Nostalgia and the Cruel Promises of Austerity: Neoliberal Narratives and Post-Industrial Memory in the South Wales Coalfield

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Abstract

Austerity in the UK has been widely framed, in academic and popular representations, as a nostalgic project, drawing legitimacy from idealised images of a resilient past. We argue that these notions of resilience embedded in austerity discourses parallel nostalgic attachments to mining legacies in the South Wales coalfield. Through analysing the promises and strategies behind austerity, we explore its complex dynamics in post-industrial communities marked by long-standing marginalisation and hardship. Based on ethnographic research in the South Wales Valleys, we contend that nostalgia plays a key role in nurturing the 'cruel optimism' of austerity, enrolling citizens into its neoliberal logic and material practices. Nostalgic practices such as heritage projects and community initiatives often reinforce values central to austerity, creating a conflicted space where memory serves both empowerment and exploitation. However, amid the legacies of deindustrialisation and austerity, a growing scepticism and recognition of austerity's failures have given rise to subtle forms of resistance, grounded in community solidarity and care. This resistance, sustained by nostalgic narratives of perseverance and collective identity, holds potential for alternative, transformative politics in the future.

Key Words

Austerity, Nostalgia, Post-Industrial, Community, Ethnography

Introduction

Austerity in the UK has been widely understood in academia and the popular media as a nostalgic project, located in and legitimised through past images of a resilient Britain (Bramall, 2013; Forkert, 2017; Hatherly, 2016). Neoliberal principles and the reduction of state provision since the 2008 financial crisis have been justified by calls for economic rationality and caution and advanced through discourses of responsibility, self-sufficiency, and obligation (Bramall, 2013; Strong, 2021a). Austerity politics were and remain framed as 'common sense', with the associated moral crises concerning those who failed or refused to 'pull up their bootstraps' in contemporary Britain, instead exploiting a too-generous welfare state (Hepworth et al., 2019; Jensen and Tyler, 2015; Strong, 2021b). Whilst the term austerity has become less commonplace in recent discourse, the logics and consequences endure in the continuing neoliberal paradigm (Irving, 2021; MacLeavy, 2023). Much of this framing mobilised particular narratives of British pasts, such as the austerity of the Second World War (Martin, 2021) and the turbulence of the 1970s (Biressi and Nunn, 2013b), alongside a sympathetic remembering and call to invoke the 'spirit' of a time when Britain dominated with imperial power (Gilroy, 2004; Stanley, 2022).

This article considers how accounts of a resilient Britain are historically framed and contemporaneously understood in the context of an ex-coal mining region. Here, these framings work in uneasy tension with the nostalgia for the mining era and the long-standing experiences of economic precarity and decline that traditionally position such communities in opposition to state-led economic strategies. Industrial work, injury, decline and closure (Clark 2023; Linkon, 2018; Mah, 2012; Walkerdine, 2010), have ensured that communities such as those in Ebbw Fach, the focus of this paper, have been disproportionately affected by austerity, deeply entrenching existing inequalities and political marginalisation (Beatty and Fothergill, 2016; Hincks and Powell, 2022; May et al., 2021). By working in communities impacted by the waves of deindustrialisation and austerity politics, we can reflect on the complexities of historical accounts and how they are employed to make sense of austerity. Contemporary relationships to austerity and economic hardship are always understood *through* and *with* notions of mining histories and memories. The heritage of coal mining is inextricably interwoven with lived, embodied, practised and material realities (Walker, 2021a), and with organised resistance to state programmes that restructured traditional industry (Gildae, 2023). Consequently, we attend to the legacies of industrial life in formal memorials and museums and the quotidian fabric of everyday life (Hamilton, 1999).

Firstly, we introduce the research projects and context of Ebbw Fach and the experiences of deindustrialisation in the South Wales Coalfield, establishing the historical backdrop of austerity. We then outline established literature that delineates how different discourses of austerity invoke nostalgic sentiments. Following this, we reflect on these notions as they resonate with ideas of resilience drawn from impoverished industrial pasts in the area. Here, we showcase how this is also inscribed in heritage sites. We consider how the narratives of austerity surround these heritage sites, positioning them and the associated social projects as opportunities to regenerate

and reinvigorate the community, intersecting with the communities' memories of entrepreneurship. However, the reality of cuts to local services, economic decline, and pervasive poverty in the area reveals the cruel optimism of these proposed strategies. We conclude by considering how residents recognise multiple ways that the legacies of deindustrialisation have been not lessened but worsened by austerity, in a continuation of the abandonment of these coal mining communities.

Researching Ebbw Fach and the Legacies of Deindustrialisation

This paper examines memory, heritage, and deindustrialisation through two ethnographic studies in the same area. The research employed methods like hanging out, going along, and informal ethnographic interviews in community spaces (Kusenbach, 2003). Researchers engaged in 'deep hanging out' (Hepworth et al., 2019) by joining local groups and observing daily routines. Oral history interviews aimed to consider the life courses of individuals relating to mining and deindustrialisation histories, as well as how perspectives of welfare and everyday expressions of class varied over time (see Hepworth et al., 2019: 2).

Austerity and the impacts of such policies were not the specific focus of these projects, rather they focused on the relevance and expression of mining heritage in everyday life (Blakely and Moles, 2019; Walker, 2021a). However, these concerns are entangled as we go on to explore. Austerity repeatedly emerged during the interpretive data analysis, with further reflection after a return to the fieldsite in 2022. Shifts in contemporary discussions about the legacies of austerity, the idea of 'levelling up' in political discourse, and concerns about a 'return to austerity' (Toth, 2024) under the Labour government established in mid-2024 reinvigorated these lines of inquiry.

The post-industrial communities researched are situated in the Ebbw Fach area of Blaenau Gwent, in the South Wales Coalfield, known colloquially as 'the Valleys'. The villages and towns of Ebbw Fach were typical of many communities impacted by deindustrialisation and drastic structural change. Experiencing rapid growth from the 1880s onward, the coal industry catalysed the valley's development. Residents identified the 1984-85 miners' strike and subsequent mine closures as the area's key 'turning point' (Gildae, 2023). Like other mining communities, Ebbw Fach united by an enduring sense of communal responsibility that was shaped by needs and a social contract of care within the community, recognised both in the historical and contemporary legacies of industrial work in coalfields across the UK (Clark 2023; Copestake, 2023; Hepworth et al., 2019). The final coal mine in Ebbw Fach closed in 1987 (Curtis, 2013).

The loss of the coal mines was dramatically transformative for Ebbw Fach. The impacts of this decline were not only economic loss; they also incorporated drastic societal changes, which have been widely discussed across the literature on deindustrialisation (Clark 2023; Emery, 2019; Mah, 2012;) and echo the repeated crises indicative of the global system of neoliberalism which Stanley (2022: 8) describes. The Valleys experienced extensive job losses, a sharp increase in

deprivation, and associated social issues. Studies report population decline, worsening health outcomes, and communities struggling to adapt to sudden and severe economic change (Cowie and Heathcott, 2003; Walkerdin, 2010; Walkerdine and Jimenez, 2012). It is beyond the scope of this paper to fully describe the 'half lives' of deindustrialisation, to follow Linkon (2018), explaining how detrimental the loss of major industry is to well-being, belonging and sense of place. Instead, we contribute to this understanding of deindustrialisation as deeply affective, experienced as a sense of melancholic loss, or even shared trauma (Walkerdine and Jimenez, 2012; Zhang, 2024).

Despite various regeneration efforts, the area has faced ongoing challenges exacerbated by austerity measures, eroding local services and already diminished social infrastructures (Beatty and Fothergill, 2016; May et al., 2021; Tomaney et al., 2024). Austerity policies disproportionately impact already marginalised post-industrial regions, exacerbating, as Emery (2022) argues, forms of fast and slow violence (Nixon, 2011) and compounding this aforementioned sense of shared trauma. To explore how austerity is encountered and understood in this context, it is crucial to highlight how deindustrialisation has become a defining condition for such communities. As one resident explained: 'It's sad, to see what it's become'.

As we go on to explore, navigating both the decline following deindustrialisation and the compounding impact of austerity often relies on mining heritage, drawing on nostalgia (Boym, 2001; Lowenthal, 1989). The use of nostalgia as a productive force to sustain identity, belonging, and social support systems in post-industrial settings is well-established in social science literature (Archer and Smith, 2024; Askland and Bunn, 2019; Cuervo and Cook, 2019). Wheeler (2017) emphasises the capacities in which nostalgia affords local communities a 'sense of continuity amid a continuously changing locale through the reassertion of place identities and attachments' (2017: 466). Similarly, May (2017: 13–14) examines how imaginaries of communal belonging are influenced by, and affectively evoked through nostalgia: 'Nostalgia […] can also be used to feel engaged in the present by connecting with a sense of belonging in the past'. Her work describes the capability of nostalgia to tie seemingly disparate temporalities together in continuity, whilst also 'allow[ing] for a sense of continuity of self, even under changing external circumstances' (May, 2017: 14). This work recognises nostalgia as an important component in the spatiotemporal circuitries of belonging in, and longing for, community and ways of communal living, especially in post-industrial communities. Here, Emery's work (2019; 2020; 2022) from the Nottinghamshire coalfield marks an example of tackling the 'affective-temporal' undercurrents of communal belonging and alienation in such contexts (Walkerdine, 2016; Wawrzyniak, 2021). Considering this, this paper focuses specifically on the elements of such nostalgia that are employed to negotiate and even justify austerity politics. As such, it is important to outline how we understand the discourses and politics of austerity that are implicated in such relationships with mining heritage.

Perspectives on Austerity: Affective Lives of Austerity and Nostalgic Framings

Following Hitchen and Raynor (2020) we adopt an understanding of austerity which looks at the ways violent impacts and affects extend beyond the economic realm and must be understood in their diverse and pervasive forms:

> Austerity becomes a set of ideologies, neoliberal strategies, discourses, and takes form in everyday objects, relationships, places, and feelings. [It] becomes a series of evolving social, cultural and economic forces that are felt, that are not always linear, or coherent, that include but also exceed political distortions and obfuscations. (Hitchen and Raynor, 2020: 186)

Austerity is a wider neoliberal project, with everyday materials, logic, and lived affective experiences (Hall 2019, 2023; Hitchen, 2016; Kane, 2023; Stanley, 2022). It is in the affective life of austerity, which is felt so keenly in the hardest hit and most deprived communities, that, as we and others have argued, the logic of such policies has become so pervasive and yet received relatively minimal resistance (Bailey, 2015; MacLeavy, 2023).

Austerity is also framed through a discursive construction that promotes a specific logic, shaping the 'common sense' of this often non-specific economic and political approach (Evans and Walker, 2010). This logic is nebulous, but includes ideas such as the necessity of economic caution, understanding national budgets as equivalent to household budgets, the unsustainability of an extensive welfare state, the importance of entrepreneurship, and the need to incentivise perceived 'work-shy' citizens to inoculate against laziness (Farnsworth and Irving, 2018; Jensen and Tyler, 2015). As Evans and Walker (2010: 170) summarise: '[A]usterity was used to assert the ideology that it is necessary and financially sound to "balance the books" via public spending cuts'. Whilst recognition of how 'bad luck' could lead to a reliance on state or charity support does emerge (Bolton et al., 2022; Hepworth et al., 2019; Tihelková, 2019), the pervasive fear of the undeserving 'scrounger' has remained an enduring image in popular imaginaries (Garthwaite, 2016), being aligned with working-class values of independence and self-reliance (Sutcliffe-Braithwaite and Thomlinson, 2023). Whilst austerity has had far more extensive impacts than only reducing individual benefits, the need to ensure that an abstracted hard-working 'tax-payer' is not unfairly funding the lifestyle of 'national abjects' has been used as justification for many cuts to social provision (Jensen and Tyler, 2015; Tyler, 2013).

The persistence of these ideas is partly attributable to how the affective lives of austerity are interwoven with collective memories and nostalgia, and how these 'scroungers' are framed in opposition to images of an imagined resilient British subject. Here, we turn to an extensive body of literature that highlights how calls to enthusiastically embrace and endure austerity often drew on nostalgic national imaginaries of British stoicism (Biressi and Nunn, 2013a; Biressi and Nunn, 2013b; Bramall, 2013; Evans and Walker, 2020; Forkert, 2017; Hatherley, 2016). The establishment of widespread austerity policies relied on historically situated narratives of resilience and endurance, often focused on wartime and post-war Britain (Bramall, 2013). The

consumption of food and clothing was regulated and reduced via rationing (Evans and Walker, 2020), leading to people becoming more frugal, self-regulated, and innovative. Navigating their reduced access to economic and material resources was also deeply interwoven with a 'community spirit' and sense of national pride (see also Stanley, 2022).

In their analysis of the emergence of the term 'austerity' and how it became integral to the UK Conservative Party electoral campaign in 2010, Evans and Walker (2020: 70) describe how David Cameron (then Conservative leader) and George Osborne (then Shadow Chancellor) 'repeatedly used the word austerity, possibly in an attempt to evoke past days of supposed national unity', when austerity was previously associated with postwar policies. As a result of austerity, Biressi and Nunn (2013b:114) explain that national events are deliberately invoked to 'conjure up wartime fortitude and a nostalgic community spirit'. Relatedly, Hatherley (2016) identifies many instances of 'austerity nostalgia' in contemporary media (see also Bramall, 2017; Evans and Walker, 2020), from posters, television programmes, media campaigns and so on. This invocation of austerity's past, anchored in national pride (Stanley, 2022), not only justifies current hardships but frames them as integral to a shared cultural identity, where enduring economic struggles are portrayed as both necessary and patriotic.

The previous discussion highlights how nostalgia provides a sense of belonging for those experiencing the impacts of deindustrialisation. Yet, nostalgia and a history of austerity also create a sense of national identity (Hatherley, 2008). In times of upheaval and uncertainty, nostalgia becomes a reliable source of stability (May, 2017). This nostalgia was intended to normalise the 'painful but necessary' austerity measures, which suggested that 'the only rational and patriotic response to increasingly difficult times must be stoic cooperation' (Biressi and Nunn, 2013b: 114). Importantly, the nostalgia of austerity remains selective, as Biressi and Nunn (2013b) explore, since memories of other historical periods in Britain are used as cautionary rather than inspirational. Austerity narratives regularly invoke the era of 1970-1985, emphasising the industrial turmoil which was primarily focused on the mining unions. Socialist policies and trade unionism are frequently linked to this undesirable scenario within the contemporary neoliberal landscape, with horror stories of the three-day week and rolling blackouts presented as the alternative to austerity.

In this paper, we explore these dimensions of austerity nostalgia, to ask how it is understood and expressed in the affective ways that Hitchen and Raynor (2010) identify in the context of nostalgia for deindustrialisation and coal mining. To achieve this, we consider Berlant's (2011) notion of 'cruel optimism', where people are enrolled in the pursuit of an ultimately harmful future, to reflect on how austerity discourses draw on nostalgia to promote unrealistic hopes of regeneration, while masking the continued neglect and structural inequalities faced by post-industrial communities. Below, we describe how these discourses of resilience, stoicism, and self-reliance often parallel, interweave with, and sometimes collide with discourses of nostalgia in Ebbw Fach.

Resilient Pasts

Discourses around austerity regularly invoke memories and histories of shared hardships overcome in the past. Attitudes and practices of resilience, fortitude, and perseverance are invoked but are also evident in imaginaries of coal mining communities and of 'respectable' working classes in general (Bramall, 2013; Skeggs, 2011; Walker, 2021b). It is this overlap between austerity nostalgia and nostalgia for mining communities that is the focus of our discussion. Austerity becomes integrated into the everyday life of these post-industrial communities, not only through the economic and social practices, but also through the integration with ideas of the community as resilient in the face of hardship.

Resilience is a defining aspect of mining communities' identity, and stories about the mining past regularly invoked ideas of enduring significant hardship in the face of poverty, job losses and industrial decline (Mah, 2012; Walker, 2021b). Whilst the precarity and pollution of the industrial era can be overlooked in more nostalgic rememberings, drawing instead on the idea of a 'job for life' (Walkerdine, 2016), the invocation of both individual and community characteristics of strength and endurance are pervasive. Local museums and discussions about mining emphasised the difficult, physically demanding and often dangerous work, as an ex-miner described first-hand working 'on [his] belly, all day, in the wet' and allowed a researcher to feel his scars from mining accidents. The physical strength of miners, often referred to by residents and in memorials, which we revisit, is also an often-invoked embodied expression of hardship and endurance, but the nuanced realities of that strength are often overlooked.

Navigating hardship was a defining experience for these communities, in both physical work and experiences of poverty. Merill and Kitson (2017: 5), drawing on the work of historian Curtis (2013), describe a period of temporary pit closures in the 1920s as an 'extreme poverty [that] gripped the South Wales valleys' and as a result that 'daily survival relied on self-reliance and local welfare support organised by the Fed [the miners' unions]'. While the subsequent section discusses the role of community-based assistance, it is evident that recollections of South Wales mining, in particular, have consistently emphasised the necessity for perseverance, having to navigate poverty for over a century. Residents mentioned both significant moments of struggle in war, shut-downs and strikes, but also grinding slow violence in pollution, poverty, and a lack of recognition from 'them down in Westminster'. Residents describe how these things were part of their everyday lives:

> *'It used to be so cold, you could see your breath in the morning, and we could write on the windows… we'd eat nothing but bread, dripping, cabbage soup for tea, you'd not have meat every day.'*

> *'Everyone was so poor, nothing used to go to waste... We'd make rag rugs, and you made sure you took care of things, because you couldn't afford to buy new. Things had to last.'*

These examples, from two residents in their 80s, resonate with many of the ideas of resourcefulness and thrift that are mobilised in media and social attitudes. These ideas are interwoven with the 'make do and mend' mentalities of 'getting by with less' that are, as Bramall (2013) argues, part of a wider social attitude of austerity and the associated attitudes, romanticised and promoted by austerity logics (see also Bramall, 2017; Forkert, 2017; Hinton and Redclift, 2009). These became not just practices that were endured, but moral imperatives that situate one as 'doing your best', and not being a burden in difficult times. These constructions align with the moral imperatives identified in the nostalgia for wartime resilience that austerity invokes (Stanley, 2022).

Individualisation and the responsibility of the self, or responsibilisation, are widely recognised as part of neoliberalism and austerity, alongside the caution surrounding socialist policies (Biressi and Nunn, 2013b; England, 2024; Forkert, 2017; Martin, 2021; Kiely 2021). While often conflicting with the nostalgia for collectivism and solidarity associated with mining communities (Clark, 2023; Copestake, 2023; Hepworth et al., 2019), the prevalent sense of individual responsibility mirrors concepts like the 'deserving poor' (Nunn and Biressi, 2009) or the 'respectable' working class (Skeggs, 2011). Public discourses around 'scroungers' and 'benefits cheats' were frequently referenced by residents, who criticised those perceived as 'not arsed to find work' or 'living off benefits'. This distinction between the 'rough' and 'respectable' working class is used to define belonging within the community (Walker, 2021b, following Skeggs, 2011). An ex-miner expressed disdain that his neighbour had received local government support for 'unnecessary' window replacements, contrasting it with his refusal of such assistance:

> *'We didn't need new windows, so we didn't take the money. It's not right.'*

These values of self-reliance are also historically rooted, as evident in a written account from the same ex-miner (see also Sutcliffe-Braithwaite and Thomlinson, 2023):

> *'The pit went on strike in 1984 which lasted 12 months… [his wife] persuaded me to collect my bag of food given by the public for the miners at the institute. This was the only time in my life I felt like a beggar, receiving food that I had not worked for, this was very demoralising.'*

Many residents often referenced the solidarity and care that they saw as central to the mining community of the past explaining how, now and then, the area was defined by a willingness to help your neighbours and 'take care of each other'. However, the quote from this ex-miner demonstrates the complexity of receiving help. Many referenced a sense of shame or embarrassment when they had been reliant on anyone outside their immediate families, and a concern about being seen as lazy. In the recollection of these histories, a broader ethos is evident. Here, strength and resilience are deeply tied to self-reliance and a reluctance to accept help

without earning it (Sutcliffe-Braithwaite and Thomlinson, 2023). This, as we have outlined above, is easily reconcilable with neoliberal principles of self-reliance and individualisation.

We also argue that these notions of strength and resilience, particularly for miners, are manifest in the landscape of Ebbw Fach. In 2010, a community group unveiled a statue called *The Guardian of the Valleys* in Six Bells, a small ex-coal mining village in Blaenau Gwent. This statue serves as a memorial to 45 men killed in an underground mining explosion on the site in 1960 and was visited by one researcher at the outset of the research process:

> *'Guardian quickly comes into view, and it's quite impressive as the sun shines through the clouds behind him… He's looming, and definitely captures the sense of protection that I think he is meant to… He's mounted on a tall plinth, about 20 metres tall… a stoic, muscular and shirtless miner… he looks nothing like Joe or the other miner's I've met…'*

Nostalgia for a resilient community is materialised in the form of *Guardian*. The statue presents the epitome of the strong miner, as he occupies an area of parkland next to main roads, a church, a community centre, and a small newly-built school. This depiction echoes many similar depictions of miners in both memorials to the industry as a whole and to commemorate specific mining disasters (see Clark and Gibbs, 2020; Morrell, 2017). The strength that is depicted in *Guardian* is emblematic of the key focus of male strength and heroism in memorial depictions of miners (Clark and Gibbs, 2020; Morrell, 2017). Made of steel and standing tall and proud, *Guardian* serves as a literal representation of the 'strength' called for by proponents of austere policies. This is in marked contrast to the, often injured and tired, bodies of real miners, highlighting the contrast between the imagined ideal miner and reality. A focal point of productive nostalgia, following Bennett (2009: 203):

> the nostalgic appropriation of symbols [...] that linked residents to particular decades and practices was important to creating a sense of community and belonging [...]. They also represent a sense of continuity and hope, connecting people to a past peppered with (sometimes similar) problems that the village survived.

The memorial does not recognise the brutal reality of mining or the consequences of the mine's closures on the village; rather, it emphasises the less contentious aspects of mining pasts. The masculinity, strength, and care presented by the *Guardian* obscure the more difficult legacies of such industrial pasts. As Bennett (2009) suggests, the *Guardian* acts as a symbol demonstrating hope for the continuity of the community's identity as a place of endurance and resilience.

Cruel Logics of Austerity: The Promises of *Guardian*

Beyond its commemorative and symbolic meaning, *Guardian* is also representative of other dimensions of austerity. It is interwoven with ideas of community provision and the decline following deindustrialisation and austerity. Funding for the statue, and the associated

regeneration of a nearby empty pub into a heritage centre, cafe, and collection of offices for local organisations and businesses, collectively called *Ty Ebbw Fach*, were obtained through the work of the Communities First Initiative. The Welsh Government initiative established local community-level partnerships focused on the most deprived areas of Wales, launched in 2001. However, by the time the authors met local Communities First workers in Six Bells in 2016, the funding for their positions and associated work was being withdrawn, which they attributed to the pressure on the Welsh government to reduce public spending.

> *'We told them how important it was to have a memorial here… we realised we'd have to fundraise it ourselves… [local residents] needed something to remember the accident, and then it helps the centre as well, like, it means people coming here.'*

These local workers had been involved in extensive fundraising efforts to build *Guardian* and to establish *Ty Ebbw Fach*. As such, they acted as historical caretakers of industrial heritage (Frisch, 1998), thereby echoing similar efforts by 'memory activists' aiming to produce communities of memory that surround such commemorative sites (Atkinson-Phillips, 2019; Clark and Gibbs, 2020). They explained how much of the funding was predicated on a need for commemorative community spaces, emphasising the mining heritage's importance. However, the elements of these heritage initiatives are also seen as potential remedies to the poverty in the area. Not only is *Ty Ebbw Fach* a heritage centre, and *Guardian* a commemorative site, but they also serve as focal points for mobilising hope and aspiration.

Following Berlant's notion of 'cruel optimism' (2011) allows us to understand that neoliberalism has been successfully mobilised, as England (2024: 4) explains, by 'offering hope and desire'. We suggest that by attending to accounts from residents, of both contemporary life and industrial memories, we can understand nostalgia as a key dimension of these promises. The heritage sites in Six Bells demonstrate the ways that nostalgia not only legitimises austerity, and neoliberal principles more broadly, but also the political strategies to overcome poverty and address the decline of the area resulting from deindustrialisation and austerity. A range of promises were attached to *Guardian* and *Ty Ebbw Fach* upon their completion (Anderson, 2023; Berlant, 2011). These promises aligned with austerity strategies aimed at fostering community self-sufficiency, including heritage-led regeneration, attracting outside businesses and local innovation. Tourism is regularly used as a strategy for economic revitalisation in post-industrial areas (Dicks, 2000). This was evident regarding *Guardian*; the Communities First workers and others associated with *Ty Ebbw Fach* talked enthusiastically about the potential of coach trips to the area and an influx of tourists coming to see *Guardian*. One suggested we should research the 'social and economic benefits of *Guardian*', clearly anticipating a measurable impact of the statue.

Austerity, and the broader shift to a service-based economy since the Thatcher government, also promoted entrepreneurship as a way to overcome poverty and structural inequality (Farnsworth and Irving, 2018), giving rise to an ethos of competitive self-interest that is fundamental to Berlant's notion of cruel optimism (Berlant, 2011; see also England, 2024). These strategies,

often debated and criticised (Fuller, 2018), were nonetheless evident during the fieldwork. Community centres like *Ty Ebbw Fach* and similar, often located at former industrial sites, provide training and business services to help locals 'reskill' and start businesses. These practices also draw on nostalgic ideas of mining communities' resourcefulness and ingenuity.

Cultural memory in the heritage displays at *Ty Ebbw Fach* often highlighted local entrepreneurship and enterprising spirits. Joe, an ex-miner, recalled his mother working as a seamstress after his father's death and himself later running a shop as well as mining, with support from his wife:

> *'Mum, she was a cleaner for a bit, then she did sewing for people from our front room…I had a small shop up on the main road for while… lots [of people] used to have their own little businesses.'*

Other residents shared similar memories of local commerce and opportunity. A young resident of Six Bells recounted:

> *'Mum always tells me you could even buy a car, you could buy everything in Abertillery once…'*

Representations of the mining era frequently invoked themes of entrepreneurship, opportunity and self-made success. Other residents often described their businesses, whether in childcare, selling craft products or food. With support from a London Arts School, *Ty Ebbw Fach* and Six Bells Regeneration Corporation began offering business classes, using paint manufactured from coal waste stored in nearby settling ponds (McCausland, 2017). This entrepreneurial venture tied directly to the remnants of coal mining, creating a sense of hope still linked to coal traces. In this context, while *Guardian* and *Ty Ebbw Fach* serve as poignant reminders of industrial heritage and community resilience, they also reflect the broader community responses to austerity, showcasing how local initiatives strive to reimagine economic futures amidst ongoing challenges.

Scepticism, Loss, and Community: Responses to the Promises of Austerity

Considering the promises of austerity that are conveyed in Ebbw Fach draw on either the entrepreneurial or tenacious spirit that is embedded in nostalgic ideas of the mining community, it is important to outline how austerity is received and understood by residents. Despite the resonances between the nostalgia invoked by austerity narratives and by accounts of mining histories, austerity and wider neoliberal ideas are not without opposition. Enduring scepticism about the efficacy of many of the proposed strategies to navigate government cuts was evident amongst residents, in both accounts and their everyday lives. Local organisations and initiatives such as those attached to the paint, *Guardian,* or *Ty Ebbw Fach* were often met with derision or sadness, that they could ultimately not be effective.

Considering emphasis on the role of self-sufficiency through business ventures, many noted how these businesses have struggled to survive enduring economic decline. This included Adam, whose wife had a small business in the area:

> *'She's got this small business, but truth be told, it's not doing that well. It's hard, no one's got any money to spend local, and like, what do they expect? … Everyone is encouraged to start businesses because there's no jobs, but there's no money here to sustain them. People don't think to shop local, or can't afford to, so everything just goes under… How can you tell people to start businesses when even the big shops don't last…like look around Abertillery, everything's empty… There's no money to keep it going.'*

What Adam described was something we saw throughout the periods of our fieldwork. Upon returning to Abertillery in 2022, only two years since the last visit, one researcher noted: 'the cafe I used to go in is closed, the bank is gone, Peacocks [a highstreet clothing retailer], loads of stuff is empty. I thought it was empty before'. Even *Ty Ebbw Fach,* the café that operated in the building next to the heritage centre and was intended to be a key site for visitors, closed for periods and changed owners, as they attempted to maintain the business. Even within the *Ty Ebbw Fach* centre*,* the site was struggling. Many of the offices in the building were empty, either due to a lack of interest or funding cuts to local NGOs that used the space, and the cafe often closed for periods and changed ownership. These community spaces originally offered hope but could not endure the severity of the cuts and the broader implications of austerity across the community.

This also introduces wider concerns around the promises of tourism associated with *Guardian* and heritage in the area. Many locals were unconvinced with comments such as 'as if anyone is going to come up here, enough to make any difference' and 'really? Tourists here?'. This was further reinforced when a school was built on the site during the fieldwork period, despite resistance from those who saw *Guardian* as a tourist site or site of personal commemoration. Concerns were raised that the school would obstruct tourist access to the statue and park, diminishing the future economic growth that *Guardian* promised. The Communities First workers explained that they were unable to lead any campaign to resist the school redevelopment since their funding had ended.

Some residents expressed to us privately that the school was necessary, reflecting on the decline of other local schools, many of which had been originally built by the miners for their own families. One resident recognised the role of austerity:

> *'There's no money being put to the schools, or anything at the moment, so at least they're giving us something [the new school] … it's not like anyone comes here for Guardian anyway.'*

This tension, between the promises of *Guardian* to address local economic decline, and the reflection on limited government funding, alongside practical issues, illustrates the cruel optimism of such projects. Promises of regeneration and income generation attached to heritage and education are both justified as meaningful routes to navigating the impact of austerity, but neither are convincingly adopted or believed by the wider community. The commemorative importance of *Guardian,* whilst never questioned, was largely framed as unimportant relative to the more immediate economic needs of the community.

Many also highlighted how austerity had eroded social networks, not only through the logic of individualism, but through diminishing the social infrastructure that was already 'gutted' by deindustrialisation (Tomaney et al., 2024). Austerity had detrimentally affected efforts to reestablish such social infrastructure in the area. The aforementioned Communities First initiative established several social groups in the area, including a Walking Group, a Men's Group and a Craft Group. Many of these groups were focused on addressing broader issues associated with poverty, in particular themes of loneliness, isolation, and poor mental health. These groups worked to reinvigorate the community spirit that had been so valued before, also reflecting the efforts of austere policies to move the responsibility for such community resources to the local community (MacLeavy, 2023; Turnbull, 2023). This was explained by a leading member of the Craft Group, but she also recognised how the end of Communities First work in the area had affected the groups:

> *'It's hard to keep stuff going, and the plan was that they'd set it up so that we could run it ourselves after they left. But [Communities First] ended sooner than we all thought and I think we're probably going to manage it, but some of the other groups, I think they've already stopped meeting. I don't think many of them will continue without the help…'*

Other community groups we spoke to also expressed that they struggled to maintain membership, as other residents struggled to make time between commuting to jobs outside of the area and 'trying to make ends meet'. Beyond just social attitudes, the decline of social infrastructures, social services and the local economy was evident even across the years the fieldwork took place, from 2015 to 2022, which was also recognised by residents. Many bemoaned the recent closures of public services, such as medical practices and reduced library and post-office services. A local council worker stated: 'This area just can't absorb any more cuts. They've cut us to the bone'.

Despite the pervasiveness of many of the discourses of austerity, the limitations of the promises have led to resignation rather than acceptance of these policies:

> *'Things just get worse, and they close whatever they can... there's not much we can do'.*

As Wilkinson and Ortega-Alcázar (2019) explain, for many residents, austerity was familiar and recognisable as a continuity of the decline that followed deindustrialisation, and hardship that

predated that. Through the repeated, almost anticipated, slow violence experienced by mining communities – from polluting industries to industrial unrest, deindustrialisation, and now austerity – the expectation that things will improve is understandably absent (see Hall, 2023; Walker, 2023). As a result, austerity appears as a continuity of the marginalisation of the area that was not only remembered but framed as the main reason for the character of such mining communities. 'They've never cared about us up here', one resident noted, illustrating both how rarely austerity was framed as a contemporary issue, and how this is recognised as a continuation of abandonment by the state that stemmed from long before the discursive construction of miners as the 'enemy within' (Gildea, 2023).

Importantly, this belief in the abandonment of the state as a continued and unremarkable reality also reinforces the importance of a historically rooted self-reliance, beyond romanticised ideals of 'making-do' that resonate with austerity nostalgia. Despite many stating their concern that formal social infrastructure often lacked support from other locals or state funding, residents regularly emphasised the importance of collectivism. Whilst discourses of responsibilisation and meritocracy were prevalent, they were not universal. Many held these beliefs in uneasy tension with the believed importance of community, not just in physical buildings but in everyday relationships. 'You could ask your neighbour for anything', stated one young resident; another explained how they had returned to the area after university for a better support network. 'There's really nowhere else like it. We all look out for each other, it's always been this way', stated another resident, in her 80s. This focus highlights the identity of the communities, built on sustaining themselves through hardship, dangerous work, industrial unrest and decline without support from the state. Whether nostalgic or otherwise, this principle has been undiminished by austerity narratives, and offers a clear instance of how austerity can also be understood differently than we have mostly seen; as an effort of neoliberalism at direct odds with the principles of community at the heart of coal-mining villages and towns like those in Ebbw Fach.

Conclusion

In this article, we have explored how understandings of austerity are interwoven with forms of nostalgic sentiment. We argued that this nostalgia was crucial to the 'cruel optimism' of austerity, to enrol UK citizens in the neoliberal logic and material practices of such policies. Exploring the emphasis on resilience and sentiments from wartime Britain, we suggested that nationalistic sentiment rooted in collective nostalgia was readily mobilised in political and media discourses to justify the establishment of these economic policies, and became embedded in the wider affective life of austerity (Hall, 2019; Hitchen and Raynor, 2019; Stanley, 2022). These sentiments had drastic moral impacts for social imaginaries, legitimising efforts to make individuals entirely responsible for their circumstances, framing 'scroungers' in opposition to the resilient and self-sufficient (Tyler, 2013).

We focused on how these sentiments were intertwined with nostalgia in post-industrial communities, particularly in the post-mining areas of Ebbw Fach. Here, nostalgia for industrial life serves as a sustaining force for belonging amidst deindustrialisation. Against this context of decline, this nostalgia contributes to a particular form of cruel optimism. While austerity discourses resonate with mining-era nostalgia and working-class values of hard work and independence, they propose strategies of resilience, individual responsibility, and entrepreneurialism that have failed to deliver stability or renewal. These strategies were also interwoven with commemorative efforts, central to mining communities' identities, weakened by industrial decline. Though intended to preserve the memory of coalfield life, monuments, heritage projects, and community events often reinforce the values that austerity narratives exploit: resilience and self-sufficiency, or were tied to other promises of economic regeneration that did not materialise. These practices offer connection to a proud past but risk becoming entangled in neoliberal rhetoric, creating a conflicted space where memory is both a source of strength and a tool for exploitation.

At the same time, we highlight how the legacies of deindustrialisation, and later austerity, have led to scepticism and resignation among residents, who recognise that these promises are unlikely to bring meaningful change. It is in the scepticism and acknowledgement of the failure of austerity promises to deliver regeneration that resistance and solidarity emerge. We follow Wilkinson and Ortega-Alcázar (2019) and Kiely (2021: 727), in suggesting that it is in weariness, waiting, and the 'grinding resistance to slow violence' that alternatives to austerity and neoliberalism are quietly and slowly maintained. The repetition of histories of perseverance and hardship beyond just the versions that resonate with more nationalist nostalgic narratives reinforces their importance to the identity of such mining communities. Ultimately, austerity nostalgia also reflects a belief in the enduring importance of community solidarity and care, which have adapted to the fluctuating support of state provision; a pattern familiar in these communities. Within this dynamic, we may uncover overlooked, everyday forms of politics that hold transformative potential (MacLeavy, 2023; Turnbull, 2023). The continued role of social groups in providing care and fostering solidarity not only sustains these communities but also resists the push toward complete individualisation, even in their weakened condition.

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