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Andrews, A.; Kefford, A.; Warner, D.

Citation

Andrews, A., Kefford, A., & Warner, D. (2023). Community, culture, crisis: the inner city in England, c. 1960-1990. *Urban History*, 50(2), 202-213. doi:10.1017/S0963926821000729

Version: Publisher's Version


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Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

INTRODUCTION

Community, culture, crisis: the inner city in England, c. 1960–1990

Aaron Andrews^{1*} , Alistair Kefford² and Daniel Warner³

¹School of Cultural Studies and Humanities, Leeds Beckett University, Broadcasting Place, Leeds, LS2 9EN, UK, ²Institute for History, University of Leiden, Johan Huizinga, Doelensteeg 16, 2311 VL Leiden, The Netherlands and ³Independent Scholar

*Corresponding author. Email: aaron.andrews@leedsbeckett.ac.uk

Writing in *The Times* newspaper in 1988, the urbanist Colin Ward claimed that ‘The “inner city” is an idea, not a place. The words...have become a euphemism for the urban poor.’¹ In many respects, Ward was right. The term ‘inner city’ emerged in the United States in the 1960s to describe the largely black neighbourhoods surrounding ‘downtown’ areas shaped by white flight, deindustrialization, the blighting effects of urban renewal and territorial stigmatization wrought by endemic racism.² In the wake of a series of urban disorders across many US cities during the ‘long hot summer’ of 1967, these inner-city areas became a focus for increasing anxiety and demonization within political and media discourse.³ With more than half an eye on events in the US, a similar nexus of anxiety around race, poverty and the city came to the fore in Britain, where commentators borrowed heavily from the American repertoire of tropes and terminologies with which to narrate – and often sensationalize – what was increasingly presented as a looming urban crisis. Such fears were given a highly inflammatory shot in the arm in April 1968, when Enoch Powell’s ‘Rivers of Blood’ speech explicitly raised the prospect of violent racial conflict on the streets of Britain’s cities.⁴ Alongside cultural fears and racist agonizing over US-style disorders came the ideational inner city. The term was applied first by political and media commentators, and then sociologists and policy-makers, to particular areas of Britain’s largest cities – most especially those in which significant black, Asian and ethnic minority communities lived.⁵ Here, the ‘inner city’ was – and often still is – euphemistically associated with communities of colour living in large urban

¹*Times*, 19 Dec. 1988.

²See, for example, T. Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton, 2005); and C. Klemek, *The Transatlantic Collapse of Urban Renewal: Postwar Urbanism from New York to Berlin* (Chicago, 2012).

³R.A. Beauregard, *Voices of Decline: The Postwar Fate of US Cities* (Oxford, 1993).

⁴C. Schofield, *Enoch Powell and the Making of Postcolonial Britain* (Cambridge, 2013), 208–63.

⁵The term ‘black’ is predominantly used throughout this Special Issue to refer to people of African and African Caribbean descent in Britain. It is not capitalized to avoid confusion with the contemporary term ‘Black’, a collective identity which could include all people of colour and was closely linked with the British Black Power movement. On ‘political blackness’, see R. Waters, *Thinking Black: Britain, 1964–1985*

areas.⁶ Political efforts to ameliorate inner-urban living conditions were thus bound closely to the ‘race relations paradigm’, in which post-war immigration, and by extension people of colour, came to be constructed as inherently problematic.⁷ The racialized and spatialized othering implied by the term served to reinforce the ‘polic[ing of] the boundaries of citizenship’ to which black Britons were subjected and under which their basic rights were subjugated.⁸

Alongside these anxieties over race, immigration and identity, the ideational inner city also gestured nebulously towards a parallel set of concerns with the deteriorating physical condition and economic prospects of Britain’s inner-urban areas, where disinvestment, depopulation and rising levels of unemployment raised the spectre of intractable social malaise. At a time of growing pessimism over national economic performance, and of disillusionment with the early promises of the affluent society and the welfare state, the inner cities figured as sites in which the faltering of the post-war social democratic project seemed to be made starkly manifest. As an idea and as a policy construct, then, the inner city tells us much about the wider political, economic and cultural trajectories of post-war Britain, revealing processes of uneven development and spatial stigmatization, new geographies of poverty and exclusion and the cultural fears that underlaid both the US and British urban crises. However, the inner city was also a place. Or, more accurately, Britain’s inner cities were real, peopled, *places* – diverse and dynamic, with complex histories and registers of experience that went well beyond the rhetorical constructions and political anxieties outlined above. This Special Issue approaches the inner city as both place and idea, recovering some of the many lesser-told histories of these important and illuminating spaces, and considering the interplay between social experience ‘on the ground’ and the ways in which the inner city was imagined, narrated and governed from above.

Delimiting the inner city in Britain is a complex undertaking. The term has been applied so loosely and inconsistently that it evades precise geographical definition, while the parallel set of cultural anxieties associated with the *idea* of the inner city cannot be mapped straightforwardly onto specific urban places. There is certainly a familiar roll call of districts within Britain’s larger cities – often with relatively large ethnic minority populations – that have frequently been referred to as ‘inner cities’. Places such as Brixton in south London, Handsworth in Birmingham, Moss Side in Manchester, Chapeltown in Leeds, Toxteth in Liverpool or the Gorbals in Glasgow enjoyed a degree of notoriety as deprived and somewhat dangerous districts. This was cemented in the public mind through the association with episodes of urban disorder after ‘rioting’ occurred in a number of these districts in 1981 and to a lesser extent 1985. In most of these cases, ‘inner city’ really did stand as a

(Berkeley, 2019); and J. White, ‘Black women’s groups, life narratives, and the construction of the self in late twentieth-century Britain’, *Historical Journal* (FirstView online, 2021), 1–21.

⁶J. Rhodes and L. Brown, ‘The rise and fall of the “inner city”: race, space and urban policy in postwar England’, *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 45 (2019), 3243–59.

⁷See, for example, C. Waters, ‘“Dark strangers” in our midst: discourses of race and nation in Britain, 1947–1963’, *Journal of British Studies*, 36 (1997), 207–38; and J. Bailkin, *The Afterlife of Empire* (Berkeley, 2012).

⁸K. Perry, ‘Black Britain and the politics of race in the 20th century’, *History Compass*, 12 (2014), 651–63.

euphemism for districts housing communities of colour, but as a concept and as an object of policy, the term also went beyond this. There are several characteristics worth emphasizing, not all of which were uniformly present in individual cases. Inner-city neighbourhoods could usually be mapped onto the doughnut-shaped ring of poorer, traditionally working-class and industrial districts that sat between the wealthier city centre and the suburban fringes. These districts were frequently characterized by large areas of older and relatively cheap housing, and they were often also subject to large-scale slum clearance programmes and subsequently newer forms of mass housing in the shape of post-war council estates. Although the term frequently served as shorthand for urban communities of colour, it should always be borne in mind that in most cases the majority of the population of inner-urban areas remained white working class. For all the hysteria in the 1960s about streets and neighbourhoods 'going black', as Rob Waters observes in this Special Issue, it was multi-racial living that usually defined such places. Perhaps the over-riding characteristic was, as Colin Ward suggested, simply urban poverty. Inner cities almost always suffered unusually high levels of deprivation, unemployment and social need. The importance of the term as a code for poverty and social deprivation was one of the reasons why the definition could stretch so wildly, to encompass peripheral housing estates or even satellite towns that made no sense practically as 'inner' urban areas but conformed to so many other associations of the term.

The inner city then, was and is a particularly slippery term. Indeed, the multiple and ambiguous meanings of the term are an important focus of analysis in this Special Issue. The boundaries of the inner city have been defined in government policy papers, setting the parameters for inner-city funding, as Phil Child demonstrates. But their borders were also socially constructed, through contemporary literature and popular imaginaries, as Waters persuasively argues in this Special Issue. The task of delineating the inner city is all the more complicated because these areas' porous and amorphous boundaries shifted over time, particularly as some neighbourhoods' social make-up, economic prospects and built environment were transformed. Ultimately, the definition of the inner city was variously constructed, and contingent upon time and place. Each of the authors in this collection has engaged with these questions and uncertainties. For example, Sue Zeleny Bishop shows how people moved in and out of the inner city, traversing both geographic boundaries and different social possibilities in pursuit of fun and romance. Isabelle Carter highlights the rhetorical slippage between a particular housing estate and a larger urban area, showing how far modernist post-war housing developments came to represent 'the inner city' in some cases. Daniel Warner explores the complex association between the 'inner city' and one of its more prominent public facilities in the form of the football stadium. Sarah Thieme demonstrates the complex similarities between conditions in the inner city and those on deprived suburban housing estates, and the consequences thereof in terms of how the Church of England named its 'Urban Priority Areas'. Collectively, these contributions illustrate well the breadth and inconsistency with which the term inner city was applied, and which itself helps to explain the wide range of 'work' – culturally and politically – that the term performed.

Many recent accounts of post-war Britain have used urban spaces as a means through which to explore wider processes of social cultural, and political change.⁹ In the decades following World War II, towns and cities in Britain underwent significant transformation: urban modernist planning, appearing to offer logical and unambiguous solutions to multiple urban problems, reshaped the physical environment; mass housing programmes improved everyday living conditions for many; mass affluence transformed urban economies, social geographies and cultural experience. Within the burgeoning urban historiography of post-war Britain, the town or city centre, suburb and New Town – as spaces of relative affluence that were created or markedly transformed by these processes – have emerged as key sites of study.¹⁰ As a result, the inner cities have sometimes faded from view within the field of urban history, or been relegated to spaces *out of which* people and employment were moved, and *into which* bulldozers drove in order to make way for transformative planning projects, especially urban motorways and mass housing.¹¹ By focusing on England's inner cities and the communities that lived in them, the articles in this Special Issue provide new accounts of social, cultural and political change in the post-war period, incorporating the stories and experiences of people and places that have been frequently excluded and at times maligned. The authors have adopted novel methodological approaches that go far beyond the government archives and policy documents that have characterized recent studies to shine new light on the history of the inner city and experiences of its residents. Waters, for example, uses both autobiographical and literary sources to reflect on the construction of the inner city as a race-class formation. Bishop, Carter and Warner make extensive use of oral histories to examine the stories of everyday life and social experience either not captured or actively maligned in official governmental and press sources. Thieme brings the history of the inner city into dialogue with the history of religion, both in terms of metanarratives of secularization and the ongoing influence of the established church on politics and policy. Finally, Child makes extensive use of the archive of a voluntary organization, a valuable source not just for the story they are able to evidence about black homelessness and activism, but also because the archives of such groups are often lost before they can be preserved and made available to researchers.

Collectively, the articles in this Special Issue trace some of the many ways in which individuals and communities negotiated and adapted to changing, often challenging, circumstances. They expose the diverse ways in which prevalent notions of urban crisis filtered into everyday lives and show what abstracted processes like decline or sociological categories such as unemployment, homelessness and hooliganism looked and felt like on the ground. They also reveal some more positive histories and trajectories, which can be occluded by the relentless problematization of such places. For all their social and economic challenges – and they were many – England's inner cities were culturally and experientially rich, with

⁹J. Greenhalgh, 'The new urban social history? Recent theses on urban development and governance in post-war Britain', *Urban History*, 47 (2020), 535–45.

¹⁰For example, G. Ortolano, *Thatcher's Progress: From Social Democracy to Market Liberalism through an English New Town* (Cambridge, 2019).

¹¹Simon Gunn, 'The rise and fall of British urban modernism: planning Bradford, circa 1945–1970', *Journal of British Studies*, 49 (2010), 849–69.

resilient and resourceful populations. They quickly emerged as dynamic and generative sites for new modes of urban living, new forms of social action and a mundane but ultimately powerful everyday multiculturalism that quietly defied the cataclysmic narratives that swirled around these places.

The inner-city crisis

While the historiography of Britain's inner cities is still emerging, an extensive and cross-disciplinary literature exists on these spaces. Sociological studies that formed part of the 'rediscovery of poverty' by contemporary observers in the mid- to late 1960s were integral to the identification of inner-urban areas, like St Ann's in Nottingham, as problematic spaces.¹² Successive governments responded to evidence of persistent deprivation, rising unemployment and physical decay in these inner-urban areas – alongside cultural and political fears surrounding racialized disorder – by establishing a series of area-based policy and research initiatives that sought to investigate and ameliorate these problems. This began with the establishment of the Urban Programme in 1968 and was followed by a succession of other initiatives and acronyms including the Community Development Projects (CDPs, 1969–78), Inner Area Studies (IAS, 1972–77), and Comprehensive Community Programme (CCP, 1974–79). After 1979, an expanded Urban Programme existed alongside Urban Development Corporations (UDCs, 1981–98) and Enterprise Zones (1981–87), which together placed greater emphasis on private enterprise, supported by public sector funding, as a way to 'regenerate' the inner city.¹³ The appraisal of these initiatives' successes and failures provided a wellspring for works by political scientists and social policy scholars from the late 1970s.¹⁴ In their analysis of this acronym-laden succession of policy initiatives, Joan Higgins, Nicholas Deakin, John Edwards and Malcolm Wicks contended that the 'diagnosis of deprivation was little more than an uncoordinated reiteration of the most obvious features of inner-city area'. Instead, they argued, the primary concern of policy-makers and politicians was immigration and 'race relations'.¹⁵ Without eschewing these programmes' concerns with race relations, Susanne MacGregor and Ben Pimlott contended that racialized inequalities and antagonisms formed part of a larger failure of the post-war welfare state.¹⁶ The growing academic literature was complemented by journalistic accounts. Paul Harrison's *Inside the Inner City*, for example, likened Britain's inner-urban areas to the 'third world' and warned of the 'sinister' consequences of their continued decline.¹⁷ The ways

¹²For example, K. Coates and R. Silburn, *Poverty: The Forgotten Englishmen* (Harmondsworth, 1970).

¹³N. Deakin and J. Edwards, *The Enterprise Culture and the Inner City* (London, 1993).

¹⁴See, for example, A. Kirby, *The Inner City: Causes and Effects* (Corbridge, 1978); G. Whitting, *Implementing an Inner City Policy: A Case Study of the London Borough of Hammersmith and Fulham Inner Area Programme* (Bristol, 1985); and P. Lawless, *Britain's Inner Cities*, 2nd edn (London, 1989).

¹⁵J. Higgins, N. Deakin, J. Edwards and M. Wicks, *Government and Urban Poverty: Inside the Policy-Making Process* (Oxford, 1983).

¹⁶S. MacGregor and B. Pimlott, 'Action and inaction in the cities', in S. MacGregor and B. Pimlott (eds.), *Tackling the Inner Cities: The 1980s Reviewed, Prospects for the 1990s* (Oxford, 1990).

¹⁷P. Harrison, *Inside the Inner City: Life under the Cutting Edge* (London, 1973), 11 and 369.

in which Britain's inner cities were investigated and narrated added significantly to their territorial stigmatization.¹⁸

The failure of successive area-based policy initiatives to markedly improve urban conditions, at least in the short term, lay at the heart of Britain's urban crisis in the 1970s and 1980s. However, the origins, nature and extent of the crisis require closer examination. This has recently been the focus for urban historians of twentieth-century Britain as their attentions have turned towards the inner city. Otto Saumarez Smith has argued that, for political and media observers, the inner city became 'a place where feelings of disillusion about [urban] modernism merged with widespread concerns about the perceived failure of Britain's social democratic project'.¹⁹ The crisis, then, was as much about political and aesthetic perception as it was the practical failures of urban governance. Nevertheless, the inner city was a space created by these forms of urban renewal and governance, as Alistair Kefford has shown in relation to the disruptive redevelopment and relocation of industrial manufacturing in Manchester and Leeds in the decades after World War II.²⁰ These material factors are critical in understanding the emergency of the inner city in the post-war decades both as a physical place and an imagined space to which contemporary anxieties were attached. Indeed, Aaron Andrews has recently argued that the materiality of urban decline meant that the physical environment of inner-city areas became an actor in its own right, functioning – at least in the eyes of urban policy-makers – as an active barrier to social and economic regeneration.²¹ This, perhaps, explains the longevity of the inner-city crisis in the face of increasing governmental attention and funding and the turn towards 'free' market-based solutions at both ends of the political spectrum.²²

The material forces that shaped Britain's inner cities also included population flows, much of which were guided by the reordering of urban space through the planning process.²³ However, the extent to which the planned decentralization of urban populations away from inner-city 'slums' to newer housing developments in the suburbs and New Towns was coterminous with 'white flight' – as was the case in the US – remains contentious. Many people who moved to Britain as Citizens of the United Kingdom and Colonies in the post-war years settled in inner-city areas, where housing was more readily available – even though this sometimes meant living in streets scheduled for clearance. It was not just the housing that was sub-standard, however, with prominent black feminist writers

¹⁸A. Butler, 'Toxic Toxteth: understanding press stigmatization of Toxteth during the 1981 uprising', *Journalism*, 21 (2020), 541–56.

¹⁹O. Saumarez Smith, 'The inner city crisis and the end of urban modernism in 1970s Britain', *Twentieth Century British History*, 27 (2016), 578–98.

²⁰A. Kefford, 'Disruption, destruction and the creation of "the inner cities": the impact of urban renewal on industry, 1945–1980', *Urban History*, 44 (2017), 492–515.

²¹A. Andrews, 'Dereliction, decay and the problem of de-industrialization in Britain, c. 1968–1977', *Urban History*, 47 (2020), 236–56.

²²See S. Wetherell, 'Freedom planned: enterprise zones and urban non-planning in post-war Britain', *Twentieth Century British History*, 27 (2016), 266–89; and O. Saumarez Smith, 'Action for cities: the Thatcher government and inner-city policy', *Urban History*, 47 (2020), 274–91.

²³See, for example, James Greenhalgh, *Reconstructing Modernity: Space, Power and Governance in Mid-Twentieth Century British Cities* (Manchester, 2018); and G. O'Hara, *From Dreams to Disillusionment: Economic and Social Planning in 1960s Britain* (Basingstoke, 2007), 101–28.

pinpointing poor-quality inner-city schools in their critique of the ‘Educational Subnormality’ scandal.²⁴ Social and cultural histories of black and Asian communities in post-war Britain provide crucial insight into the history of the inner city. These are not, generally speaking, urban histories in that they often place reduced emphasis on the spatial dynamics of everyday life and racialization of urban space.²⁵ The articles in this Special Issue go some way towards addressing this. As Waters shows here, the inner city and suburbs in post-war London were definitively race-class formations, certainly in terms of their social imaginary. While urban spaces have always been encoded as belonging to particular groups – as sides of inclusion or exclusion – post-war redevelopment and migration, they argue, created a new and highly racialized urban topography. Waters traces this through long-standing notions of respectability, but the politics of housing were also critical. The ability to access particular types of housing helped to create a racialized urban typology, with black, Asian and ethnic minority families likely to be more reliant on private sector landlords and therefore more susceptible to exploitative ‘Rachmanism’ or, as Child shows in his investigation of Birmingham’s Handsworth, homelessness.²⁶ This vulnerability, and the state’s inability to provide adequate housing for black Britons, generated a political and ameliorative response from the local voluntary sector. Using the case of the Handsworth Single Homeless Action Group in 1980s Birmingham, Child demonstrates how voluntary organizations’ response to the urban crisis contributed to the remaking of the British welfare state, but such groups also became vulnerable to political and funding pressures, especially in response to their efforts to assert the rights of local people to state support.

The inner-city crisis often played out on the streets – conceived as sites of violence, especially during the 1970s ‘mugging crisis’ and following the urban uprisings of 1980–81 and 1985 – and in the home as the location of deprivation and despair.²⁷ In response to fears that inner-city streets were becoming ungovernable, policing adapted to maintain law and order. While this included the introduction of police officers specializing in ‘community relations’, it also involved the adoption of technologies, techniques and new policing units that facilitated greater coercive

²⁴B. Bryan, S. Dadzie and S. Scafe, *The Heart of the Race: Black Women’s Lives in Britain* (London, 2018), 62 and 67. On the ‘Educational Subnormality’ scandal, see K. Andrews, *Resisting Racism: Race, Inequality, and the Black Supplementary School Movement* (London, 2013); and B. Coard, *How the West Indian Child Is Made Educationally Subnormal in the British School System: The Scandal of the Black Child in Schools in Britain* (London, 1971).

²⁵Histories of black and South Asian Britain in the twentieth century that focus on space and place, in various ways, include J.N. Brown, *Dropping Anchor, Setting Sail: Geographies of Race in Black Liverpool* (Woodstock, 2005); M. Matera, *Black London: The Imperial Metropolis and Decolonization in the Twentieth Century* (Berkeley, 2015); C. Willis, *Lovers and Strangers: An Immigrant History of Post-War Britain* (London, 2017); and K. Connell, *Black Handsworth: Race in 1980s Britain* (Berkeley, 2019).

²⁶For example, see J. Davis, ‘Rents and race in 1960s London: new light on Rachmanism’, *Twentieth Century British History*, 12 (2001), 69–92.

²⁷On the ‘mugging crisis’, see S. Hall, C. Critcher, T. Jefferson, J. Clarke and B. Roberts, *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State and Law and Order*, 2nd edn (Basingstoke, 2013). On the early 1980s disorders, see S. Peplow, ‘“A tactical manoeuvre to apply pressure”: race and the role of public inquiries in the 1980 Bristol “riot”’, *Twentieth Century British History*, 29 (2018), 129–55; and S. Peplow, *Race and Riots in Thatcher’s Britain* (Manchester, 2019).

control.²⁸ As Warner shows, there were other important inner-city spaces in which the crisis played out and onto which fears and anxieties were projected, especially the football stadium. In the 1970s and 1980s, stadiums, along with the surrounding inner-city districts in which they were generally sited, became the epicentres both of a material upsurge in football hooliganism and of an abstract moral panic that reinforced perceptions of the danger and ungovernability of such places. Warner shows how the governmental and policing response wrapped together the economic, environmental and social difficulties of the inner city, but they also highlight the resilience and resourcefulness of local populations as they organized their own forms of security and community defence. The challenges posed by the inner city generated new forms of social and political action ‘from outside’ too. The proliferation of sociological and governmental responses to the inner-city crisis is well documented, but much less well known is the story Thieme tells here of the Church of England’s initiative via its 1985 *Faith in the City* report. Thieme shows how this report – which caused much annoyance to Margaret Thatcher’s government – was both a response to the social conditions in the inner city and a product of the internal politics of an established church seeking to renew its mission. In its sympathetic, community-focused presentation of urban social problems, *Faith in the City* contributed to a wider recasting of the terms of political debate and intervention in the inner city, and the episode marked another important moment in the dialectical interaction between the external representation and the lived experience of the inner city.

The articles in this Special Issue predominantly focus on English cities. Social and economic differences, alongside a tendency for the national press to focus on the larger English conurbations, and especially London, have lent the ‘British’ inner-city crisis a peculiarly English character. Undoubtedly crucial to this is the geographical variance in rates of so-called ‘New Commonwealth’ immigration and the greater attention afforded to cities that, in 1980–81 and 1985, saw the outbreak of significant urban disorder. However, the inner-city crisis was evident, in varying degrees, in all four nations of the United Kingdom. Glasgow, along with Liverpool, was identified in the late 1980s as the two fastest declining cities in western Europe.²⁹ Concentrated deprivation and physical decay were particularly endemic in the inner areas of Glasgow, which became the epicentre of Scotland’s late twentieth-century urban crisis, although certain suburban estates also exhibited comparable problems.³⁰ Similarly, the inner areas of south Wales’ industrial cities showed signs of urban decline, associated with accelerating deindustrialization.³¹ However, the Welsh urban system was tied to distinctive patterns of industrial development that tended to produce more dispersed industrial towns rather than

²⁸See, for example, P. Joyce, *The Policing of Protest, Disorder and International Terrorism in the UK since 1945* (Basingstoke, 2016); and E. Linstrum, ‘Domesticating chemical weapons: tear gas and the militarization of policing in the British imperial world, 1919–1981’, *Journal of Modern History*, 91 (2019), 557–85.

²⁹P. Cheshire and D. Hay, *Urban Problems in Western Europe: An Economic Analysis* (London, 1989), 84–5.

³⁰A. Andrews, ‘Multiple deprivation, the inner city, and the fracturing of the welfare state: Glasgow, 1968–78’, *Twentieth Century British History*, 29 (2018), 605–24.

³¹See, for example, L. Gooberman, ‘The state and post-industrial urban regeneration: the reinvention of south Cardiff’, *Urban History*, 45 (2018), 504–23.

larger conurbations.³² As a result, the familiar typologies of the ‘inner city’ were less easily applied to the Welsh context.

The position of the cities of Belfast and Derry in Northern Ireland is more complex still, not least because the scale and severity of the ‘Troubles’ and its politico-religious dimensions eclipsed the underlying urban inequalities, especially in much of the contemporary reporting of the conflict. Belfast and Derry exhibited many of the same problems that were found in British cities: endemic and concentrated multiple deprivation, rising unemployment and a decaying physical environment.³³ Social, economic and environmental inequalities manifested spatially in these cities, as they did in Great Britain, but were compounded by inter-communal discrimination.³⁴ Moreover, the extent of inter-communal segregation dwarfed that which existed within Great Britain’s inner cities, or between inner-city and suburban areas, and the spatial dynamics were much more complex.³⁵ While inter-communal conflict clearly distinguished events in Northern Ireland’s cities from those in Great Britain – with some important caveats – it would be a mistake to suggest that the inner-city crisis was absent from the region.³⁶ Rather, the crises played out alongside, and arguably multiplied the effects of, one another. Given the complex similarities between cities in Britain and Northern Ireland, there is a need and ample possibility to develop a four nations history of the inner city.

Inner-city communities and cultures

Understanding the urban crisis shines new light on the everyday lives of inner-city residents in post-war Britain. However, the heavily politicized crisis of the inner city by no means accounts for the entirety of these residents’ experiences. Occupying a complex ideological and cultural position within the national psyche and heavily mediated through a series of reductive images and labels, political and popular understandings of the crisis often worked to obscure the diverse cultures, practices and identities of those who lived in the inner city. In 1977, for example, the architects and town planners Hugh Wilson and Lewis Womersley commented that Britain’s inner cities had become ‘the homes of the unskilled, the unemployed, the socially disadvantaged and, increasingly, of dense concentrations of black people’.³⁷ Media outlets were eager to report on the dystopian failure of modernist planning programmes and the resulting conditions of lurid inner-city squalor so

³²P. Borsay, L. Miskell and O. Roberts, ‘Introduction: Wales, a new agenda for urban history’, *Urban History*, 32 (2005), 5–16.

³³*Belfast Areas of Special Social Need: Report by Project Team* (Belfast, 1976).

³⁴S. Prince and G. Warner, *Belfast and Derry in Revolt: A New History of the Start of the Troubles* (Newbridge, 2019).

³⁵I. Gregory, N. Cunningham, C.D. Lloyd, I. Shuttleworth and P. Ell, *Troubled Geographies: A Spatial History of Religion and Society in Ireland* (Bloomington, 2013), 201–20.

³⁶Similar, though less severe, sectarian conflict existed in cities like Liverpool and Glasgow; see, for example, D. Warner, ‘When two tribes go to war: Orange parades, religious identity and urban space in Liverpool, 1965–1985’, *Oral History*, 47 (2019), 30–42. Moreover, the violence linked with the ‘Troubles’ was not absent from British cities; see G. Dawson, J. Dover and S. Hopkins (eds.), *The Northern Ireland Troubles in Britain: Impacts, Engagements, Legacies and Memories* (Manchester, 2016).

³⁷H. Wilson and L. Womersley, *Change or Decay? Final Report of the Liverpool Inner Area Study* (London, 1977), 1.

that, by the mid-1970s, the British public were well used to consuming exposés reminiscent of the new journalistic accounts of Victorian London.³⁸ One newspaper report of Liverpool in 1985, for example, described its inner areas as ‘the claustrophobic prison-house of the English working-class’ and, in summary, questioned whether ‘it is the pig who makes the sty or the sty who makes the pig?’.³⁹ These images were replicated – and sometimes challenged – through music, film and television, and photography.⁴⁰ From these representations followed a discourse of inner-city life conditioned by a set of problematic cultural values that struggled to deviate from either the sentimental or the vilifying – inner-city communities as innocent recipients of an ill-fated harvest sown by short-sighted planners and politicians, or, on the other hand, worked into more sinister mythologies around the formation of a feckless underclass. While Wilson and Womersley’s assertions were technically correct – much of the inner city’s population was indeed unskilled, unemployed or black – to label inner-city populations solely as such precluded analyses into everyday urban lives that were subject to a diversity of experience across the boundaries of time, age, class, race, gender and religion, and that continued, adapted and occasionally flourished on the forefront of social, cultural and political change and in the midst of escalating urban decay. Nor are the numbers of individuals who directly experienced this crisis numerically insignificant. By Wilson and Womersley’s own account, four million people called the inner areas of London, Glasgow, Newcastle, Leeds, Manchester, Nottingham, Birmingham and Liverpool home.

While contemporaries decried the death of ‘community’ as a result of, among other things, the displacements wrought by urban modernism, this reductive view did not accord with experience on the ground. As Jon Lawrence has argued, community continued to exist – indeed thrive – albeit in a changed form.⁴¹ This was not just true of the suburbs and New Towns that form the core of Lawrence’s work, but also of the inner city. In analysing the output of two community arts projects, Sam Wetherell has observed how East London’s communities in the 1970s and 1980s were shifting away from the vertical divides of class and moving towards a multiplicity of horizontal splits along the lines of ethnic and gendered identities.⁴² New communities established in inner-city neighbourhoods could have revolutionary potential as well as providing spaces for free expression and challenge to social and cultural norms. Brixton, in inner London, was a case in point. The area’s Railton Road was home in the 1970s to the feminist, anti-racist and squatters’ rights campaigners Olive Morris and Elizabeth Obi’s squat and social centre at number 121; and to the South London Gay Centre at number

³⁸See, for example, J.R. Walkowitz, *City of Dreadful Delight: Narratives of Sexual Danger in Late Victorian London* (Chicago, 1992).

³⁹*Sunday Times*, 25 Aug. 1985.

⁴⁰K. Connell, ‘Race, prostitution and the New Left: the postwar inner city through Janet Mendelsohn’s “social eye”’, *History Workshop Journal*, 83 (2017), 301–40; S. Hirsch and D. Swanson, ‘Photojournalism and the Moss Side riots of 1981: narrowly selective transparency’, *History Workshop Journal*, 89 (2020), 221–45.

⁴¹J. Lawrence, *Me, Me, Me? The Search for Community in Post-War England* (Oxford, 2019).

⁴²S. Wetherell, ‘Painting the crisis: community arts and the search for the “ordinary” in 1970s and ’80s London’, *History Workshop Journal*, 76 (2013), 235–49.

79.⁴³ Cheap or abandoned housing in inner-city areas made them ideal sites for such politically centred community organizations, but the exigencies of the urban crisis, as Child explains, made their activism all the more urgent.

Nevertheless, the potentialities afforded by the inner city extended beyond overt political activism. In 1980s Sheffield, as Sarah Kenny has argued, inner-city sites facilitated new forms of sociability, intercultural interaction and political action, especially for young people.⁴⁴ Young people's occupation and creative negotiation of the inner city thus served to create new forms of urban community and social action. Just as gay men arrived in Brixton in search of a safe space, heterosexual white women also entered the inner city in pursuit of freedom and romance. As Bishop shows here with regard to post-war Leicester, young people's romantic relationships, pursued creatively and at times furtively across the new social terrain of the inner city, served to forge new cross-cultural connections and familial formations, contributing in no small way to the emergence of an everyday urban multiculturalism in Leicester as in many other cities. Of course, there was nothing new about intercultural or interracial mixing, but the prominence of new migration flows in cities like Leicester markedly accentuated such dynamics, and the oral histories that Bishop has captured provide a vital counterpoint to cataclysmic, crisis-driven narratives of the inner city in the post-war period. The role that individuals and communities played in exercising agency and a degree of control over inner-city spaces has become increasingly evident. For example, in using memories of Orange Lodge parades in the 1970s, Daniel Warner has traced how the landscape of inner Liverpool was co-opted into the cultural and physical divides of the city's competing religious denominations.⁴⁵ Warner's article herein takes up a similar theme of community cohesion and agency. Calling attention to the response of Liverpool's communities to the threat of football hooliganism, Warner argues that inner-city neighbourhoods retained strong cultures of organization and self-policing and retained a level of control over their own – and others' – use of inner-city spaces. The agency of inner-city actors is also a key focus of Carter's article, based on detailed oral history interviews with residents in Hulme, Manchester. Along with neighbouring Moss Side, Hulme figured in the national consciousness as one of the most stigmatized and sensationalized inner-city districts. Carter highlights the multiple ways in which individuals reconciled these problematic imaginaries with their own diverse experiences, at times reinforcing, at times rejecting or ridiculing such stereotypes. Like Bishop, Carter's contribution highlights the emergence of a prosaic but powerful everyday multiculturalism in these heterogeneous, multi-ethnic neighbourhoods, and a strong sense of community that was, if anything, fortified by the onslaught of negative imagery imposed from outside. For some of Carter's subjects, racism was something they experienced most obviously when they ventured away from the relative tolerance and diversity of Hulme,

⁴³On Olive Morris, see Bryan, Dadzie and Scafe, *The Heart of the Race*, 151–5; on the South London Gay Centre, see M. Cook, "'Gay times': identity, locality, memory, and the Brixton squats in 1970s London", *Twentieth Century British History*, 24 (2013), 84–109.

⁴⁴S. Kenny, 'A "radical project": youth culture, leisure, and politics in 1980s Sheffield', *Twentieth Century British History*, 30 (2019), 557–84.

⁴⁵Warner, 'When two tribes go to war'.

into the wider city and beyond – though this claim was often made as a direct response to hostile media coverage of their former neighbourhood.

To turn our earlier assertion on its head, understanding the lives of inner-city residents also shines new light on the urban crisis. The articles presented here provide vivid descriptions of the people and places that were drafted into wider discourses of social breakdown and moral decay within inner-city areas. Each article, in its own right, speaks to how the particularities of the crisis were constructed and subsequently lived and experienced, conceptualizing the inner city not merely as a site of socio-economic problems and concerns but also one of distinctive social and cultural practice. If, as Saumarez Smith has suggested, the inner city emerged as a spatially materialized locus for all that had gone wrong in post-war Britain, then these articles seek to clarify precisely *where* this crisis manifested itself and *how* it interacted with the day-to-day realities of the communities who were subject to such representations. The idea of an urban crisis grew up around certain material spaces – the empty houses and desolate walkways, the insalubrious collections of pubs, clubs and bars, or the increasingly caged football stadiums – as well as the actual and metaphorical emplacement of populations – children, young couples or football supporters – and discursive constructs within them – the delinquent, the interracial couple or the hooligan. Attending more closely to the histories and experience of inner cities as actual peopled places is vital in order to probe and complicate these problematic imaginaries. Doing so reveals not only a complex interaction between imaginary and lived experience, but brings many other, lesser known but equally significant stories more clearly into view.