Austerity Britain: Back to the Future

It would not be controversial to observe that the global financial downturn and its immediate impact in Britain inaugurated a shift in popular perceptions of personal (in)security and financial prospects. For many Britons, the hegemonic mantle of British economic prosperity which had shielded the nation for much of the previous decade became increasingly threadbare and finally shabby. From 2008 the recession and the threat of recession were a constant in news and current affairs as politicians, economists and pundits sought to explain fresh surges in unemployment, tighter squeezes to family budgets, government spending reviews, a crisis in the Eurozone and the mill-stone of negative equity for mortgage holders. Perhaps it is a truism to say that, in times of national adversity such as this, public culture turns to its own national history for guidance and for strength. We report that this was certainly the case in austerity Britain, and it is this turn to history which we wish to consider in some detail. In this concluding chapter we have chosen to highlight the ways in which historical lessons have been deployed in political and popular discourses to encourage citizens to rethink their strategic everyday acts and their political values in the light of this financial downturn and the public reassessment of citizens’ current and future prospects. How should citizens make sense of the downturn from a relatively buoyant economy, and how should they conduct themselves? Should they support the public sector and defend its funding, or accept that cuts need to be made? Is it right that organised labour should strike over terms and conditions of employment, or should workers accept that sacrifices need to be made? Are Britons all really in this predicament together, as Chancellor George Osborne (2009) famously declared, or are they being conscripted to a myth of national unity which belies deep and deepening inequalities?
This chapter analyses the ways in which public political discourses have deployed historical resources, analogies and stories to provide certain authorised and persuasive answers to these questions: answers which, we will argue, are generally supportive of the continuance of neoliberal enterprise, its values and its current practices.

To pursue this analysis, we focus on the public referencing of two historical periods in the context of present austerity: the 1970s and the mid-twentieth century. Our approach is to examine how the political conscription of some historical events and periods such as the Winter of Discontent in 1978–79 and the years of industrial ‘strife’ of 1970–85 have been figured as largely dystopian, while others such as the Home Front and the austerity years of 1945–51 have been invoked far more positively. Here we make the case that the 1970s were invoked by the media and by politicians as a warning to citizens against undertaking industrial action and thereby further damaging the economy. We will also suggest that this message was dependent on depicting organised labour as an outmoded and dangerous form of class politics which belonged to an earlier, more divisive era. We then go on to argue that the more desired models of public conduct and the ‘right kind’ of values (e.g. stoicism, thrift, ‘being all in this together’) were promoted through the deployment of historical resources and myths of wartime British pluck. So, as the spectre of recession surfaced in broadsheets, broadcast news, current affairs and documentary, there was a distinct turn to myths of ‘making do’ and of thrift as one positive strategy for individuals to manage a growing insecurity around homes and jobs. From this perspective the chapter begins the work of unpacking how historical resources are deployed to formulate and underpin arguments not only about how responsible citizens should behave in current times but also about how these times should best be interpreted. We contend that in deft manoeuvres political opinion invoked the past to stall debates and counter-arguments about the present and to insist that there is only one viable option for future progress. During this process, already fragile and fractured class alliances became further weakened as certain political constituencies and certain counter-discourses and their classed associations became labelled as outmoded, retrograde or damaging.

It is surely a cause for concern when in hard times citizens are being asked to make do, to accept the rolling back of state provision and to modify their expectations of a civil society on the basis of historical myths as well as of current realities. We conclude, then, by considering what kinds of counter-myths, what kinds of alternative historical