Reassessing the seventies: the benighted decade

On 23 September 2009, the British Academy hosted a workshop to take a fresh look at the 1970s – a watershed in post-war British history. It was followed in the evening by a public panel discussion, chaired by Professor Laurie Taylor (presenter of Radio 4's 'Thinking Allowed'). **Dr Lawrence Black** *and* **Dr Hugh Pemberton** *introduce the issues that need to be tackled when studying a decade that continues to resonate strongly in our recollections of the recent past.*

In the past year Britain (and the rest of the world) has grappled with the worst financial crisis since 1929. In Britain's case, this has both invoked and reinforced memories of

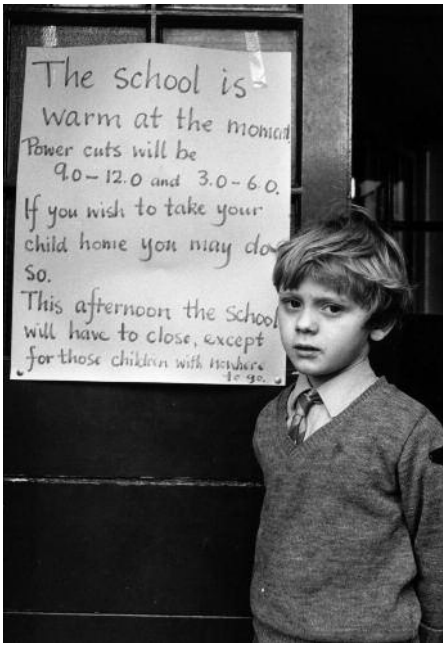

Figure 1. In February 1972, power cuts during a miner's strike forced schools to close. Photo: Chris Djukanovic/Evening Standard/Getty Images.

the seventies. These conjure up an image of a dismal, benighted decade, with unemployment and inflation at levels not experienced since the 1930s and Napoleonic Wars respectively. Energy was rationed, shop windows fell dark, and candles (which had been removed from the Retail Price Index in 1956 and thus apparently consigned to history) sold out during the three-day week. Racial conflict and terrorist bombings and assassinations became commonplace. To many Britons, Britain's entry into the Common Market seemed emblematic of its declining importance in the world. In 1976 the government was forced to go 'cap-in-hand' to the IMF to secure a $3.9 billion loan (the largest ever made by that institution). Strikes seemed endemic and work-to-rules, go-slows, demarcation, flying and secondary pickets became common parlance. Also endemic, in assorted moral panics, were muggers, scroungers, streakers, punks and hooligans. The country seemed to some to be becoming ungovernable. As nationalism advanced in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales, the very future of the United Kingdom could be doubted.

All this easily elided into apocalyptic talk of crisis. In 1973, as the three-day week approached, the *Daily Mirror* wondered, 'Is everyone going mad?' By 1979, the Sun was warning '3 MILLION FACE THE DOLE QUEUE' (ironically in the light of developments in the early-1980s).

The titles of influential contemporary studies impute what the seventies meant: *Is Britain Dying?, Britain against itself* (two American studies), *Britain's Economic Problem*, *The Break-up of Britain, Policing the Crisis, The End of Britain* (Figure 2). The hegemonic memories and representations of Britain's 'decline' in the seventies have become a byword for all that was worst about post-war Britain. The reasons why these have persisted for so long are complex. We would like here to highlight four reasons in particular.

First, the economic difficulties came as a considerable shock to contemporaries after a quarter of a century of continuous economic growth and rising affluence.

Second, the seventies were portrayed by the British media, not least by newspapers, in a way that created an impression of a country uniquely challenged by the difficult economic conditions in the world.

Third, if journalists writing the 'first draft of history' were responsible for a particular, and partial, view of Britain in the seventies, the second draft was largely written by social scientists in the 1970s and 1980s. On the whole, they were negative – assuming Britain was in decline, for example, and surprisingly unaware of developments elsewhere in the world.

Fourth, we would emphasise the way in which the politics of the ensuing 30 years saw both Thatcher and Blair hardwire such negative memories and representations of the decade into the national and popular consciousness – the quintessential image of failure in this vision being the winter of discontent.

The result is such that the memory of the 1970s is often as intense for those who weren't there as for those that were.

Nor has the decade enjoyed the best of reputations amongst historians. For economic historians it marked the end of the post-war boom; for political historians it is the time the post-war consensus fractured; for cultural historians the bright lights of the 1960s cast a long shadow.

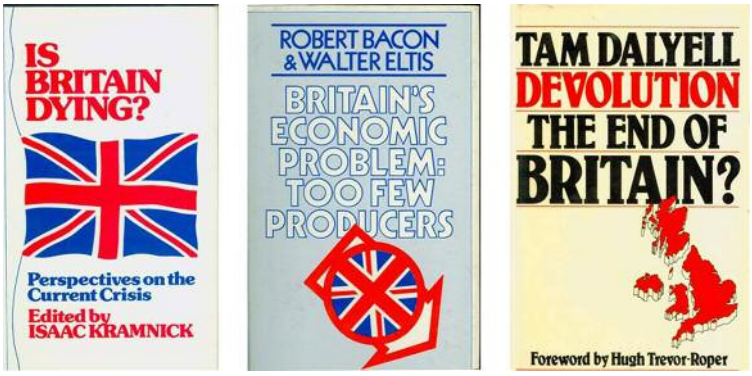

Figure 2. Portrayals of crisis published in the 1970s.

Recent perspectives have reinforced a strong sense that the 1970s were a more grounded, visceral experience than the utopias of the 1960s, the consumerist 1980s, or the years of the long-boom after 1992. This is firmly apparent in BBC TV's hit retro-science fiction drama *Life on Mars*. The nineties and noughties saw a spate of films with a similar sensibility – *The Full Monty, Billy Elliot, Brassed Off*. Nostalgia for harsh, unpleasant, but certain realities can also be detected in Mark Garnett's history, plotting Britons' drift *From anger to apathy* after 1975. With the recent recession, the media has drawn ready parallels with the l970s – 'make-do-and-mend' (last aired during the 1970s' three-day week) is back in fashion. So are cooking, sewing, DIY, and allotment gardening (reawakening memories of *The Good Life*). Commentators saw in Brown's failure to call the expected election in the autumn of 2007 uncanny echoes of Callaghan's unexpected decision not to go to the country in 1978.

Four representations of the 1970s

In four key representations of the seventies – punks, hooligans, strikers, and failed politicians – can be seen evidence and causes of decline but, in longer-term context and taking into account in-depth studies, also some grounds and terms for rehabilitating the 1970s.

Punks. Dick Hebdidge's *Subculture* explained how 'punks were … *dramatizing* what had come to be called "Britain's decline"' and had 'appropriated the rhetoric of crisis which filled the airwaves and editorials throughout the period.' Like Thatcherism, the likes of Malcolm Mclaren were pitching themselves against consensus, liberals, and hippies (Figure 3).

Hooligans. Football hooliganism provided (like punk) a popular and rich vein of media moral panics/folk devils, a cause for authoritarian populists and a rich vein of sociological research – analysed variously in terms of declining behavioural standards, the fracturing of working-class social cohesion, race, masculinity, and was held to be fed by popular irreverence, alienation and nationalism.

Strikers. If there was a certain affection for Wolfie Smith (of BBC TV sit-com *Citizen Smith*), then Derek Robinson – an AEU shop steward at Longbridge responsible for more than 500 stoppages between 1977 and 1979 which, British Leyland management estimated, cost the plant production of 113,000 engines – became an emblem of all that was wrong with the unions. Trade union membership grew in the seventies, but their public popularity fell. Though most establishments were actually unaffected by strikes, the unions were widely seen to have brought down governments in 1970 and particularly in 1974 and 1979. Unions, in short, were given little political credit for the sacrifices made by union members, particularly in the public sector, to see off inflation via the acceptance of reductions in real wages. They were ripe for political and media pillorying, and the winter of discontent was constituted by both as the epitome of their faults – an interpretation relied upon by Thatcher, Blair and the media thereafter.

'Useless politicians'. Closely linked with the perception that unions were 'out of control' was the perceived failure of incompetent and pusillanimous politicians to govern effectively. Paradoxically, there was much to be gained by politicians of both the left and the right by playing up this 'political failure'.

If these are key representations of the decade, how well do they fit the facts? To date, the seventies have been comparatively ill-served by historians (as is the case for the USA). Thatcherism and New Labour are much better served by academic literature. Other disciplines and journalists (most recently Andy Beckett and Francis Wheen) have seemed keener to delve into the seventies. Yet the 1970s, despite this historical neglect, was the fulcrum around which the post-war period moved in virtually all the sub-fields of history.

Figure 3. An icon of the later 1970s. Johnny Rotten (John Lydon) of the Sex Pistols, performing live in January 1978. Photo: Richard E. Aaron/Redferns.

Were the seventies so different, so bad?

There are other perspectives on offer, in a recent cultural history, for instance, Howard Sounes, who largely blots out economic problems, sees it as a 'brilliant' decade.

Some familiar trends were recognizable: feminism, sexual liberation. Trends associated with affluence continued – such as domestication and overseas holidays. Culturally it is hard to argue that the 1970s were less vibrant than the 1960s. Winston Fletcher's history of advertising, for instance, sees the seventies as 'golden years' which saw 'more creativity, more innovations and more attainments … than any others'. Of *Campaign*'s 100 best ads of the century, the most came from the 1970s (Figure 4). There were continuing advances on 'sixties issues': radical theatre; nationalism (the 'break-up' of Britain was a democratic cause for many); and important legislative measures – on equal pay, domestic violence, race relations, consumer rights and pensions – that belie the decade's image of austerity and conflict.

Some myths can easily be burst. Nick Tiratsoo has effectively argued that the political and economic travails were global. Strikes, fabled as the British 'disease', turn out to have been more virulent in Italy and the USA. Nor were deficiencies in British management hard to locate.

An alternative way of thinking about this was that Britain was transitioning into the first post-industrial nation. This was a decade of new environmental preoccupations, of ruralist cultural tendencies (from *Small is Beautiful* to *The Country Diary of an Edwardian Lady*). These were boom years for the heritage industry – Hewison noted in 1987 that half of Britain's museums were founded after 1971.

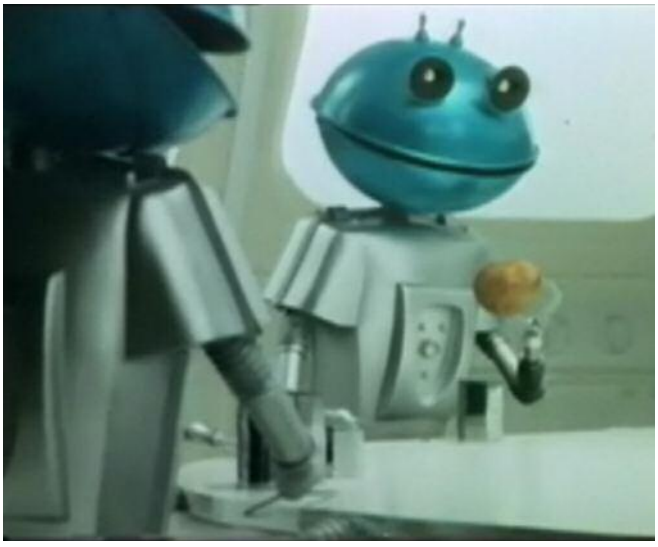

Figure 4. The creativity of the 1970s ... and nostalgia. The 'Martians' advertisement for Cadbury's Smash is still voted to be one of the most popular of all time.

Even in political economy, there is a more positive story to be told. Britain did relatively badly for much of the decade, with living standards actually falling between 1975 and 1976. Thereafter, however, there was a rapid recovery and, by 1980 Britain's growth in nominal GDP per head since 1970 was considerably better than the OECD average.

New ways of thinking about the 1970s

The enduring image of a benighted seventies in thrall both to a bankrupt politics and to excessively powerful trade unions fitted both Thatcherite and Blair visions and was burnished by both. As Thatcher battled the unions with a strong state, so Blair distanced New Labour from 'old' Labour in the 1970s, vilifying the unions, embracing the market and a more inclusive, liberal, and individualistic culture. This construction of the seventies has to be grasped before it can be first de-constructed and then re-constructed.

Britain's crisis was not unique and several recent studies have suggested parallels with the US experience. US historians have sometimes seen the seventies as an 'in-between' decade, but interest in it has recently boomed. In particular they have looked to explain why the political and social legacy of the 1960s was the rise of the right. Works by Schulman and Zelizer contend that the tactics and language of the l960s' left-liberals (grassroots mobilisation, civil rights, identity politics) were mobilised by the right. They aver reformers made more ground in affirmative action and rights than social and economic differences. This helps explain a similar paradox in Britain. Likewise, as Curran has hinted, the primary political battleground in Britain from the seventies was more cultural than economic (where neo-liberalism's supplanting of Keynesianism was hegemonic).

The reasons for the relative neglect of the 1970s by historians are not clear, since the papers are now virtually completely open. One reason may be that contemporary historians are still mining possibilities presented by the wealth of archival material available for earlier decades – or that the 'golden age', and particularly the 1960s, provides more congenial research topics. We wonder, however, if a key issue might be the centrality of political economy to the experience of the decade and a certain disconnection between this and other social science and historical analyses.

For those seeking to rethink the history of the seventies, we would highlight the following key questions for contemporary historians:

- Was the 'crisis' of the 1970s as bad as it has been (and was at the time) painted?
- Why did the decade see such a polarisation of British politics and such social and cultural discord? And why has it continued to resonate as such?
- How significant was the decade in the broad sweep of post-war British history?

However, to answer these questions we must confront some key issues:

How should we periodise the seventies? This is difficult for political, economic and cultural historians to agree on yet, we would argue, plainly in many areas of British life something fundamental did change during the decade.

How should we deal with the issue of politicisation? Since memories of the decade have, to a large degree, been politically constructed (and continually reinforced) by both right and left and 'spin' and continue to be so, historians must both explore and be wary of this.

How best can we deal with the problem of economics? Economic problems and perceptions of absolute and relative performance lie at the heart of the 1970s. Thus historians of all stripes must necessarily engage with the decade's economics if they are to provide the necessary context for their research. Plainly, there is ample scope for sub-disciplinary co-operation with economic history. Yet the discipline of economic history is in marked decline by contrast with more dynamic social science analyses or cultural history. Where does this leave us?

In conclusion, therefore, the seventies have come to be understood through the prism of later events and the decade's politically motivated construction by both left and right, but historians must seek to go beyond that. Here Peter Hall's 'marketplace for ideas' may prove a powerful tool for thinking about the decade. It is surely time, indeed a particularly apt moment, to rethink the seventies in such light.

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The panel discussion is available as a podcast from www.britac.ac.uk/medialibrary/