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Reimagining Birmingham

Public history, selective memory and the narration of urban change

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ABSTRACT This article was sparked by the relative lack of attention the city of Birmingham has received in the global reception of 'Birmingham cultural studies'. This oversight may reflect a more general trend in contemporary analysis of urban settings: a tendency to scenography. This refers to the filmic mode of address in recent studies of urban change which privilege a small number of dramatic, cinematic settings. Our article explores the city of Birmingham in its own terms, as an intense example of a wider set of processes: economic restructuring, place marketing amidst globalization. It investigates the politics of memory underlying the dominant competing visions of Birmingham which we call 'the urban Arcadia' and 'Birmingham forward'. Despite their manifest differences, these two alignments of historical imagery converge on a harmonious conception of community which excludes many of the city's residents.

KEYWORDS *city, politics of memory, regeneration, urban restructuring*

Introduction

One of the most remarkable and yet least noticed aspects of 'Birmingham cultural studies' is how the city of Birmingham itself hardly figures in that construction. It is striking how little of the work recognized globally has been explicitly about the locality around the university, despite many such projects having been conducted by staff and students over the years. Reflecting on that anomaly is one of the motivations of our article.

A further impulse is to reflect on what is evident to anyone venturing into Birmingham city centre since spring 2000. All around, cranes, diggers, exposed steel girders, fenced-in building sites testify to the breaking up of the post-war modernist vision for so long synonymous with Birmingham: the concrete ring roads and subways and, above all, the Bull Ring shopping centre. Photographs on Birmingham's online photo gallery convey the magnitude of these changes (see:

ARTICLE



<http://www.birmingham-photos.co.uk>). At a moment when, for the third time in four decades, Birmingham is being physically and symbolically rebuilt, a reflection on what this means, who this is for and how cultural studies might help come to terms with these dramatic changes is timely.

Cultural studies and the scenography of the city

Although our account is highly localized, we feel that the new city identity taking shape as Birmingham rebuilds is a particularly intense version of an urban narrative being played out in cities of a similar size throughout Britain and the wider world. An essential aspect of what some have dubbed the postmodern urban condition (Dear, 2000) is the restructuring of the urban economic base away from manufacturing to the service sector. Birmingham's justifiable claim to be the world's first manufacturing centre aligned its fortunes closely to modernity. In the 18th and 19th centuries, Birmingham-produced goods and inventions energized the development of modern industry worldwide (Hopkins, 1998; Upton, 1993). Accordingly, with its economy and identity so deeply bound up with modern industrialism, the displacement of these activities from the core of western economic life has had profound consequences for Birmingham and its residents in recent times. This particular history makes Birmingham an important case study of the politics of urban restructuring and the reimagining of city identity.

Aside from its intrinsic interest, a reflection on Birmingham is worthwhile for the deeper epistemological and methodological points it raises about the analysis of the city in cultural studies and cultural geography. The detachment of 'Birmingham cultural studies' from the locality in its global reception may reflect a more widespread problem in contemporary scholarship: theory travels and so do theory-rich narratives of urban change, yet only some cities are globally marketable on the transnational circuit of ideas, while others languish in rejected manuscripts and unpublished conference papers. The most exciting work in recent urban studies dramatically exemplifies these issues. No topic is sexier than the city. A number of recent works display all the virtues of the cultural turn in the human and social sciences: virtuoso decoding of the urban landscape, ebullient narration, seductive presentation (Castells, 1996; Dear and Flusty, 2002; Soja, 1996). Yet the claims to diversity in these postmodern urban studies conceal a troubling homogeneity that works at two levels. First, the range of cities discussed is by now predictably narrow: Los Angeles and New York always appear. Although the reach has extended to Tokyo, Shanghai and the megalopolises of Latin America, still fewer than a dozen places really make the running. Are such cities more exceptional than typical? Should their stories of urban change stand as archetypes for all to emulate?



Second, the methodological style of this writing deserves critical scrutiny. With some notable exceptions (Boyer, 1994; Hayden, 1995), the conventional investigative strategies of historiography and ethnography appear passé when cities are written about now. Patient attention to the accumulation of either archive material or empirical testimony from representative samples of local people is strikingly absent. Instead the prevalent approach might be termed scenographic. The urban landscape is projected screen-like before the gaze of the canny semiotician. A quick eye flits from fragmentary scene to arbitrarily selected setting. The reader is swept along in a relentless flow of symbolically charged, but only briefly entertained, urban vistas; the Bonaventure Hotel one minute, civic centre and Orange County the next (Soja, 1996 on Los Angeles, for example). Such a methodology is invariably drawn to the drama of extremes, to those cities most akin to film sets. Analysts of contemporary urban space should reflect carefully on what this approach places beyond the frame of exploration. Cities that superficially appear less exciting could disappear from view. Yet it is precisely in such places where global flows slow and take unique local shape, where cultural change is viscous as well as fluid, where terms like 'character' and 'texture' resonate, that most of the world's population lives. Accordingly, our analysis of Birmingham is a plea for urban researchers to widen their field of view and resist the temptation to view urban space scenographically as the inexorable unfolding drama of postmodernization or globalization. Instead we should explore 'the discursive and practical intersections of social relations that become localized in specific places at particular times' (Smith, 2001: 98).

Public histories and urban reimagining

In the last two decades, one of the defining features of globalization has been the attempt by many former industrial cities to reinvent themselves as attractive settings for the emblematic postindustrial activities of consumption, conventions, exhibitions and tourism (Kearns and Philo, 1993; Ward, 1998). Facing deeper structural problems than most British cities, Birmingham has been at the forefront of these developments. The stimulus of a damaging recession in the late 1970s encouraged local politicians to move the city away from an economic dependence on manufacturing industry. By the early 1980s, Birmingham had a uniquely abjured place within Britain's national imaginary. The country's second city, with 1 million residents, became associated with failing automotive and engineering factories, shoddy inhuman landscapes of discredited post-war redevelopment and an incomprehensible local accent; all of these the butt of comedians and national newspapers.

To remedy these adverse stereotypes and the socioeconomic decline associated with them, a two-decade-old alliance of city council and local businesses has increasingly looked to Europe for both a new urban



identity, drawing on cities like Frankfurt, Barcelona and Milan as inspiration, and for a source of new capital investment (Loftman and Nevin, 1998). The failed attempt to host the 1992 Olympics was a catalyst for a series of flagship developments, including a convention centre, concert hall and waterside redevelopment, all completed in the early 1990s. A decade later, the eastern side of the city centre is to be comprehensively redeveloped. Alongside this physical reconstruction of Birmingham, a profound symbolic labour has attempted to renarrate the city's history and recast its identity as a modern, progressive and cosmopolitan European city, making the final shortlist of six to become European Capital of Culture in the year 2008 (Bloomfield and Bianchini, 2002; Sudjic, 2002). Birmingham has been rebranded; no longer the workshop of the world, it is the world's meeting place, capable of hosting prestigious events such as the 1998 G8 economic summit, fondly recalled by Bill Clinton (*The Times*, 2 October 2002: 2). Yet the very intensity of all these regeneration and reinvention projects betrays an underlying anxiety about the nature of Birmingham as a place and prompts reflection on the extent to which large-scale public narratives encapsulate the more intimate and mundane biographies of a city's residents. The ongoing refashioning of Birmingham's identity throws the political role of public history in urban regeneration into sharp relief.

In this article we define public history as the discourses, images and narratives comprising the collective memory of the local population. When a city attempts to reinvent its identity and rebrand its global image, public history becomes a crucial site of struggle. For it is here that competing stories are circulated and tested. The spaces of the locality are reframed through an intense politics of time. Local newspapers, policy documents and planning strategies debate the relative values accorded to different historical eras in the life of the city and, by implication, rank the social agents most closely associated with them. How does the past connect to the future? What does an urban population faced with the imperatives of change choose to remember? Which social groups' contributions to the city are commemorated? What kinds of memories inform a city's vision of the future? Public history sediments the answers to such questions in the books, built environment, photographs and tourist board slogans through which the image of the city is projected. We argue that the highly selective renditions of Birmingham's past and future in both official and popular versions of public history fail to do justice to the complexity of its recent and current experiences. The desire to escape into a romantic past or aspire to an affluent future evacuates the present day and thwarts the emergence of dissident vernacular counternarratives.

The sale of the massive Rover car plant at Longbridge (on the outskirts of the city) by BMW in May 2000, ultimately to the Phoenix Consortium, crystallized these issues. With the future of one of its biggest
160 employers at the mercy of corporate strategy, venture capitalists, national



and European grant aid, the question of just what Birmingham should be and do as a city in the 21st century was posed with startling clarity. How much of its manufacturing and motor industry past should be preserved? How far can a historic industrial city depend on service sector jobs in the new economy? And of particular pertinence to our argument here: what politics underlie the images of Birmingham's past and present in play in the debate over its possible futures?

In approaching the part played by history in contemporary city identity, we draw on and extend Patrick Wright's analysis of public philosophies of history (Wright, 1985). In his study of Britain in the early 1980s, Wright shows how a series of past-present alignments lend coherence and depth to a sense of national identity by settling accounts with the nation's otherwise unresolved contradictions in historical self-understanding. Our work differs somewhat by focusing on a particular local identity. We are concerned with how visions of both the imagined past and the hoped for future selectively rearrange and manage cultural diversity and social institutions. We identify two main historical alignments in Birmingham today. These are patterns for aligning not only the past and the present, but also of preparing the way forward. The first of these we term 'the urban Arcadia', the second 'Birmingham forward'. Their respective mobilizations of yesterdays and tomorrows, while seemingly sharply at odds, in fact converge on a presentable redefinition of Birmingham as a harmonious community with a settled past and a novel, but still recognizably modern, future. These issues and processes can be traced through the dynamics of three representative sites where the management of Birmingham's changing identity and its attendant contradictions are worked out: first, the field of local history; second, the rhetoric surrounding the crisis at the Longbridge car plant in spring 2000; and, third, the unveiling of a new shopping landscape at the historic heart of Birmingham city centre. Our aim is to begin a contest over Birmingham's public history, collective memory and imagined futures which has lessons for comparable cities around the world.

Local history: 'page after page of pure nostalgia'

In recent years, the field of local history has undergone prodigious expansion in Britain. This is particularly noticeable in Birmingham. Walk into any of the large city centre bookshops and the local history section dwarfs that of wider national history. Evidence of the popularity of the field can be seen in author Alton Douglas's claims to have sold in excess of 300,000 copies of his 30 or so volumes. Typical titles are *Birmingham Shops*, *Birmingham at Work*, *Memories of Birmingham*. In these collections and others, such as a series of books published by Birmingham Library Services promising 'fond memories', sepia-toned front covers portray groups of Victorians, Edwardians, scout meetings



and schoolchildren. A work with the title *Golden Years of Birmingham* provides 'page after page of pure nostalgia' (True North Books, 1999).

In Birmingham, the project of local history finds its apotheosis in the work, celebrity and status of Dr Carl Chinn. Chinn, known throughout the region as 'the people's professor', is Community Historian at the University of Birmingham. His unbridled enthusiasm and approach to local history have struck a chord with 'Brummies', as local people are known. This is reflected and reinforced by the longevity of Chinn's weekly two-page spread in the Saturday edition of the biggest-selling local newspaper, the *Evening Mail*. Chinn also hosts a two-hour daily local radio show where he 'brings your memories to life of old Brummagem' (BBC Radio WM publicity card). He has contributed to television programmes, released CDs and videos, as well as making regular public appearances to discuss his work. While acknowledging Chinn's energy, commitment and fierce pride, we wish to locate his work in the wider cultural formation of local history. This oeuvre, which might be termed popular public history, has responded to recent developments in Birmingham with a narrative of change defined by some problematic exclusions.

Although he has written about a large range of Birmingham's history and, as we shall see, is a champion of its present and future, Chinn undoubtedly concentrates on the period before the 1960s (Figure 1). This coincides with his academic interests and a conviction, shared by many of his audience, that a 'whole way of life' was disrupted and swept away when modernizers moved in; something seemingly organic about inner city communities such as Digbeth, Hockley, Aston, Small Heath was extinguished arbitrarily from *without*. Chinn's weekly column in the *Evening Mail* explores the past in quite precise ways. Eliciting a voluminous correspondence detailing readers' memories, Chinn lovingly depicts the histories and cultures of trades, firms, pubs and cinemas right down to the level of individual houses on particular streets. With the help of the readers whose memories pervade his columns, Chinn indefatigably maps the physical and personal geographies of the city, many now disappeared or unrecognizable for the changes visited upon them. Ordinary life is described and in the process celebrated. The written word is framed by the aged photographs familiar from Alton Douglas's popular collections. Layer upon layer of names and anecdotes give three dimensions and a texture to this vanished place, variously dubbed with freighted affection 'old Brum' or 'old Brummagem'.

There is a remarkable congruence to these newspaper columns and local history books. They construct a 'golden age' of Birmingham; smiling faces, soft focus, lived in black and white. They recreate an industrial yet curiously premodern version of the city, an 'urban Arcadia'. A mnemonic listing of streets, pubs, schools and shops, attended by a cast
162 of long gone folk, invites one into the texture and values of the past. The



Figure 1. Birmingham in the 1960s. This image looks down towards the Bull Ring and the site of the city's traditional marketplace – the working-class heart of Birmingham. The surrounding area has been cleared for redevelopment and the building of the modernist shopping centre. (Picture courtesy of Mrs M.D. Davies, Birmingham)

preferred timespan is of life and landscape beginning in the early 20th century and ending in the late 1950s or early 1960s: 'So many memories – perhaps of the war and rationing, perhaps of parades, celebrations, Royal visits and sporting triumphs' (True North Books, 1999: 3). This is a version of a Birmingham lost not just to the gentle passing of time, but also to the ravages of enemy aircraft, the bulldozer and the planner. The tendency is towards the evocation of a place that, in the words of one of Chinn's correspondents, 'was taken away when they cleared up after the bombs' or 'swept away by the forming of the Inner Ring Road' (Chinn, 1999: 19); that is, post-war redevelopment. This seemingly harmless harking back to an innocent pre-war past can exhibit an almost wilfully regressive forgetting.

This form of public history defines the past as a place of settled and knowable community. Community is by implication here the property of the working classes who inhabited this milieu, 'hard-working and neighbourly folk' who gave areas 'a strong sense of identity' (Chinn, 1999: 19). This history is reassuring, telling us what we already know – provided 'we' are 'one of us'. The precise address is to a constituency that recognizes the experience of labour and neighbourhood solidarity, often accompanied by hardship. Yet this is hardship of a particular sort, where material deprivation can be recalled, almost with affection, as morally uplifting. The subtle effect of this work in what is explicitly stated, but also in the implied nod-and-a-wink between 'ourselves', is an articulation



of what is unsaid, but widely felt: things were somehow better in those days. The apparently inclusive deployment of this 'local knowledge' can serve to subtly exclude those who arrived after this golden age and thereby disavow much of what constitutes contemporary Birmingham's culturally diverse population. Some 30 percent of the city's residents are from minority ethnic backgrounds, as are four in 10 of its schoolchildren (Birmingham City Council, 2001). You would not guess this from the popular local history presented in books and newspaper columns.

The exclusionary aspect to this form of popular recollection can be gleaned from the feature 'Memories of the Market Days' in one of Chinn's weekly columns (*Evening Mail*, 3 June 2000: 18–19). The poem by a reader reflecting on the disappearance of 'The old Bull Ring market' in the post-war era poignantly conveys the alchemy of antiquity conjured in lines such as: 'when I remember I heave a sigh', 'But from now on it won't be the same. It's such a pity and oh what a shame.' The potentially regressive assertion of indigeneity can be discerned in the ending couplet: 'Still, all true Brummies will be remembering. The days gone by in the old Bull Ring.' By implication, if you can't remember those days, your claim to the city is false, you're not one of 'us'. This weekly interchange between newspaper and readers takes permanent form in a series of books edited by Chinn and marketed through the paper. For example, *Brum and Brummies 2* is

packed with articles and photographs on the Brum of yesteryear and in it Carl takes us for a mooch up the Bull Ring, a traipse down the Old End . . . to see, hear and sniff the sights, sounds and smells of Old Brum. (*Evening Mail*, 10 November 2001: 18)

This concentration on the seemingly halcyon days of the organic community of the old city landmarks, the slums and 'old Brum' affirms the trauma of post-war redevelopment, but also marks through its absence a period of substantial immigration. Indeed, those areas associated with 'authentic' Birmingham, devastated by German bombs or unsympathetic developers in Chinn's narrative, have become the 'inner city'. That term and its associated geographical territories are now inextricably linked with migrant communities, connecting the threat and actuality of post-war change and loss with racialized Otherness – those identifiably from without. Thus, a seemingly innocent forgetfulness is in fact profoundly structured. The absence of any black or Asian faces from a volume called *Golden Years of Birmingham* is striking. The back cover of the book proclaims 'It is not a history book, rather a *nostalgic* look at life concentrating on that most eventful period in our recent past centred around the 1940s, 50s and 60s' (True North Books, 1999: back cover; emphasis in original). This exemplifies in a local setting the more general forgetfulness about the consequences of empire for Britain, which Stuart Hall described as 'white amnesia' over two decades ago (Hall, 1978). There is



a selective invitation to 'rekindle thoughts of how things were in the Birmingham of our childhood, the Birmingham of our parents, and perhaps even our grandparents' (True North Books, 1999: back cover). The whiteness of this 'we' doesn't have to be stated to be understood. For all the worthy intentions of popular local history, there is a patterned disavowal of post-war migration to Birmingham, often left unspoken, but clearly implied.

This discursive structure is evident in another feature of Chinn's weekly trip down memory lane, 'Paradise Lost in Handsworth' (*Evening Mail*, 27 May 2000: 22–3). This spread encapsulates the elisions within the selective memories of local history. 'Handsworth' can only connote one of the most symbolic black settlements in Britain. Yet here the dynamics of this migration are completely ignored. Instead Chinn makes a plea for the rustic hamlet of Birchfield to 'not be allowed to drift from consciousness'. Lovingly captured in the photograph enveloping the article, the corn factory, the 1913 Odeon picture palace, the cycle depot, the horse and cart – these are all long lost. The wide road 'has cut a swathe through old Birchfield'.

The physical and cultural aspects of 'disintegration' are inextricable here. So also is the relationship between a particular time – the 1960s – and the destruction and invasion of much loved local spaces. It is now common sense to blame the 1960s for everything that went wrong in Birmingham. No less a luminary than Prince Charles has recently congratulated the city on its redevelopment programme, for 'turning its back on the 1960s . . . the planning mistakes of the post-war years' that led to a sense of disconnection and disintegration ('My Pride in Your Great City', *Evening Mail*, 13 April 2000: 8–9). Even a historical publication that does attempt to deal with migration from the Caribbean to Birmingham and which is published by the council itself chimes in with the portrayal of the post-war era as a regrettable rupture. It is entitled *The Divisive Decade* (Edmead et al., 1999). The title of this otherwise progressive intervention in local historiography underwrites a temporality based on the idea of immigration as one of the dislocating elements in a compound post-war fracture, the ongoing pain of which, for many in the white majority, is evident in the daily expression of commonsense histories of the city in the letters page of the *Evening Mail*.

Condensed narratives of local identity, culture and history are amplified daily by the *Evening Mail* newspaper, but most particularly in its letters page. Here, deep-seated resentments and anxieties about change become explicit in questions such as 'Are we living in Britain or aren't we?' (letter in *Evening Mail*, 5 October 1999: 16). The cumulative effect of these daily barbs is to evoke a sense that 'our' proprietorial rights over both city and nation have been usurped in a narrative of post-war decline. This comprises an incredibly condensed rendition of the following themes. The Second World War was a Pyrrhic victory. For



many readers thereafter, waves of immigration and lately a stream of directives from the European Union have undermined the settled foundations of a civil, decent and moral British tradition. This vague sense of injustice is recurrently given a local focus and expression in the forum of the letters page. A reader's comment on the city council's rehousing of asylum seekers once again specifies the temporal location of authentic Birmingham and true Brummies clearly in the distant past:

I would like to write on behalf of another forgotten minority, the forgotten Brummies who have for the past 40 years paid into the system and now have to live in private rented accommodation. I would like someone to explain to myself and others why asylum seekers have priority over Birmingham citizens with respect to housing. (*Evening Mail*, 2 November 2001: 9)

The juxtaposition in spring 2000 of a crisis at the city's largest car factory and the unveiling of plans for a futuristic new Selfridges department store in the heart of Birmingham city centre called forth a response which amplified and accentuated all these rhetorical devices. It also brought into the open two contrasting narratives of Birmingham's identity.

The BMW-Rover crisis: 'keep fighting the war'

The attempt on the part of Birmingham City Council to rebrand Birmingham as a postindustrial leisure and tourist destination sits uneasily with the historical proletarian identity celebrated by the popular local history of Chinn and the thousands of listeners and readers he engages with daily across different media. Tensions became explicit during the spring 2000 crisis at Rover's Longbridge car plant.

In March 2000, the Munich-based company BMW announced that it was to pull out of the Rover car plant at Longbridge, just south of Birmingham University, selling up to British venture capitalist group Alchemy. It was immediately apparent that 5000 jobs were at risk, with estimates quickly predicting up to 50,000 possible job losses in the wider West Midlands economy. This genuinely devastating prospect elicited some extraordinary rhetoric, drawing on the narrative of popular public history we have outlined above. Fearful workers began to apportion blame, enjoined by the local media and fellow citizens whose opinions were endlessly canvassed by the *Evening Mail* and amplified in extended letters pages. Eager to 'stand up and be counted' in the face of this crisis, Chinn stepped into the fray, claiming that:

If we do not fight this, the Midlands will be finished as an industrial region. This is about the future of Birmingham as a centre of manufacturing. If we do not make a stand, irrespective of our colour, creed or politics, we are going to end up in four or five years' time with mass unemployment and nothing else. (*Evening Mail*, 20 March 2000: 1)



The battle lines were now drawn. At issue was the sustainability of the local identity exemplified most strongly in Chinn's historical narrative. For Chinn, the city's very soul was embodied in the craft of automotive engineering: 'we are a folk talented in the taking of metal and the forging and fashioning of it into things of beauty and usefulness' (Chinn and Dyson, 2000: 43). Yet now a seemingly unshakeable economic base was revealed to have precarious transnational foundations, undermining the organic essentialism of his proletarian, urban Arcadia. Citizens responded on these very terms, protesting in letters to the *Evening Mail* that 'They're taking away our history' or 'Rover is Birmingham, I can't imagine the city without Longbridge'.

During this period, many explanations for Rover's predicament were forwarded. Recurring refrains bemoaned England's apparent thralldom to Brussels, that 'Europe controls our politics', a condition precluding any direct action based on self-interest. This first past-present alignment to be mobilized in shaping local identity can be identified as 'keep fighting the war'. The rhetorical organization of the relationship between history and contemporary predicaments pointedly reiterated the 'Germanness' of BMW. This mobilized a rhetoric of war and, through insults and caricatures, evoked the spirit of 1945, the defining and glorious historical episode for both city and nation. Throughout March and April 2000, the letter-writing battalions marched through the pages of the local newspapers, setting off non-sequiturs (France, Europe, asylum seekers) in all directions:

I've said it many times; You cannot trust Germans, and if it comes to that, the French also.

Did we British really win the war . . . ? I believe that our 1939 enemy will definitely have won if we allow our currency to die.

The Germans are not going to win this war. The Government should renationalise Rover now. (readers' letters, *Evening Mail*, 23 March 2000: 10–11)

Where the Luftwaffe failed to bring Longbridge to its knees, a handful of men from Munich have done so. (reader's letter, *Evening Mail*, 30 March 2000: 11)

Reflecting on his service with the Home Guard, one correspondent wrote to the *Evening Mail* on behalf of his generation:

There must be a number of old chaps, who on reading the *Mail* headlines, wonder why on earth we bothered . . . The European Community appears hell bent on the destruction of Great Britain, in waging economic warfare – not least in sending us their unwanted so-called asylum seekers. Enough is enough. (*Evening Mail*, 17 March 2000: 10)

If you are going to talk the talk of war, then a war is what you need. Given that the struggle was actually with capital, maybe a *class* war was in order. Backed by enormous coverage in the *Evening Mail*, Chinn 167



called for local people to march in solidarity with Longbridge workers to protest at BMW's actions. He invoked the historical precedent of a Chartist open-air rally for democratic reform held in Birmingham in 1832. He summoned 250,000 people to attend. The *Evening Mail* headlines demanded: 'Will *you* march for Longbridge?', presenting this event as a popular crusade. Its coverage of the build-up to the event made much of 'people power', keen to promote a community-wide rather than a class-based mobilization. Thousands of individuals called the paper to pledge that they would attend, their names listed in a roll call running to several pages in several editions of the paper: 'ordinary men, women and children anxious to register their backing'.

On the day itself (1 April 2000), 50,000 people marched through the city, with a total of 80,000 attending a rally at Cannon Hill Park. En route, a group of teenagers sang an adaptation of the theme to an abidingly popular British television sitcom set in the Second World War, *Dad's Army*. Its lyric, which was freely adapted, runs 'Who do you think you are kidding Mr Hitler, if you think we're on the run?' Along with what is now a football anthem 'You'll Never Walk Alone', it was taken up by the crowd who were joined by Roy Egan, a retired local policeman, who came dressed as the traditional embodiment of Britishness, John Bull. Reports of the occasion underlined the sense of history and the solidaristic impulses:

There was an unmistakable sense of pride as they marched through the streets of Birmingham – once famously described as 'city of a thousand trades'. Chinn declared: 'We are not walking with heads bowed. We are marching with heads held high to show the world what this region has achieved in the past, and can achieve in the future.' (*Evening Mail*, 1 April 2000: 6)

According to the newspaper's report of the rally, Chinn spoke with emotion and power, his delivery compared to that of a 'preacher'. Chinn's address of 'brothers' was aimed directly at 'the manufacturing people of Birmingham', the atmosphere angry and threatening as he cried: 'We are fighting not only for British manufacturing, we are fighting for the working class.' Faced with the loss of production of that symbol of British car-making, the Mini, he suggested that if 'they' tried to take it away from Longbridge, then he and the crowd would be there at the gates to stop them (*Evening Mail*, 3 April 2000: 8–9)!

Intriguingly, by 3 April, some of the *Evening Mail* coverage had changed its tone. The paper hesitated about how closely to align itself with the unexpected 'oratory' and 'fire and Brimstone stuff'. With a clear hint of trepidation, the business editor noted how Chinn's rhetoric and that of others on the platform recalled a more radical era. Specifically this was the 1970s, a crucial moment in Conservative mythology 'when worker protests were commonplace and unions held the upper hand across the industrial landscape of Great Britain'. There were many calls for the



renationalization of the plant at the march – notably on the ubiquitous banners handed out by the Socialist Workers Party, clearly visible yet unremarked upon in *Evening Mail* photographs. Revolutionary rhetoric was, for a few days prior to the demonstration, accompanied by a partially communistic solution, as Chinn called for ‘private entrepreneurs with first-hand knowledge of the industry to come to Longbridge’s rescue and for the 366 acre factory site to be sold off to a new “people’s co-operative” comprising councils throughout the West Midlands, Longbridge worker representatives and car industry bosses’ (*Evening Mail*, 20 March 2000: 1). Similarly, the workforce called for government aid for retraining to be set aside to enable them to take over the plant.

Yet, within days the radical class antagonisms implied were muted. As we saw earlier, Chinn’s vision of Birmingham’s past is too steeped in nostalgia to encompass serious critical analysis of the local economy and social structure. It cannot suddenly mobilize direct action in the present to redirect the city’s future. The cheerful presentation of dogged, dutiful artisans has recuperated many of the radical impulses that have propelled ‘people’s history’ in the last two decades. Its expression here rarely seems to involve any acknowledgement of how hard won ‘history from below’ has been, nor its indebtedness to a distinctly Marxist epistemology. Patrick Wright labels this radical past-present alignment ‘the marching proletariat alignment’. This sees historical development as a slow but continuous process of struggle through which the working class “wins” the present’ (Wright, 1985: 153). But in the popular local history of Birmingham, the proletariat isn’t marching forward; its history offers no radical momentum. The notion of a radical working class might be borne out by historical studies of other parts of England, such as Manchester or the mining communities of the Northeast. However, one could argue that Birmingham’s is actually a conservative tradition in which Chartist riots and trade union militancy in the 1970s were aberrations. One could certainly accuse Chinn of a remarkable disingenuousness in his call to a radical past given the evident valorization of working-class conservatism in his published studies. The construction of the ‘city of a thousand trades’ validates small-scale artisanal culture; entrepreneurial history, small family firms, craftsmanship. These, rather than strikes and demonstrations, are celebrated by the sepia-toned histories (see Chinn’s series *Our Brum*, 1997).

In the popular narratives of Birmingham’s history, the foundational term working class – typically unscrutinized – is reduced to that exactly: people defined by their work, not by a culture stemming from that work, nor by an oppositional consciousness deriving from an antagonistic relationship with capitalism. If anything, the impression of capitalism one draws from class history in Birmingham is of its benign qualities, endorsed by a quiescent workforce who, to quote the title of one of Chinn’s studies, ‘worked all their lives’ (Chinn, 1988). The deferential



demeanour of this working class is emphasized by the concentration of local history on images of loyal responses to imperial parades, the war ('we did *our* bit!') and royal visits (see True North Books, 1999 especially). Furthermore, Chinn's past-present alignment offers no progress as it is perforce invested in pastness: genuine working-class community resides dutifully in that urban Arcadia. The brief reference to 1970s radicalism by the *Evening Mail* reporter was notable, as if to issue a sobering reminder to readers impressed by the strength of feeling on the march that the most recent class war at Longbridge had ended in a resounding defeat and 18 years of Conservative government.

It was telling how quickly the oppositional rhetoric and radical proposals for worker co-operatives were immediately silenced – as was Chinn – by the emergence in the same week as the march of a bid for Rover by a group called the Phoenix Consortium, led by former Rover manager John Towers. Just a month after the demonstration, the heroic worker was usurped in favour of the heroic entrepreneur as the *Evening Mail* proclaimed 'All Brum is with you, Mr Towers!' (*Evening Mail*, 4 May 2000: 1). The Phoenix Consortium was underpinned by a vital last-minute injection of a £250m guarantee from Burdale Financial, an American venture capitalist company. The dependence of Rover on the transnational flow of funds made a mockery of the economic xenophobia and insularity exhibited during the crisis.

In the immediate aftermath of the rally, the same local newspapers that had been decrying the dependence of Birmingham on inward investment, service industries and any taint of a foreign hand or power, hailed the arrival of 21st-century shopping at the historic heart of the city, the Bull Ring, the apex of 1960s redevelopment, by now an embarrassing eyesore about to be demolished. The rest of the article explores the contradictions and unexpected convergences between old and new visions of Birmingham thrown up by its current rebuilding.

Selfridges and designer labels: the new future of Birmingham?

The futuristic design of the new Selfridges department store (Figure 2), due to open on the site of the old Bull Ring shopping centre in autumn 2003, expresses an alternative narrative of Birmingham to Chinn's. Its radical architecture symbolizes the concerted attempt to refashion the city in conscious opposition to its traditional identity as a centre for manufacturing industry. Selfridges's proposal for a new cathedral of consumption was announced as 'Space-age shopping', a £40m investment in a 260,000 square foot building whose explicit intention is to be an 'architectural icon' (see: <http://www.future-systems.com/projects/279f.htm>). Vittorio Raddice, Chief Executive of Selfridges, expressed something of the power relations involved in urban regeneration today,



implying the city should be grateful for being chosen as the preferred investment location: 'We are taking a big risk in going into the Bull Ring with its reputation. There is no point in just putting up another box with a different name on it' (*Evening Mail*, 4 April 2000: 3). Perhaps mindful of the extra advertising revenue and added circulation to be gained from a retail-led renaissance, the *Evening Mail* expressed an uncharacteristically fawning gratitude for this product of a London-based, avant-garde architectural practice, tellingly called Future Systems ('Brum Can Hold its Head High', *Evening Mail*, 4 April 2000: 8).

For once, the *Evening Mail* seemed out of touch with its readers. Some 95 percent responded negatively to an *Evening Mail* telephone poll asking 'Does New Selfridges Inspire You?' (*Evening Mail*, 7 April 2000: 10). Ironically, the main objection to the impulse represented by Selfridges lay exactly in the popular acceptance of those lessons of the past given a weekly airing in the *Evening Mail's* own local history column. These centre on suspicions that the city is about to repeat the mistakes of the 1960s. This consensus was expressed in one reader's letter complaining that:

Once again, out-of-town developers are coming in and taking no notice of the historic nature of the Bull Ring. If this and the Indoor Market are examples of what Hammersons [the developers] are proposing, I think the new Bull Ring would be worse than the old, and once again the so-called planners would have made a colossal mistake. (*Evening Mail*, 10 April 2000: 10)

Clearly, many *Evening Mail* readers were troubled by the prospect of a massive retail redevelopment. Coming at the moment of the Longbridge crisis, the appearance of Selfridges implied a seismic shift at odds with the popular past-present alignment underpinning the image of Birmingham as a manufacturing city. This antagonism was sharply evident, with a problematically racialized inflection, in a succinct statement from Chinn at the outset of the Rover crisis. There was something bathetic in Chinn's deployment of the main antagonists of the 'keep fighting the war' alignment when he asked: 'Do we really want to end up as a nation which is no more than a theme park for German or Japanese tourists?' (*Evening Mail*, 20 March 2000: 2).

'Birmingham forward'?

Chinn's question explicitly challenged the new image of Birmingham expressed by Birmingham City Council and local business leaders. This portrays Birmingham as a city driven by consumerism, convention centres and a range of upscale developments currently redefining the city's skyline. The present-future alignment underpinning these regeneration projects is wired into the thinking of any senior local politician, council officer or business leader. Our label for this aspirational rhetoric –



Figure 2. The view from Digbeth. The site seen in Figure 1 has been cleared and built upon once more. Birmingham's historical centre, 'The Bullring' marketplace, is dominated by the Selfridges building (right). The skeleton of the building is covered in a plastic sheet that conveys something of how it will look on completion, with its skin of ceramic discs. In the distance is the cylindrical 'Rotunda'. Long reviled, this totem of 1960s modernism and redevelopment is now the object of local affections. (Photograph by Louise Rastall, University of Central England)

172 'Birmingham forward' – deliberately references the city's motto. This vision self-consciously draws on the city's invented tradition of far-sighted local government, entrepreneurial innovation and the peaceful management of cultural differences. It pervades the glossy promotional literature selling the city to potential investors, visitors and rooftop penthouse purchasers.



One striking example of the discourse of 'Birmingham forward' is the brochure *Birmingham: An Investor's Guide*, produced by the city's specialist inward investment facilitator Locate in Birmingham (2000; see also: <http://www.locatebirmingham.org.uk>). Go-getting, profit-generating, market-led Birmingham has to be mobile, responsive and forward looking. Clearly evoking the spirit of Britain's New Labour government, the brochure declares: 'New Birmingham . . . is more than just a thriving business city. It is a vibrant, multicultural society currently regenerating itself through a spectacular £1.5 billion redevelopment of the City Centre' (Locate in Birmingham, 2000). Redolent of a Blairite neomodernity reconciling the potentially conflicting claims of capitalism, multiculturalism and civic responsibility, the document defines Birmingham as: 'A progressive and cosmopolitan city, it is constantly moving forward and embracing the challenge of change to create a location where entrepreneurial enterprise works in successful partnership with the public sector' (Locate in Birmingham, 2000). Predictably, the city's cultural differences are conveniently packaged into digestible segments: 'The Arcadian Centre is an established player at the heart of Birmingham's entertainment zone and providing facilities for Japanese, Chinese, Latin American, French, Italian, Indian, Irish, Vietnamese and English food is the city's veritable Global village' (Locate in Birmingham, 2000).

The heavily circumscribed progressivism of 'Birmingham forward' looks to other places for its rebranding of the city. Fresh inspiration and new meanings are sought elsewhere in an attempt to both imitate and emulate continental Europe and North America. The superlatives and favourable comparatives crowd the page: 'A new quality of life survey has placed Birmingham ahead of Barcelona, Milan and Rome' (Locate in Birmingham, 2000). In looking to conferences, leisure and business tourism, this facing towards the future cultivates a sense of transience and impermanence: relegated to service jobs, locals await the arrival of others to define them in their work. A neat example of this slightly awkward makeover was the inauguration of a prestigious Harvey Nichols store in the designer label-filled retail development of a former Royal Mail sorting office, the Mailbox. In the run up to its arrival, national media highlighted the incongruity of such a venture in Birmingham: 'When a city is synonymous with Spaghetti Junction, Jasper Carrott and a decidedly unsexy accent, it's a struggle to be seen as stylish' ('Brum's the Word', *Guardian*, 10 August 2001: G2, 8). The opening of the store in October 2001 was marked by the transport from London of a trainload of fashion journalists and B-list celebrities to give it a seal of approval, as if the city's reinvention has to be seen by others to be believed and cannot be evaluated in local terms.

The most recent expression of 'Birmingham forward' and its narrative of the city's renaissance was Birmingham City Council's grand design for a national stadium. The ongoing inability of Wembley Stadium's proposed



redevelopment to convince a sceptical British government led to the reopening of a bidding process for this prized asset, a competition Birmingham had lost several years previously. Throughout the summer and autumn of 2001, barely a day passed without the local press banging the drum for the new stadium to be built near the National Exhibition Centre on the outskirts of Birmingham. Special newspaper pull-outs, high-level presentations in London and a glossy bid document consolidated the aspirational identity of the rebranded city, eager to prove its 'world class' credentials: 'The creation of the National Stadium at the proposed site would reinforce the already recognised Birmingham Experience . . . as one of the world's favourite meeting places, hosting international conferences, sporting events and concerts with consummate skill' (Birmingham and Solihull English National Stadium Project Team, 2001).

With these real and imagined developments, Chinn's fears seem to be borne out: there is no heroic dignity of craft labour here, manufacturing industry has little place in this vision. Yet, despite the differences, there is a curious convergence between the selective nostalgia of Chinn's past-present alignment and the fragile self-confidence of the supplicatory promotional literature of 'Birmingham forward'. Chinn seeks the fullness and richness of Birmingham's identity in a mythical past; 'Birmingham forward' displaces it to just beyond the time horizon of the latest regeneration project. Yet in each case the recent past of the city is by implication written off as regrettable, a series of planning and social mistakes that can only be rectified by refashioning the city's self-image in the light of other spaces and other times. By looking elsewhere, or elsewhen, for fulfilment of the city's promise, scant attention is paid to the needs and conditions of the here and now. Stark disparities in wealth, unemployment and housing conditions persist (see Birmingham City Council, 2001), yet these make little impression on the two dominant narratives of Birmingham's identity. Furthermore, these past-present and present-future alignments converge on a common destination: a community untroubled by conflict and placed beyond critical analysis. This is remarkably evident in the following quotations:

Great cities recognise cultural diversity as a real strength. It is the collective harmony of Birmingham people working together which makes it an exciting place to live and work. If we are divided we will not be able to take advantage of the opportunities of the new century. (Councillor Albert Bore, *Evening Mail*, 3 May 2000)

Modern Birmingham is a fascinating and thrilling mixture of lifestyles, languages and beliefs. But all of its people are united by one deep bond. They have come to work in the workshop of the world . . . They are distinguished as much by their independence, by their desire to be their own gaffer, by their thirst to have their own business. English run workshops and factories, Chinese and Cypriot restaurateurs, Italian terrazzo firms, Irish building



contractors, Kashmiri balti-house keepers. Sikh and Gujarati shopowners, Caribbean entrepreneurs – the list is endless . . . Birmingham is invigorating and vital. It lives through its people. Together they form an orchestra of talents and abilities, the diverse sections of which exhibit their own distinctive natures. But each contributes to the final performance – harmonious, energetic and creative. (Chinn, 1994: introduction)

The indistinguishability of these visions is both striking and dispiriting. For both the leader of the city council and the foremost public historian of the locality respectively, cultural diversity can be readily gathered into a narrative of communal togetherness. Complex histories of how those differences were, and continue to be, generated and sustained in the face of adverse social relations are elided. Their shared assumptions testify to the lack of serious debate about how Birmingham came to be what it is now, let alone what its future as a city should be. For each of these narratives of city identity, the comforting solvent of ‘harmonious Birmingham’ dissolves all meaningful differences. For Chinn, the dynamic force for unification emerges from the direction of the past: the depth and strength of ‘old Birmingham’ comfortably absorb more recent eruptions of dissonance. For Councillor Bore and the protagonists of ‘Birmingham forward’, the energies of the future melt away the racialized conflicts and socioeconomic inequalities of Birmingham’s recent history.

Conclusion

Everywhere is not becoming the same. Some of the more hyperbolic tendencies of contemporary intellectual and political rhetoric about urban space sweep aside particularity, even as they pay lip service to the heterogeneity of the local. Scenographic approaches to the city project a handful of cities as models for everywhere else, run the risk of colluding with (sometimes appearing to provide the vocabulary for!) civic boosterism’s narratives of inevitable restructuring and thereby ‘tend to take political out of political economy and treat the cultural as entirely derivative of epochal economic transformations’ (Smith, 2001: 73). We have tried to describe the politics of local distinctiveness and how the past and future become crucial stakes in the struggle to renarrate local identity. Global forces do not overwhelm particularity; they can in fact incite its vehement reinvention. Attention to local detail is crucial for ‘globalization must be located on the ground if it is to have any practical meaning’ (Smith, 2001: 98). We believe the story of Birmingham’s reinvention is both unique and illustrative of wider patterns in contemporary urban life. In maintaining a balanced interplay between global and local forces, we would encourage analysts of social and cultural change to draw the following lessons from our brief exploration.



First, local newspapers and popular historical representations of a locality in the texts of public history are crucial, often neglected, sites for the reinvention of local identities. Physical rebuilding on the massive scale already begun and envisaged in Birmingham implies comprehensive symbolic reconstruction. There are discursive clearance programmes and building sites also. Public history as narrated in local newspapers, history books and city council promotional literature generates past-present and present-future alignments which provide the discursive resources for debates about the nature of locality. The remaking of space demands a politics of time, all too often expressed in selective memories of how things were and partial visions of the city to come. The interplay between these local vocabularies and the more widely known repertoires of urban regeneration requires sensitive treatment.

Second, the global processes restructuring localities are always mediated by highly particular local contingencies and traditions. In the case of Birmingham, the city's pivotal role in the initial stages of the industrial revolution generated a particular vulnerability to the restructuring of modern economies. This intensified the search for new narratives and a new city image. Each city will have a distinctive relationship with the structures of modern life, which will set the terms for its negotiation of social change.

Third, the tendency towards utopianism in commenting on urban reinvention should be tempered by a modest focus on the pressing issues of the here and now. The two dominant versions of local identity we have highlighted in our case study are 'the urban Arcadia' and 'Birmingham forward'. They each reveal how the city has a profound problem of identity concerning its 'presentness', exhibiting a similar lack of faith in Birmingham as it currently is. Both seek to escape from today to another time and another place. 'The urban Arcadia' has little confidence in the present as part of its definition of authentic identity, seeking solace in the roots of working-class solidarity as a bulwark against present day uncertainties. 'Birmingham forward' draws on Europe and North America for models of its future pattern of growth and activity. Both narratives decry the 'mistakes' of the post-war era, but in doing so disavow the racialized structure of their quests for communal harmony. 'The urban Arcadia' is conveniently before 'they' came, an era when 'we' truly were 'us'. 'Birmingham forward' incorporates cultural diversity into the pageant of civic pride. Each of these visions of the city displays a pronounced reluctance to explore marginal, dissident identities and the conflictual dynamics necessary to animate genuine radicalism.

A more inclusive public history must enable the hitherto marginalized to

176 become part of a memory and then transform it through their presence. . . . It is as wrong to demand that they acquire a memory in which they have no



part, as it is to expect them to be satisfied with a multiculturalism which has no real content. (Touraine, 1995: 298)

Neither of the dominant visions of Birmingham appreciates this and thus has little place for our generation of residents. We are both Birmingham born and bred, yet we are too young to remember the good old days that never were and feel increasingly reduced to the status of passive consumers rather than active participants in urban renewal. We belong to a generation that values the city precisely for the conflicts, contradictions and imperfections we had to negotiate while growing up. Our narratives are only now starting to appear in recent fiction about Birmingham (Coe, 2001; Gay and Bell, 1999; Ross and Brissett, 2001).

By contrast, neither the scenographic voyeurism of theory auteurs nor selective reimaginings in public history of the kind we have outlined here are subtle enough to register the richness of locally grounded sensibilities. A willingness to engage more patiently with the complex and mundane moments of the local is a precondition for capturing the difficulty and discord in spite of which – often because of which – Birmingham, like so many other misunderstood cities, is worth exploring, living in and loving.

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