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# Obstinate memory: Working-class politics and neoliberal forgetting in the United Kingdom and Chile

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## Abstract

In the 40 years since Chile and the United Kingdom became the crucibles of neoliberalization, working-class agency has been transformed, its institutions systematically dismantled and its politics, after the continuity neoliberalism of both the UK Blair government and the Chilean *Concertación*, in a crisis of legitimacy. In the process, memories of struggle have been captured within narratives of ‘capitalist realism’ (Fisher) – the present, past and future collapsed into Walter Benjamin’s ‘empty homogeneous time’. This article explores ways in which two traumatic moments of working-class struggle have been narrativized by the media in the service of this ‘presentism’: the 1973 coup in Chile and the 1984–1985 Miners’ Strike in the United Kingdom. We argue that the use of ‘living history’ or bottom-up approaches to memory provides an urgently needed recovery of disruptive narratives of class identity and offers a way of reclaiming alternative futures from the grip of reductive economic nationalism.

## Keywords

Chile, collective memory, media, neoliberalism, presentism, United Kingdom

## Introduction: reclaiming class memory from neoliberalism

The documentary film *Nae Pasaran*, directed by Felipe Bustos Sierra and released in 2018 to considerable acclaim, uses emotive oral histories to tell the relatively forgotten story of a group of workers at the Rolls-Royce factory in East Kilbride (led by Bob Fulton, Robert Somerville, Stuart Barrie and John Keenan), who in 1974 systematically ‘blacked’ the maintenance of the engines for the Hawker Hunter jets which had been used in the Chilean military coup on 11 September 1973 (Hirsch, 2016). Born out of anti-fascist convictions, Christian conscience and most importantly a

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powerful solidarity with trade unionists in Chile who had been persecuted and executed, the boycott was sustained for 4 years by grassroots members, until the mysterious disappearance of the engines one night (Livingstone, 2018: 57–83). In the coda of *Nae Pasaran*, Bustos Sierra reunites one of the engines, found in a scrap yard in Chile, with the now long-retired Scottish workers – a resurrection of a piece of buried shared history which for most of the protagonists is largely consigned to the past. The recovery of this memory is particularly relevant for Chileans due to the widespread destruction of any national archives considered sensitive, made as a condition of General Augusto Pinochet stepping aside as Head of State in 1990. As Bustos Sierra argues, of both the film and the engine:

It is one way of reclaiming history; one way of having tangible evidence that is absolutely missing from the story . . . I think if you're not in control of your story, what power do you have? You can't think of it in a different way. (cited in Marini, 2018)

In the 40 years since the Chilean Solidarity Campaign, considered one of the high watermarks of working-class internationalism (Jones, 2014), working-class agency across much of the world appears completely transformed, fragmented by a 'solidarity crisis' of deep material inequalities between the formal labour force and a vastly expanded precariat (Bieler et al., 2008). In Chile, trade union leaders during the dictatorship were either detained or 'disappeared', or targeted by the 1978 Plan Laboral which dismantled organized workers' rights (Drake and Frank, 2004; Taylor, 2006). In the United Kingdom, the trade unions were decimated by new industrial relations laws introduced in the aftermath of the Miners' Strike 1984–1985 (Mitchell, 1987), while the National Health Service, chapels and libraries which emerged from working-class mutual self-organization have been abandoned, closed or semi-privatized (Rose, 2010). Working-class culture, meanwhile, has been subjected to the exclusive logics of capitalism (Fisher, 2009), while Social Democratic parties' internalization of market logic has placed them in a crisis of legitimacy (Bickerton, 2018; Mansell and Motta, 2013). What is left is an account of a 'new' working class which is fragmented, socially immobile; has high levels of democratic abstention (Heath, 2016); and is primarily driven by a desire for 'national identity based law-making' (Ainsley, 2018).

Why then the renewed interest in historical memories of international solidarity? Is this any more than 'Left melancholia' (Benjamin, 1940; Brown, 1999; Traverso, 2016) – a hopeless nostalgia for a pre-neoliberal world? In this article, we argue that the experience of living in two key crucibles of neoliberal experimentation – Chile after Pinochet, and the United Kingdom after Thatcher – has created a memory vacuum, reinforced by the media, which highlights the dangers of erasing history as struggle. The comparison is approached cautiously, recognizing both the traumatic nature of its imposition in Chile and the way that the transition to democracy was constrained by the continuing power of Pinochet (Garretón, 2004; Jocelyn-Holt, 2014; Moulian, 1997). However, the re-articulation of memory under successor Left governments – the Chilean *Concertación* and the United Kingdom's New Labour – and in particular the incorporation of neoliberal narratives of the 'inevitability' of left failure and perpetuation of market-led reforms sheds light on the construction of consent to neoliberal transformation, the way it straitjackets those who come afterwards and the political instability this creates. Traverso (2016) has argued that neoliberalism requires the imposition of a remorseless ahistorical 'presentism', in which a free-market capitalist economic system is 'eternized', drawing on the Enlightenment and particularly Hobbesian idea of eternal rational truths. What a comparative analysis reveals are the ways in which, even without the pressures of explicit censorship and the sensitivities around transitions to democracy, neoliberalization imposes a process of forgetting, erasing the 'otherness' of the past. This is a

process not just of erasure but of re-articulation; what collective memory is permitted is reified and neutralized – a commodity which is sold back to us in the form of ‘pseudohistories’, strong single narratives without nuance or complexity (Boldizzoni, 2013).

Faced with an intensifying material crisis of expanding precarity, particularly among the young, as well as profound generational inequality and climate insecurity, xenophobic nationalism provides an easy distraction for those in power; at the same time, however, historical memory – collective, living memory of struggles and different ways of thinking and acting – becomes potentially explosive, because ‘it functions pedagogically to inform our political and social imagination’ (Giroux, 2018). This idea of the importance of the recovery of collective memories of struggle draws on Walter Benjamin’s concept of the radical potential ‘jetztzeit’ – the here-and-now historical materialist understanding of time, which he contrasts with the ‘empty homogeneous time’ of positivism and capitalism. While history is written by the victors, marching ‘in the triumphal procession in which today’s rulers tread over those who are sprawled underfoot’ (Benjamin, 1940: VII), the role of the historical materialist is ‘to brush history against the grain’ (Benjamin, 1940: VII).

This article draws on Stuart Hall’s (1977) idea that neoliberal transformation rests on a re-narrativization of history as bound to conservative nationalism, giving the mass media particular power (p. 346). Hall’s (1977) prescient analysis focused on the way that the media incorporates ‘acceptable’ elements of plurality into a normative world, producing a ‘structured consensus’ which allows accepted minorities marginal status while entrenching a hegemonic version of social relationships (p. 339). In this new ‘mode of life’, both political leaders and the media claim the right, from above, to speak for ‘the nation’, using emotion to change what Raymond Williams (1973) called our ‘structures of feeling’ about national community, class and individual identity. The article therefore links media and memory by exploring ways in which cultural media across two contrasting national terrains contain memories of working-class struggle within particular narrative strategies which adhere to Mark Fisher’s (2009) concept of ‘capitalist realism’, an all-encompassing cultural strategy which contains history and memory within particular narrative frameworks, which accept the inevitability of neoliberalism as the only form of ‘progress’.

These strategies are both political and institutional – embedding particular and singular narratives of nationhood and cultural – a process of commodification which Giroux (2018) describes turning memory into ‘inchoate nostalgia’. In Chile, an analysis of a range of fictional and documentary representations of the 1973 coup reveals the ways in which, even in mostly independent media, memory is institutionalized along particular narrative lines as a condition of democratization. In the United Kingdom, an analysis of cultural representations of the Miners’ Strike 1984–1985 reveals the way that under ostensibly more peaceful democratic conditions, the depoliticization of working-class memory is achieved discursively, ‘air-brushed out of history or . . . sanitized into something . . . sentimental’ (David Peace, cited in Shaw, 2012: 134). However, the article also explores ways in which, with brief reference to Derrida’s (2006) concept of Hauntology, post-traumatic memories are exhumed and reconstructed in search of an antidote; in particular, it highlights the dichotomy between dominant historical narratives and, as in *Nae Pasaran*, those produced using a bottom-up living history approach which disrupt neoliberalism’s ahistoricism. While the erasure of memories of working-class struggle has left both countries in a state of amnesia and cultural unease which is a breeding ground for pseudohistorical narratives of an imaginary homogeneous national past, conversations with the ghosts of working-class activism appear to offer an urgently needed recovery of alternative narratives of national identity, therefore opening up alternative futures beyond reductive economic nationalism and xenophobia.

## Justice (as much as possible): institutional forgetting in Chile

The Hawker Hunter jets which attacked the presidential palace in Santiago, La Moneda, on 11 September 1973, leading to the violent end of the *Unidad Popular* (Popular Unity, UP) government and the death of President Salvador Allende, also feature in the opening scenes of Patricio Guzmán's two key documentaries of the Chilean coup, *La Batalla de Chile* (The Battle of Chile, 1975, 1976, 1978) and *Memoria Obstinada* (Obstinate Memory, 1997). In the later film, Guzmán reflects on the conditions of the political transition in Chile in the early days of Patricio Aylwin administration (1990–1994) and their impact on memory; while the military censorship imposed during Augusto Pinochet's brutal 16-year dictatorship had been lifted, the authority of Pinochet and the version of the military dictatorship remained initially unchallenged, leaving Guzmán struggling to find a distributor for *La Batalla de Chile* until 1999, and Chileans struggling to reconcile their past and their present (Klubock, 2003). Truth, justice and reconciliation were made subordinate by the *Concertación por la Democracia* governments (1990–2010) to consolidating the transition to democratic institutions. Part of this process, as Hite et al. (2013) have argued, was the construction of consensual memories between political actors, which was considered necessary to keep the support of Pinochet's civilian right wing and to avoid any challenges to the democratic transition. The media played an agenda-setting role in supporting the construction of these consensual memories and in the interpretation of the history of dictatorship (Sorensen, 2009: 5–6). The route to democracy therefore required a degree of collective amnesia about Chile's past, in which both military and democratic opposition colluded, and in which the media and its political economy played an important role, creating a top-down selective narrative that followed the liberal ideological consensus embedded within the political transition.<sup>1</sup>

Stern (2006, 2009, 2010) has argued that Chilean struggles with memory reflect the tensions between these top-down strategies for remembering the past, and those bottom-up memories which have been marginalized. Elite-engineered top-down memories reflected the power dynamics and social climate of the transition, which focused on constructing institutional and economic frameworks and on political demobilization. Bottom-up strategies by contrast sought to pressurize state elites and political parties not to forget the political struggles of the Allende period and the coup.<sup>2</sup> *Memoria Obstinada* and *Nae Pasaran*, although made 15 years apart, both reflect these unresolved tensions by focusing on bottom-up oral histories of the dictatorship and its impact on Chilean society, reconstructing memories of the political struggles of the working class during Allende's government and Pinochet's dictatorship which have been excluded from mainstream memory construction. The films demonstrate the effects of a lack of any authentic national collective memory of the coup and dictatorship in Chile; instead, the unresolved trauma of the experience is shown to have led to fragmented and conflictual responses, both within the younger generations for whom these memories are largely suppressed, and between them and an older generation of Allende supporters, for whom there is only nostalgia and loss. In response, both films reflect on working-class struggles, solidarities and the lack of remembrance of the UP political project, which has been pushed from the forefront of national memory, despite the fact that memories of the UP government tend to be entangled with those of the dictatorship (Barrientos, 2015). However, these are unusual in explicitly addressing the workings of memory. As both transition and neoliberalism have become historically embedded in Chile, even as the atrocities of the dictatorship are increasingly scrutinized, remembrance of working-class solidarity, both national and international, has largely been replaced by top-down permissive narratives of the UP and dictatorship which fall into three main themes: (1) Transitional Justice, (2) Heroism – particularly the Fallen Hero and (3) Economic Success and Modernization. Ethically and ideologically, these narratives have fixed how Chileans approach their recent past and how even most independent media explores both governments.

The need for transitional justice in the face of the dictatorship's human rights violations was one of the main flags of resistance embraced by grassroots movements after the 11 September coup. While the military junta promoted a narrative of national salvation, social actors framed national and international strategies against Pinochet's regime around human rights and state terrorism as a way of resisting official 'truths' during both the dictatorship and the democratic transition period, challenging political elites and the state. The impact subsequently was that memories of resistance in civil society became predominantly structured around human rights abuses; the pursuit of the facts about those violations therefore became a core element of the memory process in Chile (Stern, 2006, 2010), seen as a way of reconciling the dichotomy between top-down and bottom-up narratives.<sup>3</sup> This framing was embraced by the Chilean state under the first *Concertación* governments, which pursued a top-down narrative of limited justice – *justicia en la medida de lo posible* (justice as much as possible) – during the transition process, effectively subordinating justice to the aims of the political transition.<sup>4</sup> During the commemoration of the 40-year anniversary of the coup, privately owned commercial Chilean media embraced this permissive narrative strand to bring these allegations of human rights violations into the mainstream for the first time, with TV channels broadcasting documentaries (Chile: The Forbidden Images, 2013, Chilevision) or drama series inspired by true events such as the Caravan of Death (Echoes of the Desert, 2013, Chilevision), or exploring the role played by Catholic church in defending political prisoners (The Archives of the Cardinal, 2011, TVN). Recently, a series of short films that recorded emblematic cases of human right violations – A Necessary History (2018) – was streamed on YouTube, subsequently being awarded an Emmy. All of these used human rights as a way to re-examine the 'truth' about Pinochet's dictatorship, which, while radical in giving the revelations a domestic media platform, reflected a reluctance to address the class dimensions of the struggle.

Because of the extensive nature of human right abuses during the years of military dictatorship, memory on the Chilean left has been institutionally shaped around this narrative path, leaving Allende's legacy narrativized primarily from one perspective only. This focuses on Salvador Allende himself as a *fallen hero* – following the Chilean tradition of the 'heroic path' (Gongora, 1981; Larraín, 2001) – portraying him as a man who sacrificed himself to fulfil his duties as president. As a result, memories of the UP government have been centralized on his figure as an individual, rather than on the collective achievements of working-class struggle in the country (Collins and Hite, 2013). This is evident in documentaries and films produced in recent years, which have centred on the figure of Allende as a father and grandfather (Tambutti-Allende, My Grandfather Allende, 2015) and as a statesman (Great Chileans of Our History– Salvador Allende, TVN, 2008;<sup>5</sup> Allende and his Labyrinth, Litin, 2014). The only prominent exception to this is Guzmán's documentary Salvador Allende (2004), which includes testimonies of union leaders and working-class activists who discuss his figure and the impact of the 'Revolution with red wine and empanadas'<sup>6</sup> in their lives. Overwhelmingly, however, the UP project is portrayed as a utopia which was impossible to realize, particularly in the context of a powerful Chilean right wing and the geopolitics of the Cold War (Harmer, 2011; Kornbluh, 2016; Petras and Morley, 1975; Qureshi, 2008).<sup>7</sup> Thus, a narrative is increasingly naturalized that Allende and the UP represented a doomed utopia that was destined to fail because of the inevitable 'realities' of capitalism and international politics.<sup>8</sup>

These two narratives – that of a failed UP and heroic but doomed Allende, and that of a single focus on human rights abuses – are permissible because they do not contradict the dominant national story of Pinochet's neoliberal transition as an economic success. On the contrary, the acceptance of both helps to promote the idea of Chile as a country that has been able to reconcile its past with its present, addressing the dark side of the recent past, while still framing the country as an exemplar of modernity. Pinochet's neoliberal project was framed as the path to the transformation of Chile from a broken country to an orderly modern society of prosperity (Stern, 2010:

327–328), a notion left unchallenged by the *Concertación* governments. The neoliberal transition transformed Chilean political culture, fostering what Fisher (2009) calls a ‘business ontology’ that de-politicized subjectivities and replaced them with non-ideological, objective, scientific and technocratic identities (p. 17). This narrative was coherent with the myth of Chilean national exceptionalism, an idea linked to the nineteenth-century project of positivist modernity and supported by national elites (Jocelyn-Holt, 2005; Loveman, 2001; Mullins, 2006). Neoliberalization was similarly framed by elites and media as a silent revolution (Lavín, 1987) that transformed Chile from a ‘relatively poor country to a relatively rich country’ (Fuentes and Valdeavellano, 2015), a so-called Chilean miracle which was held up as a model for Latin American countries because of its economic success and the stability of its political institutions which allowed for a peaceful transition to democracy. This fusion of the exceptionalist myth with the neoliberal narrative of the ‘Chilean miracle’ allowed the narrative of Pinochet’s project as an inevitable movement towards modernity to become entrenched, presenting it as project of national renewal (however painful) that was necessary to save the country not only from the Communist menace (Mansell et al., 2019) but from its own broken spirit. Even the commercially and critically successful independent film *No*, directed by Pablo Larrain (2012), which represents the 1988 referendum campaign to overturn the Pinochet dictatorship, while unequivocal in its criticisms of human rights violations and the lack of democracy, seems torn between satirizing the coming of consumerism and the marketization of politics which are inherent in the economics and ideology of neoliberalism (Benson-Allott, 2013; Howe, 2015), and centring it at the expense of the hard labour of political struggle (Cronovich, 2016).

Even these later more critical media narratives therefore leave unchallenged the idea that Pinochet’s neoliberal transition was the continuation of a traditional project that finally turned Chile into an oasis in a convulsed continent. In the narratives of exceptionalism and modernization which are central to Chilean identity, the memory of Allende’s socialist government is seen as an obstacle to this new modernity (Klubock, 2003: 276) and disruptive to the top-down memory strategies which were deployed by the state in an effort to build a consensus with the economic elites. Although this narrative is reproduced across a range of independent media, reconstructive documentaries *Memoria Obstinada* and *Nae Pasaran*, which bookend the transition period, reflect the ongoing nature of the struggle between top-down and bottom-up memory construction by using a living history approach to challenge the morality and political limitations of a transition based only on the idea of *Justice as far as Possible*. Both emphasize the need to bring working-class solidarity and internationalism back into the collective memory of Chile’s recent past, as a way to counter the dominant narrative of national exception and heroic doomed failures who were unable able to resist the march of Pinochet’s modernity.

### **‘Modernize or die!’: burying struggle in the coalfields**

The UK Miners’ Strike of 1984–1985 marked the culmination of the use of state force against the working-class Left under the Thatcher government and found its ultimate expression in Thatcher’s branding of the miners as the ‘enemy within’ (Thatcher, 1984). This Cold War discourse of political opponents as ideologically foreign enemies of the nation – also seen in Chile under Pinochet – legitimated the suspension of legal protections and the introduction of openly coercive measures, including an unprecedented resort to police violence, manipulation of the law courts and deployment of the intelligence agencies in order to crush the strike. The role of both print and television media in framing the miners as a threat to constitutional order has long been scrutinized, with a particular focus on intense controversies around representations of the ‘Battle of Orgreave’, the key conflict of the strike (Harcup, 2014; Hart, 2017; Jackson and Wardle, 1986).

As in the case of media narratives surrounding the industrial activism of the ‘Winter of Discontent’ of 1978–1979, however, the real power of this narrative is reflected in the way it is internalized by the Left. Rather than produce a counter-narrative that might have healed wounds, the New Labour project of Tony Blair imposed upon itself, as a condition of regaining power, the virtual erasure of its own history (Thomas, 2007: 277–278), driving forwards with the pursuit of industrial relations policies under New Labour which promised to be ‘the most restrictive . . . in the Western World’ (Blair, 1997, cited in Thomas, 2007: 278). This simultaneous abandonment and rewriting of the past to internalize neoliberal logic finds its particular expression in New Labour’s discourse of ‘modernization’, with Blair’s major speeches demonstrating a rhetorical obsession with a particular construction of both Party and national renewal,<sup>9</sup> replacing the concept of an international struggle of classes and ideas with a ‘celebratory patriotism’ and sense of ‘civic responsibility’ (Finlayson, 1998: 13). Modernization becomes an absolute imperative, which is defined at least in part by its opposition – ‘That which is not “on-side” or “on-message” is by definition anti-modernisation and out-dated’ (Finlayson, 1998: 18).<sup>10</sup> This rush to ‘modernisation’ left working-class memories of the conflict unaddressed, with lasting effects in twenty-first-century British society (Steber, 2018), including the impact on the defeated mining communities themselves (Nettleingham, 2017; Perchard, 2013), and particularly the toxic legacy in the former coalfields of Nottinghamshire, where Unions and communities were bitterly divided (Emery, 2018). Attempts to tell the story of labour history in the United Kingdom, and particularly the pivotal moment of the strike and its aftermath, demonstrate clear tensions between mediatized versions of collective memory, most of which internalize the modernization narrative to some degree, and the unresolved trauma of a largely untold bottom-up history rooted in experience.

Many of the most commercially successful cultural representations of the Miners’ Strike demonstrate the narrative constraints Fisher identified as inherent in ‘capitalist realism’, allowing striking miners to be remembered, even heroically, but portraying them ultimately as misguidedly resisting the inevitable forces of progress. *Brassed Off* (1996, dir. Mark Herman), therefore, although the film is a highly politicized howl of pain for lost dignity, portrays the triumph of the Grimley Colliery Brass Band as the last stand of a doomed community, from which the young protagonists will almost certainly leave to build a future. In *Billy Elliot* (2000, dir. Stephen Daldry), young Billy pursues his individual dreams by literally soaring above the gendered restrictions of his community, seen in the form of his culturally conservative (and violent) father and brother.<sup>11</sup> In *Pride* (2014, dir. Matthew Warchus), a brief moment of solidarity between the class struggle of the South Wales miners and the emerging identity politics of the metropolitan gay and lesbian rights movement, cemented by shared police persecution and media demonization,<sup>12</sup> ends in the depoliticization even of gay liberation itself. The final scene, as the Lesbians and Gays Support the Miners group prepare to march, demonstrates ‘Pride’ reintegrated into the liberal consensus through hedonism and consumption: ‘Have you heard? No politics. No slogans. More Mardi Gras, apparently’.

These are by no means apolitical films; however, all three, for all their strengths, have been criticized for indulging in a degree of ‘feel-good liberal revisionism’ (Frost, 2018), which replaces the socialist politics of their time with sympathy for individuals caught up in what appear to be inevitable defeats. This mirrors the narrative framing which was deployed by the Thatcher government of the time, for whom the rapid mass closure of the pits ‘was defended precisely on the grounds that keeping them open was not “economically realistic,” and the miners were cast in the role of the last actors in a doomed proletarian romance’ (Fisher, 2009: 7–8), in much the same way that Allende and the UP government were framed in Chile. In this form of narrative, class struggle is dead (as Thatcher, Blair and Cameron all assured us), and historical memory of the strike is flattened, reduced to museology and heritage kitsch, which can be consumed without altering the

inevitability of neoliberal ‘progress’ and personal self-fulfilment. As McGlynn (2016) comments, the rhetoric of meritocracy frames ‘social inequalities increasingly . . . not as problems to be solved but as tests of individual mettle’ (p. 330). Working-class ‘liberation’ in the post-strike world, if there is such a thing, looks less like Dai Donovan’s passionate advocacy of solidarity in *Pride* (‘Now we will pin your badge on us, we will support you’), and more like Mark Renton, the anti-hero of *Trainspotting* (1996; dir. Danny Boyle, writer Irvine Welsh), who betrays his comrades to move from counter-cultural hedonism to aspirational consumerism: ‘I’m going to be just like you’.

Even in more critical narratives – for example, David Peace, 2004 novel *GB84* – this can result in a bleak narrative framing of the strike as the ‘End of History’ (in reference to Francis Fukuyama’s thesis of the post-Cold War triumph of liberal capitalism). Arriving at Cortonwood Colliery in South Yorkshire, the first pit to strike in 1984, character Bill Reed describes what is happening as ‘the end of the world . . . The end of all our worlds’ (Peace, 2004: 320). At the very end of the novel, Martin, a striking miner, speaks of the return to work as the ultimate triumph of Thatcherism, in terms which evoke Benjamin’s image of the way capitalist ‘cultural heritage’ leaves the defeated ‘sprawled underfoot’, and working-class struggle is either buried or transformed into harmless cultural whimsy:

We are but the matchstick men, with our matchstick hats and clogs . . . Stick us in their pits – The cage door closes. The cage descends – To cover us with dirt. To leave us underground – in place of strife. In place of fear – Here where she stands at the gates at the head of her tribe and waits – Triumphant on the mountains of our skulls . . . And she looks down at the long march of labour halted here before her and says, Awake! Awake! This is England, Your England – and the Year is Zero. (Peace, 2004: 462)

This is defeat of the Miners’ Strike as an act of foundational violence – Hall’s (2011) ‘scorched earth phase of neoliberalism’ (p. 18) – with the twenty-first century seen as essentially ‘post-historical’ (Vardy, 2018: 13). However, *GB84* is a contradictory text; in presenting the strike as a horror story (Owen, 2012: 178–181), it uses ‘occult’ history (the unknown and obscured) to expose the illusory and authoritarian nature of capitalist realism. The novel has been read (Vardy, 2018) as a form of Hauntology – a reconnection of the past to the troubled politics of the twenty-first century, and an acknowledgement that we are accompanied by ghosts of alternative narratives which belong to neither past, present or future, but ‘one must reckon with them’ (Derrida, 2006). As Peace stated of the strike: ‘the many spectres of the strike continue to haunt Britain and they continue to haunt me, too’ (Peace, cited in Shaw, 2012: 133). To ‘bury’ the strike without re-examination, truth or reconciliation, is a fundamental injustice which puts a time bomb under the smooth narratives of neoliberal progress, tempered by nostalgia. As Peace states, ‘I do not believe we have any clarity or closure. Yet. Because this war is not finished’ (cited in Shaw, 2012: 140). And in *GB84*: ‘Under the ground, we scream’ (Peace, 2004: 110).<sup>13</sup>

A narrative strategy which represents an escape from the pervasive ‘historical embalming’ of Labour history and suggests a way to give voice to these screams is provided by the artist Jeremy Deller’s 2001 re-enactment of ‘The Battle of Orgreave’, the key conflict of the Miners’ Strike, filmed by Mike Figgis. Mobilizing 800 South Yorkshire people for the re-enactment, 280 of them strike veterans, Deller described his purpose as ‘digging up a corpse and giving it a proper post-mortem’, carrying elements of both catharsis and reconciliation. Like Sierra and Guzmán, Deller’s work is distinctive in using a ‘living history’ approach – a combination of direct oral testimony, re-enactment and performance – to disrupt the bland commodification of history and deliberately re-politicize the recent past (Correia, 2006: 94), and to put re-enactors ‘in a situation where they would be fighting with and against men that were part of an unfinished messy history . . .’ (Deller, 2003: 76). In the oral histories, therefore, the previously marginalized voices participants on both

sides of the conflict – former miners, their families and former local policemen – are given the opportunity to express the trauma of finding themselves transformed apparently overnight from heroes of post-war reconstruction into ‘enemies within’, and of members of the local police asked to treat their own neighbours as enemy combatants, while also challenging the official ‘truth’ of the events of 18 June 1984, endorsed by police, government and mass media. The performance element – the use of re-enactment and filming – draws attention to the artificial and mediated nature of most memories of the strike (Correia, 2006). Unlike the original news footage, the film therefore shifts viewpoint between miners and police (in the re-enactment, some original participants even change sides), and shows what was usually erased – police waving payslips, cash and even handfuls of grass at strikers to mock their poverty.

It could be argued that even the use of re-enactment is a form of commodification – marked by ‘the transformation of industrial heritage into a spectator experience’ (Correia, 2006: 101), a work of mere cultural nostalgia at a time of anxiety and disappointment for the Left, as disenchantment with New Labour set in. However, the performative elements of re-enactment have particular power in blurring boundaries between past, present and future (Schneider, 2011), and the outcomes are specifically political. As the re-enactment rehearsals begin, the film shows the director telling former miners that this is ‘a reconstruction, not a re-run’, to raucous laughter, and Farquharson (2001) noted that

rumour had it that a small number of the real miners were applying too much gusto to their roles at rehearsals the previous day . . . For many – participants and spectators alike – this Battle of Orgreave was more flashback than re-enactment. (p. 108)

There is an element of Bakhtin’s (1984 [1965]) carnival in the use of working-class humour (as well as anger and grief), which is liberating, cathartic and disruptive, a laughter which ‘presents an element of victory . . . the defeat of power, of earthly kings, of the earthly upper classes, of all that oppresses and restricts’ (p. 92). What a living history approach achieves, therefore, is not just the reintegration of memories of antagonistic politics into the ongoing historical process of the twenty-first century but a way of recapturing a Left politics that was truly subversive and which controlled its own narrative.

## **Conclusion: remembering class in Chile and the United Kingdom**

The narratives explored in this article demonstrate ways in which the eternal presentism of neoliberalism is an outcome of the ideological function of the media laid out by Hall, re-articulating collective memory through narratives which reflect the demands of capitalist realism, erasing class from national consciousness and replacing it individual rights and identity politics. In post-1990 Chile, this is done by confining narratives to those that fit with the modernization thesis of Chilean exceptionalism, in which Allende was at best a leader doomed to fail, and the focus of both institutions and narratives becomes seeking justice for individual human rights abuses, framed as an anomaly in the overall narrative of Chilean economic progress. In post-1990 UK, this is done by mirroring the modernization narrative of the New Labour project and the internalization by the political left of the inevitability of their own failure. While this effectively constructs a new consensus which separates working class from left-wing politics, it also leaves a vacuum of collective political memory which is highly unstable, a set of silences and unspoken conflicts which continue to haunt the present in the work of Sierra, Guzmán, Peace and Deller. Where those memories of class struggle are erased, neoliberalism’s ‘pseudohistories’ increasingly dominate, reconstructing collective memories as gendered, racialized and nationalized in a manner which reflects the

hierarchical needs of increasingly authoritarian forms of capitalism. This is most evident in the newly constructed ‘memories’ in the United Kingdom of a homogeneous White male nationalist working class, under siege from ‘outsiders’,<sup>14</sup> and in Chile, the erasure of class identity.

It could be argued that Sierra, Guzmán and Deller/Figgis are in their own way guilty of a wistful melancholia which suggests that struggle belongs to the past. The Rolls-Royce site at East Kilbride featured in *Nae Pasaran* closed in 2015 and was erased in 2016; Guzmán in *Memoria Obstinada* gives little sense of ongoing struggles at all, as if memory is all that remains; and the fields of *The Battle of Orgreave* have returned to grass, with many original miners involved in the re-enactment having died in the 19 years since it was staged. However, the use of bottom-up ‘living history’ to both demand justice and offer alternative truths about our histories reminds us that class struggle did not end in 1990. On the contrary, in the aftermath of the global financial crisis of 2008, the smooth surfaces of neoliberalism have given way to increasing inequality, between and within both nation states and classes, creating new sites in which a younger generation is demanding futures beyond the logics of neoliberalism. In Chile, a general detachment from the institutional politics of the *Concertación* saw a revival of contentious politics in both 2006 and 2011 (Von Bülow and Donoso, 2017), and at various points between then and the explosion of discontent and disillusionment which brought Chileans onto the streets in October 2019 (Sehnbruch and Donoso, 2020). In the United Kingdom, the inequalities and divisions both manifested and exacerbated by Brexit have continued to convulse the country, while unions have re-mobilized around campaigns against the casualization and disciplinary work environments inflicted on migrant and young workers alike (Fishwick and Connolly, 2018). While these mobilizations reflect a spreading rejection of the illusory inevitability of capitalist realism, they remain fragmented. In Chile, with the exception of the labour strikes in the copper mines of 2018–2019, they all represent mobilizations of social movements – students, feminists, indigenous groups and environmentalists – rather than working-class resistance. Without a living memory of class and the political struggles which are embedded in their recent past, they are unlikely to challenge the structures which continue to create inequality and crisis.

This article therefore lays out the groundwork for a project in which we seek to establish ways in which that knowledge base and those memories are retained, reconstructed and transmitted as part of the here-and-now – Benjamin’s *jetztzeit* – in the service of twenty-first-century struggles, and what that means for working-class agency and identity in Chile and the United Kingdom, two countries profoundly linked by the imposition of neoliberal experimentation, by the constraints this has placed on their politics and identity and by new forms of resistance to it. The contradictions embodied in twenty-first-century neoliberalism between the illusory promise of economic freedom for all and the increasingly authoritarian structures which are put in place to underpin the accumulation of profit in a more chaotic capitalist era, between individualism, globalism and nationalism, constitute a double assault on the very concept of class solidarity and struggle generally. However, the revival of interest in collective memories of class struggle – in archival and cultural forms – offers an opportunity to resist the apparent inevitability of Benjamin’s ‘empty homogeneous time’. These are not only historical narratives; they go digging into the past for a reason: to rescue the future from the junkyard of neoliberalism. To quote a participant in *Memoria Obstinada*: ‘We know how it ends, but it’s still OK to dream’.

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## Notes

1. Mainstream media in Chile is organized largely on a liberal market model and has been dominated by liberal and right-wing groups (Bahamonde et al., 2018; Monckeberg, 2011; Tironi and Sunkel, 2000; Wiley, 2006). This article, however, focuses mainly on independent media, which, although it has a limited reach in terms of audiences (Sorensen, 2009), has played an important role in openly addressing Chile's relationship with its own history.
2. Stern describes these struggles over memory as reflecting the tensions between two types of Gramscian hegemony: a soft hegemony that is provided by electoral majorities and cultural influence versus a hard hegemony constructed around military power and elite sectors considered necessary for political stability and economic growth (Stern, 2010: 361).
3. Stern (2010: 380) describes human rights memories as mainly: (1) symbolically and politically based on human rights activism, (2) socially and culturally built around testimonies and transnational solidarity and (3) legally and institutionally based on criminal justices and international tribunals.
4. A limited Truth and Reconciliation Commission was established during Patricio Alwyn's Administration (1990–1994) to address human rights abuses and the cases of the detained and disappeared. These investigations allowed some well-known perpetrators to be brought to justice, such as the former head of Dina, Juan Manuel Contreras in 1995. Other actions which institutionalized this approach to memory include the creation of the Human Rights Institute in 2010, memorial sites in former torture centres such as Villa Grimaldi in 1997 and the Museum of Memory and Human Rights in 2010.
5. This is part of a series which sees Allende incorporated into the tradition of great figures representing Chilean national identity, such as Violeta Parra and Gabriela Mistral.
6. Allende described his project in this way to emphasize that Chile was searching for its own more democratic path towards radical transformation, and to differentiate it from other Latin American revolutions, such as that in Cuba.
7. *Memoria Obstinate* is one of the first films that shows how Allende's project itself is still portrayed largely as a utopia which was impossible to concretize in real life. Guzman's film also focuses on breaking those silences around the working-class struggles through disinterring the past – naming the dead, reconstructing their actions at Allende's investiture and performing the hymn of the Allende's *Unidad Popular* (UP) government, '¡Venceremos!', to surprised bystanders in 1996 Santiago, some of whom applaud and some of whom greet it with hostility.
8. Even where there have been attempts to engage with the spatial and social conflict of the UP years – for example, in Andres Woods' films *Machucha* (2004) and *Violeta Went to Heaven* (2011) (Vilches, 2016) – the narrative is one of the personal struggle of living in a politically divided society, rather than one of working-class solidarity. As Gonzalo Infante's father states in *Machucha*, socialism is good for Chile, but not for them (Martín-Cabrera and Noemi Voionmma, 2007; Tal, 2005).
9. Fairclough (2000) identified that the word 'New' occurred 609 times in 53 speeches of Tony Blair's between 1997 and 1999.
10. In empirical fieldwork in the North Nottinghamshire former coalfield at the end of the New Labour era (Watkins, 2017), the legacy of this 'forgetting' was evident in tensions between working-class participants who spoke with pride about Manton Colliery being one of the only pits in Nottinghamshire to stay out, and local authority officers for whom this defiance was 'hanging on to the past a bit too much' and 'still fighting the last miners' strike'.

11. As McGlynn (2016) says of *Billy Elliott*: ‘the film imagines the problem to have been an illiberal working class mindset depressing the ability of an extraordinary individual to dance himself up by his bootstraps’ (p. 324).
12. The film references these shared ‘enemies’ in the moral panics whipped up by tabloid newspapers (particularly *The Sun*), and the attitudes of the police, particularly those of James Anderton, the Thatcher-allied police chief, who compared mass picketing to ‘acts of terrorism’, but was more famous for saying AIDS patients were ‘swirling in a cesspit of their own making’.
13. The Orgreave Truth and Justice Campaign has continued to demand an independent review into the trial of 95 striking miners for ‘mob violence’, which collapsed amid allegations that officers had fabricated their accounts (Conn, 2017).
14. Reflecting on the production of another work of cultural memory, the album *Every Valley* by the band Public Service Broadcasting, two former miners, Wayne Thomas and Ron Stoate, explained how this process of erasure informed the shift to an anti-immigrant narrative which profoundly influenced the 2016 Brexit vote. ‘People going, “Bloody Poles coming here, taking our jobs.” Down the mines, we worked with Poles all the time. Lithuanians, Latvians, all of them! . . . Locally, nationally, internationally, there’s been a smashing of that knowledge base, those memories’ (Rogers, 2017).

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