

Living in the Ruins: Melancholic Nostalgia and the Decomposition of England's Traditional Working Class

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Abstract

Drawing on longitudinal ethnographic fieldwork, this article examines the function and significance of nostalgia in white working-class communities in northern England. While contemporary political discourse often frames working-class nostalgia as a regressive force fuelling populist nationalism, this study reveals a more complex and melancholic dynamic. Drawing on Lacanian psychoanalysis and the work of Žižek and Han, the article theorises nostalgia not as a reactionary retreat but as a response to four fundamental ruptures: the collapse of communal structures, the perpetual insecurity of economic existence, the fragmentation of shared cultural meaning, and the disappearance of positive visions of the future. Participants' nostalgic memories function as attempts to access an elusive lost object that promises to restore a sense of wholeness. However, the lost community participants hoped to rediscover simply cannot be identified and reclaimed. The article demonstrates how melancholic attachment to vanished communal structures reflects broader temporal disorientation in an era of material decline, where the certainties of the past have dissolved and the future has become unimaginable. This melancholic nostalgia bears little relation to imperial longing or ethnic nationalism; rather, it grows from the enclashed experience of watching one's culture and way of life fade from view, leaving only the certainty of loss and the haunting presence of what once was.

Keywords

Nostalgia; melancholia; working class; deindustrialisation; community; temporality; Lacan; Žižek; neoliberalism

Introduction

Nostalgia pervades contemporary life, from the promises of populist movements (Nilan et al., 2025) to the aesthetics of consumer culture (Becker, 2023; Cross, 2015). Politicians and marketers have become skilled in the manipulation of nostalgia—the former to frame dissatisfaction with the present, the latter to commodify the past (Hatherley, 2016; Jameson, 1992; Fisher, 2022). Yet these features of popular debate tend to misconstrue the reality of

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nostalgia and overlook its function in communities experiencing material decline. Beneath the surface of these contested nostalgias lies a more profound question: why does nostalgia appear to be an increasingly significant cultural trend now, as the certainties of the past disappear, as sources of security fade from view, and as popular conceptions of the future take a darker turn?

In intellectual life too there has been growing interest in nostalgia (Becker, 2023; Tanner, 2023; Arnold-Forster, 2025). Traditionally, nostalgia and those who succumb to it have been associated with failure, withdrawal and regression (Adorno, 1974; Gilroy, 2004; Bauman, 2017). The nostalgic individual is commonly depicted as turning away from an unsatisfying present and seeking solace in sanitized, commodified images of an idealized past. A broad range of contemporary analyses tend to simply historicise, contextualise and reaffirm the standard multipolar interpretation of nostalgia as inherently regressive, a problem for the other but never the self, before asserting that it is once again on the march to threaten freedoms, curtail progress and prevent us from honestly appraising the world as it truly is (see for example Campanella and Dassu, 2019).

While the academic literature on nostalgia offers valuable insights (see for example Strangleman, 1999; Boym, 2002; Davis, 2014), as yet it has failed to extend its reach towards the contextualized utility of nostalgia in an era marked by the disappearance of positive visions of the future (Berardi, 2011). What does nostalgia signify in our present moment—a time characterized by genuine material regression, fracture, atomisation and fear, a time in which many have abandoned the standard post-Enlightenment faith in incremental progress and instead accept the inevitability of decline (Wark, 2021; Varoufakis, 2024)? What might patterns and themes in the contemporary experience of nostalgia reveal about the various ways we interpret our own disjointed age, an age in which so many feel excluded from the normative flow of historical time, cleaved away from history and disinvested in all but the vaguest conceptions of the future?

Before we can begin to consider such matters, it is first necessary to identify precisely what is meant by nostalgia and situate it a little more firmly within our cultures and mental life. Following this original account of the function and role of nostalgia in the present, the paper moves on to outline the methods used in the empirical aspect of this study. Data and analysis then follows, addressing first the melancholic attachment respondents had to their dead communities and, second, the common assumption that the future would be worse than the present and the past.

The meaning of nostalgia

Nostalgic memories are intertwined with other forms of memory (Conway, 1985, 1994; Tulving, 2002). Memory has of course been integral to human development. What we are now, both subjectively and collectively, is inextricably bound up with our ability to remember. Our memories are complex and extend well beyond conscious mental processes (Ledoux, 2020; Johnston and Malabou, 2013; Hall and Winlow, 2025). Writing at the end of the nineteenth century, Henri Bergson (2018, 2019) suggested that memory exists in two forms: habit-memory, which he applied to apparently automatic, body-centred actions, like riding a bike, and pure memory, a category he suggested captured the personal recollections used in more complex tasks, such as assisting in processes of identity formation. The brain, Bergson maintained, does not simply store memories. Rather, it filters information, drawing upon past experiences and weaving them together with elements of what he called the *durée* of lived experience. Bergson's dualistic model has been quietly influential in the development of philosophical approaches to the study of memory.

But how might our memories inform our identities and the various ways we approach self and social life? Nostalgic memories in particular seem to equip us with a diverse range of ‘dialectical images’ (Benjamin, 1999) that can be brought together and used to create narratives that aid the individual as she moves from immediacy through opposition and alienation towards resolution in her battle of self-becoming (Hegel, 1976). Images of the past clash with conscious perceptions of the present to aid the process of building a dynamic perception of ourselves. This process involves not only the interplay of development, contradiction and reconciliation (*ibid.*), but also the complexities of forgetting, remembering and misremembering (Winlow, 2025). Paul Ricoeur’s (2006) concept of narrative identity is especially pertinent here. Ricoeur argues that individuals construct their identities through the stories they tell themselves about their lives, integrating past, present, and future into a coherent narrative of self and how we became whatever we imagine ourselves to be. Nostalgic memories, in this sense, and following Bergson, are not passive recollections but active elements of this narrative process, helping individuals navigate dislocation and change.

The process of constructing one’s personal identity, then, appears partially dependent upon retrospective biographical narratives. These biographical narratives are structured in relation to our evolving memories of specific events, people, and places. As the actual events that inform the creation and recreation of biographical narratives recede further into the past, our memories of them become increasingly fluid and vague (Schacter, 2002). We do not routinely retain exact images of actual events. Our memories of even the most important events in our lives are reconstructions that inevitably change over time (Schacter, 1997). However, while our memories of actual events change or disappear entirely, the emotions that become attached to such events appear more stable and enduring. It is this emotional residue that seems to form a significant part of the bittersweet substance of nostalgic memories. We ‘remember’ not just what happened, but the emotions we believe accompanied what happened. These memories are interwoven with the emotions evoked in the act of remembering (Ledouw, 1999; Tulving, 2002), reinterpreted, reconstructed, codified and often revisited in those moments when we seek meaning or comfort in what we have come to imagine once was.

When we revisit nostalgic memories, we do so as voyeurs, consuming representations of our own experiences. The raw authenticity of the original moment is lost, leaving only an unstable, mediated representation. As Baudrillard (1994) observed, our hyperreal present ensures we consume the past as a simulacrum. Authentic images become indistinguishable from an infinite assortment of replicas. As truth collapses into mere representation, authenticity ceases to matter.

We often turn to nostalgic memories in times of personal turmoil (Phillips, 1995). Nostalgic memories can offer a sense of solace, and they are often revisited when we find ourselves in need of clarity or guidance (Vess et al., 2012; Wildschut et al., 2006). In this way, nostalgic memories play a crucial role in processes of self-narration and understanding (Sedikides and Wildschut, 2018; Routledge, 2015). Halbwachs (1992) argued that even seemingly personal nostalgic memories are socially framed, relying on shared symbols, rhythms, and narratives to render them intelligible. Collective nostalgia sustains community cohesion by selectively reactivating pasts that serve present needs (Davis, 2014). These dynamics often crystallize around material anchors—childhood homes, anniversaries—that tether nostalgia’s abstractions to lived practice. Thus, while regional and cultural identities remain unstable, they are partially bolstered by shared retrospections.

Our understanding of nostalgia can also be aided by drawing upon elements of psychoanalysis. Freud’s early work suggested nostalgia functions as a form of screen memory—a selectively idealized past that conceals unresolved conflicts or traumas beneath its comforting surface

imagery (Freud, 2001). This idealization parallels his later distinction between mourning, which for Freud suggested an adaptive engagement with loss, and melancholia, which he believed indicated a pathological fixation on an irretrievable object (Freud, 2005). This line of analysis was extended by Lacan, who placed nostalgia firmly in the realm of the Imaginary. The Imaginary for Lacan is the realm in which the subject relates to illusory images of wholeness and coherence that mask the fragmented nature of the subject. Nostalgic memories seem to promise the return to a unified, prelinguistic self, which of course is the principal reason why such memories can be so appealing. However, as Lacan stressed, this unified self has never truly existed, and our fundamental fragmentation cannot be overcome (Lacan, 1998).

Lacan's *objet petit a*—the unattainable object-cause of desire—clarifies why participants clung to idealized memories of community. Their nostalgia fixated on a lost social world they believed could resolve present alienation, yet this 'true community' was always already a fantasy, never the fully realized harmony they imagined (Lacan, 1998). This gap between memory and material history, as we'll see, rendered their nostalgia melancholic: they mourned something that never existed in the form they recalled. The lost object of true community seemed to be hiding within many of the diverse nostalgic memories offered by men and women across the entire sample. There were many noteworthy absences in their lives. Their nostalgic memories often seemed to centre upon times in which they believed themselves to have experienced a greater degree of autonomy, contentment, joy, acceptance and relative affluence, but all of these narratives traced multiple paths back to the same destination. They yearned for the stable world of meaning they believed was once provided by the Big Other's symbolic order (Lacan, 1998), but what they wanted could never exist. It had not existed in the past in the ways they imagine, and it could not be recreated in the present. Participants' growing conscious awareness that what they desired most was destined to remain out of reach cloaked the entire project in a cloud of melancholy (Winlow, 2025).

Slavoj Žižek's analysis of the structural role of fantasy in ideological systems also informs the analysis developed below. Building on Lacan's concept of *objet petit a*, Žižek (2009) theorizes ideology as operating through what he terms *the sublime object*: a Lacanian lost object rooted in ideological mystification. This lost object is 'sublime' in the sense that it attracts fantasmatic and fetishistic investment despite constantly eluding fixity and understanding. Žižek's conceptualisation allows us to get to grips with the various ways political movements generate affective power by elevating specific visions—Marxism's classless utopia, conservatism's organic traditionalism, liberalism's progressive horizon—into imagined or mystified resolutions for historical antagonisms. Crucially, these ideological formations tend to exist independently of their potential practical applications. Rather, it is their very impossibility that imbues them with energy; the sublime object's potency lies in its perpetual deferral, sustaining desire through the promise of a future harmony capable of negating present discontents.

Žižek's (2009) critical contribution lies in his extension of Lacan's original analysis to include an essentially Hegelian account of the dialectics of absence as they pertain to political ideology. The sublime object is neither simple false consciousness nor naïve utopianism, but a constitutive fiction that coordinates social reality. As an empty signifier, it anchors political discourse, organizing perception and practice around an absence. This generates a degree of ideological coherence while ironically reproducing the contradictions it purports to transcend. Participants' idealized recollections of their past cultural lives function as something akin to a sublime object: imagined plenitude contrasted with present want, past security could be compared to present insecurity, cultural vibrancy with insipid commercialism, and so on. However, the idealised culture state remained somehow vaguely composed and completely inaccessible. Its power lay in its non-existence and the forms of fantasmatic investment it

inspired. The very act of nostalgic invocation thus reveals both the necessity and impossibility of this lost harmony, mirroring the logic Žižek identifies at the heart of political belief.

Nostalgic memories can, it seems, stabilize identity through narrative continuity. Leader (2000) suggests that individuals often use idealised memories or self-narratives to impose a sense of order on what would otherwise be the chaotic material of everyday life. Similarly, Bollas (2017) has often claimed individuals unconsciously draw on early relational experiences to shape ongoing patterns of being and relating. We are, Bollas suggests, historical beings inextricably bonded to our known and unknown pasts. We use our history, drawn from both the conscious and unconscious realms, as we attempt to organise our present experience. Again, the fundamental message is that the past remains active in our mental life. Nostalgia is not simple reminiscence but a dynamic negotiation between memory's consoling fictions and the unconscious truths those consoling fictions obscure.

For the participants discussed below, nostalgia seemed to provide both of these functions simultaneously: their emotional connection to the lost community appears to sustain them as they battle the real-world problems of the present. Many suggested that private nostalgic memories delivered a measured degree of repose and emotional satisfaction, as if such memories functioned to ground their lives and experiences, clarifying where they had come from and what mattered to them. Similarly, shared nostalgic memories provided the vital function of bonding groups together in material circumstances that seemed set to inevitably drive them apart. However, in a process similar to Adrian Johnston's (2008) model of deadaptation, their absorption into the lost community's ideologies guarantees they cannot rejoin the cultural and economic mainstream. Put simply, as the cultural mainstream has motored inexorably forward, at least in the temporal sense, participants' backwards gaze and attachment to that which was always already lost ensures the gap between themselves and the mainstream grows gradually wider. They remain bonded to a lost aspect of culture that serves no function in an economy energised by insecurity and competition, and a post-social order rooted in unflinching privatism and individualism (Winlow and Hall, 2012). Yearning for the ethics of a past judged more secure and more sociable and pining for myriad lost rituals, they feel out of place in time: a discarded ex-community condemned to haunt a transformed version of their own neighbourhoods, living on in times that seem increasingly alien, wishing to rejoin a world retained in memory so that they might truly live again.

Methods

The data presented here comes from a broad empirical and theoretical investigation of the interplay between nostalgia and working-class political consciousness. In the years following Brexit, Trump's election, and the surge of European right-wing populism, a recurring narrative took hold: that white working-class voters were being seduced by regressive nostalgia (e.g., Judah, 2016; Bhambra, 2017; see also McKenzie, 2017). Such claims seemed to capture the discontent of the liberal mainstream as it sought to come to terms with a climate of increased turbulence and enmity while navigating a range of quite old but newly energised antagonisms. However, while interesting and occasionally insightful, such claims often rested on intuition and abstract critique and were absent of a trustworthy empirical foundation. To bridge this gap, I turned my attention to six adjacent neighbourhoods in a northern English city struggling to break free from the inertia of its industrial inheritance. The city where the research took place has been greatly affected by austerity, welfare retrenchment and a lack of public and private investment (Lloyd, 2016; Telford and Lloyd, 2020; Johnson et al, 2024). If an attempt was ever made, political, cultural and financial elites have resoundingly failed to construct a range of

new, optimistic and forward-looking images and narratives to sustain the city and its people as a new epoch begins to unfold (Telford, 2022, 2024). Stripped of its former industry, absent of anything new beyond some half-hearted political bluster about redevelopment, the city – which must remain anonymous here – seems to have been discarded to history (Winlow et al, 2015; Telford, 2022). It has, predictably, high rates of crime and other social problems. Its people have shorter lifespans (Walsh and McCartney, 2024). Its infrastructure is dilapidated, its central shopping areas dishevelled and sparsely populated. Most of its civic buildings have either been sold off or left to fall into disrepair. The neighbourhoods where the research was carried out are poor and have been for some time (Winlow, 2001; Hall et al, 2008; McKenzie, 2015). Being born here, or even moving here in later life, is an indicator of future negative outcomes. While these neighbourhoods remain dominated by the white working class, they have changed markedly in character (Hall et al., 2008; Winlow et al., 2017). There has been a great decline in long-term residents, and the population is much more transient than in years gone by. Individuals and families often move in only to move quickly out again. Inevitably, these trends effect community life and shape interaction rituals.

The study sought to unravel a web of interrelated questions: Were white working-class voters truly defecting to the nationalist right? Were they drawn to the populist right by its powerful rhetoric and reductive analytical tropes, or were they so repelled by the blandness of the technocratic mainstream they began to look to the political margins for inspiration? How did the nostalgia of these ordinary men and women differ from mere reminiscence? Amid their diverse yearnings, was it possible to identify a desire to resurrect an imperial past (Mitchell, 2021) or return to a white monoculture in which people like them fared better (Bhambra, 2017)?

In an effort to untangle these various lines of inquiry and construct a robust empirical base that might enable me to say something new about how nostalgia is experienced and how it connects to the field of politics, I employed a suite of qualitative methods. I was able to draw upon longstanding ties and established research relationships in the neighbourhoods where the research took place. These contacts introduced me to men and women who might be willing to be interviewed, vouched for me and helped me greatly as the project developed and evolved over time. I focused on residents aged 45–60, a cohort old enough to recall forms of community life predating neoliberal restructuring but young enough to remain at least partially involved in common culture and community life. The overwhelming majority of those who agreed to participate in the study identified themselves as being white, English and working class. Most were atheists, but a small number identified as Christian. My contacts were more likely to introduce me to men, and overall men were keener to get involved in the project and submit to interview. These facts reflect my identity as a researcher and the realities of the neighbourhoods in which the research was carried out.

The most poignant and insightful data tended to come from walking interviews. Walking interviews (n=39) with participants traversing sites of personal and collective history—shuttered pubs, childhood homes, derelict factories—elicited emotionally charged reflections on decline. These walks frequently led on to unstructured sit-down conversations—mostly in homes and local cafés—that allowed me to explore some of their observations more deeply. There was of course a good deal of talk of happy times, and most nostalgic memories seem tied in various ways to a sense of security that most suggested once elevated their lives. However, every warm recollection was inevitably followed by the realisation that those times were gone and could not return. Participants realised there was a degree of comfort in nostalgic memories. But alongside that comfort lay a palpable and multidimensional sense of loss that for the most part was left unaddressed in their everyday lives. Loss could be found encroaching upon

virtually every topic we discussed. A total of 63 participants (50 men, 13 women) engaged in these standard interviews, with 28 returning for follow-up discussions.

I also conducted a long-running immersive ethnographic investigation of the neighbourhoods under discussion. I spent months observing street interactions and public behaviour while also engaging in casual talk with residents in shops, pubs, cafes and out on the street. Being present in these neighbourhoods for extended periods allowed me to check the veracity of claims made by participants as I began to form my own views, and as various hypotheses and lines of analyses began to emerge.

Melancholic attachments to dead communities

Participants did not simply remember their extinct communities; they lived alongside their absence, haunted by the disappearance of the rituals that once appeared to hold the symbolic order in place (Kotze and Lloyd, 2022; Linkon and Russo, 2002). For Han (2020), rituals are not mere social conventions but the embodied infrastructure of communal meaning. Rituals lent coherence to individual lives by utilising and reproducing what can appear relatively fixed range of symbols. Rituals mark time collectively, unsullied by the atomized and reductive schedules of neoliberal productivity (see for example Crary, 2014; Lloyd, 2018; Bushell, 2023). The erosion and disappearance of rituals creates what Han terms a crisis of continuity. When a society that oscillates around personal achievement replaces shared symbols and rites with vague and alienating invocations towards self-optimization, individuals become increasingly untethered from history and disconnected from one another.

How can we begin to conceptualise the material and symbolic death of these communities? Han (2020) suggests digital capitalism dissolves communal temporality into a scattered series of disconnected now-points where even memory becomes atomized into isolated data fragments. Participants' sensory fragments of loss are not merely memories. When contextualised and addressed in their true complexity, they are suggestive of multiple and ongoing failed attempts to reassemble *durée* from contemporary capitalism's temporal granularization (Han, 2020). Without the stabilizing force of collective rituals—those repetitive, embodied practices that once transformed abstract 'community' into a tangible sense of belonging—the past ceases to function as a stabilizing shared resource. Instead, it fractures into privatized nostalgia, apparently foreclosing a collective response to the prevailing sense of decline and diminishment.

This double death offers a means of illuminating why participants' nostalgia occasionally fixed on sensory fragments from the past: the smell of a long-demolished chip shop, the sight of the teal grey churning sea on what was supposed to be a summer holiday, the sound of one's mother humming in the kitchen while preparing tea. These are what Bergson (2002) would call pure memories—affect-laden shards that seem to resist narrative coherence. Intuitively, in attempting to communicate an unknown reality, participants told stories rooted in happiness, security, contentment or comfort lost. When asked directly about their lost community, they were able to move beyond indicative narratives to offer often cogent and revelatory insight into precisely what had been lost, what this loss meant and how it had transformed the lives of those who remained invested in its image. Here, nostalgic memories appeared to operate as the dialectical images (Benjamin, 1999) touched upon earlier: snapshots from the past that, when juxtaposed with the present, led inevitably to an informed account of the contradictions of 'progress'.

Melancholia, Freud noted, is inherently future-averse. Participants tended to assume that decline was inevitable. However, their negativistic view of the future should not be dismissed as mere pessimism. It grows from their inability to invest in a temporal order from which they felt expunged. Žižek (2009) frames this as the foreclosure of the symbolic horizon: put simply, when the dominant ideology can no longer promise a better tomorrow, the marginalized respond by fetishizing yesterday. Han's (2020) analysis of temporal exhaustion extends this point. In a society that replaces collective futures with endless presentism, nostalgia appears to become an ambiguous and double-edged escape, yet one that offers at least minor overtones of temporal agency.

Dennis is a 53-year-old joiner and kitchen fitter. He has two adult children and recently became a grandfather. He was not disposed to romanticising the past, but he still had this to say about the perceived decline of community sentiments:

“It was just real, do you know what I mean? I can't explain it. It was a nicer time. That's how it seems now. People around here used to know each other. I had family around, everyone had family around... To me it seemed everyone was happier (...). Work was great when I started. I had friends, we'd be out every weekend (...). There were less worries (...). All of that's just gone. Is it getting older (...)? I look at my kids, their kids, people at work, just ordinary people around the place, and it's something else.”

This ‘something else’ kept cropping up through all aspects of the research. For many participants, what was missing resisted simple identification. No matter how hard they thought about it, they could not fix upon precisely what it was that was once present and had now been withdrawn. In order to move closer to this causative absence, participants told stories that they hoped would cast some light upon it.

Dennis again:

“There was an action to everything. We had some proper characters living around here. The pubs were great (...). Then you're old. You get wrapped up with everything, family, job, stuff like that. Your life just changes. Everyone I grew up with around here moved away or just died, I don't know. I didn't even miss it. I'd be with the family, mind on work, money, personal stuff, you know? And then you start to miss it. I started to miss it about ten, five years ago maybe. I lost touch with some people. Lots of the lads are scattered around, gone (...). And everything's just changed. Look at it. I can't make sense of it. I don't know none of these people here. I lived here forty-odd years.”

Like all melancholics, participants remained invested in a lost object. While consciously they could accept its non-existence, unconsciously they simply couldn't let it go. The rehabilitative work of mourning could not begin.

Brendan is 55 years old and works in the hospitality industry. He has two adult children and three grandchildren:

“This place now, I don't recognise it. The pubs have gone, the shops have gone, everyone I knew pretty much. The people here now just keep themselves to themselves. It's a very private area now, and it never used to be that way. The world just races past you, doesn't it? And it does seem to me that it all changed, like, super quick. Like, it was the way it was, it was home, it was my place. And then just, totally different. Like it changed before you can even tell what's going on.”

Q: What's missing?

“Well, the people have gone, the people who used to live here. If you know how it was you can really see the difference... I don’t know [what else has changed]. It’s not the buildings or the roads or the shops or anything. Not really (...). It just doesn’t feel like home anymore. I feel a bit out of place (...). My local [pub] shut. I used to go to the bakery at the bottom of the road there, but that’s gone. But no one cares. Maybe that’s it. All that stuff has gone, and no one cares. Maybe I’m pissed off they don’t care. They’ve got their own stuff going on. They don’t want to know the history. That’s what it feels like: I’m saying, ‘this stuff matters’, but no-one’s got time, it doesn’t affect them, so they don’t care.”

Here Brendan hits upon a succession of important insights. First, he notes the gradual shift to privatisation. This is a material reality rather than an idealised fiction. The extended multi-generational families that were once common in these neighbourhoods have reduced markedly in number and, in a process described as ‘churn’ (see Burrell, 2016; Dahlberg, 2020), new arrivals often tend not to stay. Brendan’s retrospective idealisation of the lost community is brought into dialectical tension with the material realities that shape his present experience. Brendan also talks directly about feeling alienated from the very places he has called home for much of his life. Many other participants felt the same. Brendan’s ‘home’ had changed to such an extent that, for him, it could no longer be accurately identified as such. Again, it was missing something vital but something that could not easily be named. As we have already seen, this feeling of discomfort in the present spurred a retreat into bittersweet reminiscence where at least some degree of repose and recognition could be found. Mark, 51, makes a similar point:

“I feel old before my time. Everyone does these days don’t they? You don’t realise, then woosh, its gone.”

Q: Why do you feel old?

“I think I just feel out of it, like the young one’s have gone off in a completely different direction. The gaps are massive. I don’t get the humour. Like on TV. I don’t get it. I don’t get all the new technology stuff. I’ve tried (...).”

Q: Do you reckon that’s just the way it goes, getting older?

“I suppose. You’re stuck in the past a bit (...). But (...) it wasn’t like that with my parents (...). I don’t think it’s been like that in the past, you know, overall (...). We kept things going, I think, with the sports and the interests, that kind of thing. We’re not that much different [my generation from the one before] (...). [W]e got married, couple of pints, kids, work, all of that. The gap now seems much bigger. At least it does to me.”

Q: You don’t think your Mam and Dad felt the same?

“No, I don’t think so (...). [L]ots of times we ended up working in the same jobs, especially before all the factories shut down (...). I think with women it was even more. Like, there wasn’t a big jump with all that between the mother and the daughter. A lot of it was the same. Houses, family, work, friends (...). There’s ties, isn’t there? (...). I don’t get that as much with kids today (...). They haven’t got those ties, have they?”

Very few participants could summon up positive images of the future. The future was, somehow, unimaginable. For the most part, participants tended to assume the negativities of the present would continue and worsen, and this prompted a range of anxieties about what would become of their children and grandchildren. Again, implied here is not a sudden rupture but an incremental thinning and gradual disappearance.

Graham is 49. He is divorced and has a 15-year-old daughter. He works as a delivery driver for a large supermarket.

“I think there was a community once (...). I’m not saying it was perfect, but there wasn’t as many selfish cunts about, only bothered about money, only bothered about themselves. When I look back, I grew up with some properly kind people, you know? (...). But now what have you got? And I think it’s all affected me. Just seeing what people are. That you’re basically on your own. I don’t know how to say it. Just the coldness of it. It affected me (...). We are just dying out, aren’t we?”

Derek is 56 and has a managerial job for a large retailer. He has three children and one grandchild. He had this to say:

“I tell them, I tell them all to move away. There’s nothing left here. They’re never going to bring jobs back. Look, everything’s crumbling. It’s just the way it is. I tell them to get out and find somewhere. Go, while you can. I love this place, but I hate it sometimes. It’s a strange feeling, because the good has all gone (...). That’s what I feel, walking around here now. It’s home, but there’s something missing (...). It’s just getting that little bit worse, year to year, everything, isn’t it? I want the kids to find somewhere, somewhere safe. But who the fuck knows where that is?”

Sandra is 56 and works in the retail industry. She offered the following observation, which is remarkably similar to that offered by Derek, above:

“It’s going to get worse as far as I can see. No one wants to fix it, do they? The politicians couldn’t care less. It’s just gone, that whole thing. I’ve said before, I tell the kids to move. Why would you stay? Get out while you can, that’s what I tell them.”

Many participants agreed with Sandra and Derek on this point. Tony is 53 and a salesman. He is married with two children and one grandchild. He said:

“You want your kids to get on in life: jobs, houses, stuff like that. You want them to be successful, safe, and just happy I suppose. But here, I don’t think there is much positive to come. You’ve got to get out there, get into a good job somehow, and then you’ve got to fight to keep it. It’s too late for me, I know that. I don’t care. I just want the family to be safe. I don’t want them dragged down by what’s coming.”

Louise, 53, had this to say:

“It’s a bit worrying when you stop and think about it. I mean, when does it stop? You find yourself hoping, you know, things will turn around. There’ll be proper jobs, more money, the place will come to life again. You’re kind of waiting. But then you get to my age, and you’ve been waiting for, what, years, isn’t it? Years and years. Maybe it will come back in the future, but not in my lifetime.”

Q: Why?

“I don’t know. It’s all just feelings, isn’t it? It feels like it’s just done (...). Maybe it’s just me and I need to snap out of it. There needs to be something big. To change things, there needs to be, I don’t know, a revolution or something. Something big, something major (...). So that’s why I’m all negative about it. There’s nothing big is there? Just more of the same.”

For participants, the cultural practices of the past had become less accessible and those that remained seemed somehow less nourishing. The neighbourhoods they had long inhabited no longer provided the same sense of belonging or security. Many had internalized the expectation that they would preserve their cultural traditions for future generations. Some recounted futile efforts to sustain symbolic practices but most acknowledged that such practices had now faded beyond recovery. To experience the cultural rituals they valued, they could only reminisce.

In the quotes above we can also see a striking contradiction in participants' narratives: even as they grieved for their lost culture and community, many actively encouraged their children to detach themselves from its tattered remnants to seek opportunities elsewhere. This suggested a pragmatic, if painful, acceptance of cultural dissolution. While they sought to preserve affective ties through memory, they also tended to believe the neighbourhood, the city and the region would continue their downwards descent while the last remnants of the lost community finally faded into nothingness. The intergenerational transmission of culture, once a core expectation, now seemed a pointless undertaking. Their cultural inheritance was no longer considered a great gift. Rather, passing the culture on to their children was often interpreted as saddling their children with ideals, tastes, attitudes and demeanours unsuited to the new world. Instead, participants encouraged their children to leave in search of something better. This was the clearest indication that participants accepted that what they loved could not return. The dead culture, they were sure, was worth preserving. But it had not been preserved, and it had eventually died. It was, as so many participants said, 'too late for them'. Their children were encouraged to find a space where they could shelter from the coming storms.

Conclusion

This ethnography reveals how nostalgia functions as a melancholic attachment to vanished communal structures, reflecting broader ruptures occurring in the wake of global capitalism's ongoing metamorphosis (Wark, 2021; Hall, 2022; Varoufakis, 2024). For participants, nostalgia bore little relation to prevailing cultural debates about nationalism, ethnocentrism or imperialism. Far from fuelling reactionary populism (see Winlow and Hall, 2022, for discussion), this specific strand of melancholic nostalgia grows from a working class that has, for the moment at least, stopped believing in any political salvation—whether from left or right. Rather, their longing focused intensely on the disappearance of a particular way of life – a once-thriving community that persisted vividly in memory but had ceased to exist in reality. They remained emotionally invested in the symbols, rituals and traditions of their lost community, and they remained invested because the lost culture had provided them with a comprehensive means of interpreting themselves and the world around them.

We observe here a distinct form of melancholic nostalgia that emerges from the enclashed experience of the present. It arises as a response to four fundamental ruptures: the collapse of communal structures, the perpetual insecurity of economic existence, the fragmentation of shared cultural meaning, and the disappearance of the future from shared cultural and political discourse. These ruptures appear to have given rise to the sense of estrangement many feel from deep historical processes that once enabled individuals to situate themselves firmly in relation to past, present and future. This common sense of dislocation, evidenced in all aspects of the study, is also tied to participants' experiences of a reality where once-stable foundations appear to have dissolved into the atomized logic of an evolving post-social market oligarchy.

At its core, this nostalgia represents the human pursuit of the *objet petit a* – something elusive that might finally piece together our fractured experience of contemporary social and cultural life. Participants believed that rediscovering this missing object – for them, the dearly remembered lost community – would give them a sense of wholeness and elevate their

experience. However, the lost community never truly existed in the ways they imagined. It cannot be recovered, and nor can a hastily manufactured replica conclusively restore the longed-for sense of wholeness.

Participants' nostalgia does not seek to resurrect the past. While it distorts reality, it speaks to perception and bears witness to personal consequences of watching one's culture and way of life fade from view. Their longing is not for a mythic golden age, but for a world that once offered coherence—a coherence now irretrievably shattered by economic abandonment and cultural erasure. What remains is not the promise of reclamation, but the certainty of loss: the neighbourhoods they knew are gone, the rituals that sustained them hollowed out, and their children urged to flee rather than stay and inherit a dying legacy. This is not to say that the decline of community sentiments is new or that the erasure of location and time-specific cultures is not a traditional feature of historical change. Rather, it is to position the decline and death of specific modern cultures in relation to material processes and the corresponding collapse of functional symbolic orders. The decline and death of the specific culture analysed here is tied to a specific form of political economy – neoliberalism – which is now approaching its end (Winlow, 2022; Hall, 2022). However, it is difficult to celebrate the end of neoliberalism, given that what appears to be emerging in its wake seems likely to be significantly worse (Varoufakis, 2024). Cultures inevitably evolve over time. Participants' children and grandchildren will not necessarily be denied access to a reasonably coherent cultural life, even if the cultures that emerge in the future are shorn of the emphasis modern working-class cultures placed upon collectivism, common interests and their various associated rituals. But one thing is clear: no emergent culture will not absorb this study's participants, and nor will they be able to find any comfort in it.

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