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Canonical Generations and the British Left: the Narrative Construction of the Miners' Strike 1984-5

Abstract

'Generations' have been invoked to describe a variety of social and cultural relationships, and to understand the development of self-conscious group identity. Equally, the term can be an applied label and politically useful construct; generations can be retrospectively *produced*. Drawing on the concept of 'canonical generations' – those whose experiences come to epitomise an event of historic and symbolic importance – this article examines the narrative creation and functions of 'generations' as collective memory shapes and re-shapes the desire for social change. Building a case study of the canonical role of the miners' strike of 1984-5 in the narrative history of the British left, it examines the selective appropriation and transmission of the past in the development of political consciousness. It foregrounds the autobiographical narratives of activists who, in examining and legitimising their own actions and prospects, (re)produce a 'generation' in order to create a relatable and useful historical understanding.

Keywords

autobiography, canon, generations, memory, miners' strike, narrative, socialism

Introduction

Subject to various academic and colloquial meanings, the term 'generation' has been invoked to describe a variety of social and cultural relationships. Lost generations, Baby Boomers, Generations X and Y, Millennials: the idea that social groups are forged in and impact upon given periods of time, has been central to the way we perceive social change and reproduction. Sociologically, the term is incorporated into studies of biography, social history, and long-term historical and political trends. The relationship between, and possibility of addressing these multiple aspects and approaches has been viewed as the great strength of generations as a focus for study, representing the dialectic relationship of biography and history (Abrams, 1982). Short-term or localised relationships and experiences are contextualised in longer-term cycles of social change and vice versa. The relational experiences and understandings developed by cohorts are simultaneously complimented by the transmission of ideas and collective meaning over time (see Hardy and Waite, 1997; Kertzer, 1983; Vincent, 1995). The labelling of 'generations' past and present has, in this regard, also found itself taking on a rhetorically useful role in political discourse. The active narrative *production* of a generation has provided a framework for explaining and periodising social change; creating a purposeful vision of community and the security of continuity in uncertain times (White, 2013). Edmunds and Turner (2002) have argued that generations are one of the most useful categories for social analysis at our disposal, particularly as we attempt to understand the formation of socially and politically aware and active groups.

This article explores both the dialectical relationships important to the emergence of a self-conscious generational identity, and the role of the *applied* demarcation of a 'generation' in the construction of the political and historical narratives that forge it. Building on the concept of 'canonical generations' developed by Ben Ze'ev and Lomsky-Feder (2009), I use the case study of the role of the 1984-5 miners' strike in the narrative history and ongoing rationale of the British left, to explore how and why a 'generation' comes to be given their place in the canonical narrative of a group. With 2014-5 marking its 30th anniversary, the memory and narrative treatment of the strike makes for an interesting case by which to explore these relationships. Such milestones provide an opportunity for reflection: on the role of the strike in the collective memory of communities, a class, a movement, and the idea of British socialism. That the anniversary fell so shortly after the death and public memorialisation of Margaret Thatcher in 2013 has placed not just the left, but a nation in a position whereby the collective memory of the industrial struggles and ideologies of the 1980s are being re-examined. Using published accounts from the years following the strike, and a series of recent interviews with current and former members of socialist organisations, I examine the narrative production of an historical 'generation', and the roles this production can play in the development of short and long-term personal and collective political identities.

Location and Canon in Generational Study

Karl Mannheim's 1927 essay *The Problem of Generations* is a common starting point for many studies, and from his work have sprung various ways of viewing the development of collective identities and, in particular, historical and political consciousness. The formation of what he describes as a 'generation unit' has its roots in the 'location' in which a group find themselves – the time, place and circumstances of their situation. To share in and embody a common inheritance of circumstantial consciousness can help to imbue a group with 'an identity of responses' (Mannheim, 1997: 49). This is an identity forged among those who share common interpretations and meanings, enabling a group to form and actualise a meaningful consciousness of their position in history, and to exercise some agency within it. There is thus something inherently political in the potential of this shared meaning (Braungart and Braungart, 1986); in the 'strategic' capacity to mobilise and make an impact on culture and society through control of the 'cultural resources' that locational opportunity provides (Turner, 2002).

However, as much as social change and conditions may actualise a generation, so in turn actualised generations 'realise social change' (Andrews, 2002: 76). This relationship between locational consciousness and political agency has been explored in various ways. Studies have, for example, examined the role of childhood and adolescent experience on how significant socio-political events are in producing a sense of generational self-consciousness (Schuman and Scott, 1989); or how the rallying cries and concepts of political movements are adapted and appropriated according to their relevance to successive cohorts (Everingham et al, 2007). More recently, in a study by Ben-Ze'ev and Lomsky-Feder (2009), the implications of the relationship between biography and history present in generational self-consciousness

take on greater levels of complexity. Their work raises the question of what happens when generations are *remembered* by subsequent actors who are, in turn, attempting to make their own mark.

Ben-Ze'ev and Lomsky-Feder coin the term 'canonical generations' to describe a cohort 'whose personal stories converge with a formative national event' (2009: 1047); whose experience coincides with or helps to create events that come to be remembered as historically important. In their work on the treatment of those who fought in the wars that have come to define Israeli national identity, they identify how a group can come to embody an event. Such groups become the epitomised markers or relatable personification of an experience, a time and place, beyond their own self-conscious role. A 'generation' whose experience coincides with, alters or establishes a dominant cultural identity has a greater degree of influence in cultural thought and practice. As an historical event or ideology incarnate, their biographies become treated as inseparable from the events in which they took part and the consequences of those events. Where those events come to define the trajectory of a broader group identity, that generation is 'given public standing and space.' (*ibid*)

Referring back to what a generation did or said, or *would do and say*, and employing it as a rationale in a later locational setting, makes the canonising of a generation important in the development of group identity. As representatives of the positive aspects of a broader experience, there is little allowance for the canonised individual or group to deviate from the expectations and obligations that a society makes of them. Over time, a sense of agency (real or imagined depending on proximity in time and place to both event and expectation) may be taken away from the actors themselves (*ibid*: 1060), their lives becoming part of a mythologised or abstracted story. In this institutionalising and ritualising of a group what is remembered and transmitted may be far from a true representation – those looking back locating themselves in relation to an institutional memory in order to relate to events outside of their own experience.

Ben-Ze'ev and Lomsky-Feder highlight the use-value of generations to both their own time and place, and to the subsequent political narrative construction of an historical group identity. To identify a 'war generation' for example is a demarcation that acknowledges war as a formative experience for those who participated *and* is a retrospective appropriation of this experience towards a greater narrative of the war's legacy. The concept of canonical generations allows us to combine an understanding of locational consciousness and the narrative production of historic generations in this regard – the canon mediates location past (the event canonised) and location present (the needs of those canonising). Both locations provide limitations or opportunities that establish a group's ability to exert influence; that define the nature of their self-consciousness. However, in developing this consciousness and in attempting to make a mark, locational needs and circumstances are contextualised and articulated in the negotiation between the present and the ongoing transmission of a canon of past experiences. The location of those remembering an event, applying meaning to it, is as vital to its memory as the setting in which the remembered event took place. Equally, the

development of a group's historical understanding through narratives of where they came from, and how they reached this point, are as much part of the development of politically aware and active groups as the actualising effects of their own circumstances. Indeed, they are part of how the idea of the potential of a present location is rationalised and arrived at. It is this relationship that makes the question of how we can research and understand the (re)production of a canonical generation, a question of the narrative construction of political identity.

The invocation of generations as political descriptors, explanatory frameworks or narrative devices foregrounds the prominence of the 'generationalism' in political discourse. It highlights that as much as we consider a generation to have a sense of self-conscious group identity, the term can be an *applied* label and politically useful construct. In particular, the term has been used to study the appeal to generations by the politically powerful to reshape narratives of past and present responsibility, decline or progress, and to legitimate policy decisions (see White, 2013). However, articulated through the inter-relationship between location and canon, the idea that generations are produced equally allows us to explore the roles they play for those whose political understandings and actions challenge rather than reinforce a political system. Or rather, how they reinforce an identity that exists in opposition to the structures of political power. The example presented here explores how canonical generations are produced and appropriated by the British left, and what they do for socialist and labour movement identities and rationales.

The institutionalisation of canonical generations helps members of the left locate themselves in the historical/ideological trajectory of their movement, providing members with a sense of purpose as much as an explanatory framework for why things are as they are. The left's treatment of the miners' strike of 1984-5 in particular contains various canonical aspects, focused on the figures involved, and the communities they belonged to. It is a well-established narrative in the history of the labour movement. The miners have become symbolic figures living in a more political age – a time of clear class distinctions. Their lived experiences are interchangeable with concepts of unity, community, struggle, oppression: the epitome of the working-class experience and plight today as much as in the 1980s. The British left's retelling of the story of the strike gives us an example of how a group of workers who happen to live through a period of deindustrialisation within their industry, who fight for their jobs, families and communities, become more than workers; more than their experience. In the narration of the event for the purposes of the present, they are bound to a wider political narrative: the last generation of miners; marking a distinction between one generation and the next.

Writing the Miners' Strike 1984-5

The 1980s are often viewed as a period of defeat for the left, marked by a sharp decline in trade union membership, particularly when compared to the growth experienced in the years up to 1979 (see Brownlie, 2011) – a growth which still fuels the journalistic cliché that the union movement had become 'too powerful' (see Hay, 1996). The 1970s are remembered for

mass industrial action that played an important role in bringing down a government; by a shift to the left among the Labour Party membership (Davies, 1992); and as Raymond Williams described at the beginning of the 1980s, 'the most open class struggle British society had seen since the war' (1981: 376). In particular, the miners' strikes of 1972-74 are documented as among the greatest successes of the period. Yet, it is the failure of a decade later that has been more dominant in the canon.

By 1984 the nationalised British coal-mining industry faced cuts in subsidies and a level of animosity from the Thatcher government (the successes of industrial action in the 1970s fresh in the memory) that put not just individual pits, but whole coalfields at risk of closure (Allen, 2009). A series of closures of 'uneconomic' pits had already taken place during the early 1980s, and the announcement of more to follow fuelled fears for the future of the industry, miners' livelihoods and communities. The National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) attempted to call for national strike action three times in the years leading to 1984, but each time fell short of a majority (see Davies, 1992). However, at the beginning of March 1984 the National Coal Board announced the closure of Cortonwood Colliery in South Yorkshire, having only recently invested in and guaranteed its future. With the escalation of the sudden and politically provocative reversal at Cortonwood, miners in Yorkshire came out on strike, followed by those in coalfields from across the country and a national NUM strike was declared.

The year-long strike ended in defeat for the miners, its aftermath saw mass closures, and following its privatisation in the 1990s, the near disappearance of coal mining in the UK. Why it failed is a much debated question: whether the lack of a national ballot affected the unity of or delegitimised the action; to what extent it was possible to win when regional variations in participation in the strike undermined the action – most starkly demonstrated in Nottinghamshire where a majority continued to work throughout the strike (see Peter, 1988; Richards, 1996); or whether it lacked the solidarity of the wider labour movement seen in 1972 (Darlington, 2005). Despite such questions, the miners' strike of 1984-5 has come to epitomise political struggle and unity in the 1980s, the collective fight against Thatcherite economic and social policies and, in its defeat, the subsequent fate of both organised labour and the working class more broadly.

For the left, remembering the strike is not an exercise in historical accuracy, but a symbolic relationship of association developing over time. The role of the strike, how it is remembered, and how it is put to use in the contemporary political imagination, are embedded in canonical narrative practices that potentially delimit or defy the experience and details of the strike itself for other purposes. In its immediate aftermath the strike was treated by the far-left as a quasi-revolutionary event, and this idea marks the first of these practices. If the miners had succeeded in challenging the government, then the course of Thatcherite policies and plans may have been stemmed. Leading theorist of the Socialist Workers Party, Alex Callinicos, wrote of the strike two years later as an epic struggle in which the miners represented the working class standing up to the power of the British state (1987: 6). Such portrayals are not confined to the left however. As Milne (1994: 5) notes, it was equally 'one

of the great obsessions of Conservative political life' following the actions of the 1970s. For the right, it tapped into something in the 'folk memory' of Britain's ruling class; in the longstanding spectre of 'miners emerging from the bowels of the earth' to demand their rights (*ibid*). For the government, argues Samuel (1986), the miners symbolised a fear of the potential power of the working class disproportionate to the actual economic and industrial effects of the strike. They famously became 'the enemy within'. This was class division and class conflict experienced and embodied in the opposing interests of the two sides, and symbolic of a greater historical struggle. That the battle was lost does not detract from this understanding.

The strike is viewed as a moment in time that marks out two distinct eras; or the fork where two alternative futures divert: one in which working-class people have greater power, the other where working-class communities are devastated. Much of the focus on the role and impact of the 1984-5 strike has been specifically on the experiences and role of these communities – the second canonical narrative practice. The strike may represent the sacrifice and martyrdom of a class and community to the new economic order (Crookston, 2010), yet it equally draws on a very positive ideal of what community can be. Strikes, suggests Allen, usually 'have predetermined relatively short lives' as money becomes scarce and everyday life becomes more difficult. However, that such pressures were alleviated for so long during the 1984-5 strike is in part due to the role of community, and in particular the role of women (2009: 284). Women were integral in the organisation of welfare for the striking miners and their families: raising money and in the supply of food and provisions. McCrindle, writing shortly after the strike notes the ease with which groups of women came together as organised bodies in themselves, and indeed that in many former mining communities, these organisations remained the centre of community life thereafter (Rowbotham and McCrindle, 1986).

The strike became a struggle for survival for such communities, a 'sheer act of collective will' (Samuel, 1986: 34) in places where work and life were so closely tied. Indeed, it was not so much an 'expression' of existing community ties, as a 'discovery' of the bonds that held people together (*ibid*: 10). The transcendence of not just gender, but race and connections made with the LGBT community led those involved to speak of 'the depth of emotional experience which had accompanied their participation, a new birth of their consciousness.' (Thompson, 1993: 135) Thatcherism had justified a neoliberal economic project with appeals to a return to idealised 'Victorian Values' – 'family solidarity, the dignity of work, the security of the home' (Samuel, 1998: 347). The mining industry stood in the way of economic progress. The great irony of its eventual loss, argues Samuel, is that if any group had ever truly embodied these 'values', it was the miners and their communities.

Methodology

The narrative that emerges from political histories highlights the impact of the miners' strike to the events of the 1980s for the British left, and perceptions of subsequent political trajectories. However in these commentaries, while drawn into a canonical narrative of the

labour movement, the miners and their communities are not treated as a 'generation' per se. To understand the way in which the miners have attained this status, we have to examine how, over time, activists have drawn upon the miners' experiences within their own political work. The ways in which the biographies of a past group are drawn into the autobiography of present political actors can help highlight how the demarcation of a 'generation' is a narrative device; one that makes the past relatable and allows present actors to see themselves within an inheritance.

In what follows, I draw on a series of oral historical interviews carried out between November 2009 and August 2010 with current and former members of Kent and London-based branches of five British socialist organisations¹. From the testimonies emerged a range of themes and influences, discussion on motivations and experiences, their hopes, perceptions of achievement and relationships with other activists. Among the 34 interviews conducted, the most common and prominent event to have influenced both political thought and action was the miners' strike, appearing in varying degrees of detail and importance in every one². Within the sample, the age of the participant and level of exposure to the event formed distinct boundaries between those *remembering* the strike and those too young to remember, applying an *imagined* retrospective understanding³. Yet, across the whole age range (19-68), participants' narratives highlighted a more meaningful connection to the *idea* of the strike and what it means today, than to the event's details. Those recalling it first-hand rarely spoke of the day-to-day of the strike, or the events leading to it. That the young do not remember it directly means that their perceptions drew primarily on the narratives passed down. This act of storytelling, along with the prevalence of age as a marker of experience, speaks to us about the role of memory – personal and collective – in relation to the meanings attached to an event (see Portelli, 2006). This is the strength of oral history in studying the canonising of a generation – it explores how and why social actors become attached to a time and place, and the dynamic, evolving nature of these attachments as the narrative memory of the past – conveyed in stories and understood via subsequent experiences, appropriated and altered in the telling – supersedes the event itself (for good examples of this process see Portelli, 1991).

As Samuel notes, memory changes 'colour and shape according to the emergencies of the moment', is 'progressively altered from generation to generation' (1994: x). We can see this at work in the autobiographical narratives of the participants. The retelling of the event in a later context by those who remember it is filtered through a developing personal experience and changing political landscape. The roles that a canonised event can play and how this is articulated within a movement, but equally why certain events and groups come to be appropriated and canonised at all, is explored through the relationships participants have with their perceived predecessors. Framed according to three thematic approaches emerging from the interviews, here I examine the retrospective conferral of generational status upon a group tied to such an event through exploring the relationship between past and present in political identity construction.

Either Socialism, or the Death of the Working Class

Among participants, the quasi-revolutionary nature of the strike remains a common refrain. The biographies of the miners who participated are tied to the strike and its consequences, and moreover, to the biographies of those remembering. Within this framework, the locational experience of the miners is retrospectively actualised to give them status in the ongoing trajectory of the movement. Their experiences are viewed as having altered this trajectory, they become a group defined by this experience: the last generation of an era, or the first generation of a new era if they had succeeded. In each case their experience is viewed as markedly different from that of those who came after. It is not so much a case of remembering the experience of the strike, but its legacy for successive generations within mining communities and political organisations.

As Fred, 60, notes had the miners succeeded in achieving their demands, Thatcherism could have been curtailed. Instead, it was left to do irreparable damage to the mining communities that Fred grew up in and around. The wrong revolution was successful, and this extends far beyond that immediate location:

I don't think you'd be sitting here now with massive cuts planned in public expenditure, and we'd have more control of the banks. There would've been more regulation... they couldn't suck the country dry and pay themselves massive bonuses. Now that sort of thing would not've happened.

The miners' strike here is a key moment in a downward trajectory in British working-class politics, to the extent that a discussion about the miners can very quickly become one about the financial crisis of 2007-8. This direct association attributes the miners significance far beyond their aims of protecting jobs and communities. The failure of the miners is the failure to bring about social(ist) change. The approaches taken to the miners' strike among the participants took this kind of relativistic tone, drawing on the strike in different ways to the various published accounts and recollections of it. For each participant the strike held an important role in and of itself, and indeed especially for those who had direct memories of it. Moreover, the strike was always placed into the context of the future trajectory of the movement, and in the either/or relationship the strike plays, is viewed more for its impact on the present.

For some participants this narrative of the subsequent trajectory of working-class identity and its potential can be felt in the way that those born after the strike relate to the nature of class division and the formation of a post-strike generation. As Susie, 49, describes:

[young people] look at you though you're mad. They can't understand why you keep going on about the working class, why you keep going on about the miners' strike... they don't think of themselves as middle class or working class.

Paula, 62, is concerned that ‘many of them have grown up with the idea that trade unions hold the country to ransom’, and for many the failure of the miners had consequences not only for mining communities, but also for the left as a community. In particular, the ethos of Thatcherism is viewed as having seeped into the way that young people think about themselves and their campaigning. It is of a lack of trust or belief in organised structures to achieve an end beyond the issue at hand. For those who lived through it, the strike has thus come to symbolise not just one defeat, but decades of defeat and the collapse of the organised left. The comparative impact of the miners’ collective identity and Thatcherite individualism are seen to have very real longer-term effects, as George, 55, describes:

nowadays on the left amongst young people ideas of autonomism are much stronger i.e. being individual activists – link up with people when you want to, go off on your own when you don’t... all of which are perfectly reasonable pictures but they’re much more powerful now because of two generations of defeat.

Where treated as marking a fork in the historical trajectory of the working class as a whole, as a group the miners posthumously take on a particular set of responsibilities. Today activists who recall the strikes and the mining communities first-hand, attribute the miners a vital generational position in this sense. The loss of the strike is framed as the loss of an entire way of life – the miners’ biographies mark a rupture and trauma that divides the past from the present. As such, the miners embody both a lost past and the changes that have occurred in activist identity since; they are remembered in relation to the sense of purpose felt by subsequent actors developing a political consciousness in resultant locational circumstances. This marks them out with a collective status defined by their locational setting, and cements an important canonical and formative role for the miners in the narrative construction of contemporary left identities.

The Community Ideal

The mining communities at the heart of the conflict and the broader community that formed around the strike are central to its canonised narrative in more specific ways. The memory of the actions of the miners is institutionalised in ‘community’, further cementing their collective status and conferring a greater sense of meaning upon them. It is a memory applied, providing a political compass guiding action in the present. Generational status is developed in this applied memory or imagined image of community in direct relation to locational conditions today.

In the first place, acts of unity and resilience that allowed the mining communities to survive take on a greater significance in a number of ways. Such communities were shown at their best suggests Fred at this tipping point, but equally a broader sense of collective locational self-consciousness emerged around the experience:

that campaign links up people who thought they had no common interest with each other. You had women who'd be involved with it. Some of the miners were very macho, 'cause it was a macho area in which to work, and so when the women joined them, the miners, were exposed to how women were treated, and then there was an issue of racism. Now, racism, you know, how miners were suddenly being attacked by police was something like black people... had experienced for generations.

This reinforced in the minds of the strikers and their supporters the distinction between those with political power and those without; the scale of resources that the uneven sides were able to muster, and which would eventually spell the end of the strike. For those looking back, it cements the retrospective application of locational self-awareness and collective identity. As such, the solidarity of the communities, the intersectionality of their struggle and the clear distinction of class interests that are drawn into this sense of identity, take on an important role in the story of the strike (and by implication its aftermath).

The plight of the miners is present in the wider sense of community membership felt by those who had experience of the strike. For Martin, 64, a former miner, the strike represents precisely the potential of this:

Although we got absolutely hammered and defeated, the miners did, what happened there has strengthened what I believe in about society – a communist society, a socialist society.

For Susie, the experience of the miners is relatable due to similarities in her own embodied experience of struggle. Considering the role of police violence in a wider narrative, the miners' experience comes to mark the moment she understood police brutality for the first time and, crucially, developed a class consciousness:

it's kind of our class, you know, when they attacked a miner, it would be like them attacking us... all people were trying to do was defend their jobs and defend their communities... [they] were thriving communities. You go back there now, those communities are completely, absolutely wiped out.

For those who experienced the strike first hand, it has become formative and inescapably tied to the trajectory of their own lives; the experience of the miners imprinted relationally on to how they consider their own experiences. The sense of community is reinforced where the fate of the miners is incorporated into personal narratives of belonging in this way. For those too young to have been there, the strength of community ties that the strike represents are equally lamentably lost. Yet they still provide a model for the potential success of any future struggle. Where this connection occurs, the mining communities are treated not only as exemplars but are abstracted from the conditions in which they actually

lived. Simon, 25, had begun 'working with trade unions and trying to talk to workers about why they should or shouldn't be on strike'. This, he suggests, is an antidote to the loss of community infrastructure necessary for the potential mobilisation of people for a cause:

You don't have huge community sectors anymore, whereas I think in previous generations you could have had things like community centres from pubs to working men's clubs to, I don't know, local sports groups, and that sort of thing doesn't really exist to the same extent.

For Simon, the fate of the mining communities is that of the working class, and simultaneously community is an ideal to be sought or rekindled if the movement is to succeed. Loss demarcates the present from the past, but the suffering endured during the strike is secondary to the idea that community ties could be mobilised at all in that time and place. Their actions become archetypally communal in the retrospective imagination of shared experience and meaning. This was a sentiment that went beyond the strike into a more general desire for community. Questions were raised by participants about how the mobilisation of a community for social change could be achieved, and some very practical concerns about how a socialist society would function. Emphasis on an idealised communality surrounding the strike acts to group together miners, their families and other activists into a shared locational experience that can be drawn upon in this way.

As much as the finding of community during the struggle became important in the recognition of both short and long-term narrations of collective identity, the loss of the mining communities is an even greater symbolic marker, representing a model for participation. The community ideal is also an interesting indication of the negotiated relationship between the location of a cohort and the role of the canon in helping that cohort to express something about their own circumstances. In situations where the mining communities are directly remembered, and in those where they are imagined, retrospectively reconstructed and reified, their appropriation is drawn from an attempt to understand the potential and problems of shared locational consciousness in their present setting. Further, the case of the mining communities highlights that while a group may be canonically utilised according to their perceived relevance to present locational needs, it is, in particular, the relatability of the mining communities and the way they are perceived as embodying the opportunities of location that lends itself to canonisation.

An Authentic Radicalism

For those young people active in the movement today, the strike has been amalgamated into a conceptualised 1980s and taken on a canonical life of its own in the absence of having lived through it: the struggle has come to represent a time of more authentic activism and opportunity for change. The fork is not about the trajectory of the working class (which they generally accept to have been defeated), but about the nature of a broader politics of socialism now. This is particularly true where participants used the strike as a symbol of a

wider notion of political activism, and ascribed them a privileged vocal position in the narrative trajectory of the movement. For example, Chloe, 20, believes very strongly that 'in Thatcher's day we were just looking for an excuse to take to the streets'. Placing herself in the trajectory of her perceived forebears, and irritated by what she views as the comparative lack of political consciousness among her peers, Chloe imagines the miners and other activists as a much more visible presence, and more prone to direct action than political actors today. The miners, though by her own admission she is unfamiliar with the history of the strike, are detached from the direct struggle for their jobs and communities, and subsumed into a wide-ranging category of 'political activists', who are collectively ascribed behaviours and motivations. Such a description is an attempt to understand both the miners in terms that apply to her own situation, and to build an understanding of her situation through an imagined attribution.

Younger participants engaged in a process whereby the agency and biographical experiences of the miners served only the needs of the present. Once again, they are treated as a group acting on shared meanings in a locational setting now long past. However, rather than just derive a sense of comparative difference from specific circumstances, these meanings are portrayed as universal to socialist aims. Individual choices and nuances are removed in the interests not of what they did, but what it means that they did it. Generational status is conferred not because participants recognised a collectivity in the miners' generational self-consciousness, but because to them the miners represent a previous generation acting within the trajectory of a movement, inhabiting a time so different to today. A 'generation' for the younger participants is a narrative attribution rather than a relatable collectivity defined in the relativity and comparative relationship of memory and location.

Simon goes further than Chloe, choosing to represent the past as a model for desirable action more directly. He laments the loss of 'the old tradition of community meetings and residents' associations and so on, which indulged in mass meetings'. This type of event is given precedence in Simon's mind as a way to build a movement for change, and unites the role of communities, unions and political campaigns in his understanding of what once was and could be once again:

That is a change we are trying to reverse by going back to the mass movements of the 70s and the early 80s, going back to unions being first ports of call so that we can recreate the social atmosphere of that mass activism.

The 1970s and 1980s are seen by Simon to be the ideal model to apply to contemporary action. The tactics employed at that time are considered the correct ones, and it is necessary to 'reverse' the changes that political activism has undergone since; to return to the type of union-led action that the miners represent. For Katie, 19, it is not just the tactics of miners, unions and the left at that time, but their language that retains its relevance in the face of social change. Having read about the miners' strike, she recalls a recent strike that she

attended, and ‘feeling utter horror when I see people I know are like my age going across picket lines’:

You *never* cross a picket line, and they’re like “What’s a picket line?” and then I feel sort of sad... you have to massively consider the language you’re using depending on the age of the person you’re talking to. I would never use the word ‘scab’ in front of someone my age.

The word ‘scab’ is a linguistic link between her and the society of the past that she has read so much about, but it is understood as out of time. It is a link precisely because she finds that most people her own age do not understand what it means. The use of a word here becomes a form of membership and participation in an inheritance, and her understanding of contemporary strike action is informed, at least in the way she attempts to find descriptors of this feeling of belonging, by the miners’ embodied experiences. The tendency of the young towards abstraction connects to the idea of older activists that their youthful counterparts lack a more direct understanding of the issues at stake. As much as this construction of narratives may introduce a structured framework then, it is seen to equally diminish the range of outcomes that can potentially be imagined. However, the canonical strike is for the young a more useful expression of their current location than simply historicising the event and the miners. It allows them to see themselves as part of a longer-term trajectory of a movement that, even if the miners’ experience is firmly in the past, still has a future – one they hope to influence. Past figures and events, help to keep the movement alive by acting as what Kevin, 37, describes when considering how to talk to young people about the past, as ‘lily-pads across the pond’.

For the young, it is seemingly kept alive by the reverence detachment allows for their own locational self-consciousness. This level of abstraction – the miners becoming ‘activists’ or ‘radicals’ – simultaneously privileges the miners’ role in the narrative of a broader movement, while removing their agency and the locational circumstances that may have placed them in such a position to begin with. This is the creation of a ‘generation’ where the canonised group are not required to share a meaningful self-consciousness of an historical position. It is a shared meaning provided in their absence. Ironically perhaps, their working lives are reduced to a strike, and even the specificity of that action is not so much appropriated as re-appropriated; selected for its use-value and treated as locationally distant.

Conclusion: the Strike ‘Generation’

Traditions of historic struggle are as much a part of the revolutionary ideal as the attempted transformation of the self and society, or the rupture with the situation one hopes to change (Boym, 2001). As Hobsbawm puts it, ‘even revolutionaries like to have ancestors’ (2011: 17). In examining this relationship through the concept of canonical generations, we are able to explore the dynamic negotiation of past and present that imprints events and groups on to the collective political imagination. Within these narratives, the striking miners are not just a

group of workers in a specific industry. 'Miners' instead becomes a byword for strikers, activists, socialist, or working-class. Nor were they just fighting for their communities, families and jobs, but for revolutionary change. That participants did not mention divisions and tensions within the miners' ranks, question the mandate for action, or indeed note any of the events leading up to the strike, speaks to us of the irrelevance of a more nuanced account in their aims. This includes, more consequentially than purposefully, a tendency common to generational attribution to 'downplay internal diversity... disagreements and contradiction' (White, 2013: 237) among those involved for the sake of the narrative. In the retelling, the story of the miners' experience is either tied to the experiences of subsequent struggles in the relatability of personification, or detached from the event in the delineation of a lost inheritance. In both cases the strike is not simply a reconstruction in the collective political memory, but the active demarcation and attribution of collective identities, articulating a shared generational participation or defining generations against one another.

Stories, argues Andrews, are 'products of their times; not only what someone tells, but how they tell it or even that they tell it' (2002: 84). The memory of socially formative and transformative events is always in flux; in the process of being made and re-made according to the needs of the present. The future trajectory of the story of the strike will rely as much on its subsequent narrative construction as on the event itself. When expressed through political (auto)biography, the narratives here highlight a creative and qualitative narrative construction of time; the formation of political self-consciousness in the appropriation of experience across it. Viewing the miners as the embodiment of a time and place, as the group whose defeat marks a fork in the history of a movement, allows activists as well as academics to tap into the potential of generations: of the short-term knowability of action and long-term historical goals. The relationship between location and canon can thus help us to understand the narrative construction and uses of 'generations' for political actors, as they approach a task defined in terms as historic as they are pressing. It is a canonical generation's narration or production that maintains their ongoing relevance; and the perception of their relevance that provides the rationale for their production in the first place. The appeal to generations is a narrative tool forging necessary myths in an unpromising time; selectively foregrounding those who embody an event to make it relatable, relevant and, fundamentally, useful.

Notes

1. 'Socialist' here refers broadly to those in the Trotskyist and Communist traditions, and while the two are distinct, the narratives that emerged in the interviews did not highlight such distinctions in the approaches of individual members to the strike.
2. Not every comment on the strike is included, nor every participant. Where a quotation is used I have attempted to express larger trends through articulating the particular.
3. Age was *the* predominant narrative device to emerge. However, it is important to note how some other factors did/did not emerge in relation to this. The level of education of the participants reflected a clear demarcation in age-related experience – those 45 and under all having a university education, and those older tending to have entered work straight

from school (with only a few exceptions). This might be viewed through the lens of class distinction, however given that all participants saw themselves as engaged in working-class struggle, it would be problematic based on these testimonies to make such judgements. Class status, where self-identified by those quoted, appears in the analysis. However, educational difference did correlate with the likelihood of the participant to hail from and remain in the area surrounding a former coalfield. In this sense, not only were younger participants unable to experience the strike directly, but they tended to have no relationship of proximity to former mining communities. Where proximity to a coalfield is important to a narrative (i.e. where a participant was living or working in the area), this is noted in the analysis. Perhaps surprisingly, given the nature of mining work, and the relationships built during the strike, participants did not explicitly connect their *own* gender, ethnicity or sexuality to their narratives.

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