SOCIETYNOW

THE POLITICS OF NOSTALGIA

Class, Rootlessness and Decline

Simon Winlow

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In The Politics of Nostalgia, *Winlow takes us out onto the streets of our forgotten towns and cities to reveal lives destabilised by economic insecurity and high-paced cultural change. In these places, nostalgia is reshaping the political views of ordinary people, but not in the ways we tend to assume. This is a daring analysis of a nation tumbling downwards, a nation in which more and more people see only dark days ahead…* The Politics of Nostalgia *runs contrary to so much mainstream analysis of contemporary Britain, and it will be awkward reading for many who would prefer to look away from the reality of our nation today. Nonetheless, it offers an essential examination of where we are now, and where we appear to be going… It's also a reminder that a much better Britain existed in the near past, and, with sufficient public investment, a better future is possible. Having given away our resources and past to those with no interest in Britain, the state needs to get us our resources in order to give us back our future.*

—*Matthew Johnson*, Professor of Public Policy and Chair of the Common Sense Policy Group

This is an outstanding ethnographic study of a crucial social and political issue. For the first time in living memory, huge numbers of people believe the future will be qualitatively worse than the present. The data is sad but revelatory. Winlow's analysis is full of pathos and insight, with occasional bursts of anger at the refusal of our political elites to cast off

the shackles of neoliberalism and reassert our commitment to the common good… Utterly compelling reading!

—*James Treadwell*, Professor of Criminology, Staffordshire University

The Politics of Nostalgia *is a boundary-redefining ethnographic analysis of the rootlessness and decline overwhelming Britain today. In focusing on the sentiments of those who feel increasingly lost in today's fast-paced society, and their nostalgic attachment to a world that once made sense, Simon Winlow offers a crucial understanding of our current political conjuncture. Essential reading.*

—*Anthony Lloyd*, Professor of Sociology, Teesside University

Simon Winlow has long been the outstanding criminologist working in Britain and The Politics of Nostalgia *enhances his already stellar reputation. Beautifully written and sensitively researched, it returns to one of his enduring themes – how class remains the best means of illuminating what is hidden in contemporary British society and why looking back provides solace, reassurance and a powerful sense of self-narration.*

—*David Wilson*, Emeritus Professor of Criminology, Birmingham City University

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BY

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emerald PUBLISHING

United Kingdom – North America – Japan – India
Malaysia – China

Emerald Publishing Limited
Emerald Publishing, Floor 5, Northspring, 21-23 Wellington Street,
Leeds LS1 4DL

First edition 2025

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-1-83753-551-4 (Print)
ISBN: 978-1-83753-548-4 (Online)
ISBN: 978-1-83753-550-7 (Epub)

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Simon Winlow is a Professor of Social Science at Northumbria University, UK. He is the author or coauthor of the following books: *Badfellas: Crime, Tradition and New Masculinities* (Berg, 2001); *Bouncers: Violence and Governance in the Night-time Economy* (Oxford University Press, 2003) *Violent Night: Urban Leisure and Contemporary Culture* (Berg, 2004) *Criminal Identities and Consumer Culture: Crime, Exclusion and the New Culture of Narcissism* (Willan, 2008); *Rethinking Social Exclusion: The Death of the Social?* (Sage, 2012); *Riots and Political Protest: Notes from the Post-Political Present* (Routledge, 2015); *Revitalizing Criminological Theory: Towards a New Ultra-Realism* (Routledge, 2015); *Rise of the Right: English Nationalism and the Transformation of Working-Class Politics* (Policy, 2017), and *Death of the Left: Why we must begin from the beginning again* (Policy, 2022).

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The book you are holding in your hands offers a brief glimpse into what was a large longitudinal ethnographic study investigating the evolving political views of a sample of ordinary people living somewhere in the north of England. These men and women generously gave up their time to talk to me about their lives, and for that, I will be forever grateful. I would especially like to thank the characters I call Arthur and Paul for giving me so much help tracking down people who had illuminating things to say about nostalgia, culture, politics and change. I am also very grateful to The Leverhulme Trust, who funded this research project. To be given two years to pursue research of this kind is incredibly rare, and I am very thankful to the Trust for its generosity.

I must also thank a large number of academic colleagues who have assisted me in one way or another. First, I must thank Steve Hall and Tom Raymen for kindly reading through and commenting on the first draft of this book. Their insights certainly helped me to tighten my analysis and improve the overall quality of this book. I should also thank my colleagues Dan Briggs, Justin Kotze, Alex Hall, Georgios Antonopoulos, Matthew Johnson, Sarah Soppitt, Nick Gibbs and Mark Bushell, all of whom work hard every day to ensure that intellectual matters remain a key feature of our day-to-day working lives. To that list, I should add the names of a range

of academics who also embody all that remains good in inquisitive, objective social science: Anthony Lloyd, James Treadwell, Tammy Ayres, Pat Carlen, Tony Ellis, David Wilson, Dick Hobbs, Keith Hayward, Walter DeKeseredy, Luke Telford, Kate Tudor, Robert Reiner, Lisa McKenzie, Adam Lynes, Deirdre O'Neill, Elissavet Farmaki, Rowland Atkinson, Grace Gallagher, Craig Kelly, Emma Armstrong, Lee Jones, Paul Alker, Parisa Diba, Sam Barnes, David Temple, Owen Hodgkinson, Elaine Campbell, Peter Squires, Dan Rusu, Liam Brolan, Tereza Østbø Kuldova, Alex Hochuli, Phil Cunliffe and George Hoare.

I must also take this opportunity to extend my love and gratitude to my extended family. However, I reserve special praise for my beautiful wife, Emma, and my wonderful son, Gabriel. The Winlow clan were also, during the writing of this book, lucky enough to welcome a baby boy. Roman made his grand entrance on the 20 May 2024, and he has already added immeasurably to the joyfulness of our happy home.

INTRODUCTION: FALLING

Nostalgia seems to be everywhere these days. It clearly shapes a broad range of trends in consumer culture. We can see it in the movies and television shows we watch, in the products we buy and of course in the ubiquitous marketing messages that subtly shape our leisure habits. We can also identify the manipulation of its seductive appeal in the realm of politics and especially in the new populist movements that purport to threaten the dour political consensus that continues to bear down so heavily upon ordinary people.

In its original conception, the word 'nostalgia' was used to capture the discomfort of homesickness.[1] To be in the grip of nostalgia was to be plagued by powerful, sentimental memories and a deep yearning to again experience the various comforts we associate with home. Of course, both intellectuals and ordinary people have understood and used the concept of nostalgia in a variety of ways, and its core meaning has evolved slightly over time. Initially, I saw this book as a response to nostalgia's recent politicisation, a process that has stripped away many of nostalgia's traditional symbolic features before pressing a revised version of the concept into the service of robust political and cultural critique, much of it aimed at the working class, or at least the working class as it is perceived by the progressive neoliberals who now manage many of our core institutions.[2] My hope was to move beyond hostile, divisive and inaccurate cultural criticism to address

honestly and accurately how, why and to what extent nostalgia informs the political attitudes of the British working class today. However, as my research developed, new themes emerged to carry my analysis in a slightly different direction.

The research project at the centre of this book took around two years to complete.[3] I used ethnographic research methods to investigate the lives and shifting political sensibilities of working-class voters in and around a post-industrial city in the north of England.[4] In total, I spoke to around 70 men and women, all of whom were between the ages of 45 and 60. Overwhelmingly, my participants came from what is commonly termed 'the traditional working class'. Most of the men worked in manual trades. They were builders, mechanics, plumbers, joiners, kitchen fitters, heating engineers, machine operators and factory workers. Some had passed through manual trades and ascended to lower managerial positions in the construction and manufacturing industries.

A smaller but still significant number of my contacts, both male and female, fitted quite neatly into what we might call 'the new working class'. They were call centre workers, retail workers, salespeople and administrators. Rather than working with their hands, they spent their days on the shop floor or behind a desk, talking to customers and carrying out various administrative tasks.[5] I also spoke to men and women who had moved between these two groups. In each instance, this involved a move from traditional working-class labour into newer occupations associated with the post-industrial working class. This shift from traditional to newer forms of working-class work is indicative of the deep changes that have taken place in our national and global economies.[6] As most readers will know, Britain's industrial sector shrank as neoliberalism established itself as a global orthodoxy during the 1980s.[7] Manufacturing moved to the east and to the developing world, where corporations could take advantage

of low labour costs, low taxes, minimal regulation and the sparsity of trade unions. Consumerism grew, and in the wake of a prodigious decline in its manufacturing industries, Britain became reliant upon imported goods. As the neoliberal era developed, it became increasingly clear that many workers in Britain would need to look to the growing and diversifying service sector for the jobs they needed to sustain themselves.[8] However, most jobs available in this sector were poorly paid and insecure, and many more were short-term and non-unionised.

The social and cultural effects of deindustrialisation were huge.[9] In many respects, they act as a crucial contextual background for this study. In the broadest sense, the forms of security and rootedness that existed during the modern industrial era – in particular those that stemmed from the willingness of a succession of governments to intervene in the economy in an effort to ensure stability, safety and adequate standards of living – frame the nostalgic memories of my participants when they reflect upon what they have lost and where they are now. Similarly, the sense of impermanence and insecurity often associated with the post-industrial era finds expression when participants discuss their present difficulties and their fears for the future.

It is often said that the decline of modern British industrialism inevitably led to the decline of Britain's old industrial working class.[10] Britain's post-industrial economy spurred the growth of what seemed to be an entirely new working class, more diverse, mobile, urban and adaptable than the old.[11] There is certainly some truth to this. The forms of work that now seem to constitute 'working-class labour' vary enormously, and the cultural forms that characterised the working class during the modern era have either evolved at great speed or disappeared entirely. High levels of net immigration have made the working class much more diverse in terms of culture,

ethnicity and religion. The working-class men and women who cluster in our largest cities can seem at first glance to have nothing at all in common with the standard stereotypes we associate with the old working class. Nor do they seem to have much in common with the predominantly white post-industrial working class that can still be found in huge numbers in regions once dominated by heavy industry. However, in our rush to embrace the new and cleave ourselves apart from the old we should not overlook the forms of continuity and commonality that can still be found below the surface diversity of everyday life.[12]

With regard to my research, there were no significant differences between manual and non-manual workers. They did not view the field of politics differently, and they tended to be nostalgic for similar times, experiences and objects. They lived in the same neighbourhoods and, broadly speaking, their leisure lives were composed of the same interests and pastimes. They also tended to express a similar range of anxieties about the future, and their complaints about the present tended to focus on the same fundamental issues. Their jobs were a little different, but both groups were working class. They occupied the same structural position in the socio-economic hierarchy, and they shared a common culture.

It is difficult to deny that working-class work is far more varied than it once was. Clearly, the working class are no longer clustered in a rather narrow band of productive, extractive and manufacturing industries. Nor can they be found teeming out of mines, shipyards and factories in quite the numbers they once did. However, while they may be slightly harder to spot, there can be little doubt that they continue to play a central role in our national economy. They can of course be found throughout our sprawling service sector and in what remains of the productive economy. They can also be found working in construction and throughout our

agricultural and tourist industries. In line with this diversity, the incomes associated with working-class work now vary enormously. For some, work is so poorly paid that they remain very firmly 'in poverty'.[13] For others, working-class work pays enough to secure a standard of living we might once have associated with the lower reaches of the old middle class.[14]

While income disparities among the working-class have grown, they are certainly not new. Nor are discussions about whether, in the face of what often appears to be boundless diversity and change, it is worth persevering with 'the working class' as a cultural and socio-political category.[15] We can also casually throw into this bubbling cauldron of apparently incessant change the fact that, throughout the neoliberal era, middle-class work has also stretched, swelled and shifted, gradually encroaching upon terrain that once belonged solely to the old working class.[16] Many men and women with impressive qualifications, and some with stereotypically middle-class cultural characteristics, now find themselves in downgraded, insecure and 'proletarianised' jobs that grant few if any of the advantages once associated with middle-class employment. What remains to bond together the more affluent elements of the old middle class with those downgraded and insecure but credentialised men and women who find themselves locked into a perpetual struggle to make ends meet? Is the entire idea of social class now useless, a relic from a bygone age, a form of categorisation that no longer accurately captures and reflects the realities of a transformed Britain?

Such debates have raged on for decades, and often it seems that we have made little forward motion. It is certainly true that the cultural life of the people has undergone enormous change. It is also true that labour markets have been radically overhauled. Our economic lives are more precarious, and the

ways we engage with the world of work have evolved a great deal in a relatively short period of time. The relationship between the employer and the employee has also shifted in ways that reflect underlying economic change. In Britain, the reasonably organic forms of culture that still existed in the latter half of the 20th century are now very difficult to identify. Our popular culture has been commercialised and dumbed down. The public realm has been stripped back and sold off. Growing numbers of people – anxious about the dangers of public space and keen to avoid awkward or unwanted encounters with others – increasingly want *off this world*.[17] Some want to float among their own high ideals, distant from the perceived decay of the real world and the grubbiness of social experience. Responding to the disintegration of 20th century liberalism, and the diffusion of what were once its constitutive fragments, some embrace atomisation and construct in their imagination appealing images of the sovereign self that might salve their prevailing sense of loss as we hurtle into an unknowable future.

In any case, it is difficult to deny the retreat to the private realm and the forms of mediated sociality that can be found there. Obvious examples of apparently vibrant sociality today often communicate an awkward sense of simulation and rarely exist independently of commercial imperatives. It seems unlikely that the collective identities of the modern age can be sustained much further into the 21st century.[18] Where they can be found they tend to be absent of the forms of belief that once gave them their vitality and significance. All of these things, and much else besides, linger in the background of debates about class. Can we construct an objective conception of class amid the tumult of a disintegrating social order?

To briefly simplify, those who offer essentially liberal accounts of changing Britain often suggest that the concept of social class has become old fashioned and unwieldy. It is now

incapable of accurately capturing a fluid social order in which ordinary people have been liberated from the modern age's restrictive structures and protocols and can now creatively construct and reconstruct their identities as they see fit.

Traditional materialists and their fellow travellers on the other side of the argument continue to stress that social classes are the product of unjust economic arrangements. The observable cultural characteristics of class groups are complex and ephemeral creations that grow from a shared position within the formal economy. Changes to the structure of the social class system are predictable and routine and do not threaten the continuity of the system itself.

There is value to be found on both sides of the argument. It is certainly true that ordinary people no longer feel *enclassed* to anything like the extent they once did. While class was a key tool used by their parents and grandparents to understand themselves, their identities, their socio-economic status and their relation to others, young people today tend to draw on a broader range of cultural resources as they construct their self-images. And what is left of class if it is not felt? What is left if people no longer invest in it and use its logic and symbolism to make sense of themselves and their lives? Does class retain any positive political symbolism? Can it be simply bequeathed to social scientists, becoming solely a means of separating groups of people so that they might be targeted with more culturally appropriate corporate messaging? Readers will be aware that class now plays a much-reduced role in popular culture.[19] It has also been jettisoned from mainstream political debate. Even the Labour Party, which was formed to advance the interests of Britain's working class, refuses to use class as an instrument of social analysis or an anchor for policymaking.

The disappearance of class from the public sphere is one of many symptoms of our ongoing political malaise and the

prohibition that has been placed upon policy innovation and the kinds of deep socio-economic interventions we need to address our most pressing problems. Rather than being simply a logical outcome of the rise of consumerism and the perceived growth of opportunities to make active decisions about who we are and what matters to us, it behoves us to fully investigate the possibility that class has been strategically withdrawn from political debate in order to disguise and repress the continuing reality of class antagonism.

The strategic withdrawal of class analysis has aided the broad and dispiriting popular acceptance that today's dominant form of political economy represents a historical end point, beyond which nothing positive might emerge.[20] The competition inherent to neoliberal capitalism's social order is, in the absence of class analysis, for the most part naturalised: rendered unproblematic and unavoidable. Rather than moving with others onto the field of politics in the hopes of fashioning something better, the sovereign individual must throw herself into the ceaseless battle of all against all to achieve a modicum of material comfort and security.

Large sections of the left have relieved themselves of the weight of traditional leftist accounts of class conflict as they have rushed to lend support to new identitarian struggles. Rather than pushing for the abandonment of competition, they tend to petition authority to make the competition fairer. The absence of serious thinking on the left about how our economies can be significantly reformed or revolutionised is one of the principal reasons why the left no longer represents a significant electoral force.[21] And yet the injustices of our present economic system are legion. The gap between rich and poor grows wider with every passing year, and the malignant effects of poverty and income inequality are everywhere to be seen.[22] The broad left's determined effort to foreground the struggles of marginalised identity groups unfortunately tends