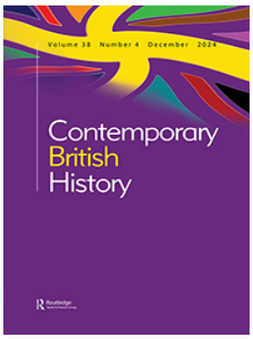

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Beyond the end of history: rethinking Britain's nineties

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ABSTRACT

Historical scholarship on Britain's 1990s is in its infancy. Historians have not yet produced the volume of rich empirical work which has transformed recent understandings of the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, an absence which this special issue begins to address. This introductory essay outlines existing frameworks for historicising the decade of the 1990s, from the influential 'Holiday from History' metanarrative to the idea of a neoliberal consensus, before setting out alternative stories and trajectories. In the political sphere, these include a heightened focus on questions of rights, citizenship and democracy, whilst in the arena of social and cultural change emphasis is placed on new forms of chosen community and the complex effects of digital technologies on selfhood and identity across the decade. The essay concludes with a discussion of the archive available to historians of the 1990s, encompassing the increasing prominence of the 'born-digital record'. Rather than constituting a coherent periodisation, 'the nineties', we suggest, offers a useful lens for thinking more broadly about change and continuity at the end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first.

KEYWORDS

The nineties; decades; democracy; born digital; neoliberalism

Introduction

One eye-catching feature of the lavish pageant held in June 2022 to mark the Platinum Jubilee of Elizabeth II was the procession of seven open-top double-decker buses, each marking a decade of the Queen's seventy-year reign. Amongst those representing the Nineties were supermodels Kate Moss and Naomi Campbell, who danced and waved to the London crowds atop a vehicle festooned with a jumble of decadal images: a newly liberated Nelson Mandela riding in the royal carriage next to the Queen; the actress Liz Hurley in her iconic Versace dress with plunging neckline; television comedy character Mr Bean hiding inside a red pillar box; the cover of *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone;* Dolly, the cloned sheep; a Tamagotchi toy; an acid house logo; the list goes on. In homage to nineties pop group the Spice Girls, the bus's destination was set to 'Spice Up Your Life' while its numberplate read 'GIRL PWR'. Union Jacks were abundant, from the enormous Britpop guitar emblazoned on the side of the bus to the biker jacket donned by Moss.

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Mandela and Dolly aside, the overall impression was of a decade defined by popular culture and celebrity, with a particularly strong showing for fashion, television and sport.[1]

Given the event's celebratory and playful tone, we should be careful not to read too much significance into this light-hearted spectacle charting recent British history.[2] Yet occasions like the Platinum Jubilee do offer nations an opportunity to tell stories about themselves and it is notable that the organisers chose to slice the Queen's reign into easily recognisable decadal units. This has been the strategy of many popularisers of Britain's post-war history, who find in the decade an attractive template for best-selling books, museum exhibitions and television and radio documentaries.[3] Amazon books search for '1980s Britain', for instance, produces hits for serious works of historical non-fiction by Alwyn Turner, Andy Beckett and other authors, alongside eighties-themed quiz and crossword books, nostalgic memoirs of eighties childhoods and publications aimed at hobbyists and enthusiasts, of which *Lorries in Britain: The 1980s* and *British Buses of the 1980s* are merely indicative titles.

The writer Ian Jack dates this 'decade-ism' back to the 1960s, a genuinely transformative period which 'set loose a popular, attractive way of looking at the recent past'.[4] Academic historians typically look with scepticism upon such neat, self-contained periodisations.[5] Yet decades are undoubtedly useful to think with. Arthur Marwick argued for a 'long Sixties' stretching from 1958 to 1974 but divided into three general phases with what he calls the 'high sixties' occupying the years 1963–1969. For Marwick, the sixties was when 'minor and rather insignificant' developments of the fifties became 'powerful practicalities' characterised by 'the vast number of innovative activities taking place *simultaneously*, by unprecedent *interaction* and *acceleration*'.[6] Marwick's schema, and especially his pivot year of 1963, has since been challenged, but his work still serves as a suggestive example of how issues of periodisation are inherently bound up with questions of interpretation. In the current literature, contests over the 'the Sixties' are perhaps most keenly played out by historians of religion, with scholars including Callum Brown, Hugh McLeod, and Sam Brewitt-Taylor contributing to lively debates about the nature and timing of a 'cultural revolution' across different parts of the United Kingdom.[7]

Popular conceptions of the 1970s as a decade of 'crisis' have similarly been problematised by historians working outside the familiar grooves of prolonged industrial action, spiralling inflation, growing unemployment and mismanaged public finances. Standard narratives view these decadal features as signs of the unravelling of post-war social democracy and the ushering in of a new neoliberal order symbolised by Margaret Thatcher's triumph in the general election of May 1979. Yet as revisionist scholarship over the past five to ten years has sought to emphasise, more complex stories can be told about the 1970s.[8] Alongside industrial strife, this was the era of Women's Liberation and the Race Relations Act, of rising home ownership and major social welfare reforms, of Britain's entry to the European Economic Community, of a resurgent Scottish Nationalism and of a multifaceted globalisation.[9] As well as restoring balance to our view of the decade, this scholarship has complicated the notion of rupture, suggesting that during the 1970s neoliberalism and social democracy fed off the same socio-historical forces–namely, affluence and individualism–and that Labour's political defeat in 1979 might be viewed as a contingent, rather than inevitable, event.[10]

This revisionist turn has also recast historical understandings of the 1980s, which, until relatively recently, were dominated by studies of Margaret Thatcher and her Conservative

governments. Such a focus is not unjustified, given the coincidental precision of Thatcher's tenure as Prime Minister with the years 1979 to 1990 and her hegemonic ambition to free the market and roll back the state. Yet as Matthew Hilton, Chris Moores and Florence Sutcliffe-Braithwaite argued in a special 2017 issue of *CBH*, Thatcher and Thatcherism do not supply 'the sole guiding force or analytic framework through which we should understand the 1980s'.[11] They propose 'ordinariness' as an alternative discursive theme, showing how the language of the everyday could be deployed to depoliticise class identities, whilst in other contexts, 'ordinariness' might valorise non-elite voices and experiences.[12] Another emphasis of the recent literature falls on forms of left-wing activism and thought which were not purely oppositional in character but tracked longer-term intellectual trajectories and dynamics internal to the labour movement.[13]

These and other themes animate an increasingly rich scholarship on the 1980s, encompassing (amongst other subjects) radical Black politics in Birmingham, the transformation of the built environment of British cities, and histories of financialization which de-centre the actions of policy elites in favour of popular understandings of capitalist culture.[14] In her recent, thought-provoking book, Lucy Robinson characterises the eighties as 'a post-modern pastiche of time, a list of events, a chart, a top ten or a compilation', noting the decade's importance in establishing new media forms. These included the clip show and the compilation album, which fed a broader tendency to interpret culture through lists–of chart-topping records, best-selling authors, most-watched television programmes, indeed of any product or event which could be named and counted.[15]

What of the 1990s? As exemplified by the Jubilee bus montage, the nineties is a colourful repository of popular memory of the kind excavated by Robinson for the eighties, yet scholarly reassessment of the decade by historians is in its infancy. Of the themes shaping nineties decade-ism, arguably the most intellectually substantive is the 'holiday from history'. This phrase was coined by *Washington Post* journalist George Will shortly after the 9/11 attacks in New York to describe a period of relative global stability beginning with the end of the Cold War and closing with the War on Terror.[16] British journalist Jonathan Freedland borrowed it for his 2017 Radio 4 documentary, which painted a similar picture of the nineties as an 'oasis of calm' sandwiched between the fall of the Berlin Wall and the terror attacks on the Twin Towers.[17] Freedland narrates the decade as a time when sustained economic growth and political consensus gave Britons the luxury of becoming preoccupied with the 'frivolities of celebrity soap operas', be it the trial of OJ Simpson or Charles and Diana's royal divorce. James Brooke-Smith argues a similar case in his recent cultural history of the nineties, when it felt, he writes, as though 'history's source codes had been scrambled, the grand narratives of the twentieth century cast aside, but nothing of appropriate gravity put in their place'.[18]

This framing owes much to the influential thesis of Francis Fukuyama, who famously predicted in the summer of 1989 that the world was moving towards the 'end of history'.[19] Developing his thesis three years later, following the dramatic events in Europe, Fukuyama argued that the end of the Cold War had secured the hegemonic status of US-style capitalism and liberal democracy and that 'history' would henceforth unfold within the ideological parameters which these systems set out. The idea that class struggle had been banished, market capitalism entrenched and liberal democracy enshrined as the only game in town was much repeated as the decade wore on.[20] This narrative continues to shape the historical memory of the era. Celia Donert and Stefan-

Ludwig Hoffmann, in a piece which interrogates the belief that the 1990s marked a 'global interregnum' where liberal internationalism reigned supreme, have implored historians to resist the temptation to position 1989 as the 'turning point when Europe's past became our present'.[21] In Britain, this story was frequently told in relation to a growing acceptance across the political spectrum of the principles of small government and free markets, and to the displacement of 'traditional' class ties by new identities and values centred upon gender, sexuality, ethnicity and nation. In his pacey popular history of Britain's nineties, Alwyn Turner characterises the decade as 'the victory of liberalism' in all its economic, social and cultural forms.[22] New Labour appeared to epitomise this new consensus, projecting a carefully curated blend of Thatcherite neoliberal economics and cosmopolitan identity politics. Indeed, as discussed below, the richest subject for historical scholarship on the decade to date concerns the rise of New Labour, with much argument and debate turning on the significance of the 1997 election for British politics and society.[23]

Scholars working on geographies outside Britain and North America have been less beholden to the 'End of History' metanarrative and have worked with alternative periodisations and chronologies of change. In the former Soviet bloc in Eastern Europe, the nineties was anything but a 'holiday', marking instead a paradigmatic shift towards the reinforcement, and also reconstitution, of global capitalistic systems and logics.[24] A body of literature on the Scandinavian experience has explored the 'Nordic Nineties' as a period in which the region's identity and strategic position within Europe and the world was reimagined. Andreas Mørkved Hellenes, Haakon A. Ikonomou, Carl Marklund and Ada Nissen argue that, in the face of globalisation, these nations remodelled themselves as competition states, pursuing public-private promotional campaigns overseas and 'popular cultural mega-events' at home, such as World Expos and the Olympic Games.[25] Beyond the European arena, historians attending to post-apartheid South Africa, post-colonial India and the newly independent Hong Kong have positioned the 1990s as a watershed decade in trajectories of global history and Britain's place within it.[26] These histories have narrated fundamental breaks with previous regimes of power and knowledge, often centring on processes of democratisation, decolonisation, and self-governance and punctuated by a language of 'rights'. Indeed, Stefan-Ludwig Hoffmann has argued that 'we can first speak of individual human rights as a basic concept (Grundbegriff), that is, a contested, irreplaceable and consequential concept of global politics, only in the 1990s, after the end of the Cold War'.[27] In this historiographical context, Britain's so called 'holiday' appears at the very least anomalous.

Drawing inspiration from the revisionist scholarship on the 1970s and 1980s and from these critical perspectives beyond Britain, this special issue seeks to stake out new directions for histories of the 1990s. It adopts a critical stance towards decade-ism, taking 'the nineties' not as a given but as a point of departure for new ways of thinking about the end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first. As has been suggested elsewhere, the nineties were temporally 'sticky', with the spectre of the millennium, against the backdrop of a maturing heritage industry, generating new and contested imaginings of past, present and future.[28] When, exactly, the nineties can be said to have started or ended, and what was distinctive about the socio-economic, political and cultural formations underpinning the decade are questions which the articles in this special issue begin to answer. Covering subjects from rave culture and single parent activism to constitutional change and the National Lottery, they suggest a number

of possible periodisations and turning points and offer fine-grained accounts of how Britain's nineties were experienced in different places and by different groups of people. Building from a series of exploratory workshops facilitated by the editors in 2021, the articles showcase a range of archival pathways into the decade, modelling the kind of rich empirical work and careful contextualisation which is needed if we are to historicise the decade effectively.[29]

The rest of this introductory essay explores in greater detail the key themes of the issue and outlines an emerging framework for future study. It begins with a discussion of 'neoliberalism' as a key paradigm within which much of the recent scholarship on Britain in the late twentieth century has been framed, including, for the 1990s, the rise of New Labour under Tony Blair. While the neoliberal framework (and the 'Holiday from History' thesis to which it is intrinsically related) remains powerful for explaining some aspects of the decade, we suggest that applying it too rigidly risks obscuring other important themes and trajectories. In the political arena, these include the highly consequential changes to Britain's constitution which occurred across the decade, and an intensified focus on questions of rights, democracy and citizenship within party-political and non-governmental activism. In the realm of social and cultural change, Britons grappled with individualising forces and new forms of chosen community in a world that appeared increasingly global and mediated by fast-moving technologies. Historians, we argue, should take care to avoid reproducing contemporary understandings of these phenomena, which frequently overstated the pace and potential of change. Instead, we should use our critical long-term perspective to probe those understandings while recovering alternative stories and less familiar voices from the archive. The final section of the essay gives space to this latter task, putting in focus the notable growth in community-led archiving across the decade as well as the challenge posed by the increasing prominence of the 'born-digital' record, comprising emails, websites, social media posts and other kinds of sources held in digital rather than paper form. This radical transformation of the archive, we suggest, offers yet another compelling argument for the distinctiveness of the nineties as a subject for the historian.

A neoliberal decade?

In his keynote speech to a conference marking twenty-five years since New Labour's 1997 election victory, former minister David Miliband disparaged the claim that Labour won popularity 'by aping the Tories'. New Labour's aims, he insisted, were progressive, modelled on the radical reforming achievements of previous governments of the left. Under Tony Blair's leadership from 1994, the party sought to 'bring together ideas that were distinctively social democratic, in essence the advance of social justice through collective action, with ideas that were small l liberal, essentially the extension of individual freedom in a market economy'. Pointing to policy achievements such as the National Minimum Wage and sweeping public services reform, Miliband argued that it was wrong to fold the New Labour period into a larger narrative of 'forty years of neoliberalism'. There was no desire 'to continue the Tory trajectory; instead, we pledged to change it, to make the UK a more equal society in its opportunities, in its incomes, in its distribution of power'.[30]

Delivered in 2022, Miliband's spirited defence replicated the key stakes at play in much of the scholarship on New Labour, one of the few 'nineties' subjects to have generated

a relatively rich historiography. Central to that scholarship has been the problem of evaluating what, if anything, was 'new' about New Labour both in relation to the party's prior history and to the preceding Conservative governments of Thatcher and John Major. The earliest contributions from historians appeared while Blair was still in power.[31] In his 2003 monograph, Steven Fielding argued that, far from representing 'Thatcherism Mark II', New Labour shared the moderate social-democratic objective of previous Labour administrations, namely 'to reform capitalism so that it may better serve the interests of the majority'.[32] Richard Toye disputed this verdict in an article of 2004, claiming that New Labour was notably more pro-market than its predecessors, showed itself willing to pursue privatisation and prioritised controlling inflation over maintaining employment, all features of neoliberal economic management as favoured by Thatcher. Yet New Labour had not transformed the party as a whole, Toye concluded, operating instead as a modernising faction which governed in coalition with other groups, including many 'Old Labour' sceptics amongst the grassroots membership.[33]

The debate over whether New Labour was a 'neoliberal' or 'social democratic' project has continued to dominate the scholarship, which has gradually extended its coverage to include the government of Blair's successor, Gordon Brown (2007–2010), and to assess New Labour in light of changes within the party after 2010, especially the left-wing programme of Jeremy Corbyn.[34] A recent contribution by David Edgerton forcefully restates the Thatcherite continuity thesis, coining the term 'Blatcherism' to denote the extent of political consensus from the mid-1990s behind unregulated markets, privatisation, trade liberalisation and fiscal restraints on public spending.[35] By contrast, Mark Wickham Jones (gratefully cited by Miliband in his speech) argues that neither Blair nor Brown offered 'the kind of principled normative support of markets that might be expected of neoliberalism' and that whilst Labour's rhetoric became more 'market-friendly' in the 1990s, its programme in government comprised major public spending commitments with a 'redistributive impulse'.[36] Florence Sutcliffe-Braithwaite, meanwhile, has sought to historicise the ongoing debate over New Labour's ideology by exploring how party leaders, pollsters and advisors conceptualised the post-Thatcherite electorate. She shows how, rather than abandoning class as a political category, modernisers tapped into 'vernacular' languages of identity which emphasised aspiration and individuality. They used these insights to shape policies which would build a majoritarian base for Labour whilst helping the worst-off in society.[37]

Sutcliffe-Braithwaite's work signals a more general tendency amongst historians of the Labour party to emphasise the intellectual pluralism driving 'modernisation' from the late 1980s, a term which held multiple meanings for those involved.[38] Colm Murphy's contribution to this issue develops this theme through a reassessment of Labour's 'dynamic new politics of constitutional reform' which resulted, by 2001, in devolved assemblies for Scotland and Wales, a significant erosion of the principle of hereditary peerage in the House of Lords, the introduction of proportional voting systems, and a Human Rights Act. Murphy carefully reconstructs the networks connecting advocates of these reforms across the UK, revealing a 'social-democratic intellectual "archipelago" surrounding the Labour party's constitutional policymaking'. This milieu, Murphy shows, was politically eclectic, stretching across pressure groups, think-tanks and a clutch of media outlets, and finding Conservative allies as well as a more obvious home in the Liberal Democrats. But it cannot, Murphy argues, be characterised as 'neoliberal'.

Other articles in this issue support Murphy's account of 'the increasing resonance of democracy, citizenship, and human rights' for the politics of the 1990s. Hutton's focus on John Major's failed efforts at a revived Tory localism through the establishment of single unitary authorities suggests that interest in these issues was not confined to the left, even if concern for 'efficiency' in service delivery ultimately trumped civic idealism. Articles by George Severs and Anna Maguire demonstrate how non-governmental activists mobilised the language of citizenship and rights to combat the discrimination experienced by gay men and to fight exclusionary policies targeting refugees from outside the European Union. Both find that 'rights', whether pursued through formal legal channels at a national or supranational level, or nested within a wider politics of social justice and recognition served as a powerful resource for NGO actors in the 1990s. Josie McLellan et al's account of SPAN, a Bristol-based organisation run by and for single parents, adds to this picture by showing how radical practices associated with grassroots organising in the 1970s and 1980s–including principles of self-determination and anti-racism–survived into the 1990s. Groups like SPAN positioned on the 'margins', McLellan et al argue, deserve more attention from historians for the counterpoint which they supply to narratives of professionalisation and depoliticisation centred on larger or longer-established NGOs.[39]

These perspectives do not suggest that historians should abandon 'neoliberalism' as a useful category for assessing the ideological complexion of politics and policy-making across the 1990s. That the economic policies of the Major and Blair governments reproduced, to varying degrees, the claims and assumptions of a late twentieth-century, trans-Atlantic 'neoliberal thought collective' seems incontrovertible, and ever more so in light of the coordinated response by western governments to the Global Financial Crisis of 2007–8, as well as its aftermath.[40] In an important recent contribution, Tehila Sasson makes a powerful case for bringing non-governmental actors into focus in histories of neoliberalism, demonstrating the role played by large non-profits such as Oxfam and Save the Children in the reshaping of global capitalism along purportedly 'ethical' lines across the later twentieth century.[41] Yet as Sasson's nuanced account of the ideological origins of this 'solidarity economy' demonstrates, neoliberalism's explanatory power must always be specified and evidenced by historians, rather than taken for granted. As scholars have demonstrated for the seventies and eighties, other framings are available.

The 'me' decade?

A similar warning might be made in relation to the social and cultural history of the decade. Beyond the arena of the political economy, 'neoliberalism' has been proposed as a framework for understanding contemporary subjectivity and selfhood by cultural theorists, often linked to a totalising Foucauldian conception of governmentality. Rosalind Gill and Christina Scharff, for instance, write of neoliberalism as 'a force for creating actors who are rational, calculating and self-motivating, and who are increasingly exhorted to make sense of their individual biographies in terms of discourses of freedom, autonomy and choice–no matter how constrained their lives may actually be'.[42] Historians have found it harder to work with this 'maximalist' version of neoliberalism than with frameworks allowing for more precise analyses of its ideological effects, as in the influence of 'neoliberal' ideas in particular areas of policy-making.[43] Moving into the realm of lived

experience, we find complex identities and contradictory behaviours that are arguably too messy to be flattened into any unitary conceptual regime.

What has gained greater traction amongst historians are sociological theories of 'individualisation' associated with scholars such as Anthony Giddens and Ulrich Beck. These suggest that individuals became increasingly reflexive about their lives in the late twentieth century due to the weakening hold of collective class identities and expanding freedom of choice in relation to lifestyle, family structures and sexuality. Post-war affluence, combined with liberationist movements in the 1960s and 1970s (especially feminism), empowered ordinary people to follow their own paths, breaking free of static class structures and the servility demanded of women by the patriarchal family.[44] Many histories of Britain in the second half of the twentieth century draw explicitly or implicitly on these sociological frameworks, perhaps because such claims about the processes driving social change in western societies lend themselves more easily to empirical testing than do propositions concerning neoliberal subjectivity.[45] Making extensive use of field-notes produced by social scientists in the post-war decades, Jon Lawrence, for instance, argues that people in England increasingly resisted the hold of social custom and tradition over their lives in favour of 'new forms of chosen, personal community'.[46] The voices that Lawrence finds in the archive were grappling with how to pursue self-fulfilment whilst sustaining meaningful social bonds with family, friends, co-workers and neighbours. The late twentieth century was not, he concludes, an era of atomisation, as some versions of the individualisation thesis suggest, but of the quest to reconcile self and society.[47]

Lawrence takes his narrative into the 2000s, demonstrating the possibilities for detailed archival research into 'vernacular' understandings of social change in the very recent past. In this issue, David Cowan similarly makes use of a rich qualitative source–Mass Observation–to explore the response of faith communities to the National Lottery, launched by John Major's government in 1994. His article shows how, rather than expressing wholly secularised views of the Lottery, Britons engaged actively with the ethical issues that it raised, questioning the morality of large jackpots and the effect of state-sponsored gambling on the poorest in society. Cowan reveals how Christians and Muslims alike were highly reflexive on whether to play the Lottery, what to do with any winnings and whether their faith leaders were justified in condemning the Lottery from the pulpit whilst accepting charitable funding originating from the same source. Georgia Churchman and Benjamin Jones delineate a very different history of feeling by exploring the 'emotional communities' forged by the British rave scene between the late 1980s and mid-1990s. Their careful reading of archived oral testimonies recovers the particularity of rave as an embodied collective experience, one which complicates standard narratives of rave as a class-based expression of resistance to Thatcherism.

This links to a well-established strand of historical enquiry into the reconfiguring of 'traditional' class and gender identities in the late twentieth century. Space does not permit a full discussion of this scholarship, but emerging work on the nineties paints a complex picture. Turner, for example, suggests that a 'classless culture' took shape across the decade, defined by figures such as footballer David Beckham and Princess Diana (whose death in 1997 prompted nationwide mourning), and infused with anti-elitist values. Selina Todd, by contrast, argues for the continuing relevance of class to everyday experience and identity, sustained by deepening inequalities of wealth and mounting precarity in the labour market.[48] Historians of gender, meanwhile, have pointed to

contradictions and continuities in dominant models of femininity and masculinity. High levels of educational achievement by girls plus women's advances in the professional workplace fuelled optimistic narratives of feminist progress from some quarters.[49] Yet these mingled with more ambivalent reactions to the figure of the 'ladette', a term coined for the hard-drinking, foul-mouthed party girl of the 1990s, which were reminiscent, as historians have pointed out, of discourses of troublesome femininity from earlier in the century.[50]

In this issue, McLellan et al's study of SPAN adds to our understanding of these complexities by illuminating the lived experience of lone mothers, who were much vilified by Conservative politicians and the right-wing press in the early 1990s. Their article reveals the crucial intersections between gender and race in shaping that lived experience, whilst noting the ambiguous position of single fathers within the organisation. This latter tension points to a broader opportunity for historians of masculinity, about which there was a great deal of cultural commentary across the decade. Much of it positioned men as the dispossessed victims of feminist gains, a narrative which animates Chuck Palahniuk's cult black comedy novel *Fight Club* (1996), and David Fincher's film (1999) of the same title starring Brad Pitt.[51] What is now needed from historians are empirically rich, carefully contextualised studies which try to connect these cultural scripts of 'masculinity in crisis' to the gendered experiences of real men's lives, including those positioned outside heterosexual norms.[52]

This clarifies the more general task for the social and cultural historian of the nineties: to offer a critical historical perspective upon narratives of change which gained currency during the decade itself. It is worth noting that Giddens, a chief proponent of the individualisation thesis, was closely involved with the New Labour project in its early stages, helping to shape its analysis of how voters were becoming increasingly demanding of opportunity and choice.[53] Two further, interrelated, themes which Giddens (amongst others, including Manuel Castells and David Held) popularised in these years were globalisation and the transformative impact of new technologies. Giddens tackled both in his Reith Lectures of 1999, in which he argued that globalisation was reshaping people's everyday lives and intimate relationships, identifying the revolution in global communications as an especially important driver of change.[54] Historians critiqued claims regarding the novelty of globalisation almost as quickly as they were made, but the passage of time now allows for more nuanced perspectives.[55] One is immediately suggested by the stark contrast which Maguire draws in this issue between the enhanced freedom of movement enjoyed by EU citizens in the 1990s and the measures put in place by governments to deter and criminalise the movement of non-EU migrants, mostly people of colour. The 1990s as a decade of new (im)mobilities created by the lifting and closing of borders, by cheap flights and overseas baby-boomer retirements is deserving of fuller attention by historians, especially when viewed from beneath the shadow of Brexit and the existential threat of climate change.[56]

The idea of a 'digital revolution' similarly demands our critical gaze, not least because of the implications of a paperless world for our practice as historians (discussed below). Historians of technology have traced the rise of home computing in the late twentieth century, whilst new research led by Eve Colpus at the University of Southampton is exploring young people's 'phone cultures' across the same period.[57] The nineties has a particular claim to importance in these histories, being the decade in which personal

computers became commonplace in homes and workplaces, mobile phones entered the mass market and, arguably most consequential of all, ordinary Britons discovered the internet. Research by historians has only begun to scratch at the surface of these rich subjects.[58] In an article of 2017, James Baker and David Geiringer used material from Mass Observation to show how word processing and email began to alter everyday modes of communication, whilst the presence of a home computer reconfigured domestic spaces and family relationships.[59] More research into everyday uses and understandings of new technologies is needed if we are to historicise correctly the claims made by contemporaries for their all-pervasive impact. Whilst approaching such claims with a critical mindset, the 'digital revolution' nonetheless presents historians with a lens through which multiple phenomena of the decade might be viewed in a single frame, from Lawrence's 'chosen, personal communities' to the class, gender and racial inequalities which structured how people accessed and engaged with new technologies.[60]

A paperless decade?

The 'digital revolution' also demands our attention as we seek to map the archive of the 1990s. Historians of the decade have the dubious privilege of being blessed with a wide and diverse range of source materials, forcing us to reflect as much upon the forms of evidence we do not include in our analysis as the forms that we do. Several factors contribute to this abundance: the emergence of the 'born digital' archive has expanded the nature of, and access to, historical records; the availability of living participants for oral history and memory studies research offers opportunities to recontextualise dominant narratives; the uptick in sociological and anthropological research during the decade provides a rich seam of qualitative and quantitative data; and finally, the professionalisation of historical record-keeping and archiving across the decade itself, a part of what Peter Mandler describes as a wider 'history boom', has enabled historians to navigate large, user friendly archives which document the 1990s quickly and productively.[61] As the reduction of the thirty-year rule to twenty years peels back yet more of the official record of the 1990s (and, indeed, the 2000s), it seems timely to reflect on both the exciting possibilities afforded by these developments and the new understandings of the archive which were generated in the decade.

Archives became the subject of heightened intellectual scrutiny and theorisation in the 1990s. Building on Michel Foucault's conception of the archive as a repository of disciplinary power, Jacques Derrida's *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression* (1995) considered the impact of digital technologies and media storage on the structures of human memory.[62] Developing a capacious theory of the archive which extended beyond a material grounding in space, Derrida's ideas were highly influential for disciplines including psychoanalysis, literature, gender studies and philosophy.[63] Writing in 2002, the art historian Cheryl Simon located an 'archival turn' squarely in the 1990s, suggesting that 'first and foremost, the idea of an "archival turn" makes reference to the increased appearance of historical and archival photographs and artifacts, and the approximation of archival forms, in the art and photographic practices of the 1990s'.[64] Whilst this notion of an 'archival turn' has attracted critique, historians stand much to gain from engaging with this legacy of the 1990s, thinking reflexively about the power relations which underpin the organisation of historical records.

As demonstrated in our final virtual workshop, dedicated to exploring the archive of the 1990s, historians and archivists are developing creative ways of approaching the practice and parameters of archival research.[65] The panellists reflected a renewed interest in looking beyond official records and institutional archives to tell stories which uncover hidden histories: Jenny Crane, for example, spoke of how she had attended to voluntary sector records to offer a more 'bottom up' account of the shifting relationship between citizen and state.[66] Working with archives which amplify the voices of 'ordinary' and marginalised historical actors emerges as a theme within this special issue through the contributions of McLellan et al. and Severs. The collaboration between McLellan and volunteers at SPAN was sparked by the recognition that an archive needed to be 'salvaged from a skip' to preserve the rich and highly intersectional history of the organisation.[67] This reflects the financial pressures which shape the capacity to maintain archives of smaller organisations, but also the recent trend towards community-led archiving. Terry Cook describes the growth of the latter in the last thirty years as amounting to nothing short of a 'paradigm shift', with the role of the archivist transforming from passive curator to community facilitator.[68] The expansion of social media has arguably extended these democratising processes, offering individuals platforms to curate and share 'personal' archives of the 1990s. Anne Helen Petersen's reflections on 'Archiving Your Teen Self', published as a blog post on the online platform Substack, is typical of an emergent genre of nostalgic memorialisation of the 1990s, but also speaks of the will to preserve and curate the material culture of a decade which now feels 'historical'.[69]

One particularly popular resource for accessing intimately personal insights into everyday life in nineties Britain has been the newly-digitised Mass Observation Project (MOP), an archive of life-writing based at the University of Sussex. The evolving character of MOP is emblematic of wider developments in the sector during the decade. Under the leadership of Dorothy Sheridan from 1990, the organisation shifted its focus towards life stories and personal topics rather than current affairs, as had typified its directives in the 1980s.[70] Matt Cook's description of MOP as an 'archive of feeling', written in relation to his study of popular attitudes towards AIDS, referred to the late 1980s, but it was in the early 1990s that the organisation began to actively embrace and shape its directives in this image.[71] In his contribution to this issue, Cowan makes the most of MOP's concern for the affective, looking beyond Christian attitudes towards the Lottery to uncover how 'individuals *felt* about connections between belief and the lottery'.[72] His article offers a suggestive blueprint for how historians of religion can engage with the richly emotional articulations of faith contained within the MOP archive. This movement within the social sciences to record individual thoughts and feelings, with a particular attention to topics that were widely considered 'private' - sex, relationships, religion, family, and health–is further exemplified by the eventual realisation of the National Survey of Sexual Attitudes and Lifestyles (NATSAL) in 1990. As Toni Belfield shows, NATSAL 1, which surveyed a sample of 18,876 people about their attitudes towards sex and sexual health, had been denied funding throughout the 1980s, with *The Sunday Times* reporting that Margaret Thatcher herself had 'halted' the survey in 1989.[73] Wendy MacDowall's history of NATSAL situates the survey in a broader anthropological reorientation towards emotional and embodied experiences in the 1990s, a theme developed in this issue by Jones and Churchman's exploration of rave.[74]

While, as noted earlier, historians continue to debate whether the rapid expansion of digital technologies in the 1990s should be described as a 'digital revolution', these developments, notably the increasing prominence of the 'born-digital record' - a record which only exists in electronic, or digital form–had a seismic impact on archives and recordkeeping. Born-digital records, which range from computer files and email to archived websites and text messages, pose challenging questions about the contexts of production and reception. As Baker and Geiringer have shown, the changing means of producing text–of converting ideas into words–brought about by the popularisation of home computing meant that acts of self-expression underwent historically unprecedented shifts at the turn of the century.[75] The 1990s witnessed the usurpation of the pen and typewriter by the computer keyboard, a process that was inflected by variations such as age, class and gender, but nevertheless recalibrated the conditions under which historical records were produced. One practical implication of this change has been the ease and speed with which born-digital sources can be searched and read, but as Lise Jaillant, Katie Aske, Eirini Goudarouli and Natasha Kitcher demonstrate, this also holds consequences for the privileging of certain voices above others.[76]

Another distinctive feature of the born digital record is its dynamic and ephemeral character, best exemplified by the archived web. 'Web crawling' tools deployed by major archiving projects such as the Internet Archive and the UK Web Archive capture snapshots of sites at single moments in time, a strategy which, by definition, results in a highly selective and static record.[77] Historians are accustomed to working with gaps and ambiguities in the archive, but the volatility of the archived web, including social media sites owned by technology companies, is arguably new. Reflecting in 2011 on the disappearance of a major citizen-led website constructed four years earlier by the *Times of India* to commemorate sixty years since Independence, Ravinder Kaur suggests that historians might need to become their own web archivists–learning, for example, to take screenshots and making use of free web archiving software tools.[78] Richard Ovenden, chief librarian at the University of Oxford, warned of the challenge posed to digital preservation efforts by commercial platforms such as Flickr, Twitter and YouTube, citing a recent case in which the latter deleted thousands of hours of footage documenting the Syrian Civil War.[79] A major cyber-attack on the British Library's digital infrastructure in October 2023, the devastating effects of which are ongoing at the time of writing, underlines further the vulnerability of the born digital archive.

Finally, there is the sheer volume of born-digital records to grapple with. Email collections have been described as inaccessible and 'dark' because of their unwieldly scale.[80] As the AHRC-funded *Big UK Domain Data for the Arts and Humanities* project highlighted, developing strategies and technologies to support the retrieval, selection and use of source materials within digital archives represents a key imperative.[81] A valuable recent development driven by scholars in business history has been the use of AI technologies to navigate and contextualise large email datasets. Prototype AI search tools have been used by Stephanie Decker, David Kirsch, Santhilata Kuppili Venkata and Adam Nix to provide a new 'pathway to contextual discovery' that supports 'the diversity of future archival users, their interests and level of experience'.[82] Imagining future users inclusively, accounting for the range of community, activist, personal, professional and academic purposes archives serve, will be vital for meeting the challenges posed by the scale and complexity of digital archives. It is

important to note that these challenges were anticipated by archivists in the 1990s: Ronald Weissman observed that software technologies were creating a new 'information architecture' for archives that would revolutionise information search and retrieval strategies, but that these same technologies would produce their own forms of exclusion and biases.[83] Understanding how the archive, the archivist and the archive user were reconstituted in the 1990s, be it through deconstructionist theories, digital technologies or wider societal changes, remains a key avenue for future research in the digital humanities.

Conclusion

This special issue does not set out to rethink Britain's nineties comprehensively, but rather to showcase emerging research and stake out new directions in the historical study of the decade. Major themes which emerge from our authors' contributions include constitutional reform, non-governmental pressure for citizenship rights and new forms of chosen community, yet many other 'nineties' subjects remain in need of serious attention by historians. Although race as a critical theme weaves through nearly all of the contributions, it deserves more space than is found here. Stuart Hall identified the nineties as the locus of an assertive 'Black British' identity which thrived despite everyday realities for people of colour of structural racism and violence, as symbolised by the murder of Stephen Lawrence in 1993 and the subsequent mishandling of the case by the Metropolitan Police.[84] Historians can now map these contradictory forces with deeper perspective, setting policy discourses of 'multiculturalism' and 'institutional racism' alongside the experiences of differently racialised minorities.[85] Britain's position in the post-Cold War geopolitical landscape is a similarly rich subject in need of historians, from elite policy-making and cultural diplomacy to popular attitudes towards the string of military conflicts in which Britain played a role across the decade.[86] Finally, regional differences demand more consideration than is possible in these pages, not only in terms of the four nations of the UK, but in light of nineties debates about the uneven effects of globalisation on local identities and urban forms.[87] As Hutton's contribution to this issue demonstrates, whether nations, cities and towns within the UK were losing their distinctiveness around the millennium or alternatively asserting local differences more vigorously than ever is a problem which historians are now well-equipped to take on.[88]

This Special Issue thus is as much an invitation to the field as it is an intervention in the historicising of the recent past. It is to be hoped that before long we will possess an empirically rich scholarship which propels the history of the nineties towards destinations less clichéd than 'Spice Up Your Life', Tamagotchis or Cool Britannia, but which at the same time help us to understand why these popular tropes have been so formative in shaping the cultural memory of the decade. What role does a celebrity-obsessed, 'frivolous', depoliticised image of the nineties play in our post-Brexit, post-pandemic world? Martin Conway, Celia Donert, and Kiran Klaus Patel have called for historians of contemporary Europe to 'liberate the history of the present' by resisting a preoccupation with the decades immediately following 1945 and turn instead to the developments of the post-1989 era.[89] The articles collected here attempt that task for the field of modern British history, providing interpretive frameworks through which to rethink subjects which very much belong to histories of the present, from the rights of refugees and sexual minorities, to the everyday

politics of place and the growth of community activism. Just as decade-ism has proved intellectually generative for historians of the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, so, we suggest, does 'the nineties' offer a lens onto Britain's recent past which is useful to think with.

Notes

1. For media coverage of the procession, see Brenda Dennehy and Geraint Llewellyn. "Kate Moss and Naomi Campbell Steal the Show" *MailOnline*, June 5, 2022; and Bonnie Mclaren. "Who was on the 90s Platinum Jubilee Bus–And Why" *Grazia*, June 6, 2022.
2. The 1960s bus was flower-power themed; the numberplate for the 1970s bus read 'GROOVY'; while the destination of the 1980s vehicle was 'Let's Get Physical', a reference to the chart-topping pop song released by Olivia Newton John.
3. See, for example, Hennessy. *Having It So Good*: Sandbrook, *White Heat;* Beckett. *When the Lights Went Out;* Turner, *Crisis? What Crisis?*; Sandbrook. *State of Emergency* and *Seasons in the* Sun; Stewart. *Bang! A History of Britain in the* 1980s; and Turner *Rejoice, Rejoice!*
4. Jack. "Downhill From Here"; and Pemberton. "Strange days indeed: British politics in the 1970s".
5. For example, see Scott Smith. "The Strange History of the Decade".
6. Marwick, *The* Sixties, 7
7. Brown. *The death of Christian Britain;* McLeod, *The Religious Crisis of the 1960s*; and Brewitt-Taylor. *Christian Radicalism in the Church of England*.
8. Black. Pemberton and Thane ed., *Reassessing 1970s Britain*.
9. Saunders. *Yes to Europe!;* Worth. "Gender, Education and Social Mobility"; Jolly. *Sisterhood and After;* Sloman. "The pragmatist's solution to poverty' and 'Harold Wilson, Selsdon Man"; Jackson. *The Case for Scottish Independence*; Ferguson et al., eds, *The Shock of the Global*.
10. Robinson. "Telling Stories about Post-war Britain"; and see also Saunders. 'Thatcherism in the Seventies' and Ortolano, *Thatcher's Progress*.
11. Hilton et al., "New Times Revisited"; see also Brooke, 'Living in New Times.'
12. This claim draws on those developed in Sutcliffe Braithwaite, *Class, Politics and the Decline of Deference* and Lawrence, *Me? Me? Me?*
13. Campsie. "Socialism will never be the same again"; Murphy, 'The Rainbow Alliance or the Focus Group?'
14. Connell. *Black Handsworth;* Wetherell, "Freedom Planned; and Edwards, *Are We Rich Yet?;* and Barrett, "King Caz".
15. Robinson. *Now That's What I Call A History of the 1980s*, 8–9.
16. Will. "The End of Our Holiday from History".
17. J. Freedland. *The 90s: A holiday from history*, BBC Radio 4, first broadcast 1st September 2018. https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b08n1hnh.
18. Brooke-Smith, *Accelerate!* 16. See also Klosterman. *The 1990s: A Book*.
19. Fukuyama, 'The End of History?'
20. Ibid., *The End of History and the Last Man*.
21. Celia Donert et al, 'Introduction: Eclipse of internationalism?'
22. Turner, *A Classless Society*.
23. For a popular treatment of this latter subject, see Power Syed, *1997: The Future That Never Happened*.
24. Ther. *Europe since 1989*: Bockman and Eyal, 'Eastern Europe as a Laboratory for Economic Knowledge; and Betts, "1989 At Thirty".
25. Hellenes et al, "Nordic Nineties'.
26. Desai and Vahed, *A History of the Present*.
27. Hoffmann, "Human Rights and History," 279.
28. For a discussion of temporal imaginings of the 1990s, see Geiringer, 'The nineties in 1990s Britain.'

29. Six virtual workshops were held between January and March 2021, captured in a series of blogposts written by postgraduate participants [https://pastandpresent.org.uk/when-was-the-nineties/] A further in-person workshop was held at the University of Cambridge in September 2021 at which versions of the articles in this special issue were first presented.
30. Miliband, "Between the Obsolete and the Utopian: How to understand the 1997 Project".
31. Most of the early scholarly assessments of New Labour were produced by political scientists rather than historians, although they tended to centre similar questions about the extent to which Labour had accommodated its programme to the Thatcherite consensus. See, for example, Hay, 'Labour's Thatcherite Revisionism'; Panitch and Leys, *The End of Parliamentary* Socialism; and Heffernan, *New Labour and Thatcherism*.
32. Fielding. *The Labour Party*, 217. See also Fielding. "New Labour and the past". For further early historical assessments, see Brivati and Bale, eds, *New Labour in power*.
33. Toye. "The Smallest Party in History'?" For New Labour's antagonistic relationship with party members, see Steer, "Keep the party Labour".
34. For the neoliberalism continuity thesis, see Jenkins, *Thatcher & Sons;* Hall, 'Will Life After Blair be Different?'; Brivati, 'The New Labour Government's Place in History'. For the social democracy reconfigured thesis, see Diamond, T*he British Labour Party in Opposition and Power 1979-*2019 and Beech, *The Political Philosophy of New Labour* (2006). For studies stressing the composite or hybrid nature of New Labour's ideology, see Shaw, *Losing Labour's Soul?* And Driver and Martell, *Blair's Britain*. For a thoughtful recent overview of the problems of historicising New Labour, see O'Hara, 'New Labour in Power'.
35. Edgerton, *The Rise and Fall of the British Nation*, 507.
36. Wickham Jones, 'Neoliberalism and the Labour party" in Davies, eds, *The Neoliberal Age?*, quotes at 248 and 249.
37. Sutcliffe Braithwaite, *Class, Politics and the Decline of Deference in England*, Chapter 8
38. Campsie, "Socialism will never be the same again"; and Murphy, *Futures of Socialism*: Morris et al, '*Renewal* beyond New Labour.'
39. As found, for example, in Hilton et al, *The Politics of Expertise*.
40. See essays in Part IV of Davies et al, *The Neoliberal Age?*, although for an argument against the usage of 'neoliberalism' in any context, see David Edgerton's essay in the same volume. For a US perspective, see Gerstle, *The Rise and Fall of the Neoliberal Order*.
41. Sasson, *The Solidarity Economy*.
42. Gill and Scharf, eds., *New Femininities*, 6. See Helen McCarthy's discussion of this literature in 'I Don't Know How She Does It!' in Davies et al, *The Neoliberal Age?*
43. Although see Ellen Boucher's careful attempt to recover a 'neoliberal sensibility' in how Britons responded to the risk of nuclear war in the 1980s. Boucher, 'Anticipating Armageddon'.
44. Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity* and *The Transformation of Intimacy*; and Beck, *Risk Society;* Beck et al, *Reflexive Modernization.*
45. A good example is Addison, *No Turning Back*.
46. Lawrence, *Me Me Me?*, 1.
47. For a 'declinist' version of individualisation, see Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*.
48. Turner, *A Classless Society*, 574; and Todd, *The People*, Chapter 16.
49. Walter, *The New Feminism;* Wilkinson and Howard, *Tomorrow's Women.*
50. Jackson and Tinkler. ''Ladettes' and 'Modern Girls'; and Dyhouse, *Girl Trouble*, Chapter 7.
51. See also Brooke-Smith's discussion of Kathryn Bigelow's 1991 surfer film, *Point Break*, in *Accelerate!*, 32–4.
52. One fruitful approach is indicated by Lucy Delap's oral histories with men active in the women's movement. See Delap, 'Feminism, masculinities and emotional politics in the late twentieth century'. For emerging histories of queer masculinities in the 1990s, see George J Severs, " Queer citizenship in 1990s Britain " and *Radical Acts*; and Jones, '"It's more what me and my partner feel comfortable with"'.
53. See his foreword to Brivati and Bale, *New Labour in power.*

54. The lectures were published in Giddens, *Runaway World*.
55. Hirst and Thompson, *Globalization in Question;* Tomlinson, 'History as Political Rhetoric'.
56. Calder, *No Frills;* For overseas retirement, see King et al, *Sunset lives*, Oliver, *Retirement Migration*, and O'Reilly, *The British on the Costa del Sol*.
57. Lean, *Electronic Dreams;* Sumner, "Today, Computers Should Interest Everybody". For youth phone cultures, see http://telephonicyouth.co.uk.
58. For an early effort to historicise the mobile phone, see Agar, *Constant Touch*.
59. Baker and Geiringer, 'Space, text and selfhood'.
60. For one such intersectional study, see Sobande, *The Digital Lives of Black Women in Britain*.
61. Mandler. *History and National Life*.
62. Derrida, *Archive Fever*.
63. Hill, "Introduction," in Hill, ed., *The Future of Archives and Recordkeeping*, 1.
64. Simon, "Introduction: Following the Archival Turn".
65. Dahlborn, 'Digital Narratives of the 1990s'.
66. Jennifer Crane, 'Gifted Children and "the making of the New World Order" in the 1990s' conference paper presented September 2021.
67. McLellan,"'Proud of our families': single-parent activism in the 1990s".
68. Cook, "Evidence, memory, identity, and community".
69. Petersen, "Arching Your Teen Self". See also McCarthy, "Time and the Middle-Aged Historian".
70. Sheridan et al, *Writing Ourselves*.
71. Matt Cook, "Archives of Feeling".
72. David Cowan, "The National Lottery, religion, and community in mid-1990s Britain".
73. Durham and Hughes, "Thatcher halts survey on sex".
74. MacDowall, "The evolution of the National Survey of Sexual Attitudes and Lifestyles". For more on the history of NATSAL, see Overy et al, eds, *History of the National Survey of Sexual Attitudes and Lifestyles*.
75. Baker and Geiringer. "Space, text and selfhood," 293–312.
76. Jaillant et al. 'Introduction: challenges and prospects of born-digital and digitised archives in the digital humanities'
77. Winters. "Web archives and (digital) history"; and Winters. "Breaking in to the mainstream".
78. Kaur. "Writing history in a paperless world".
79. Ovenden. *Burning the Books*, 199–200.
80. Decker et al, "The Dotcom Archive".
81. See website for *Big UK Domain Data for the Arts and Humanities* (BUDDAH) https://buddah.projects.history.ac.uk/.
82. Decker et al, "Finding light in dark archives".
83. Weissman, "Archives and the New Information Architecture of the Late 1990s".
84. Hall, "Aspiration and Attitude" and "From Scarman to Stephen Lawrence".
85. Work which begins to tackle this task includes: Arday, *Cool Britannia and Multi-ethnic* Britain; Peplow, ''In 1997 Nobody Had Heard of Windrush'; and Din. "British-Pakistani homeworkers and activist campaigns, 1962–2002".
86. Jones, 'Ending Cold War fears'; and Ellison, 'The Search for World Order and the Wars in Kosovo and Iraq'; Westlake, 'Building the BBC-branded NGO'.
87. For historical accounts of devolution in the 1990s, see Finlay, 'Thatcherism, Civil Society and the Road to Home Rule' and Cheung et al, *Devolution at 20*. For the highly significant history of the Northern Ireland peace process in the nineties, see Bean 'Leaving the soundbites at home?'; Bew, *The making and unmaking of the Good Friday Agreement*; Powell, *Great hatred, little* room; Hennessey, *The Northern Ireland peace process;* Frampton, *The long march*.
88. See, for example, Wetherell, "Sowing Seeds".
89. Conway et al, "Why Europe, Which Europe"?

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