**“There is nothing there”: Deindustrialization and Loss in a Coastal Town.**

**Abstract**

Based on 52 qualitative interviews with working class individuals, this paper explores the social and economic decline of a coastal locale referred to as High Town in Teesside in the North East of England. First, the paper outlines how the locality expanded as a popular seaside resort under capitalism’s post-war period. It then assesses how the seaside existed together with industrial work, offering stable employment opportunities, economic security, and a sense of community. Next, the article documents the shift to neoliberalism in the 1980s, specifically the decline of High Town’s seaside resort, the deindustrialization process and therefore the 2015 closure of High Town’s steelworks. It explicates how this exacerbated the locale’s economic decline through the loss of industrial work’s ‘job for life’, its diminishing popularity as a coastal area and the further deterioration of the town centre. The paper concludes by suggesting High Town has lost its *raison d’être* under neoliberalism and faces difficulties in revival.

**Introduction**

This paper explores the rise and fall of a coastal locale that is referred to as High Town in Teesside in the North East of England.Throughout the twentieth century, Teesside’s local economy was dominated by the iron, steel, petrochemicals, and heavy engineering industries (Shildrick, et al 2012). As it was at the ‘forefront of capitalist development’ (Birch, et al 2010: 40), the area became the leading global producer of iron ore (Lloyd, 2013). The petrochemicals company Imperial Chemicals Industry (ICI) innovated in chemical processing (Warren, 2018), establishing two sites in Teesside in 1927 and 1956; the latter was two miles from High Town. By the 1960s, 56% of Teesside’s population possessed a relatively well-paid industrial job (North, 1975). Relatedly, in 1979 ‘one of the largest integrated steel units in the Western hemisphere’ (North, 1975: 86) was built in High Town. The steelwork’s site was an important employer in High Town and Teesside, employing 7000 people within five years (Hudson, et al 1994). As High Town is situated along the coastline and offered various cultural amenities, it also became one of the most popular coastal resorts in the country (Walton, 2000). Accordingly, High Town prospered both socially and economically, branded as ‘the lung of the great industrial population of Teesside’ (Cockroft, 1975: 106).

However, the neoliberal turn in the 1980s contributed to High Town’s decline. As capital controls were abandoned, Teesside’s local economy deindustrialized (Warren, 2018). Its labour market lost 100,000 remunerative manufacturing jobs and attained 92,000 service-based jobs between the mid-1970s and 2007 (Shildrick, et al 2012). While the service economy is principally comprised of poorly paid and non-unionized employment, the pride and sense of accomplishment from industrial work is also absent (Lloyd, 2013, 2018; Shildrick, et al 2012). Throughout neoliberalism High Town’s steelworks endured various privatizations and downsizes of the workforce (Hudson and Swanton, 2012), culminating in its closure in 2015. Therefore, around 2000 jobs were lost, as well as many more in the local supply chain (Telford and Wistow, 2020). Many of Britain’s coastal towns like High Town have also declined in popularity under neoliberalism, generating various socio-cultural and economic problems (Beatty and Fothergill, 2004; Leonard, 2016; McDowell and Thompson, 2019).

While the impact of Teesside’s industrial decline has been explicated by many (Hudson, et al 1994; Hudson and Swanton, 2012; Lloyd, 2018; MacDonald, et al 2020; Shildrick, et al 2012; Telford and Lloyd, 2020; Warren, 2018), few accounts have explored the *toxic symbiosis* of deindustrialization alongside coastal decline. This paper also responds to calls for further research about deprived coastal towns (Agarwal et al., 2018; McDowell and Thompson, 2019; Smith, 2012; Wenham, 2020) and builds upon the dearth of qualitative knowledge about Britain’s former ‘industrial towns by the sea’ (Beatty and Fothergill, 2004: 463). As Emery (2018: 4) stresses, it is important to explore the ‘enduring impacts of deindustrialization on working-class lives’ because working class people continue to live with the consequences (Linkon, 2013; Strangleman, 2017). Therefore, the article sheds empirical light on the repercussions of both industrial ruination and the decline of the seaside resort in High Town under neoliberalism.

The paper begins with an explication of neoliberalism, coastal areas, and deindustrialization. This literature acts as the backdrop for the article’s empirical findings and analysis. The two qualitative research projects (N=52) that form the paper’s findings are then discussed in the methodology. The first findings section: ‘The seaside and the steelworks’ demonstrate how many individuals obtained an identity, a sense of community and economic stability from what is identified as the town’s core *functioning points.* It also outlines the sense of nostalgia many participants expressed regarding High Town’s coastal and industrial heyday. The next findings section: ‘The lost functioning points’ outlines the social impact of a prolonged period of economic decline under neoliberalism, culminating in the 2015 steelwork’s closure. The article considers how a lack of industrial employment opportunities intensified over time and the implications for many residents, including a palpable sense of loss. Next, the paper documents the deterioration of the local town centre. This article concludes by suggesting High Town has lost its *raison d’être* under neoliberalism.

**Neoliberalism**

As Agarwal (2005) and Telford and Lloyd (2020) note, the decline of coastal and deindustrialized locales should be situated within global processes. Therefore, this paper attends to and critiques neoliberal political economy to shed further light on how the primacy to a globalised market economy generates negative effects for once relatively prosperous coastal and industrial areas. Indeed, structural crises in the early twentieth century including widespread poverty, economic inequality and World War Two withered laissez faire capitalism’s legitimacy (Hobsbawm, 1995; Judt, 2010). In consequence, between 1945-1979 Western governments adhered to the citizenry’s demands for redistributive policies; many workers experienced a significant growth in living standards and economic inequality narrowed (Frieden, 2007; Judt, 2010; Streeck, 2016). As both commodified consumer freedoms and wages increased, the belief that post-war Keynesian welfare state capitalism was functioning relatively well for the industrial working class was widespread (Frieden, 2007; Marquand, 1988). As we shall encounter, many people continue to nostalgically reflect on this era in High Town. However, structural conditions in the 1970s including a global oil crisis enabled a ‘rebellion of capital against Keynesianism’ (Streeck, 2016: 23). Indeed, this is when neoliberalism emerged.

Fine and Saad-Filho (2017) and Mitchell and Fazi (2017) stress that neoliberalism has consolidated capital’s power and control over workers through anti-trade union policies, the stagnation of wages and the proliferation of insecure employment. However, they problematize Harvey’s (2005) notion that neoliberalism is about the *restoration of* class power and control after it was constrained under Keynesianism, since capitalism has always ‘conspired against the workers’ (Fine and Saad-Filho, 2017: 699). Others note how neoliberalism seeks to entrench market logic - the maximization of profitability, competition, and individualism - as the core characteristic of social life (Jessop, 2019). This is often implemented in labour markets under the language of progress, freedom, and choice (Peck and Theodore, 2019; Rodgers, 2018).

While some view neoliberalism as driven by the bottom up (Barnett, 2005), others contend that it uses the nation state to restructure global institutions around neoliberalism’s core ideals including profitability, market expansion and the privatization of state assets (Cahill, 2018; Mitchell and Fazi, 2017; Slobodian, 2018). Relatedly, Cahill (2018: 981) borrows from Karl Polanyi and utilises the term ‘embedded neoliberalism’ to denote how the economy is entrenched in global institutions, enabling it to both function and ensure its hegemon. Slobodian (2018: 16) believes this protects neoliberalism ‘from the mass demands for social justice and redistributive equality’, since institutions enforce neoliberal policies and possess the power to overrule nation states to protect global capital. As a result, many contend that neoliberalism’s global functioning depends upon the nation state (Mitchell and Fazi, 2017; Slobodian, 2018).

Others view neoliberalism as a process (Brenner et al., 2010). Firstly, capitalism’s crisis conditions are utilised to instil pro-market policies; secondly, knowledge networks about neoliberalism are circulated throughout the globe; lastly, influential global institutions such as the International Monetary Fund implement neoliberal ideology (Peck and Theodore, 2019; Slobodian, 2018). Although the *neoliberalization* process differs across the globe, it has entailed the globalisation of the economy (Cahill, 2018, Fine and Saad-Filho, 2017). This is known as ‘neoliberal globalization’ (Peck and Theodore, 2019: 260), whereby capital is protected from the citizenry’s demands for fair wages and secure working conditions (Jessop, 2019; Rodgers, 2018). While this has benefited capital, it has led to the decline of many seaside areas and the deindustrialization of local economies such as High Town in Teesside.

Although some of England’s coastal locales declined in the 1960s, this deterioration intensified in the mid-1970s (Beatty and Fothergill, 2004; Leonard, 2016; McDowell and Thompson, 2019) since neoliberalism allowed tourists to visit parts of the world that were previously relatively insulated (Agarwal, 2005). Between 1979-1988, the number of tourists that stayed over for the evening at Britain’s seaside resorts declined by 27% (Gale, 2005). Meanwhile, capital shifted to low-wage economies, principally in Asia, to enhance its returns on investment (Streeck, 2016). Neoliberalism therefore imposed ‘intense forms of deindustrialization’ (Peck and Theodore, 2019: 257) in areas like Teesside. Although deindustrialization has been a lengthy process (Lloyd, 2013, 2018; Warren, 2018), High Town’s steelworks closed in 2015. The next two sections outline the literature on coastal communities and the impact of industrial ruination. As we will encounter, the similarities in these structural experiences include the loss of employment opportunities, unemployment, and social and economic deprivation (Agarwal, 2005; Beatty and Fothergill, 2004; High, 2003; Warren, 2018; Wenham, 2020).

**Coastal communities**

As neoliberalism awarded capital more freedom to maximize profitability (Jessop, 2019; Slobodian, 2018), marketing and advertising by tourist companies for relatively cheap holidays abroad proliferated (Gale, 2005). Simultaneously, neoliberalism restructured working class attitudes towards ‘freedom, choice and playfulness’ (Gale, 2005: 94); therefore, many people cast traditional seaside areas as outdated and unmodern. Whilst many working-class people continue to nostalgically reflect on the previous popularity of England’s coastal localities (Jarratt and Gammon, 2016; Walton, 2000), Rickey and Houghton (2009: 51) suggest that many are now characterised by a ‘legacy of disinvestment and decay’.

Utilizing ethnography, participatory arts-based research and interviews with young people, Wenham (2020) explicated a deprived coastal town in the North East of England. As many of her respondents possessed few formal qualifications, when they applied for jobs they experienced ‘constant knock backs from potential employers’ (Wenham, 2020: 53). Like Reid and Westergaard’s (2017), MacDonald, et al’s (2020) and Telford and Lloyd’s (2020) research, many young people believed the area had been economically abandoned. Contrarily, Agarwal et al., (2018) examined data from the United Kingdom’s census between 2001-2011. They ascertained that England’s coastal towns tend to possess numerous indices of economic deprivation, including temporary employment contracts and cheap privately rented accommodation (Corfe, 2017; Smith, 2012). However, this deprivation is geographically variegated; for instance, Margate and Blackpool are the most deprived, since they contain higher levels of long-term unemployment (also see: Rickey and Houghton, 2009; Walton, 2000).

Drawing on ethnographic research in deindustrialized Teesside, Nayak (2019) suggests residents disagreed with the media’s depiction of the area as possessing a multitude of social problems. He claims they believed the region had been regenerated, partially because of its proximity to the coastline, which amounted to ‘hidden beauty in the depths of darkness’ (Nayak, 2019: 945). Others contend that post-industrial localities often possess a post-social configuration; community spirit is absent and competitive individualism is pervasive (Winlow and Hall, 2013). Nonetheless, McDowell and Thompson (2019) conducted 40 interviews with precarious young people in Hastings, Ilfracombe, Southport, and South Shields. Echoing Beatty and Fothergill (2005), Shildrick et al (2012) and Wenham (2020), they ascertained unemployment, insecure work, and temporary employment contracts.

Smith (2012) investigated the prevalence of housing with multiple occupancies (HMO) in Britain’s coastal towns. Although many HMO were previously residential properties or sizable guesthouses, as tourist numbers declined, they were deemed surplus to requirements. Smith also discerned that particularly Morecambe, Scarborough and Hastings have high levels of HMO. He also outlines regeneration efforts in Hastings, including the local council’s attempts to limit the number of HMOs to decrease the presence of socially disadvantaged groups such as substance misusers. However, similarly to McDowell and Thompson (2019), Nayak (2019) and Reid and Westergaard (2017), as well as this article, the ability of residents to attain remunerative employment was circumscribed and thus the locale continued to decline. Others utilised interviews with individuals in Bexhill-On-Sea, in the south of England, to ascertain how people migrating to the area to retire impacted on the coastal town (Leonard, 2016). In effect, the area had shifted from a relatively busy seaside resort to a quiet retirement locale. Although regenerative efforts from various agencies occurred, they were met with ‘very vocal opposition’ (Leonard, 2016: 118) from retired migrants because they were satisfied with conditions in the area.

Rickey and Houghton (2009) demonstrate how Margate, a once prosperous coastal locale in South East England, is now defined by high levels of poorly paid jobs, poverty, cheap accommodation, substance misuse and the outward migration of its younger residents (also see: Corfe, 2017; Emery, 2018). They emphasise the importance of regeneration such as exploring new sectors or upskilling the local population; but Agarwal (2005) and Leonard (2016) contend that for regeneration to be successful it must involve the collaboration of multiple organisations to address residents’ needs including adequate housing and jobs.

While this section explored the literature on coastal communities under neoliberalism, the next section outlines industrial collapse. Mirroring much of the scholarship above, research on deindustrialization’s effects unveils poverty (Shildrick et al., 2012), joblessness (Mckenzie, 2015), the loss of an identity (Emery, 2018), as well as a palpable sense of nostalgia for industrialism’s stability and security (High, 2003; Strangleman, 2013; Walley, 2015).

**Deindustrialization**

Like the decline of coastal towns, deindustrialization has been an ongoing process throughout neoliberalism (Strangleman and Rhodes, 2014) across North America and Western Europe (Clark and Gibbs, 2020; Emery, 2018; Mckenzie, 2017; Neumann, 2018; Sassen, 1990). Placed within the context of global neoliberal capitalism, we can discern the similarities in experience across deindustrialized locales including a sense of loss (Walkerdine, 2010), the evisceration of economic stability and security (Linkon, 2013), lost pride (Mckenzie, 2015) and an identity (Strangleman, 2017). Therefore, the effects of industrial retrenchment continue long after manufacturing plants have closed (Emery, 2018; Strangleman, 2017; MacDonald, et al 2020; Telford and Lloyd, 2020).

Clark and Gibbs (2020) and Pleasant (2019) suggest industrial work offered parallel biographies; sons would follow in their father’s footsteps and obtain a perceived job for life. Although many working-class people nostalgically recall industrialism’s working conditions (High, 2003; Taylor, 2020), many post-industrial locales’ employment pathways are now non-unionized and uncertain. Echoing Emery (2018), Walley (2015: 626) notes that being an industrial worker was ‘often the only conceivable – life path for men’, particularly under capitalism’s post-war period. Although industrial labour was often dirty and dangerous, it fostered feelings of respectability and pride that have declined under neoliberalism (Emery, 2018; Strangleman, 2017; Walley, 2015). Others identify a palpable sense of loss brought by deindustrialization (Taylor, 2020; Walkerdine, 2010). For instance, Taylor (2020) explicated the effects of an industrial plant’s closure in the North of England. Respondents suggested their previous employer offered good remuneration and social security and therefore they were often nostalgic for these working conditions. In consequence, ‘the rhythmical noises of industrial production’ (Taylor, 2020: 47) were absent.

Like empirical work in coastal communities (McDowell and Thompson, 2019; Rickey and Houghton, 2009; Wenham, 2020), research on deindustrialization ascertained unemployment (High, 2003; Linkon, 2013; Mckenzie, 2015; Neumann, 2018; Shildrick, et al 2012). For example, Neumann (2018) suggests industrial retrenchment in Pittsburgh in the USA engendered high levels of unemployment, suicide, and depopulation because many people left to acquire employment elsewhere. Whilst some deindustrialized areas receive investment, innovate, and begin to bounce back (Froud, et al 2018; Tomlinson & Branston, 2014), others have lost their former ‘rhythms of life’ (Walkerdine, 2010: 102) including economic security and stable employment and thus continue to decline.

As mentioned, prominent themes in research on both coastal communities and deindustrialized locales include unemployment, a lack of jobs, a lost identity, and a sense of loss (Lloyd, 2018; Mckenzie, 2017; Reid and Westergaard, 2017; Taylor, 2020; Walkerdine, 2010; Wenham, 2020). Although deindustrialization has been a process throughout neoliberalism, it unfolds in ‘several waves’ (Strangleman, 2017: 473). The latest wave on Teesside was in 2015 when the last remaining steelworks closed. As some note, there is a need to understand the effects of this ongoing process on working class peoples’ lives (Emery, 2018; Strangleman, 2017; Telford and Lloyd, 2020), since ‘the reckoning of the industrial past and the experience of deindustrialisation remains unfinished business’ (Clark and Gibbs, 2020: 56). While this article builds upon the paucity of qualitative research in deprived coastal areas (Agarwal et al., 2018; McDowell and Thompson, 2019; Smith, 2012; Wenham, 2020), few scholars have explicated industrial ruination alongside the seaside’s decline. Indeed, the paper now turns to the two research projects (N=52) that underpin the empirical findings, which are analysed thereafter.

**Methodology**

Data outlined in this article is gathered from two qualitative research projects that explored social class and its interactions with deindustrialization, the contemporary labour market, and politics. Utilizing 27 interviews in 2017 to cultivate nuanced views and sentiments, the first project explored how the locale’s social and economic decline generated political dissatisfaction. As is common in qualitative research (Ellis, 2016; Kotzé, 2019; Lloyd, 2018), the researcher utilized their biography to begin participant recruitment, enabling access to eight respondents. The rest were recruited through snowball sampling. All respondents are white which is representative of local demographics. Relatedly, all live in three towns in the same local authority as High Town– two localities are six miles from High Town, the other is nine miles. 20 participants are men, the others are women. 10 respondents are retired. At the time of the interviews, two were unemployed, two were self-employed and two worked in the area’s emaciated petrochemicals industry. Others laboured for various construction companies. Overall, 15 respondents had previously worked in Teesside’s former steel and petrochemicals industries.

Research for the second project occurred across 2018-2019. The use of 25 face to face interviews built upon the first study and explored the effects of industrial ruination under neoliberalism, particularly the 2015 steelwork’s closure, current labor market conditions and political discontent. Ethnographic vignettes also situated sentiments within a broader contextual backdrop (Ellis, 2016; Kotzé, 2019). Five gatekeepers were utilised, enabling access to 14 respondents; the rest were recruited through snowballing. Most of the sample were aged between 40-60, four are aged between 18-20. 13 are women, the others are men. Five individuals had retired. Some of these participants had also previously worked in Teesside’s industry. However, if they had not, they knew a *significant other* that did – namely a partner or relative. While 22 participants live in High Town, two live in a town that was included in the first research project and the remaining participant lives in a different locale on Teesside. Gauging insights from respondents in both High Town and the surrounding localities enabled a range of reflections about the area’s decline, particularly the steelwork’s closure. Importantly, most of the participants also identified High Town as symptomatic of Teesside’s socio-economic decline. Current employment roles included bar work, postmen and women, supermarket assistant, self-employed individuals, teaching assistants, among others.

Data from both projects was thematically analysed (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Recurring codes and themes were therefore identified, highlighted, and pasted into separate Microsoft Word documents. Transcripts were read several times to ensure rigorousness. Undoubtedly, this research contains a core limitation. Drawing principally on gatekeepers and snowball sampling means the respondents are confined to the researcher’s and participants’ contact group, impacting upon its claims to generalizability. However, Kotzé (2019) claims qualitative research offers analytical generalizability; empirical findings can be confirmed and/or problematised by other research in locales that possess similar social, economic, cultural, and political conditions. As outlined, previous empirical work on both coastal communities and deindustrialized areas ascertained poverty, joblessness, and a sense of loss (Lloyd, 2018; MacDonald, et al 2020; Reid and Westergaard, 2017; Taylor, 2020; Walkerdine, 2010; Wenham, 2020). All participants were given an information sheet prior to the interviews, documenting what the research was about, intended usage of the data, withdrawal rights and the risk of harm which was considered minimal. The next sections explicate the empirical findings. First, it explores the sense of cultural buoyancy and social stability associated with the seaside and the steelworks.

**The seaside and the steelworks**

Indeed, England’s coastal locales provided leisurely activities to working class people throughout the nineteenth and parts of the twentieth century (Gale, 2005; Jarratt and Gammon, 2016; Walton, 2000). Whilst they formed ‘bucket and spade holiday destinations’ (Zebracki, 2018: 21), they were also popular for day trips which was evidenced in this research. High Town was one of the most popular seaside resorts in the country in the twentieth century (Walton, 2000), and thus many respondents spoke about how the area was once busy with tourists who often travelled sizable distances to visit it. Archie, retired, claimed:

“When I was a young lad, High Town was a booming place. You had the seafront; on a summer’s day it would be heaving. Lots of stalls on the beach, trampolines, slides, roundabouts - there was everything. People went for days out and they would enjoy themselves. There was fun palaces and stalls, ice cream kiosks, the high street was booming as well. Lots of shoppers, the racecourse too. I can remember there was loads of buses to take people home from the races. It was a big, booming place”.

Although Archie’s nostalgic recollections of High Town in the post-war period are partially idealised because this era possessed endemic class and gendered inequalities (Judt, 2010; Lloyd, 2013), it is substantiated by the presence of social and economic expansion. The locale provided various cultural enjoyments, creating employment opportunities for the local population. Note how Archie suggests there was a sense of cultural buoyancy as the locale possessed a social function, partially forging its identity from the seaside. This was corroborated by Julia, in her 50s: “when I was little, it used to be quite a lively summertime holiday destination. People would stay or at least come for days out. The beach was busy, the town was busy”. These conditions meant High Town provided a transient leisurely escape from Teesside’s industry and its ‘twin bursts of flame and smoke’ (Hudson, et al 1994: 21). Chloe elucidated the locality’s popularity with tourists:

“When I was young, I used to always come down here to the amusements and seafront. My mam would tell you, we had bus trips coming here, from Leeds, Bradford, different areas. The beaches and amusements used to be full – it was like a proper day out. My mam and dad would take us down here for ice-cream, fish and chips”.

A sense of social substance pervaded locales like High Town under post-war capitalism as working-class people spent a sizable amount of time with one another in their locality (Blackwell and Seabrook, 1985; Winlow and Hall, 2013). Indeed, its cultural amenities were utilised by both residents and day trippers, as Dave, 52, nostalgically reflected: “when I was younger, I used to look out of the window at my dad’s and watch people come in their droves on the train, coming to High Town”. Evidently, the area’s post-war cultural milieu was recalled fondly by many respondents because it offered clarity, stability, and continuity. As commodified consumer freedoms expanded, many commentators suggest an age of relative affluence enveloped working class life, particularly in coastal and industrialised areas (Kotzé, 2019; Lloyd, 2013; Walton, 2000). Anna, 87, described how:

“During the summer, there was loads of swings, roundabouts - this was in the 60s. It was very busy. There were loads of shops in the high-street too”.

Although this popularity was partially dependent upon good weather, High Town’s post-war era was perceived fondly by the participants because it fostered a sense of commonality amongst its residents. This meant ‘the spectres of capitalist crisis, mass unemployment and severe economic inequality – all central to the politics in the 1930s – appeared to have been banished’ (Kenny, 1995: 56) from the working class’s psyche in places like High Town. These conditions generated what might be identified as a sense of community. Mary, 45, explained:

“I loved growing up here [High Town]. There were lots of parks and my parents would take us. There was more of a community then, in the sense that there was a paddling pool that is near the seafront now and you couldn’t get a seat. It was heaving with local people”.

The notion that the locality was perpetually busy was a regular refrain across the sample, as Alan, retired, noted: “It did seem more sparkly in the 60s and 70s, all of the amusements and sugar boats. I would go down on busy days; the beach was jam packed”. Broadly defined as ‘an idealized and selective representation of the past’ (Jarratt and Gammon, 2016: 125), nostalgia for High Town’s formerly popular coastal resort continues to exist, enabling the participants to reflect on *what once existed*. Nostalgia enables Chloe, Julia, Dave, Mary, Alan, and others to view High Town through the eyes of their younger selves, generating recollections of a time that, as we will encounter, has now been *lost*. In effect, nostalgic memories allowed the participants to psychologically transcend High Town’s lost popularity as a seaside resort, providing meaning and attachment. Whilst nostalgia is therefore useful, as we will see, it can generate a dispiriting realization that the social world yearned for can no longer return (Jarratt and Gammon, 2016; Walton, 2000).

Nonetheless, the increased consumer freedoms reflected on nostalgically by the participants above revitalised capitalism, allowing it to stabilise itself after the early twentieth century’s structural crises including World War Two (Heath & Potter, 2006). According to Streeck (2016), this enabled the system to obtain the citizenry’s allegiance in the face of competing ideologies such as Soviet Union style communism. It also empowered capitalism to stimulate new desires and therefore pursue another phase of market expansion and capital accumulation (Heath and Potter, 2006; Streeck, 2016). While community spirit was potentially generated in High Town, some suggest the constitution of the working class serves capital’s economic interests (Blackwell & Seabrook, 1985). Anchoring coastal locales in a community was tolerated by capital because it did not threaten capitalism’s underlying economic logic of profit maximization (Winlow and Hall, 2013); rather, it aided its stabilization (Blackwell and Seabrook, 1985).

Nostalgic recollections of the area’s coastal and industrial heyday were substantiated by the local steelworks. Most respondents claimed that the area’s identity was accrued from the locale’s core functioning points - industrial work and the seaside - as Mary noted: “The *steelworks and the seaside, that worked together*”. As deindustrialization hit Teesside, particularly in the 1980s, many of the area’s shipyards and steelworks closed (Hudson, et al 1994). Thereafter, jobs became difficult to obtain; a textile factory opened in Teesside in the early 1980s and received 3500 applications for its first 24 job opportunities (Hudson, et al 1994). However, High Town’s steelworks opened in 1979 and offered some people in this research economic security and social stability. Ray, in his 50s, explained:

“In the 80s, there was massive unemployment. I was unemployed for a few years then I was at British Steel for over 30 years. British Steel was hard work; but it was great. Amazing work times - it got me a house, car, holidays. It was well paid. I did four days on, four days off - unreal. I practically worked six months of the year, but for the time you were there it was 12-hour shifts. It was hard work”.

Underpinning the steelworks was longevity and adequate remuneration, enabling steelworkers to forge a livelihood and plan for their future (Emery, 2018; Linkon, 2013; Walkerdine, 2010). Such stability meant worries about not being able to pay the bills were dispensed from steelworkers’ and their families’ psyche. Nonetheless, steelworkers worked long hours and it was physically demanding; workers had to be both tough and committed (Linkon, 2013; Pleasant, 2019). Although it was laborious, adequate trade union representation awarded industrial workers sizable holidays and in-work benefits (Warren, 2018). Accordingly, many former steelworkers claimed they felt fortunate to endure their working life in the remunerative steel industry. The lucrative nature of the steelworks was identified by Craig:

“The steel was the main employer around here; people would actually come from other places to work here. ICI, British Steel, your parents would work at one or the other”.

Scholars suggest some people migrated from the south of England, including from afar as Devon, to work in Teesside’s industry because of its social stability and economic security (Lloyd, 2013; Shildrick, et al2012; Warren, 2018). Note how Craig also highlights that a generational tradition was forged which occasionally meant sons would follow in their fathers’ footsteps and obtain an industrial job. Indeed, all respondents mentioned the steelworks alongside ICI. In the mid-1970s, ICI employed around 35,000 people at its two petrochemical sites on Teesside (Shildrick, et al 2012; Williamson, 2008); as mentioned, one of which was two miles from High Town. Therefore, capital’s demands for a large labour force under post-war capitalism generated a belief that it was relatively easy to obtain work in the area, as Deidre, retired, noted: “If you finished one job, you could get one on the Monday to start again. There was lots of job opportunities back then”. Accordingly, many participants and some significant others obtained stability and security from ICI. Tony, a former ICI employee, suggested:

“I worked at Wilton [ICI] for over a decade. Wilton was best job going, the last year I worked on the rail, could do what ya want. Sometimes there was buses queuing to take people back”.

Evidence suggests former workers and the local community recall ICI nostalgically because the company was perceived to care for its staff in employment and retirement (Hudson, et al 1994; Warren, 2018; Williamson, 2008). Such sentiments were evidenced in this research by Roger: “my brother worked for ICI; it was good money”. Offering both rewarding pay and lucrative pensions, ICI was a valued employer in the region; it gave workers sizable disposable income to spend in their area (Williamson, 2008). Participants spoke about how it offered former employees a sense of purpose, pride, and social fulfilment. As the chemical plants produced important products such as Perspex that was exported globally, workers were cognizant of their role in contributing productively to the local area and the nation’s economy (Shildrick, et al 2012; Williamson, 2008; Warren, 2018). Occasionally, the company provided housing for employees and university scholarships to their children, as well as ample opportunities for career progression through training, support, and regular wage increases (Williamson, 2008). Although ICI worked closely with trade unions, strikes were uncommon because workers believed they were fairly treated (Williamson, 2008). Nostalgically reflecting on these working conditions, ex ICI employee Alice, said:

“Retrospectively, you realise how good it was, you don’t realise how good you’ve got it until it’s gone”.

Nostalgia symbolises a sense of loss; a feeling that something is missing (Smith & Campbell, 2017; Walley, 2015). Note how Tony, Roger, Alice, and others indicate a yearning for industrial work’s economic stability and camaraderie, since it contrasts sharply with High Town’s labour market conditions under neoliberalism. Given ICI was occasionally dangerous and dirty, industrial nostalgia ought to be treated carefully (High, 2003; Strangleman, 2013; Walley, 2015). However, ICI provided many people in this research with a clear route forward in their working lives towards socioeconomic betterment. The steelworks, in particular, generated companionship and togetherness. Emma, 49, highlighted how her husband:

“Loved it. I think it was just like, yeah, a job for all the lads, a massive laugh. The jobs got done, but there was great banter - they played pranks on each other. John [Emma’s husband] really misses that”.

As feelings of commonality and shared bonds were forged on the shop floor (Taylor, 2020), co-workers were often viewed as a source of mutual strength. This meant obligation and commitment amongst the steelworkers were formed. Therefore, many suggested the steelworks was their “best job”. Note how Emma claims her husband misses the banter that came from working there, indicating that it is a *lost culture* that working class people are nostalgic for (Jarratt and Gammon, 2016; Walton, 2000). Whilst industrial labour was viewed as masculine and often confined to men (Strangleman and Rhodes, 2014; Strangleman, 2017), it provided a stable family wage (Walkerdine, 2010). Accordingly, a burgeoning coastal locale and remunerative industrial employment generated a sense that working-class life in places like High Town was improving, optimism and positivity characterised former industrial workers’ views about the future. However, these sentiments diminished throughout neoliberalism as High Town’s popularity as a tourist resort dwindled and various waves (Strangleman, 2017) of industrial collapse occurred. The impact of this decline on the locality and residents is the subject of the next section.

**The lost functioning points**

Most respondents could not identify a ‘punctual moment’ (Fisher, 2009: 2) that engendered the locale’s decline. Instead, its popularity as a tourist area withered throughout neoliberalism because former visitors increasingly accessed relatively cheap foreign holidays abroad (Agarwal, 2005; Beatty and Fothergill, 2004; Gale, 2005; Walton, 2000). Many spoke about how the amusement arcades are principally quiet in both the summer and winter months. Others suggested that High Town’s coastline is a fraction as busy as it was several decades ago. Roger claimed:

 “I go down the Gare [fishing area] sometimes, it looks like a *ghost town*”.

Similarly, Anna said:

“What I miss is the fishing boats, they were really nice. Now, you see one or two. It used to be nice, there was a lot more on the front. Now, there is nothing”.

The unchanging nature of the coastline can generate nostalgic reflections of previous days out on the coast (Jarratt & Gammon, 2016); a time where High Town’s seafront was populated with fishing boats. However, across the sample those from both High Town and the surrounding locales suggested High Town was in terminal decline. Whilst nostalgic memories of a fading history continue to punctuate the present, the bleakness of High Town’s current socio-economic arrangements clouded the participants’ views in this research. There was a sense that the area’s identity had deteriorated; it had stopped functioning as a vibrant coastal locality. This was elucidated by Clive, 18:

“It is like your Scarborough or Skegness, Blackpool - they have just been left, haven’t they?”

As mentioned, though the decline of England’s coastal towns is geographically variegated, many of them are defined by multiple indices of deprivation including poverty and higher than national average levels of unemployment (Leonard, 2016; McDowell and Thompson, 2019). While some receive significant reinvestment and bounce back (Agarwal, 2005; Leonard, 2016), the *raison d’être* of others like High Town is not adequately replaced so it continues to degenerate under neoliberalism. This is representative of Harvey’s (2005) point that capital moves spatially to maximise its returns on investment; if seaside towns do not have something to attract tourists and money they are left to decline. Relatedly, Mary said:

“The seaside, you still get some people in the summer. But it is seasonal, you have to get the weather. If not the businesses struggle”.

Indeed, many claimed that the coastline no longer appeals to ‘day trippers’ because of the area’s social problems, meaning it is perceived negatively. Whilst High Town has lost its popularity as a coastal town, it has also witnessed industrial retrenchment throughout neoliberalism which has impacted detrimentally on the area. This combination generates a *toxic symbiotic* relationship whereby social problems emerge, actively preventing growth and resurgence. Although ICI was at the forefront of capitalist development in the post-war era, its historical tendency to innovate was its eventual downfall since new technological processes were formed that did not require a sizable labour force (Hudson, et al 1994; Williamson, 2008). Increased competition from companies abroad also accelerated its decline, as ICI responded by making workers redundant, moving parts of their production abroad and concentrating on special chemicals (Hudson, et al 1994; Williamson, 2008). There was also growing hostility from many locals about ICI’s detrimental impact on the environment; for instance, Alan recalled a sizable fire at ICI which caused damage to nearby houses, meaning “they had to pay out thousands in compensation.” While ICI’s decline was spoke about with a sense of loss, the more recent steelwork’s closure in 2015 was recalled with a palpable feeling of sadness. Trev, 52, felt its closure was:

“Very sad, to be honest. I am not sure on how many people worked there, but ya know, it was the main employer by far. You thought at one point everything was going to be okay, and then they made some job losses at Scunthorpe and Port Talbot, and High Town went”.

Over 2000 people lost their jobs when the steelworks closed, including many others that were employed in the local supply chain. Whilst the steelworks had been threatened with closure since 2010 when it was temporarily mothballed, most respondents stressed that they *never believed* it would shut. Symbolising this was Julia: “my husband worked there for twenty years, we thought it [closure] would never happen”. Horsley & Lloyd (2020) suggest neoliberalism is defined by uncertainty and instability, yet some people continue to believe that everything will either stay the same or improve. In their view, post-war capitalism’s relative security has subsided, and more and more people encounter employment insecurities, particularly in areas like High Town. Tony illuminated this:

“They should have done more to save jobs at British Steel. All these people losing jobs has a knock-on effect on peoples’ health. Try to find new work; new resources needed to retrain, but there aren’t enough jobs up here. It’s hard to get a job. There’s no such thing as a job for life anymore”.

The ‘accompanying ravages of deindustrialisation’ (Peck and Tickell, 2012: 246) under neoliberalism were highlighted by most respondents, particularly unemployment and a lack of remunerative industrial employment opportunities (Kotzé, 2019; Mckenzie, 2015, 2017; Pleasant, 2019), as Mary noted: “the steelworks shutting means the town has no focus”. Most believed that demand for jobs now outstrips supply, shifting power away from employees and towards capital. In this way, young peoples’ labor market prospects in High Town were highlighted as a core concern, since the financially lucrative industrial jobs previously available to the older respondents are at a premium. Katie’s husband lost his job at the steelworks. She said:

“British Steel - it was a given that you would go in and do an apprenticeship then you would have a job for the rest of your life. *There is nothing like that now*”.

Trev expressed similar sentiments:

“I don’t know what all the youngsters are going to do in High Town – what are they going to do? What are they going to do for jobs?”

Whilst nostalgia is often frowned upon as backward looking (Strangleman, 2013; Smith & Campbell, 2017; Walley, 2015), it is clear in this research that nostalgia in High Town partially symbolises a dissatisfaction with neoliberalism. It embodies a longing for ICI and the steelwork’s stability and security; a time where many working-class people would look to the future safe in the knowledge that their lives would continue to improve. This ‘memorialization’ (Strangleman, 2013: 29) of industrial work in High Town partially occurs because they have been forgotten about under neoliberalism, often laboring in economically insecure employment that fails to provide ICI and the steelwork’s positive symbolism.

Accordingly, many young people in locales like High Town now face myriad competition for poorly paid employment (MacDonald, et al 2020; Shildrick, et al 2012; Warren, 2018). The inability to obtain remunerative work means their future is a ‘blocked horizon’ (Stiegler, 2019: 52); many are unable to plan beyond the present. Most participants suggested today’s apprenticeships often form a cost-cutting mechanism for employers, since the guarantee of employment after one’s initial training and development is slim. Note how Katie argues that such conditions are contrary to the steelwork’s apprenticeships, as they once offered lengthy apprenticeship placements. As the post-war compromise between capital and labour has been abandoned (Fine and Saad-Filho, 2017; Jessop, 2019; Slobodian, 2018), it was believed that employers possess the power to pick and choose their workforce. Matty, 54, an ex-steelworker, claimed:

“It is hard these days. They [young people] don’t even get replies when they go for jobs. We used to get a letter saying ‘sorry’ if we haven’t got the job, now they [employers] don’t even get back in touch”.

The abandonment of post-war capitalism’s class compromise means that the policy goal of full employment has been abandoned under neoliberalism (Marquand, 1988; Winlow and Hall, 2013). Many companies therefore no longer shoulder the responsibility of replying to applicants, because they have a reserve army of labour to draw upon when required (Streeck, 2016; Mitchell and Fazi, 2017). Harvey (2005) notes that this was a core plank of the neoliberal restoration, enabling capital to abandon its former commitments to workers such as regular wage increases. This negatively impacts upon people in High Town, as Sue stressed: “It isn’t the same now [job opportunities]. I would not want to be growing up now”. Such sentiments indicate a yearning for a time of good employment in High Town, experienced through rising standards of living and a sense of positivity brought by both a bustling seaside resort and industrial work.

As High-Town’s popularity as a coastal locale has declined, and the local labor market is characterized by precarious employment (MacDonald, et al 2020; Warren, 2018), the notion that the area was unrecognisable in comparison to its coastal and industrial heyday was commonplace. Many respondents stressed that much of the local populace no longer possess the disposable income to spend in the town. Therefore, many stores either close and are abandoned or face dwindling demand for their services (Linkon, 2013; Walkerdine, 2010). Most identified the steelwork’s closure as further exacerbating the locality’s slow-motion decline. Jack, an ex-steelworker, explained:

“Look at the steelworks - a lot of shops are closing down, businesses are closing, they aren’t selling half as much. My sister has worked at the butchers in High Town for 30 years, she said the people that used to come in don’t come in anymore now. It [steelwork’s closure] affects it all”.

The effects of industrial ruination under neoliberalism continue to ripple out across High Town’s local community. While some shops close and thus people lose their jobs, other outlets that have existed on High Town’s high-street for many decades face difficulty in surviving. This intensifies the respondents’ *feelings of loss* and sense that the area’s identity has dwindled. Karl, a construction worker, stressed that:

“The North East is an abandoned area. Everywhere you look it’s gone downhill, especially since the steelworks closing”.

Note the difference in the sentiments about High Town’s coastal and industrial heyday and its constitution today; there has been a historic shift from positivity to a profound sense of loss. Symbolising the sample’s reflections on the locale’s high street were fatalism and resignation, generating a sense that there are ‘no ‘shocks of the new’ to come’ (Fisher, 2009: 3). In effect, the participants were *passive spectators,* unable to avert the decline of High Town as both a seaside resort and its former industrial prowess. This is symptomatic of the ‘multiple forms of impotence, powerlessness and incapability’ (Stiegler, 2019 :297) that working-class people in deindustrialized areas like High Town endure under neoliberalism:

I: “What’s it like around the high-street”?

Lizzy: “*There is nothing there*. There is naught there: no shops, they are all closed down. It is *depressing* when you go down there, it is all charity shops - rubbish. I don’t tend to go up there much now”.

Whilst deindustrialization in Teesside has been a lengthy economic process (MacDonald, et al 2020; Warren, 2018), the steelwork’s recent closure further intensified unemployment, competition for jobs and adversely affected High Town’s local community and town centre. Whilst capital is mobile and free to move across localities to maximize its returns on investment (Cahill, 2018; Harvey, 2005; Slobodian, 2018), people in places like High Town are more rooted in place and therefore left to endure the consequences when the town’s core functioning points no longer exist in the way they once did.

**Conclusion**

Many of England’s coastal communities including High Town were once busy seaside resorts, offering leisure and pleasure to the working classes (Jarratt and Gammon, 2016; Walton, 2000). Whilst their decline contains some geographical variation, many coastal areas have been abandoned under neoliberalism (Agarwal et al., 2018; McDowell and Thompson, 2019; Wenham, 2020). Despite this myriad structural change, there has been a paucity of in-depth qualitative research in coastal localities that sheds empirical light on how working-class people have endured this decline (Agarwal et al., 2018; McDowell and Thompson, 2019; Smith, 2012; Wenham, 2020). Relatedly, few scholars have explicated the degeneration of a coastal locale alongside deindustrialization.

Therefore, the paper has built upon this dearth of research and contributes to knowledge about one of England’s formerly relatively prosperous coastal and industrialised localities. Nostalgic recollections offered here by local residents provided evidence that the area was previously popular with both locals and tourists under capitalism’s post-war era (Cockroft, 1975; Walton, 2000). Particularly the older respondents fondly recalled High Town’s previous popularity as a seaside resort, suggesting that it offered an identity and a sense of community. As the area also contained a sizable industrial base (Hudson, et al 1994; Warren, 2018), ICI and the steelworks offered many people in this research social stability and a feeling that they were contributing productively to the local area. Some offered stories of industrial work’s ‘job for life’, economic security and parallel biographies since many working-class children would follow in their parents’ footsteps and work at ICI or the steelworks. This suggests that many participants were nostalgic for High Town’s coastal and industrial heyday because it offered a stable and secure *way of life*.

Outlined data indicated that the evisceration of the town’s core functioning points – the seaside resort and industrial work – adversely impacted upon High Town’s local population. The 2015 steelwork’s closure, in particular, exacerbated joblessness, competition for insecure employment and the decline of the locale’s town centre. The participants’ sentiments and beliefs were rooted in a palpable sense of loss, providing further evidence that working-class people continue to live with the consequences of deindustrialization under neoliberalism (Clark and Gibbs, 2020; Emery, 2018; MacDonald, et al 2020; Strangleman, 2017). As Ellis (2016: 135) notes, the working class were once provided with ‘an economic purpose to further industrial capitalism’s military and heavy-productive ends, but was largely discarded towards the end of the twentieth century during de-industrialisation’. Ultimately, the article therefore further exposed how localities like High Town have lost their *raison d’être* under neoliberalism (High, 2003; McDowell and Thompson, 2019; Mckenzie, 2017; Rickey and Houghton, 2009); the decline of the town’s vibrancy as a coastal locale alongside industrial ruination means it faces difficulties in revival.

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