Post-Industrial Precarity

New Ethnographies of Urban Lives in Uncertain Times

Edited by
Gillian Evans
University of Manchester

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Contributors

Dr Gillian Evans is an urban anthropologist. She is especially interested in the transformation of post-industrial cities in Britain, and particularly London. Gillian explores and explains what it means for the society we live in that once thriving industries, and manufacturing sites in Britain, like the docks, the coal mines, the steelworks, the potteries and so on, have declined and closed down whilst a new service sector, and knowledge and financial services economy has grown. Her research addresses the pressing question of what it means to inhabit a post-industrial society at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Gillian's most recent research is about the planning and development of London's Olympic legacy in East London. This was a five-year research project exploring the urban regeneration associated with the London 2012 Olympic Games. The book arising from this research, entitled *London's Olympic Legacy: The Inside Track*, argues London will become the test-case city for other host cities bidding for the Olympic Games. Her previous research, set in the former Docklands of Bermondsey, was a turn-of-the-century project to investigate what it means to be working class in Britain at the beginning of the new millennium. A book entitled *Educational Failure and Working Class White Children in Britain* was the outcome of this project. The book focuses on the discrepancy between children and young people's experiences at home and on the street, and their experience of learning at school. The research asks whether schools are failing working-class children or whether working-class life presents alternative means for gaining social status that conflict with what it means to do well at school. Focusing on Southeast London, this book provides insight into class values as they are embodied, lived and experienced in a post-industrial neighbourhood. When extracts of the book were published in the national media, controversy and debate were provoked. This was because the book touched a nerve in the nation by exposing the complex cultural politics of white working-class pride at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

Lucilla Barchetta is an urban ethnographer who recently completed her PhD Candidate in Urban Studies at the Gran Sasso Science Institute (L'Aquila, Italy). Her research develops an interdisciplinary perspective on urban natures, by exploring the complex interface between biophysical processes, culture and everyday urban space.

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Dr Angela Torresan has taught Visual Anthropology at the Granada Centre for Visual Anthropology in the University of Manchester since 2007. She received a Master's in Social Anthropology at the National Museum, UFRJ, Brazil, and her PhD in Social Anthropology with Visual Media from the University of Manchester. Her publications and films explore issues of middle-class migration, favela gentrification, and urban studies. She is currently doing research on state violence and resistance in Brazil.

Glossary

BNP	British National Party
CCT	conditional cash transfers
CDR	Council for the Development and Reconstruction
CPO	compulsory purchase order
CWG	Commonwealth Games
DIWO	Do It With Others
DIY	Do It Yourself
ECoC	European Capital of Culture
EU	European Union
GCC	Glasgow City Council
IMF	International Monetary Fund
ITERJ	Land and Cartography of Rio de Janeiro State
NGO	non-governmental organisation
PPPs	public-private partnerships
UKIP	United Kingdom Independence Party
UPPs	Pacification Police Units
USA	United States of America
VDU	visual display unit

Introduction

The failed promise of post-industrial society

Gillian Evans, University of Manchester

> Like many advances in human history, post-industrial developments promise men and women greater control over their social destinies. But this is only possible under conditions of freedom and open political institutions, the freedom to pursue truth against those who wish to restrict it. This is the alpha and omega of the alphabet of knowledge.
>
> (Bell 1999: xxxiv)

> What the new society will be remains to be seen, for the controlling agency is *not* the technology but the character of the political managers who will have to organize this new strategic resource and use it to buttress their political system.
>
> (Bell 1999: 112)

> We are witnessing the gradual disappearance of the postwar British welfare state behind a webpage and an algorithm.
>
> (Alston 2018: 7)

In June 2016, UK voters decided in a referendum to leave the European Union. Early in 2017, in an attempt to explain this outcome, known as Brexit, to an American audience, I argued (Evans 2017) that the result of the referendum is to be understood, in part, in terms of the failed promise of post-industrial society. The failure relates to the abandonment, by 'political managers', of the predominantly working-class populations inhabiting the regions of the UK that were once the industrial and manufacturing powerhouse of the nation. Relative to optimism about the remarkable social potential of post-industrial change, which was expressed by Daniel Bell in the 1999 foreword to a new edition of his seminal book—*The Coming of Post-Industrial Society* (originally published in 1973)—this political abandonment represents a policy attitude in the UK that has been variously described as 'benign neglect' (Comfort 2013), or 'managed decline' (Travis 2011). As Berlant (2011) suggests, optimism can be cruel; the

freedoms envisaged by Daniel Bell in his imagining of post-1980s social change remain mostly unrealised. For swathes of the population, despite shared dreams of a better life, the prevailing political conditions of the contemporary moment thwart the desire for increased control over social destiny.

For example, in Liverpool on the Northwest coast of England, which was once, among other things, the site of the docks and shipbuilding yards that serviced trade with Ireland and America, national recession and the decline of the docks as a result of containerisation led, by the beginning of the 1980s, to high levels of unemployment (30–50 per cent in some neighbourhoods), rising crime, deteriorating social outcomes and finally, explosive riots in the inner city. Similar race riots, which were the worst urban disturbances of the twentieth century, spread through England's cities, in Birmingham, Leeds and London, and led to publication of the Scarman Report (1981). Scarman recommended urgent action and concluded that the consequences of national recession and uneven economic deprivation in British cities had most affected Black and Minority Ethnic populations from the Commonwealth who were targeted by racist policing and thus felt excluded from any sense of belonging to Britain. Scarman advised that racism in Britain was a 'disease' that if left unchallenged threatened to pull the nation apart.

Against the advice of the Environment Minister of that time, Michael Heseltine, who had argued for immediate and sustained investment to address the chronic problems of economic and social decline in northern cities, the Conservative Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, adopted instead a strategy of 'tactical retreat'. This proposed what Heseltine described in his White Paper (*It Took a Riot)* as a combination of 'economic erosion and encouraged-evacuation' leading to tens of thousands of people leaving the city of Liverpool in search of opportunities elsewhere. This course of action led to the retrospective accusation, when Thatcher's political papers were released for public scrutiny in 2011, of a scandalous level of political neglect, because the former Prime Minister had clearly attempted to leave industrial cities like Liverpool to die a slow death (Travis 2011).

The political system that Thatcher ushered in to support the transition to post-industrial society in 1980s Britain came to be understood as a USA-inspired form of neoliberalism (Evans 2017). This entailed a newly liberal attitude to capital interests, freeing business from government regulation, promoting the free market, which spelt the end of the preceding era of Keynesian economics, and that led to the increasing privatisation of national and public assets. The proposition was that a new economy in the form of post-industrial knowledge and service sectors, and financial capitalism bolstered by the revolution of new digital information, could, if freed from restriction, provide the kind of prosperity that would free the nation from its former

responsibilities towards, reliance on and, indeed, identification with industries and manufacturing threatened by the dislocating forces of globalisation.

At the same time, in a sustained program of municipal withdrawal, the state and its participation in the provision of social welfare were massively reduced with devastating cuts to local government budgets. The usual terms of political solidarity in England and the spirit of resistance from below were broken when the trade union movement was defeated by the government's military-style responses to the 1984 Miners' Strikes and the 1989 protests against the imposition of the Poll Tax. In 1987, Thatcher had also casually announced in an interview for a women's magazine that there was no such thing as society, explaining that people had to learn how to stand on their own two feet—as individuals—without the safety net of the state. Consequently, it became clear that the post-industrial regions of Britain were to be blamed for their own disadvantage in a system that rewarded individual competition and entrepreneurial initiative and punished the poor for having been left behind by the forward march of progressive society.

The work of Stuart Hall and colleagues (1978) described how popular consent for this radical transformation of British society and politics was generated by the manufacture of a moral crisis such that young black males in the urban areas of Britain were scapegoated and made 'other' to the idea of national belonging. In their seminal text, *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State and Law and Order*, Hall and colleagues explained the legitimation of rule created by dramatic government responses to a series of manufactured moral crises that had to be policed. The ideological battle involved the re-signification of the problems of social and economic inequality. These were to be understood not in terms of the immoral consequences of changing forms of capitalism, but rather as the evidence of the immorality of those persons or groups posing a threat to the nation's peace and prosperity. By implication, the new national collectivity constituted by a style of politics that Hall *et al.* described as 'authoritarian populism' emerged from the success of a strategy to symbolically generate the categories of persons and behaviours labelled as 'other' to the patriotic mission.

For example, the sudden disproportionate sentencing that Hall *et al.* (ibid.) describe, of three young black men from Birmingham, for an unexceptional street robbery, and the proliferation of the new discourse of 'mugging' that was imported from the USA, distracted public attention from the problems of urban racial inequality in Britain. Instead, the concept of mugging made young black working-class masculinity into a primary symbol of the kind of rebellious 'otherness' that posed a threat to the British public. This explained the popularity of the exceptional law-and-order response, which made it appear that only a more punitive, authoritative leadership could quell the

kind of unrest that was continuously framed as the evidence of immoral forces at work within the nation. Hence, as capitalism was unpicked and freed from the responsibilities of welfare, and the economy was dis-embedded from society, a fetish was created out of political authority, which concealed the fact that the immorality of burgeoning inequality was becoming taboo as a point of ethical discussion in neoliberal times.

One consequence of this authoritarianism, and the racialisation of policing in British cities, was the riots that exploded only a few years after Hall's work was first published. Regardless, despite changes to policing arising from the recommendations of the Scarman Report (1981), and despite the recommendation of the Conservative Environment Minister for massive and sustained investment in inner-city neighbourhoods, the neglect of post-industrial urban areas continued throughout the era of Thatcher's government and growing urban social inequality was the result. Thus, the exclusion of the former industrial and manufacturing working classes from the promise of a post-industrial society came with a heavy social price.

The new political order created freedoms for those who had the means of social mobility and could join a liberated technocratic class, in service to the new knowledge economy, but it also seriously limited the 'social destiny' and 'political freedom' of those who were excluded from this progressive vision of the future. Most interesting about this divide in the nation between those who felt themselves to be part of the excitement of the post-industrial future of Britain and those who perceived themselves to be 'left behind' was the fracturing of the most disadvantaged cities and populations along racial lines such that by the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century it was becoming clear that in the period of time during which successive governments have been determined to ignore the working class, it had become white. How was this possible?

Multiculturalism and the political vacuum created by New Labour

Strong support for Thatcher's Conservative ideology of helping those who could help themselves proved popular enough to change long-lasting traditions of voting behaviour. The economic and political chaos of late-1970s Britain, with high unemployment and high inflation, had bought the ruling Labour Party to its knees; it was no surprise, then, with the rapid decline of industry in the north of England in the 1980s, that many working-class people, especially in the south of England, started to switch political allegiance. In the general election of 1987, for the first time, 42 per cent of working-class former Labour voters started voting for the Conservatives. This new cross-social class coalition of voters led to a sustained 18-year period of rule for the Conservative Party—from 1979 to 1997.

For working-class voters in the safe Labour seats of the Midlands and north of England, this was a double betrayal. They felt abandoned by the government's policy of 'managed decline' and faced a loss of solidarity from working-class voters who moved towards the new consensus of self-determination through personal gain. Then, in a final insult, the New Labour government (1991–2010) completely failed to address and represent the interests of its traditional supporters in the post-industrial heartlands of Britain. Instead, New Labour was preoccupied with maintaining what the Conservatives had created, which was a centre ground composed of middle-class professionals and other voters aspiring to middle-class status.

My own research in the post-industrial docklands of Southeast Central London (Evans 2006) defied the political trend: it broke the taboo about speaking of the ongoing alienation of the post-industrial working classes, and caused a furore by bringing uncomfortable truths to the surface of political and public discourse. Just as in other post-industrial cities of England, like Stoke-on-Trent in the Midlands, a predominantly white, working-class population in the docklands of South London was coming to terms with the collapse of industry, in this case docks and food-processing factories, and struggling to adapt to a post-industrial service economy that was transforming the meaning of life and work.

In the docklands, social hierarchies had always mapped onto economic and political distinctions (Evans 2012a). For example, in the food-processing factories, Bermondsey grandmothers had always occupied the most prestigious positions of employment on the production lines, while Irish women from immigrant families were relegated to lower positions, and newly arrived Jamaican immigrant women were kept out of sight, labouring unseen and unable to socialise with the general workforce. Similarly, the functioning of the Labour Party, before the 1980s, was traditionally inseparable from an extremely localised way of doing politics. To be popular, politicians had to live locally, conform to ideas about whose needs came first in the hierarchical scheme of community inclusion, and attend actively to grassroots concerns (Evans 2012b). This meant that people felt taken care of by old-style Labour politicians in a system of paternalism that suited the social prejudices of the area and preserved the status quo.

The fate of Irish and Jamaican women in Bermondsey demonstrates a more general point, which is that the logic of a system of place-based, born-and-bred belonging in working-class industrial neighbourhoods necessarily implied, in a country that was far from united, a fraught tension between the categories and lived experiences of class, race, and nationalism. The unhappy marriage of class and race, even in the trade unions, explains why black and Asian migrants, arriving from the former colonies of the British Empire to the

relatively impoverished neighbourhoods of the United Kingdom, found themselves caught between two forms of historical struggle for social justice and greater equality. Economically, the Labour movement ought to have provided the rational means for political integration in Britain, but the experience of xenophobia and exclusion from place-based systems of local belonging also made necessary a fight for racial equality. This took the form of the struggle for religious, ethnic, and cultural recognition, a struggle that was supported by the Labour Party with policies of multiculturalism from the 1960s onward. As long as the struggle for economic equality and the struggle for racial equality intersected as the measures of what defined a progressive society, there existed a fragile foundation of community cohesion. Without this overlap, it was clear that neighbourhoods, and potentially Britain itself, could begin to break apart.

In the docklands, I heard people lament time and again that their community had died. The fear was not about economic precariousness, but about increasing numbers of black and Asian immigrants and the policies of multiculturalism that encouraged the celebration of black and Asian people's diverse ways of life. Discontent was also expressed about a modern system of social welfare that meant that those classified as being most in need had priority access to prized public services, such as social housing. By definition, this system of needs-based welfare allocation eclipsed the historical precedence of local birth and long-standing intergenerational family residence. As a result, resentment was growing and emotions running high, because new residents who were considered outsiders were perceived as receiving preferential treatment. This led to the constant refrain of my fieldwork interlocutors, who asked, either in resignation or desperation, "What about our culture? Who cares about us?"

In places like Stoke-on-Trent, these questions had led, by 2008, to the growing success of the far-right British National Party. New Labour had become associated with a continuation of the Conservatives' economic strategy, as well as a progressive social collaboration between white middle-class aspiration and black and Asian multiculturalism. This left the white working class in post-industrial neighbourhoods in a political vacuum working out how to fight for equality when solidarity within the labour movement no longer appeared to be an option. The only solution seemed to be the multicultural bandwagon, learning how to compete with black, Asian, and white immigrants for resources and cultural equality. This meant that the choice facing white working-class voters was either to aspire to middle-class status or to learn, in the multicultural climate, how to be ethnic too.

The latter was the British National Party's strategy. Nick Griffin, the party leader, was a Cambridge law graduate. Cleverly, he was manoeuvring within

the law to reconfigure the politics of working-class solidarity into a new form of ethnic association (Evans 2012a). He knew that it was now illegal to be racist in everyday life and in British politics. This meant that to be considered a legitimate political option among a population with a complete distaste for fascism, the BNP had to disguise its racist inclinations. Griffin fashioned a discourse of ethnic and cultural belonging that turned the postcolonial trope of indigeneity on its head. He described England as a land that belonged to those people whose ancient ancestors were born and bred there and who were therefore entitled to have their needs met before all others. The relative success of this strategy suggested that Labour's traditional voters were collaborating in the reconfiguration of politics away from class altogether and toward a new form of solidarity built on cultural nationalism, in which their version of cultural belonging took precedence.

In Stoke-on-Trent, the considerable success of the BNP by 2008 had been a wake-up call to the Labour Party, and, indeed, the whole political establishment. By the time of the general election in 2010, the BNP was defeated by the antifascist organisation Hope Not Hate, which acted swiftly and worked with the Labour Party in key constituencies to restore Labour's local grassroots activism. This was not enough to save Labour from defeat at the general election, but neither has it been enough to save the Conservative Party from the onward march of protectionist forms of cultural nationalism in various transforming guises. The decline of the BNP immediately led to the reconfiguration of the right wing in British politics (Ford and Goodwin 2014). Already, those older, male, white working-class voters in the south and east of the country who had voted Conservative were becoming disillusioned by what they perceived to be a growing disconnection between ordinary people and a self-serving elite in Westminster. They had begun to switch allegiance to the populist, right-wing UK Independence Party (UKIP), which campaigned as an anti-elitist, radically anti-European Union, anti-immigration, libertarian (i.e. anti-state) nationalist party.

As support for the BNP collapsed, UKIP was keen to extend its influence and began campaigning in post-industrial areas, formerly Labour heartlands, where the BNP had enjoyed a measure of success. Not surprisingly, the party's unprecedented rise in popularity caused another stir in the political establishment. Most significant about this was that UKIP began to bring together, across the political divide, older, white, better-off working-class men of formerly opposing Conservative and Labour persuasions. This was no longer simply about post-industrial urban alienation, but more generally about an anti-establishment populism. It was becoming clear, by 2014 that a broader political coalition was on the rise. All UKIP had to do to capture the centre ground and move it to the right, was to add a middle-class support

base to this new coalition of working-class voters. This it had in microcosm in the form of the Conservative Party's Eurosceptic rebels, who opposed Britain's membership in the European Union, but how to connect this to a broader base of discontent in the population?

Nigel Farage, leader of UKIP, needed to distance himself from the racism of the far-right BNP, and, like the party leaders who politically sanitised the Front National in France, he knew that the legitimacy of his party depended on cleaning up the reputation of his members and politicians, who were renowned for their shockingly illiberal outbursts. Farage emphasised that his version of nationalism was not like the "blood and soil" nationalism of the BNP. Given that the party manifesto was blatantly anti-multicultural and anti-immigration, UKIP cleverly disguised its emphasis on cultural hierarchy and racial difference. This concealment meant UKIP could also appeal to long-standing black and Asian migrants who wanted to enjoy a privileged position relative to increasing numbers of new immigrants making claims on resources and jobs. Despite the Labour Party's attempts to revitalise its appeal and principles (especially with the election to party leader of left-wing socialist Jeremy Corbyn in 2016), UKIP's growing success suggested that the political landscape of Britain was shifting inexorably to the right.

Conservative leader David Cameron was under increasing pressure throughout 2015–16 to maintain a sense of unity in his party. Conservative members of Parliament had defected to UKIP, and the influence of the long-established Eurosceptic opposition was growing again. Determined to keep Britain in Europe and to call his opponents' bluff, Cameron gambled on his success in negotiating reforms to the terms of Britain's membership of the European Union and called the June 23 referendum. The tragedy of this political miscalculation was that the referendum created an opportunity for UKIP, with only one Member of Parliament in the House of Commons, to bypass the system of parliamentary democracy and join forces with elite rebels in the Conservative camp. Hoping to further his ambitions to challenge David Cameron for the leadership of the Conservative Party, Boris Johnson, a former mayor of London, ruthlessly betrayed the metropolitan multicultural values of the London majority to ride the populist wave of the UKIP leader and join forces with Farage.

Taking advantage of the perfect storm of a migrant crisis in Europe and concomitant growing anti-Muslim sentiment in reaction to terrorist incidents in France, Johnson and Farage campaigned on a platform of anti-Europe, anti-migrant cultural nationalism, and the vote to leave the European Union won by a narrow majority. This expression of discontent in post-industrial urban areas was matched by a whole range of other protest votes about life in Britain. As a result, an unintended alliance formed that combined an emerging cultural

nationalism with a hotchpotch of previously unconnected complaints against austerity, the establishment, the EU bureaucracy, and capitalism more broadly.

The Brexit result sent a shockwave through the nation. This was an important victory for UKIP and Farage. The Westminster establishment and the liberal, multicultural, metropolitan elite never expected this outcome. They had underestimated the extent of alienation in the population, which revealed what the right-wing political opposition had known all along. It had learned to capitalise on the segregation of the political elite and the middle class from the everyday lives of those who have been left behind by a form of politics that gambled on financial capitalism and European integration, and hoped to consign the industrial working classes to the scrap heap of history. Now it appeared that all kinds of people who had been ignored or forgotten were suddenly given a voice, and they were going to have their day as the establishment, and its progressive idea of the future, was turned upside down. The real result is that everything, including our theory of society, is now open to negotiation. In this sense, the consequence of the Brexit vote is that all of us in Britain are disoriented and post-industrial now.

Brexit in Britain and Trump in the USA

I made this argument about Brexit in Britain, in order to provide the context for a comparison with a similar turning point in American politics. In November 2016, Donald Trump won the presidential election in the USA, and I wanted to make the claim that important similarities underlie the electoral results in Britain and America. My argument was that the results mark a turning point in the contemporary unfolding of post-industrial society. This is because both campaigns—the campaign in Britain to Leave the European Union—and, in the USA, Trump's campaign for the presidency—cleverly mobilised a significant and growing crisis of post-industrial alienation to craft a new political-cultural formation based on emergent forms of cultural nationalism.

These populist ethno-cultural reconfigurations of the nationalist project both depended for their success/political authority on making a moral crisis out of immigration. This crisis purposefully reconfigures the tri-partite relationship between government, population and territory (by moving in defence of sovereignty), and turns the forces of law and order, and popular opinion, and media attention, towards the borders, and against unwanted 'outsiders'. Significant about the manufacture of this new consensus—about the need for an increasingly authoritarian approach to the problem of 'outsiders'—is that it tries to resolve in cultural terms underlying problems of profound social, economic and political transformation. These underlying problems are to do with the twin crises of the failed promise of post-industrial society, and the post-2008-financial crash entrenchment of neoliberal

governance of the knowledge and service economies. Rather than presenting these problems in terms of the threat they pose either to the American Dream, or the European project of economic prosperity and political stability, the political threat posed by extreme and growing economic inequality is again displaced as it was before under Margaret Thatcher. The problem posed by the spatial geographies of ruin and decline, for example in the Rust Belt of America, and the post-industrial northern cities of Britain, is not understood in terms of the moral crisis of advanced capitalism, whose inequalities would then have to be addressed. No, rather the problem is framed in terms of the danger that 'outsiders' pose to the patriotic mission of the nation whose prosperity now depends on defence of its borders.

In this way, the reconfiguration of nationalism entails the preservation of the project of neoliberalism, but at the expense now of its marriage with the forms of civic liberalism that formerly defined the terms of what counted as progressive society. These include, for example, the commitment to anti-racist, multicultural ethnic and religious plurality as the means for a taken-for-granted sense of how national integration ought, ideally to work. As this idea of what counts as progressive society is renegotiated a sense of moral outrage is general in the liberal establishment as the new forms of authoritarian populism take hold and begin to test the limits of what social democracy will tolerate.

Hence, in the present moment, both Britain and the USA are engaged in policy experiments that test liberal sensibilities through the internalisation of the policing of the national border by suddenly making illegal, and thus attempting to expel, migrant residents whose status in the previous political regime was never under question. In Britain this took the form, in 2018, of the Windrush Scandal that disrupted the lives of thousands of long-standing migrants from the Caribbean whose status as British citizens was never questioned before, and in the USA, Trump first announced the expulsion of 57,000 Honduran migrants who had been in the country as long as two decades. In the face of the moral outrage that these kinds of expulsions generate, it is important to understand how this kind of right-of-centre politics has gained popular appeal. My argument is that it is impossible to make sense of the contemporary turn of events without an explanation of the unfolding crisis of post-industrial society. This book adds flesh to the bones of the argument I propose here, by bringing together a collection of nine new ethnographies that chart the spatial geographies of bold ambitions for future change and alongside this, a sense of the resilience of precarious lives lived in cities that are adapting to the conditions of advanced capitalism in the USA, the UK, the Lebanon, Brazil, and Italy. My intention is to reassert what Bell (1999) proposed, which is that if the political managers of post-industrial society fail to articulate the new

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