Urban nightmares and dystopias, or places of hope?

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Urban Nightmares and Dystopias or Places of Hope?
Gerry Mooney

Estates: An Intimate History
Jynsy Hanley, Granta Books, 2007

Back to ‘Workhouse Social Welfare’?

English Housing Minister Caroline Flint’s suggestion in February 2008 that unemployed council and housing association tenants (collectively termed ‘social housing’ tenants) must no longer be able to hand in their homes was widely criticised, or alternatively dismissed, as ‘simply’ an exercise in thinking ‘outside the box’, ‘thinking the unthinkable’ or ‘blue skies thinking’ – with reports also claiming that her Cabinet colleagues were keen to distance themselves from her. Flint’s ideas were, nonetheless, only too indicative of a deep-seated way of thinking about poor and impoverished people that has an enduring legacy in the UK – and across much of the Western world. Her proposal to have council tenants sign ‘commitment contracts’ requiring them to seek work for the privilege of living in a council house smacks of successive generations of social welfare policy which, over the period of the past four hundred years or so – and certainly going back to the Elizabethan poor relief reforms – have sought to focus attention on those deemed to be ‘anti-social’ and ‘problem’ families. Among the parents of unruly children. Among the targets of ‘anti-social’ and ‘problem’ families have come to be associated largely, though by no means exclusively, with the council estate. More recently, following the Government in London launched the Youth Crime Action Plan for England and Wales which promises to further extend the targeting of ‘anti-social’ and ‘problem’ families and the parents of unruly children. Among the sanctions announced include possible eviction from council rented properties. ‘The “workless” council estate where “benefit” and “dependency” cultures endure, and in which crime and delinquency apparently flourish, has become a recurring story across swathes of television documentaries and dramas, popular fiction, travellinguses and cinema’. But, more significantly, over the past decade the ‘moral panic’ that dominated the Tories’ administrations has become increasingly central to New Labour’s electoral and policy making rhetoric. It is this which has provided the backdrop for Flint’s assertions – and which helps to inform a range of more punitive government approaches to crime and indeed to increasing criminalisation.

Territorial Stigmatisation

Flint is but one in a long and growing line of politicians, policy-makers, journalists and commentators who indulge in the popular pastime of territorial stigmatisation: “Over the last two decades the gap between these worst estates and the rest of the country has grown... It shames us as a nation, it wastes lives and we all have to pay the costs of dependency and social division.” Tony Blair, 1998

“The truth is that council housing is a living tomb. You dare not give up the house because you might never get another, but staying is to be trapped in a ghetto of both place and mind.” Will Hutton, 2007

...there are thousands of people across Britain eking out lives... marked by violence, educational underachievement, unemployment, sickness and disease... At the heart of every thriving city in Britain lies a second city, hidden from visitors’ eyes.” Amelia Hill, 2003

“Ghettos of the workless and the hopeless.” Polly Toynbee, 1998

In these brief extracts there is a shared view across the mainstream political spectrum of the council estate as a place of ‘worklessness’, ‘benefit dependency’, ‘anti-social behaviour’ and ‘moral decline’ – of hopelessness and despair. These are the kinds of locales increasingly identified by politicians and policy advisors as places where moral breakdown is translated into social breakdown. This is nothing less than an antipathy to working class cultures and to working class life, an antipathy which in many respects not that dissimilar from the anti-working class hatred that is central to ‘underclass’ ideologies. Such ideologies construct the impoverished poor as a group cut-off from ‘normality’, as the authors of their own misfortune, evidenced by claims about the disorganised, disheveled and deprived lifestyles of those deemed to be part of such an underclass. Dress it up any way you wish, by all means use the term ‘socially excluded’ and there’s no need to make reference to the ‘underclass’. But there’s no escaping that what we have in these brief comments is the continuing prevalence for a people and place stigmatisation that is shaped and influenced by decades of conservative thinking around poverty and disadvantage. In this approach structural factors such as class, racism and state oppression are completely neglected in favour of an attack and demonisation of public welfare as a major factor that underpins the reproduction of poverty, family dysfunctionality and which contributes to widening issues of law and order, community fragmentation and breakdown. We find ourselves in a position now, once again, of having to rebut such ideas and discourses, to reject victim blaming and individualist understandings wherever they emerge.

‘Nightmares’, ‘Dystopias’ and Moral Panics

While the spectre of the council estate plays an important symbolic role in such representations and discourses, the city or ‘the urban’ is an ever present backdrop. In other significant ways this also echoes a long history of anti-urban sentiment which together with anti-poverty discourses have come to be entangled in different and complex ways to construct particular locales as dystopian and pathological. Steve Macke’s ‘Urban Nightmares: The Media, the Right and the Moral Panic over the City’, provides a detailed and comprehensive account of the ways in which a climate of fear and hostility to the city has been part of popular imaginings in the United States over the past two decades. In particular, he is concerned with the ways in which conservatives (including journalists in leading US newspapers) have been successful in constructing and representing ‘the nation’s cities as violent and out of control, as populated by murderers, muggers, drug addicts and lowlifes, as places where the rules of normal, decent behaviour no longer apply’. Such sentiments have been further articulated, as emphasised, by a complicit mass media and by Hollywood to conjure up a vision of another America wherein “apocalyptic social decay, wanton violence and depravity” became the staples of rolling news reportage, newspaper story backdrops and popular films. Macke argues that the effects of such imagery was to shock suburban America, which he claims was still influenced by the 1950s and 1960s ideals and imagery of ‘traditional American family values’. The ensuing culture of fear around urban decay and disorder that both reflected and fuelled a new wave of anti-urbanism was to find policy outcomes that have become all too apparent on both sides of the Atlantic, lending support and legitimacy to “an expanded police state coupled with a stripped-down welfare apparatus”.

“Urban Nightmares” is a very readable chronicle of the moral panic over the urban poor and marginalised which has come to be the dominant story of US urban life in recent times. All the familiar ingredients of an underclass ideology are to be found in this provocative brew: moral breakdown, flawed lifestyles, dysfunctional families, violence and welfare dependency. Such ways of thinking were to find infamous expression in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in August 2005, as part of a concerted effort by conservative politicians, city elites, property developers, and of course local law enforcement agencies, to blame explicit sections of New Orleans’ impoverished residents for being contributors to their ‘own’ predicament. Bubbling beneath the surface, race and the racial disparity of income was a key issue. However, as Macke argues, this was euphemized in different ways, for instance, ‘the inner city’ or even in the term, ‘underclass’.

“Such linguistic turns of phrase ‘performed an important socio-psychological function for the white middle class in that it provides them with a series of code words that permit the expression of deeply felt anti-black and Latino sentiment with little self-consciousness or embarrassment’.

In an evocatively entitled section which explores ‘The Cinema of Suburban Paranoia’, Macke neatly considers the important ways in which these visions of an urban nightmare influence mainstream US cinema. These sentiments are echoed in films such as ‘Batman (1989), Bonfire of the Vanities (1990) Grand Canyon (1991), Judgement Night (1993) and Seven (1995), among many others. Here, urban violence, gang warfare and the stock story of apocalyptic urban social breakdown provide the backdrop. But if the racialised discourse is couched in other terms, on the blogosphere, web, and in video home entertainment systems, such sentiments are rarely hidden but given much more of a voice. Many video games (the Grand Theft Auto series or
A Failure of American Liberalism? The dominance of conservative and right-wing views circumscribing the city, disadvantage, and poverty, is accompanied for MacKay by the collapse of US liberalism. In particular, the Clinton Presidency was held to be particularly culpable of surrendering to conservative ideologies, reflected in the 1994 ‘Crime Control Bill’ and then in 1996 the ‘Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act’. These two acts played to conservative-inspired fears of urban breakdown, dependency and worklessness. But the liberal surrender went beyond the Clinton administration, a ‘victim-blaming discourse’ gripped liberal thinking. This was reflected in “It is not British civilization that aids, the ‘moral poverty’ which in turn fed a language which spoke of ‘criminaligenic environments’ and ‘superpredators’ (or in the term favoured by right-wing cutteslowes) ‘supercreatables’”1 but which also deployed a range of ‘biologically-derived’ metaphors which worked to demonize teenage mothers and also unruly youth. The emergence of something approaching a joint conservative-liberal consensus (reflected in the popularity of cultures of poverty arguments, for example) which was built on a particular story of urban chaos and disorder in the ‘inner city’, contrasted with the assumed tranquillity and normality of suburbia. All this reminds us of the close interconnections between the constructions of particular places and particular kinds of people and populations as problematic.

Particular Kinds of People in Particular Kinds of Places “Play word association with the term ‘council estate’. Estates mean alcoholism, drug addiction, relentless petty crime, high juvenile delinquency, chronic poverty and the human mind caged by the rigid bars of class and learned incuriosity.”2 “you only have to say the word ‘estates’ for someone to refer to vast amount of meaning from it. It’s a bruise in the mind on the outer Birmingham Wood estate, ‘Estates: An Intimate History’, it wasn’t always quite like this. Leaving aside for the moment that there are contrasting levels of investment and differing stories of mismanagement, it is important that we hold on to the understanding that council estates met an acute social need in inter-war and post-1945 Britain; a need that the private sector – then as much as now – is unable and unwilling to meet. Housing the poorest sections of the population was always a laudable aim – even if many of the pioneering generations of tenants in the higher quality council estates in inter-war Britain were hardly the poorest citizens. In the aftermath of World War II up to the 1970s, the public sector provided housing for half of the entire UK population, many living on the kinds of estates now the objects and subjects of middle-class sneering and vilification. Council estates were not always ‘blots on the urban landscape’.3 Hanley shows that council estates in the 1950s and 1960s, while often falling short of policy making ideals, were far removed from the slum landlordism which characterised the private renting sectors. Cottage-style estates mushroomed, mimicking in various but not stray ways the ideals of the garden city movement of planned communities. But already in the 1950s ‘concerns’ were being voiced that council estates were characterised by ‘sink estates’, ‘problem estates’, ‘supercreatables’4 but which despite their initial wide social appeal, were increasingly single-class locales. By the mid to late 1950s and reaching a peak in the 1960s and early 1970s, high-rise housing (together with a penchant among some construction firms and architects for ‘deck-access’ type housing, typically the case in Manchester or Darney in Glasgow) signalled the demise of council housing. Under Thatcher and the Tories in the 1980s and 1990s, tenants ‘right to buy’ the home they were living in served to deplete council housing stock, it also hastened the rise in property prices through encouraging demand and speculation. With remaining council housing stock concentrated in less well serviced areas with fewer employment opportunities, it also served to further isolate and stigmatize tenants, with remaining public sector provision seen as a residualised form of housing of the last resort for those who were not attractive propositions for market provision. This was closely followed in the late 1990s and 2000s by the reduction of council housing ownership to privately registered landlords (some of them national companies), and the use of ‘selective demolition’ and compulsory purchase as a tool for further exploitation in the name of redevelopment. This represents the culmination of a long-term decline, underpinned by decades of a chronic lack of investment – indeed even disinvestment in council estates. In peak in the late 1970s, housing nearly 50% of the population, by around 2004 this had declined to between 12% and 20% (though this is uneven geographically). Hanley talks of two main public perceptions of the council estate: of a dream gone sour, where once a council house was a sign of a full slate in coming generation; it is sippled with metal and glass; and of a place to house those who will always be with us – the poor. “You’ve got to put them somewhere, after all. Preferably somewhere a long way away from the rest of us; somewhere not very nice, so there is always that invisible stick to the backside, with the far-off prospect of escape to a better place as the tantalizing carrot.”5 was building ‘community’ but of the wrong kind! But Hanley also running of their estates and building ‘community’ in the estates – though critics of council estates are frightened of inequality. They are a physical reminder that we live in a society that divides people up according to how much money they have to spend on shelter.”

Urban Apartheid UK Style “Counsell estates are nothing to be scared of unless you are frightened of inequality. There is a physical reminder that we live in a society that divides people up according to how much money they have to spend on shelter.”

One of the Cutteslowe Walls: (left) standing, (right) demolished.

Resident Evil (for example) rely on stereotypical imagery of the urban or Latino gangster, for instance. Mental entertainment not only reflect but also serve to reproduce anti-urban visions of social breakdown, anarchy and violence.
the negative associations and views that it is “second class” housing.

To return to the idea of a workhouse social policy: As New Labour becomes increasingly more punitive around benefit entitlements, with recently announced plans5 to introduce what amounts to community service punishments for those unable to find work after two years on benefit – community jobs, such as tidying parks, at a rate of £1.70 per hour! And with council tenants now being told by Caroline Flint that their tenancy may depend on them taking up paid employment, policing, regulating and disciplining poor people is increasingly the order of the day.

Landscapes of Class

“The entrenched quarters of misery have ‘made a name’ for themselves as repositories for all the urban ills of the age, places to be shunned, feared and deprecated. It matters little that the discourses of demonisation that have mushroomed about them often have tenuous connections to the reality of everyday life in them. A pervading territorial stigma is firmly affixed upon the residents of such negativised quarters of socioeconomic exile that adds its burden to the disrepute of poverty and the resurging prejudice against ethnic minorities and immigrants.” 6

Lair Wacquant, “Urban Marginality in the Coming Millennium”

The “urban outcasts”7 of the US inner city and UK council estate have become the stuff of parody, of ridicule but also of vicious class hatred. The ways in which disadvantaged localities are constructed and represented often act as euphemisms for problem people. The use of such euphemisms reminds us again of the ways in which US liberals couched their embracing of ‘second class’ housing. To return to the idea of a workhouse social policy: As New Labour becomes increasingly more punitive around benefit entitlements, with recently announced plans to introduce what amounts to community service punishments for those unable to find work after two years on benefit – community jobs, such as tidying parks, at a rate of £1.70 per hour! And with council tenants now being told by Caroline Flint that their tenancy may depend on them taking up paid employment, policing, regulating and disciplining poorer people is increasingly the order of the day.

at the apex of those troubles, as problematic, in need and usually ‘in receipt’ but not capable of giving or teaching anything of worth to dominant centres of value (public space, political institutions, middle-class ways of being).”

At least Hanley holds on to the idea that council estates can be places that can offer hope and that they can be places of resistance. Indeed, if council housing were the uniformly appalling places they are thought to be, why have many tenants fought and voted against council stock transfer? Council housing has played a significant historic role in meeting the housing needs of millions of people in the UK. What is needed now is a vast investment in remaking council housing, not its complete and utter destruction – but this is also tied to a wider commitment to re-establishing welfare and social need as a right, not a punishment! This, of course, would have to include the reintroduction of the basic democratic mechanisms of local government that have also eroded. As Macek shows in the context of the contemporary United States, free market policies have failed. In the face of the celebration of the market by New Labour, such ‘solutions’ are also failing here in the UK.

Notes


3. Many benefits and social policies are more complicated than they used to be, having an array of eligibility criteria and conditions attached to them. Drug users risk benefit cuts: Jobcentre staff will be able to withhold cash and force claimants to attend treatment programmes, The Observer, Sunday July 20, 2008 http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2008/jul/22/drugpolicy-welfare?__s=txt feeder&uknews

4. The Blair government created 3,022 new criminal offences in nine-years from starting office in May 1997, one for almost every day it had been in power and twice the rate of the previous Tory administration. “Blair’s ‘criminalised law making’: a new offence for every day spent in office”, The Independent, Nigel Morris, Wednesday, 16 August 2006.


11. The nature of paid employment today is that benefits workers are themselves are in receipt of benefits In the face of mass privatisations of sections of the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) the functions of jobcentres, Mark Serwotka of The Public and Commercial Services union was reported in the Guardian as saying: “We have far too many members administering government benefits that they also have to claim to just to scrape together a living.” The Guardian, Tuesday February 17, 2004 http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2004/feb/17/wk Whit h eall


15. Macek, p.110

16. Macek, pp56/58

17. Hanley, p. 7

18. Hanley, p.20


20. As Unison declared in 1999: the “Scottish Executive is funding for further real cuts in public investment in social housing”, and “Past under-investment means there is a massive repair backlog”.