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Urban Nightmares and Dystopias or Places of Hope?
Gerry Mooney

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 gain employment or lose 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 who 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 ‘undeserving’.

On stating her position, Flint expressed some initial surprise that council tenants are more likely to be unemployed than other sections of the population and that poverty and unemployment 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, travelogues 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.

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.1

This is nothing less than an antipathy to working class cultures and to working class life, an antipathy which is in many respects not that dissimilar from the anti-working class hatred that is central to ‘underclass’ ideologies.2 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, deviant 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 its ‘underclass’ basis. 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 wider 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-poor discourses have come to be entangled in different and complex ways to construct particular locales as dystopian and pathological. Steve Macek’s ‘Urban Nightmares: The Media, the Right and the Moral Panic over the City’ offers 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”.3 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”4 became the staples of rolling news reportage, newspaper story backdrops and popular films. Macek 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 recycled 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 persuasive breviary: 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 Macek 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 whole 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’.5 In an evocatively entitled section which explores ‘The Cinema of Suburban Para-noia’, Macek 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

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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 generation 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 sniping and vilification. Council estates were not always ‘blots on the urban landscape’! 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 general 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 ‘deterioration’ 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 in Manchester or Darnley 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 a new form of speculation. With remaining council housing stock concentrated in less well serviced areas with fewer employment opportunities, it also served to further isolate and stigmatise 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 wider market provision. This was closely followed in the late 1990s and 2000s by an issue stock transfer of council housing ownership (often privately registered with 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! 

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 stake in community; it is replaced by metal and concrete; 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 tantalising carrot.”

A Wall in the Head?

“To be working-class in Britain is also to have a wall in the head, and, since council housing has come to mean housing for the working-class (and the non-working class), that wall exists unbroken throughout every estate in the land.”

Hanley recounts the infamous story of Cuttslowe Walls. Cuttslowe was an area of Oxford where adjoining council and private estates were built. In the early 1930s it accommodated a growing population of the town, then prospering on the expansion of the first generation of motor factories. These two estates were startlingly indistinguishable but the developer behind the private estate thought differently and without planning permission constructed in 1934 two walls (28 metres high and 26 metres deep) across the playing fields and grounds between the two estates to completely isolate the council tenants. This illegal wall stayed put until the late 1950s.

This was nothing less than an exercise in class segregation – class apartheid. Hanley is well aware that Britain is a class divided society – even if her understanding of class is somewhat vague and undeveloped. In other places it reads almost as a Weberian notion of status – for Weber, as a third category distinct from ‘class’ and ‘power’, ‘status’ was understood in relation to ‘respect’ and ‘prestige’: status groups were hierarchically arrayed on the basis of distinctive lifestyles, consumption patterns, and modes of conduct or action, and therefore the inconsistency between someone’s social status and economic class (status inconsistency) might have strong effects on people’s behaviour. She is clear that Thatcherism in the form of ‘right to buy’, lack of investment, and the ensuing residualisation of council estates has contributed to the problems between white-collar workers, low-income, crime and other social problems. Her solutions entail the redesign of council housing, giving tenants a greater say in the day-to-day running of their estates and building ‘community’ in the estates – though critics of council estates frequently complain that they have too much community, but of the wrong kind. Hanley also calls for a complete rethinking of council housing; seeing it as an “integral part” of the national housing stock which she claims will help to remove
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 plans\(^5\) 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**

...these entrenched quarters of misery have ‘made a name’ for themselves as repositories for all the 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 no real connection to the reality of everyday life in them. A pervading territorial stigma is firmly affixed upon the residents of such neighbourhoods of socioeconomic exile that adds its burden to the disrepute of poverty and the resurging prejudice against ethnic minorities and immigrants.\(^9\)

Laurie Wacquant, *Urban Marginality in the Coming Millennium*

The “urban outcasts”\(^30\) of the US inner city and UK council estate have become the stuff of parody, of ridicule but also of vicious class hatred. As such the class-basis of these discourses are somewhat neglected by both Macek and Hanley.

The construction and representation of particular discourses as problems does not happen in isolation from the wider class relations which permeate society and which underpin right-wing and conservative ways of thinking (as well as shaping some of the ‘left’ of centre discourses highlighted here).

The idea of the ‘ghetto poor’\(^24\) or ‘slum poor’ has a long and pernicious history for example in late nineteenth century middle class concerns with ‘the rookeries’ of London) and while the language might have changed – the sentiments and why which such discourses are to only too evident in the context of the neo-liberalism of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Such poor and disadvantaged groups are portrayed as recalcitrants, in as some ways less adaptable and ‘conservative’ in that they are unwilling to change to face new challenges.

The ways in which disadvantaged locales 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 conservative ‘blame the victim’ discourses in a range of coy terms. But hidden beneath the surface is a pathological view of working class life. As Chris Haylett has forcefully argued: “The issue then, is not so much the existence of working class conditions (of hardship, exploitation and so on) as the particular ways in which they are problematised and the solutions attendant upon these ways of thinking. Put bluntly, where working-class identities and cultures and the processes through which they are constituted are not seen to warrant debate, target problems easily become targeted lives, little more than the adjuncts of rationalistic theory and policy-making. It would seem that this elision, practiced by politicians and theorists alike, is partly about a troubled approach to relationships between class and culture. Working-class cultures are positioned 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).”\(^33\)

At least Hanley holds on to the idea that council estates can be places that can offer hope and 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 remaking 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 been 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 falling here in the UK.

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**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/20/drugs/policy-welfare

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 “frenzied 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 are workers are themselves are in receipt of benefits In the face of mass privatisations of sections of the Department for Work and Pensions, Mark Serwedu 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 just to scrape together a living.” The Guardian, Tuesday February 17, 2004 http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2004/feb/17/kw.whitewall


13. See Chris Hallett ‘Illegitimate subjects? Abject whites, neoliberal modernisation and middle-class multi-


16. Macek, p.65


18. Macek, p.135-6

19. Macek, p.110

20. Macek, pp.56-58


22. Hanley, p.20


24. As Unison declared in 1999: the “Scottish Executive is budgeting for further real cuts in public 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 been 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 falling here in the UK.

25. Hanley, p.11

26. Hanley, p.149

27. Hanley, p.4

28. Hanley, p.5


**References**