

## INTRODUCTION

# The de-industrializing city in the UK and Germany: conceptual approaches and empirical findings in comparative perspective

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When the Coventry-based band The Specials released their single ‘Ghost Town’ in June 1981, they appeared to be giving stark expression to a broader sense of crisis that characterized Britain’s urban environment in the early Thatcher years. The song’s invocation of urban decay, social dislocation and violence, juxtaposed to a romanticized past of ‘good old days ... in a de boomtown’, struck a chord with contemporary audiences.<sup>1</sup> It provided a fitting soundtrack to the urban riots that broke out in many British cities later that summer.<sup>2</sup> Yet at the same time, the band’s innovative fusion of the different musical influences of Punk and Ska, their attention to branding and style and not least of all their ethnically diverse line-up pointed in the direction of opportunities and new departures amid the gloom that the music so hauntingly evoked.<sup>3</sup> Above all, the song ‘Ghost Town’ illustrated that the urban environment had become a space in which intersecting developments were taking shape that characterized the late twentieth century more generally: transformation and continuity, conflict and resilience, farewells and new beginnings.

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<sup>1</sup>The Specials, ‘Ghost Town’ (2 Tone Records, 1981).

<sup>2</sup>On the riots of the early 1980s, see S. Peplow, *Race and Riots in Thatcher’s Britain* (Manchester, 2019); A. Marwick, *British Society since 1945*, 4th edn (London, 2003), 227–32; B. Harrison, *Finding a Role? The United Kingdom 1970–1990* (Oxford and New York, 2010), 525–6; and, in a more populist vein, A. Beckett, *Promised You a Miracle: Why 1980–1982 Made Modern Britain* (London, 2015), 59–80.

<sup>3</sup>Compare S. Reynolds, *Rip It Up and Start Again: Postpunk 1978–1984* (London, 2005), 281–303. Reynolds stresses that the innovation consisted, in considerable measure, in a return to the musical styles and aesthetics of the 1960s.

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This Special Issue takes up these multiple transformations and examines their intersections and frictions through the lens of the ‘de-industrializing city’. De-industrialization was rooted in economic change, but had distinct social, cultural, spatial and political reverberations. De-industrialization physically inscribed itself onto the face of cities. It manifested itself in disused dockyards, abandoned steel plants and textile mills. Mass redundancies, industrial wastelands, urban blight and population decline were de-industrialization’s most visible consequences, profoundly affecting the lived experience of the urban working class. De-industrialization also presented a powerful set of symbolically resonant tropes for those who experienced them ‘only on their journey to work as they look down from the railway across the backs of terraces, or across the vacant land from main roads’.<sup>4</sup> The loss of major industries also challenged collective identities: could Sheffield, for example, still be identified as ‘steel city’ when the mills had been shut down? As the contributions to this Special Issue will demonstrate, de-industrialization profoundly affected cities as built but also as lived and imagined environments. In doing so, the contributions go beyond the narrowly economic understandings of de-industrialization that dominate much of the historiography.<sup>5</sup>

The term ‘de-industrialization’ is not without its problems. The neologism was used by contemporaries in their attempts to make sense of the profound changes that they witnessed all around them.<sup>6</sup> There was also the problem of political ownership. While initially a technical term in the debate about the perceived ills of the British economy in the 1970s, ‘de-industrialization’ came to be monopolized by the Left and was soon turned into a byword for the ravages that the ‘Thatcher revolution’ was visiting upon the social fabric of Britain.<sup>7</sup> Yet, used as a concept,

<sup>4</sup>H. Wilson and L. Womersley, *Change or Decay: Final Report of the Liverpool Inner Area Studies* (London, 1977), 1.

<sup>5</sup>M. Kitson and J. Michie, ‘The de-industrial revolution: the rise and fall of UK manufacturing’, in R. Floud, J. Humphries and P. Johnson (eds.), *The Cambridge Economic History of Modern Britain*, vol. II: 1870 to the Present (Cambridge, 2014), 302–29.

<sup>6</sup>The *Oxford English Dictionary* records the first use of the verb ‘to de-industrialize’ as far back as 1882, the first use of the noun ‘de-industrialization’ in the context of Nazi Germany’s economic restructuring plans for occupied Europe in 1940. But it was during the economic crisis of the 1970s that the term gained new traction as a ‘vogue Whitehall phrase’ (*Daily Telegraph*, 13 Dec. 1979, 21). See *Oxford English Dictionary*, entry ‘de- prefix’ (online edition): [www.oed.com/view/Entry/47600?redirectedFrom=deindustrialisation#eid119212182](http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/47600?redirectedFrom=deindustrialisation#eid119212182), accessed 3 Jun. 2018. See also C.H. Johnson, ‘Introduction: de-industrialization and globalization’, *International Review of Social History*, 47 (2002), 3–34; S. High, ‘“The wounds of class”: a historiographical reflection on the study of deindustrialization, 1973–2013’, *History Compass*, 11 (2013), 994–1007; J. Arnold, ‘“De-industrialization”: a research project on the societal history of economic change in Britain (1970–90)’, *German Historical Institute Bulletin*, 34 (2012), 34–60, at 36ff. In the Federal Republic of Germany of the 1970s and 1980s, the term appears to have been far less common. In the historiography, too, the term plays a subordinate role only. See L. Raphael and A. Doering-Manteuffel, *Nach dem Boom: Perspektiven auf die Zeitgeschichte seit 1970*, 3rd edn (Göttingen, 2012).

<sup>7</sup>For contemporary politicized usages of the term see, for example, T. Benn, F. Morrell and F. Cripps, *A Ten-Year Industrial Strategy for Britain*, Institute for Workers’ Control Pamphlet No. 49 (Nottingham, [1975]), 3; *House of Commons Debates*, vol. 979, col. 635, 21 Feb. 1980 (contribution by Jack Dormond MP (Labour)); C. Killip, *In Flagrante* (London, 1988), foreword: ‘I don’t believe that anyone in these photographs [believes in the objective history of England] as they face the reality of de-industrialisation in a

'de-industrialization' has considerable potential. It can help to situate short-term political and architectural interventions in longer-term processes of socio-economic and socio-cultural change. Most importantly, perhaps, 'de-industrialization' allows for an approach that reconnects cultural representation to manifest lived experience. De-industrialization is not meant by us to be a metanarrative that crowds out other developments or approaches to the history of cities in the twentieth century such as gentrification, renewal or regeneration, but rather we propose it as a particularly useful tool with which to ground abstract processes of historical change in particular places and to open up former industrial cities to comparative analysis.

This Special Issue brings together established as well as early career scholars from the UK and Germany. While all scholars pursue their individual approaches, the contributions are held together by a shared interest in the multiple, often traumatic, transformations that many European cities underwent between the late twentieth century and the first decades of the twenty-first century. Collectively, the contributions assembled here not only posit de-industrialization as a key to understanding the urban history of the period, but also explore how this economic process interacted and forced changes of approach to other transformations. Within the historiography on modern Britain, structural economic changes have been given much less prominence than shifts in the political, architectural and cultural spheres, such as the ideological switch from a social democratic to a 'neo-liberal' polity, the ascendancy and then the disavowal of modernist approaches to the built environment or the growth of cities as multicultural environments.<sup>8</sup> The Special Issue shifts its focus through different scales, from rundown streets and rusting factories, to national politics and cultural representations, right up to global historical processes. It will link abstract economic processes and political and cultural constructions, with everyday places and the lived experiences of the wider population. It asks how global historical processes were experienced locally.

The focus on de-industrialization as a background to other equally transformative processes is intended both to shed light on these other processes, and also to disrupt established narratives, not least the purported move from a social democratic to a neo-liberal polity. The Special Issue develops a new, more international, perspective to several issues which are currently of wide-ranging interest within post-war historiography. These issues include the nature of a perceived 'crisis' during the 1970s, problems of periodization and the relative importance of national and global contexts for the development of individual cities. Cumulatively, the

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system which regards their lives as disposable.' For a contrasting usage, see S. Brittan, 'De-industrialisation is good for the UK', *Financial Times*, 3 Jul. 1980.

<sup>8</sup>On the state of the historiographical debate, see the landmark collections L. Black, H. Pemberton and P. Thane (eds.), *Reassessing 1970s Britain* (Manchester, 2013); B. Jackson and R. Saunders (eds.), *Making Thatcher's Britain* (Cambridge, 2012); and E. Robinson, C. Schofield and F. Sutcliffe-Braithwaite, 'Telling stories about post-war Britain: popular individualism and the "crisis" of the 1970s', *Twentieth Century British History*, 28 (2017), 268–304; on urban history more specifically, see S. Gunn and C. Hyde, 'Post-industrial place, multicultural space: the transformation of Leicester, c. 1970–1990', *International Journal of Regional and Local History*, 8 (2013), 94–111; O. Saumarez Smith, 'The inner city crisis and the end of urban modernism in 1970s Britain', *Twentieth Century British History*, 27 (2016), 578–98; M. Föllmer and M.B. Smith, 'Urban societies in Europe since 1945: toward a historical interpretation', *Contemporary European History*, 24 (2015), 475–91; C. Zimmermann (ed.), *Industrial Cities: History and Future* (Frankfurt and New York, 2013).

contributions to this Special Issue help to put de-industrialization at the heart of our conception of the transformations that cities underwent between the late 1960s and the present. In doing so, they make an important contribution not just to our understanding of urban history, but of contemporary British and European history more generally. The Special Issue has grown out of an international conference held at the German Historical Institute in London in December 2016. The conference opened a dialogue between scholars working in the field of urban history in Britain and Germany (as well as several other European countries). The Special Issue aims to solidify the achievement of the conference. The articles, which were selected from two rich days of talks, retain the geographical scope, while moving between broad theoretical standpoints, and more focused local case-studies. The Special Issue alternates articles with a British and a German focus. It is structured around three sets of complementary articles, bringing into conversation with one another two historiographical traditions that share much in common, but which have also developed distinct approaches to the transformations that have swept western societies since the second half of the twentieth century.

The first two contributions probe the heuristic benefits, but also the problems, of employing 'de-industrialization' as a concept for understanding contemporary British and European urban history. In his article, Jim Tomlinson separates the analytical usage of 'de-industrialization' from the connotations with which the contemporaries of the 1970s and 1980s had invested the term. Defining de-industrialization strictly in terms of industrial employment, Tomlinson divests 'de-industrialization' of the declinist and alarmist connotations of the contemporaries. At the same time, such a conceptual usage allows Tomlinson to underline the deleterious effects on social equality and social security that the loss of manual industrial labour would often bring in its wake. By focusing on the seemingly disparate examples of Dundee, London and High Wycombe, Tomlinson demonstrates both the ubiquitous impact of de-industrialization on Britain's urban fabric, but also the varied nature of this impact. Whereas Tomlinson views post-war British history through the lens of a single concept, Arndt Neumann makes the case for employing a 'conceptual frame' as a tool for understanding the transition from 'Fordist' to 'neo-liberal' urban spaces. Drawing on the pioneering work of Lutz Raphael and Anselm Doering-Manteuffel, Neumann uses the example of Hamburg to identify seven dimensions which he considers crucial for the 'cumulative structural break' that characterized late twentieth-century urban history: globalization, the rise of 'creative industries', digitalization, the emergence of networks, the blurring of boundaries, an increase in precarious living conditions and, finally, the renaissance of the inner city.

The conceptual articles are followed by two case-studies that focus on port cities. In his treatment of 1970s Liverpool, Aaron Andrews contests one of the guiding assumptions of conventional narratives of de-industrialization. In the case of Liverpool, decline did not result from a contraction of industrial employment, but from an ailing port economy. It was the service sector, rather than industry, that precipitated Liverpool's economic problems in the 1970s. Strictly speaking, then, Liverpool, although often taken as the prime example of Britain's urban crisis during the 1970s and 1980s, sits uncomfortably in a broader narrative of de-industrialization,

as Andrews shows. Whatever the precise causes of Liverpool's problems, they were experienced in day-to-day life, in the form of conspicuous dereliction and urban decay, as the article powerfully makes clear. While contemporary observers would sometimes contrast Liverpool to Hamburg, Jörn Eiben in his contribution focuses on a lesser-known German example, the port city of Wilhelmshaven. As he makes clear, locally the 1970s were a period of optimism in which the global crisis was interpreted as an opportunity for attracting industry to a city which had long relied heavily on the German navy for sustaining the local economy. The hopes for a comprehensive industrialization of Wilhelmshaven proved overtly optimistic and were soon followed by disillusionment, but the case-study serves as a reminder that local historical developments can play themselves out in varied and sometimes contradictory ways.

While the case-studies of Liverpool and Wilhelmshaven explore the local repercussions of broader socio-economic transformations, the two final contributions situate discourses on 'the city' and the 'urban crisis' within the respective political and cultural contexts of late twentieth-century Britain. In his contribution, Otto Saumarez Smith surveys various policy interventions of the Thatcher government in attempting to ameliorate the inner-city crisis, one of the areas where issues that attended de-industrialization were most apparent. Finally, in his contribution on the cultural construction of one of the central antagonists of the Conservative government in the 1980s, Jörg Arnold argues that the idea of the 'ruralized' coal miner drew its potency from a dystopian vision that associated the urban environment, and the London metropolis in particular, with vice, corruption and betrayal. It was only through the physical removal from the city, influential protagonists inside the National Union of Mineworkers argued, that the miners could insulate their trade union representatives from the corrupting influence of the seats of government and corporate power.

To many contemporaries, the wailing sounds and haunting lyrics of the song 'Ghost Town' appeared a portent of the dystopian future that lay ahead. In the old industrial centres of the UK and across the west more generally, few contemporary observers were able to look beyond the physical dereliction, social dislocation and aggravated tensions which were such conspicuous features of their everyday experience and for which the term 'de-industrialization' stood in as a convenient shorthand. With the benefit of hindsight and in historical perspective, we can discern much more clearly the new departures that characterized the 1970s and 1980s in addition to the often painful endings. We can also identify the considerable lines of continuity between late twentieth-century approaches to the 'urban crisis' and earlier policy initiatives. Used as a concept, 'de-industrialization', while not without its problems, possesses considerable heuristic potential, offering much more than a mere retelling of these older dystopian narratives, as the contributions to this Special Issue make clear. The de-industrializing city was a site of complex and sometimes contradictory transformations whose historical study has only just begun.

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