



Belonging, memory and history in the north Nottinghamshire coalfield

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ABSTRACT

Studies recurrently emphasise the critical role played by memory in the production of belonging in the context of deindustrialisation. This paper examines the interrelations of memory, history and belonging among former coal miners in the north Nottinghamshire coalfield surrounding Mansfield, UK, an area of complex and contested memories and histories. Couched in the approaches of emotional geographies and the 'turn to affect', the paper investigates the emotional and affective dimensions of remembering histories of the coal industry under nationalisation between 1947 and 1994 including job security, the 1984–1985 miners' strike and colliery closures, as well as the industrial ruination which these closures caused. To fully apprehend and empathise with the emotional processes of memory, the paper contends that memories must always be situated within a reading of the wider historical geographies and politics upon which they are constituted. Drawing on archival research and psychosocial life history interviews, the paper broadly argues that historicising memories as well as examining their affective dimensions advances understanding into what has been lost and disrupted through localised processes of deindustrialisation and postindustrialism. In the case of north Nottinghamshire the contested solidarities of the miners' strike and subsequent colliery closures have endured in affective memories which, in turn, have problematised the production of individual and collective belonging.

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It is the 22nd of March 2014. A Saturday. Stood on the terraces of Field Mill I am waiting to watch my team, Mansfield Town Football Club, play bitter local rivals Chesterfield. The Stags versus the Spireites.¹ As the supporters shuffle in testosterone fills the air, trapped under the steel roof above. Common to fixtures with the expectancy of crowd violence, kick-off has been moved two hours earlier to limit the time available for alcohol consumption. The smell of beer, however, still hangs on breaths. The mutual animosity between the two sets of supporters is palpable. The atmosphere inside the stadium swells, ever tense and volatile.² Through bodies and voice, both sides engage in performances of belonging in attempts to exclude each other.³ The home supporters, with

fingers aggressively jabbing towards the away fans, sing their familiar chorus: 'We hate Spireites! We hate Spireites!' On cue the Chesterfield support, huddled adjacent behind stewards and police, retaliate with their familiar rhythmic, monosyllabic chant, specially reserved for Mansfield: 'Scabs! Scabs! Scabs! Scabs!'

The chant of 'scab', those detested individuals that work during labour strikes, began ringing around this fixture in 1984. Ever since the majority of Mansfield's thirty thousand coalminers worked through the year-long miners' strike.⁴ After the football game has ended there will be violence reminiscent of the clashes between pickets, miners and police outside the gates of collieries across the area exactly thirty years earlier. Despite the abatement of anger and vitriol over the intervening years, and irrespective of personal histories, to these chanting Chesterfield supporters we forever remain the scabs of Scab County. To them, not only did we betray the solidarity of miners across Britain, we are culpable in the

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¹ The Stags and the Spireites are the nicknames, respectively, of Mansfield Town Football Club and Chesterfield Town Football Club. Mansfield is a large town in the north of the county of Nottinghamshire, UK. Chesterfield is a town of comparable size ten miles from Mansfield in the county of Derbyshire.

² T. Edensor, Producing atmospheres at the match: fan cultures, commercialisation and mood management in English football, *Emotion, Space and Society* 15 (2015) 82–89.

³ D. Trudeau, Politics of belonging in the construction of landscapes: place-making, boundary drawing and exclusion, *Cultural Geographies* 13 (2006) 421–443.

⁴ D. Amos, The Nottinghamshire miners, the Union of Democratic Mineworkers and the 1984–5 Miners' Strike: scabs or scapegoats?, unpublished PhD Thesis, University of Nottingham, 2011; C. Griffin, 'Notts. have some very peculiar history': understanding the reaction of the Nottinghamshire miners to the 1984–85 Strike, *Historical Studies in Industrial Relations* 19 (2005) 63–99.

deindustrialisation of the coalfields and the socioeconomic ruination from which they are still to recover.⁵ Memories of work and community before the collieries closed are embedded within these coalfield landscapes, haunting their inhabitants and disrupting senses of belonging.⁶ The Chesterfield supporters will not forget what this place and its people did three decades ago, nor will they let us forget either.

Amid the gathered Mansfield fans, the picture is more complex. At one level we collectively belong through our support of, and emotional attachment to, the local football team. However, among the former miners, here and across north Nottinghamshire, there are associations and memories evoked by the pejorative 'scab' that are divided and troubled. These memories of lived histories include the fracturing of social relations resulting from opposing positions during the 1984–1985 miners' strike, bitter splits in trade union support and the traumas and loss of colliery closures and redundancy. All these are juxtaposed to and problematised by a faltering nostalgia for the old ways of life and work in the mining community.⁷ This paper examines the interrelations of these memories and histories and how they have mediated forms of belonging among former miners in the north Nottinghamshire coalfield surrounding Mansfield (Fig. 1). Couched in the approaches of emotional geographies and the 'turn to affect', it uses psychosocial interviewing methods to investigate the emotional and affective dimensions involved in remembering work and deindustrialisation.⁸ This paper also contends that to fully apprehend and empathise with the emotional processes of memory, elicited memories must be situated within a reading of the historical geographies and politics upon which they are constituted. Such an approach will further understandings of the impacts of deindustrialisation on how people feel about their shared pasts and how these memories and their attendant emotions, in turn, mediate forms of belonging in post-industrial places.

The next section presents a discussion of the literature on belonging, memory and deindustrialisation which ends by making a case for more extensive archival analysis to be used alongside psychosocial life history interviews. The theoretical and methodological approaches taken in this paper are then outlined. The analysis of material drawn from these methods then follows and is presented in two parts. The first provides an historical and geographical analysis of the British coal industry as it was experienced in north Nottinghamshire between the nationalisation of the coal industry in 1947 and the widespread closure of collieries in the 1990s. The key issue here is job security, which is critical for understanding both the changing formations of belonging in north Nottinghamshire over the period of nationalisation and, also, memories of this period. The localised perception of mining being a 'job for life' is particularly important in understanding the 1984–1985 miners' strike and deindustrialisation in the area. The second part investigates how the difficult and troubled histories of coal mining, the miners' strike and deindustrialisation are remembered in north Nottinghamshire, and how these memories

are interpreted, reconciled and suppressed within the renegotiation of belonging in the present.

Belonging, memory and deindustrialisation

Belonging, as a nebulously defined, yet inherently human, phenomenon, first attracted the attention of geographers within the humanistic and phenomenological traditions. Early theorisations of it centred on senses or feelings of 'rootedness' which 'in its essence means being completely at home' in one's surroundings.⁹ Definitions of belonging have not strayed far from these formative ideas. Its conceptualisation, and that of the cognate ideas of place attachment and senses of place and community, coalesce around belonging being an emotional attachment to and identification with a bounded space, of being at ease within the place to which you belong.¹⁰ Belonging to place can exist across multiple scales – attachment to a locality, a city, a nation or a continent – often at the same time and in relation to each other. Rather than being a specific, categorised emotion, such as anger or joy, belonging is understood as an assemblage of emotions producing an affective state.¹¹ The absence of belonging – of being 'out of place' – is also often expressed in emotional terms as 'feelings of loneliness, isolation, alienation, and dis-placement'.¹²

In recent years scholars have focussed on the processes, performances, practices and politics involved in the production and expression of belonging, as well as how these can be undone.¹³ Much of this literature is concerned with how individuals produce and give authenticity to forms of belonging through personal and collective memory.¹⁴ Important to these understandings is the relationship between memory and space.¹⁵ Following the trend toward embodiment, the potentialities of the embodied and sensory landscape of touch, smells, tastes and sounds to evoke memories is increasingly appreciated. As Owain Jones writes:

The past survives however much one tries to drive it down and away from one's consciousness. It rears up provoked by something overheard or a scene, a place, an object, a tune, a scent even. It is inescapable.¹⁶

The processes of memory where they concern belonging can, for clarity, be separated into two reciprocal forms. The first of these is what social psychologists call procedural memory and what some

⁵ M. Foden, S. Fothergill and T. Gore, *The State of the Coalfields: Economic and Social Conditions in the Former Mining Communities of England, Scotland and Wales*, Centre for Regional Economic and Social Research, 2014, <http://www.shu.ac.uk/research/cresr/sites/shu.ac.uk/files/state-of-the-coalfields.pdf> Last accessed 14 December 2015.

⁶ A. Mah, *Industrial Ruination, Community, and Place: Landscapes and Legacies of Urban Decline*, Toronto, 2012; G.N. Bright, 'The lady is not returning!': educational precarity and a social haunting in the UK coalfields, *Ethnography and Education* 11 (2016) 142–157.

⁷ T. Strangleman, Networks, place and identities in post-industrial mining communities, *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 25 (2001) 253–267.

⁸ O. Jones and J. Garde Hansen (Eds.), *Geography and Memory: Explorations in Identity, Place and Becoming*, Basingstoke, 2012.

⁹ Y-F. Tuan, Rootedness versus sense of place, *Landscape* 24 (1980) 5; A. Buttner, Grasping the dynamism of lifeworld, *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 66 (1976) 277–292; E. Relph, *Place and Placelessness*, London, 1976; C. Nagel, Belonging, in: V.J. Del Casino Jr, M.E. Thomas, P. Cloke and R. Panelli (Eds), *A Companion to Social Geography*, Chichester, 2011, 108–124.

¹⁰ N. Lovell, Introduction, in: N. Lovell (Ed.), *Locality and Belonging*, London, 1998, 1–24; N. Wood and L. Waite, Scales of belonging, *Emotion, Spaces and Society* 4 (2011) 201–202.

¹¹ K. Mee and S. Wright, Geographies of belonging, *Environment and Planning A* 41 (2009) 772–779.

¹² T. Cresswell, *In Place/Out of Place: Geography, Ideology, and Transgression*, Minneapolis, 1996; M. Antonsich, Searching for belonging – an analytical framework, *Geography Compass* 4 (2010) 649.

¹³ J. Tomaney, Regions and place II: belonging, *Progress in Human Geography* 39 (2015) 507–516.

¹⁴ J. Edwards, The need for a bit of history: place and past in English identity, in: Lovell (Ed.), *Locality and Belonging*, 147–167.

¹⁵ S. Hoelscher and D.H. Alderman, Memory and place: geographies of a critical relationship, *Social and Cultural Geography* 5 (2004) 347–355; D. Hayden, *The Power of Place: Urban Landscapes as Public History*, London, 1997.

¹⁶ O. Jones, 'Not promising a landfall ...': an autotopographical account of loss, memory and landscape, *Environmental Humanities* 6 (2015) 1.

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