear down these bleak council estates and start again!'

Former Coventry (Tile Hill, CV4) resident: 'Yes, you are missing something! I grew up here on a council estate (Tile Hill South) in the 50s and 60s. We were very pleased to have such good housing. It served us well. It's all dirty now and this series of paintings captures all that.' (Comments, George Shaw: I woz ere, 10 March 2012)

As in the comments above many visitors find the paintings 'beautiful, yet depressing' (North Coventry (CV6) resident, Comments, George Shaw: I woz ere, 29 December 2011). The similar 'sense of depression' associated with their own experience of

living in council estates was expressed by some young people from Getting Involved group who visited the exhibition during the workshop sessions:

‘After the lunch we have a visit to the George Shaw exhibition. During the visit, I talked to Flame, he said that he did not like it because from all sceneries of the city Shaw had chosen to depict the most depressing – he knew similar places in his neighbourhood...’ (The Herbert fieldwork diary, 25 January 2012)

The George Shaw exhibition was finished by the time of the Nuneaton workshop however, in emulation of Shaw’s approach to memory, the participants were asked to take photographs of the town that, in their opinion, represented its history but also spoke to their personal memories. Although no photographs of council estates were taken by this group of young people (who came mainly from middle class families), the estates and their residents were constantly mentioned in their interviews with negative connotations of the town’s ‘gloomy present’ as opposed to its ‘communal past’. During the focus group discussion with the Nuneaton youth, the council estates were mentioned in relation to one of the former miners’ neighbourhoods in the town which was perhaps more than other area of the town affected by de-industrialisation with a significant number unemployed people living there. It is indicative, therefore, that our middle-class respondents described the neighbourhood’s residents as undeserving recipients of benefits reproducing the current government’s ‘assault’ on the welfare system (Ramesh, 2012) and the stigmatisation of people claiming benefits

in the media (Baumberg et al, 2012).¹³ The present day association of council estates with poverty, crime and social deprivation featured in these narratives:

UKFG2R7: 'It probably, the thing is with all towns there are nicer places and little bits in there, there are the better places and the worse places, like Camp Hill's got quite a reputation as a not very nice place to be around...'

UKFG2R11: 'Yes, it has got new estates and new areas and new council buildings, but it's, again with the people that live there... I may be stereotyping here, and I may be branching off completely wrong, but they, they seem rougher in those areas because it's a mainly council built-up area, it's not private residential homes, they're mainly council houses or council flats, they just seem to have a rougher aspect to them than people do that live in a different area...'

There's nothing wrong with living in council houses, but people now, at this day and age, associate council houses with people who are on the dole, or can't be bothered to find work, and they're just too lazy so they therefore feed off the council and feed off other people's like, the taxes, they just feed off the money, so they just associate that with how people react with the other things, and then it's therefore created a bad image...'

UKFG2R9: 'And the thing that I've noticed is, there's a difference between people living in Council houses who genuinely need it, because they've got a struggling family, but a large percentage is lack of caring, lack of respect, and also there's a massive feeling when I've gone to these like deprived council

¹³ The recent research report 'Benefits stigma in Britain' written by a group of sociologists from the University of Kent and commissioned by a national charity organisation, Elizabeth Finn Care, shows that 'the public now see claimants as less deserving than they did 20 years ago, with noticeable shifts in opinion in the late 1990s and early 2000s.' Also the research findings 'support the idea that negative media coverage is linked to stigma – with people who read more stigmatising newspapers perceiving higher levels of fraud and greater personal stigma' (Baumberg et al, 2012: 82-83).

estates, that they're owed something, and that it's their right, and they're owed to have this, and they're owed. But they feel like they're owed it, but then don't then have any respect for it, and that's what I've noticed, from going round working with underprivileged people in Nuneaton...' (UKFG2, 26 July 2012)

Perhaps, it is not accidental that the residents of council estates in Nuneaton are described in these narratives in moral terms of 'dis/respect' for their houses, public places and the town, in general. Watt maintains that 'the social history of council housing demonstrates that communal sociability was often undermined by antagonistic status divisions along lines of roughness and respectability' (2006: 779). The 'rough/respectable' distinction also surfaced in the Getting Involved focus group in their negative comments on 'chavs' albeit without any reference to council housing (UKFG1R3).¹⁴ According to Nayak's study of post-industrial working-class youth, the (re)production of chavs' identities demonstrates continuities in traditional working-class social hierarchies demarcated along the lines of being 'ruff' or respectable (2006: 827).

2.8. Generational split between nostalgic memories and oblivion of 'the communal past'?

The traumatic memories associated with de-industrialisation and urban decline rooted in the socio-economic transformations of the 1970s-80s are often juxtaposed in narratives to a more nostalgic vision of the 'community' from that period. In this section the nostalgia for the community is examined in its relation to the living

¹⁴ In his research of young working-class men, Nayak offers one possible etymology for the concept 'chav' which directly links it with council estates' stereotypes as an acronym for 'Council House And Violent' (Nayak, 2006: 824).

memories of urban decline. Our analysis demonstrates that misremembering as well as forgetting the ‘community’ play an important part in producing such nostalgia.¹⁵

The Herbert’s exhibition ‘From Highfield Road to Wembley Way’ (April – June 2012), which was dedicated to the 25th anniversary of the Coventry City FC’s FA Cup victory against Tottenham Hotspur FC, is a good example of how the ‘glorious events’ from the past evoke nostalgic memories of community cohesion. At the exhibition visitors were invited to leave their comments in the form of written testimonies of that victory, which was displayed on the walls in the exhibition hall (see Plate 9). Interestingly, many ‘memories’ were left by young people who were not born at the time of the famous victory or were too little to remember. However, both the testimonies of the older and younger generations of football fans convey the clear sense of being proud of their club but also being nostalgic for times when seemingly the entire city came out as one community to celebrate the team’s return as it was parading in Coventry city centre in an open top bus. Importantly, the testimonies demonstrate that the memories of that victory are passed down within family. Support for Coventry City is seen by many as a family tradition that demonstrates the importance of emplaced family memories for local identities:

‘Me and my mates arrived in London at 9.15 in the morning. Covered in sky blue and white¹⁶ by the time we got to Wembley I had lost my voice. I don’t really remember much about the game itself. What I do remember is the fans. It is amazing how sport can bring people together. There was a certain sense of

¹⁵ Arguably the public discourses which emphasise ‘community’ as a unit and foundation for social solidarities are at least partly result from New Labour’s use of the concept in their policies targeting social issues related to conditions in poor and socially excluded neighbourhoods (Wallace, 2010).

¹⁶ Sky blue and white are the colours of the Coventry City FC which is also called by its supporters ‘Sky Blues’.

community that I will never forget. Good times. PUSB'.¹⁷ (Mark B. 'Your 1987 FA Cup memories' testimony)

'I was 13, my Dad had gone to Wembley and I watched the match with my uncle and grandma. We all cried when Abide with Me¹⁸ was sung and it was a nail biting match. I went home on the bus from Tile Hill through town. People were sitting on car roofs while they were driving, confetti was coming out of Queen Victoria House and everyone was so happy. I had made a wig from sky blue, dark blue and white crepe paper, had painted my face in stripes with my blue eye shadow and wore my Dad's City flax cap! I've never seen so many happy and friendly people in one place before. It brought everyone together and it brings a tear to my eye and makes my hairs stand on end thinking about it. We were a proud city. A day I'll never forget.' (Michelle M. 'Your 1987 FA Cup memories' testimony)

'My granddad told me about the match and how on Sunday all the family went to the forum to see the players on the open top bus. Everyone was clapping and cheering.' (Thomas B. 11 years old, 'Your 1987 FA Cup memories' testimony)

'My mum was seventeen and went to see it. She always says it was a great day, one of the best days of her life. She arrived at Wembley just after nine o'clock and partied well into the early hours of the next morning. The atmosphere in

¹⁷ 'PUSB' is an abbreviated phrase 'play up Sky Blues'. It was often used by visitors to end their testimonies.

¹⁸ Abide with Me is a traditional Anglican hymn that is sung before the start of each FA Cup Final match.

Coventry was electric - a feeling that Coventry is unlikely to experience again.

Play up Sky Blues!!' (Maisie, 'Your 1987 FA Cup memories' testimony)



Plate 9: The 'Memory Wall' with testimonies of Coventry people as part of the 'From Highfield Road to Wembley Way' exhibition (June 2012).

The positive or nostalgic memories of 'past community' are also featured in narratives of young people when they talked for example about the 'communal past' of Nuneaton's housing estates.

'In the seventies and eighties I feel it was a lot more acceptable, because such a large, I don't know what percentage it was, but such a large amount of the population did live in council provided housing, and it wasn't seen a bad thing, I think. But also the sense of community was a lot greater, which meant, sort of more, even if there was negative connotations from other classes or other cultures towards a certain community, it would be more a feeling of "oh, we're all in this, like, together," all kind of, a lot more communal spirit, which I think's really important.' (UKFG2R9, 26 July 2012)

The same respondent, being an active member of Labour Party, however, was very critical the Conservative idea of 'Big Society' which arguably draws upon the similar nostalgic ideas. She dismissed it as an artificial attempt to emulate a 'natural community' and as a strategy to 'put blame on communities for things closing down' (UKR9).

During their group discussion, the homeless young people from the Getting Involved workshop, while reflecting on the past, expressed their anger about the current situation blaming contemporary society (and some of its institutions such as the media, for example) for treating young people unfairly (UKFG1). In both groups, however, young people were comparing the present with the past rather in unfavourable terms. They talked about 'lack of freedom', 'inequality', 'prejudice' when characterising the present, whereas the past was described as 'colourful', 'freedom', 'free of prejudice'.

'They didn't judge anyone. Not in the 70s or 80s they didn't judge anyone. They only started judging people towards when like the 90s and that, when all chavs came in. Sorry if anyone's a chav in here, but yes. Do you know what I mean? Chavs do my head in.' (UKFG1R3, 8 February 2012)

Interestingly, though, young people interviewed express their dissatisfaction with social inequalities in terms of consumption – fashion styles, gadgets, media representations, etc.- rather than as rights and access to public services. This partly confirms the dominant position which consumerism holds in the British cultural

paradigm something that Hall sees as a direct result of neo-liberal ideologies dominating the country's politics since Thatcherism (Hall, 2011):

UKFG1R1: 'I would probably have to say the freedom of expression that they had back in those days because when you look at the clothing they used to wear.'

UKFG1R4: 'We still have that. It's just there are a lot of people who don't have the confidence to do it.'

UKFG1R1: 'Well the thing is that back then, you know, you could go out wearing... looking liked you'd been attacked by a rainbow.'

UKFG1R5: 'What's stopping you now?'

UKFG1R1: 'These days, if you go out looking like that you are going to get ridiculed. You're going to get the idiots in the street throwing stuff at you.'

UKFG1R4: 'So what's stopping you from saying "do one mate or else"?''

UKFG1R3: 'Is it because people are going to judge you?'

UKFG1R1: 'It doesn't matter that they judge me. It's the fact that I've seen people attacked for not wearing the fashion.'

UKFG1R3: 'What is fashion?'

UKFG1R4: 'It never stops any of us lot. I've gone out in trench coats. I get it all. I get Neo and everything. I question them on it and then they decide whether they want to go with it.'

UKFG1R1: 'I get the same thing. The difference is that it shouldn't be like that because back then you wouldn't get ridiculed, no matter what you were wearing. You could go out looking like, as I say, been assaulted by a pack of Skittles.'

UKFG1R2: 'The problem with today's society is the fact that the media has a great influence over that. A stupid amount of influence over it and it's like, going back to the relative point to that, you get beaten up in the streets because the media hasn't specified that that's the fashion that's in.'

The 'positive spin' in the collective memories felt in the visitors' 'Your 1987 FA Cup memories' testimonies left at the exhibition 'From Highfield Road to Wembley Way' is understandable, after all, that exhibition was in commemoration of the victory and the atmosphere of the community solidarity. But such nostalgic memories are a result of the present memory-work and perhaps as much as the young people's narratives they expressed the present day Coventrians' concerns with the lack of a community spirit and feeling of collective underachievement rather than an accurate recollection of what happened on the day. In a way such nostalgic testimonies are an example of how the past can be collectively misremembered. The actual experiences of the particular event as well as the period, in general, could be more diverse than they were represented in the collective memory. It is telling that among hundreds of visitors' comments on the exhibition's wall of memory only one testimony contained a chilling recollection of social fragmentation, urban violence, racial tensions and institutionalised discrimination against ethnic minorities that were perhaps more prevalent in that time than today:

'After the Game. On the way across the coach park, myself, my "cousin" George and my friend Steven M., now sadly no longer with us, were attacked by two individuals, who it later transpired were Chelsea BNP members (my friend Steve was black). He was arrested and held overnight and subsequently missed

the celebrations that night and the following day. This event has soured my memories to this day, but will never totally overshadow our achievement that Saturday afternoon. RIP Steve.¹⁹ Keep The Faith (AP – underlined as in an original). (Milan S. ‘Your 1987 FA Cup memories’ testimony)

Thus the nostalgic memories of community are at least partly a product of misremembering. Some observers note a generational dimension in community nostalgia (Charlesworth 2000, Watt 2006). Charlesworth (2000), for instance, talks about the generational split between older and middle-aged people who carry nostalgic memories of social relations based on working class ethos and community solidarity and the younger people’s experience of living with realisation that they are perhaps never going to be in employment. Ravetz also notes the ‘golden age’ memories of an older generation of council house tenants when they speak about the times when their estates ‘used to be lovely’; a past which probably existed only in their nostalgia (Ravetz, 2000: 177). Our research demonstrates that class, ethnicity, education, political affiliation as well as regional factors might in some cases have more significant impact on the production of community nostalgia than generational divide. Young people from middle class families seemed to speak about the community of the past in similar terms as the older generation of people. At the same time, the very word ‘community’ was noticeably absent in homeless youth’s narratives about the past.

¹⁹ RIP is an abbreviated expression ‘rest in peace’ that has often appeared on the visitors’ testimonies as they connect their memories of the event with the memories of their deceased relatives and friends. This is another example of how such community-centred commemorative event provides space and opportunity for people to link their personal and familiar memories with the collective one.

One of the examples of how the working-class community is misremembered or even forgotten is young people's attitudes towards the places such as working-class pubs or social centres that used to be at the centre of the 'community' in the past. In her interview one of our Nuneaton participants talked about the 'roughest' pub in the town as the one which represents working-class cultural resistance to its gentrification. Although being ironic, the respondent portrayed the pub regulars in very negative terms of being sexists and racists:

'The Pig and Whistle is like the roughest pub in Nuneaton. It was so rough and it always has smashed windows and no matter how many times they're fixed, they'll be smashed by the next Saturday night and they closed it down so many times. They keep opening it back up and keep trying their hardest to make it into this kind of like gourmet pub, or this pub where families can go, but it just kind of always attracts the same crowd because of the part of town it is and the history it has. You know, like you were told not to walk past it. You were told to try and avoid the Pig and Whistle because you'd just be wolf-whistled and abused by walking past it but like, no matter how hard they tried, within six months of it opening back up, I mean you can see that there are St. George's flags all over it. It's half-price beer. There's Sky Sports on 24/7 and there are always a massive group of people outside smoking and you always still get abused every time you walk past. I like it because it's in quite a grim part of the town. It's not in the nice part. It's in an undeveloped part that nobody really goes down... You think it is very kind of like an English man's rough working pub, is how I would describe it. I wouldn't want to stereotype more than that really.' (UKR9, 26 July 2012)

This pub is situated next door to the last bingo hall (a magnificent art-deco building) in the town which was closed a few years ago. Our respondent acknowledged that with the closure of the bingo hall the elderly and female members of the local working-class community lost an important place where they were socialising in the past.

A younger generation might not have memories of working-class ‘communities’ that the generation of their grandparents cherish so nostalgically. The following extract from the field notes produced in the course of the Tile Hill memory workshop presents an example of how living memories of urban decline are embodied in the younger generation’s destructions of a landmark which for many older residents signifies the pride of their community in the past:

‘When we were near the social club. Derek told us that all windows on the first floor are shut now with wooden boards. Glass remained unbroken only in one or two windows until last night but it had been broken now. Dave went to take pictures of the broken glass window when a group of teenagers – two boys in grey tracksuits holding Coke bottles and a girl with cigarette – appeared. One boy came towards Dave and started asking some questions and saying something. It looked quite intimidating from the outside. Then he posed in front of the window and Dave took some pictures of him. Dave told us that the boy said that this window was his job – it took him two bricks to break it. While we were standing there and talking an old man appeared wearing a flat cap with some tiny budes on it. He told us that he is a life-member of the social club and

he still had a membership card which expires in 2055. He said that the social club was built in 1968. Now he thinks the man who bought it would demolish it very soon, because he demolished two on other sites of the area which also used to be pubs (or something like this). Toby told us before that the social club is now owned by “an Asian man.” He also told us that this man had been demolishing old buildings he bought in Tile Hill. He mentioned some other site as well which they afraid was going to be demolished. They were regretting this but were not really angry. Rather they were talking about the situation as an inevitable one. On our way back to the youth centre I asked Rob, a Herbert’s inclusion officer, what he made of that situation. Why was the older generation so nostalgic about the place and the younger one busy destroying it? He said that the place had fallen into decay because the whole social fabric was destroyed. When the social club had its glorious days, local people were all employed in the factories which were now closed down.’ (Tile Hill fieldwork diary, 25 February 2012)



Plate 10: The Tile Hill social club closed down and sold out with boarded windows has been vandalised by the local youth (February 2012).

For Watt, the decline of working-class community solidarities often manifested itself in the erosion of ‘the public leisure spaces centred around working-class pubs, shops and markets’ (2006: 783). As one of the visitors to the ‘I woz ‘ere’ exhibition stated ‘no more pubs, no prospects for any one’ (Coventry (Wyken, CV2) resident, Comments, George Shaw: I woz ere, 1 December 2011). The dilapidated building of the once popular social club and the youth with nothing to do but break the last glass in its windows is an embodiment of living memories of urban decline. Ironically, though, just across the road from the social club the Tile Hill youth centre is situated. The mural on its wall depicts boxing champions who had been training in the old club this wall faces (Plate 11). Thus the living memory of urban decline and site of community nostalgia stand face to face in Tile Hill.



Plate 11: The ‘Hall of Fame’ murals on the wall of the Tile Hill Youth Centre depicting famous boxing champions who trained in the Tile Hill Social Club in the 1960s-80s (February 2012).

3. Conclusions

In our research the 1970s-80s have been identified as a ‘difficult’ or ‘problematic’ past in terms of its lasting legacy for British society. This is a period in British history

associated with Margaret Thatcher and radical transformations in the social, political and economic life of the country as a result of complex process of de-industrialisation.

Published sociological and historical literature points to the profound effects that de-industrialisation of the British economy has had, in particular on class structures, community relations, inter-racial tensions and identities. The changes that have occurred in British working-class communities since the period in question are defined in terms of 'urban decline' characterised by the growth of social deprivation, economic poverty and the production of marginalised groups sometimes rather ambiguously defined as an 'underclass'.

Although the historical narratives of de-industrialisation and 'urban decline' are represented in the Herbert Art Gallery and Museum they are rather marginal to the main focus of the museum on other aspects of Coventry's social history. The very approach to history dominant in the museum, focusing on communities and the lives of 'ordinary people', is arguably rooted in a left-wing opposition to Thatcherism's assault on 'society'. During the years of the New Labour government (1997-2010) this approach had been enhanced since it was seen as an effective tool for engagement with marginalised groups and deprived communities (which were themselves sometimes seen as a products of de-industrialisation and changing society). The museum's historical exhibitions reflect the political discourses of social inclusion and cultural diversity that were at the centre of New Labour's social policies. Currently, however, the Herbert's proactive promotion of values and principles of cultural diversity stands in opposition to the current coalition (Conservative and Liberal Democrat) government's critique of multiculturalism. Thus the government's policy

of economic cuts resulted in the reduction of funding available for the public sector in general and those directed to social policy in particular.

Young people's interpretation and internalisations of historical narratives through which the 1970s-80s are represented in the Herbert museum demonstrates that, as for many in the UK, for them that period continues to exert a lasting legacy which might be defined as providing 'living memories of urban decline'. Memories of de-industrialisation in such industrial centres as Coventry are continuing to be lived by an increasingly marginalised working-class population of the city. These memories are 'living memories' for many in Coventry partly because the closure of the manufacturing industries which provided the majority of work places in Coventry and the surrounding area had started in the late 1970s and continued throughout the 1990s up until the present day, when the future of the last car-manufacturing plant remaining in the city is uncertain. These living memories of de-industrialisation in the past have translated into a feeling of the 'depressing present' expressed by many of our participants.

The living memories of deindustrialisation are expressed by young people in their interviews through the discourse of 'urban decline' when they focus on the social deprivation epitomised by the 'council estates'. In their interviews they reproduce the stereotypical and stigmatising view of estate residents as 'underprivileged' and lacking 'respect' for the 'community'. At the same time, the 'community' is talked about in nostalgic terms of social solidarity and 'respect' and 'security'. In their reflections on the 'difficult past' young people express their frustration and dissatisfaction with the present when they talk about lack of future prospects in the

deindustrialised towns and cities of West Midlands. Ironically, they sometimes tend to idealise that period, even if they acknowledge that it was 'difficult'. For example they ascribe more meaning and effectiveness to protest movements from the past than to contemporary online activism or violent clashes that took place during recent student protests and riots in August 2011. These nostalgic memories are a result of memory-work and they represent young people's concerns with contemporary society that they describe as unfair, unequal, and restrictive in terms of individual freedom. Our analysis demonstrates how misremembering and forgetting on the part of younger and older generations contributes to the 'community nostalgia' narratives as part of the complex process of living memories of urban decline. Living through the legacy of de-industrialisation and making sense of urban decline young people themselves are active members of mnemonic communities.

The living memories of de-industrialisation and urban decline have to be examined, however, in relation to other dominant historical and social discourses that have been developed to interpret periods with preceded and/or came after the 'difficult past' in question. Thus the Coventry Blitz (during WWII) has been mentioned as the ready-made response to the question about events in the local history which might be defined as 'difficult' or 'problematic'. The memories of the Blitz play an important constitutive role for Coventry people as a 'mnemonic community' providing them with common ground for the forging of a well-established historical narrative. The discourse of multicultural Britain shaped during the years of the New Labour government has impacted on how young people see urban culture. It also has to be taken into consideration when we analyse how memories of racial tensions in the past

(the race riots of the 1980s, for example) and the multicultural environment of contemporary British cities are interpreted by young people.

Last but not least, our research demonstrates the important role which popular culture and family play in what and how young people remember or forget about the period in question. Young people often mention classic British films as a source of information about the particular historical events associated with the 1970s-80s (e.g. the miners' strike) or music styles and bands from that time (for example, punk, 2-Tone, heavy metal); although they are not always aware of the social context within which such cultural developments occurred. The older generation of family members are also often mentioned not only as the source of memory narratives but also as influential figures in terms of socialisation in cultural practices (e.g. particular musical preferences) or political culture and social attitudes (being socialists, mistrust towards the police, anti-racist or xenophobic ideas) originating from the historical period under consideration. In contrast, our research to date has not identified any significant role which school and college curricula play in developing young people's perceptions of the period of the 1970s and 1980s.

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