Urban nightmares and dystopias, or places of hope?

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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 now sign ‘commitment contracts’ requiring them to work or lose their homes (collectively termed ‘social housing’ tenants) has become a recurring story across swathes of crime and delinquency apparently flourish, and ‘dependency’ cultures endure, and in which from council rented properties. Sanctions announced include possible eviction and the parents of unruly children. Among 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 impose conditions on those deemed to be ‘deserving’.

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 policy and anti-crime rhetoric. It is this which 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 two 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 Hall, 2003

“Ghettoes of the workless and the hopeless.” Polly Synnove, 1988

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 is 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, 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 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 undermines 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 Maciek’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. Maciek 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 this 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 Maciek 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’, Maciek 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), ‘Boogie 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
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 about half of the entire UK population, many living on the kinds of estates now the objects and subjects of middle-class snearing 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 not always 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 upward mobility, 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’ tower type housing, typified in Manchester and Darwen 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 and made encouraging social 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 to the market provision. This was closely followed in the late 1990s and 2000s by en bloc stock transfer 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’

Hanley talks to two extreme public perceptions of the council estate: of a ‘dream gone sour, where once a council house was a sign of a full stake in life and community; 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 says her history is a description of how the ways in which the monopoly of the built environment, which characterises many of the council estates dotted around the UK, helps to create and reproduce what she terms a “wall in the head”. Here we have the idea that council estate living is a state of mind, one typified by ‘invisible barriers to improvement and knowledge’ – and to social mobility. Council estates supposedly work to “speak the spirit, suck out hope and ambition, and draw in apathy and nihilism.”

The sense of a world that is vividly portrayed in Hanley’s account of life on the Wood estate – and her ‘escape’ from it. Hanley is absolutely right to talk of a sense of exclusion and of alienation but she is also, somehow, here – and territory that I fear she is not always successful in traversing. Hanley is well aware that council estates have diverse stories and multiple histories: there is little sense here of the idea of ‘the council tenant’ as a monolithic grouping. While she avoids the patronising and valorising version, as well as the underclass-inspired thinking that favours so much reportage of council estates. In talking of a ‘wall in the head’ or of council estates as ‘a state of mind’ there is a tendency to indulge in a pop-sociology of the kind that is increasingly common in social commentary and in policy-making discourses, such as ‘positive thinking’, that suggests all that council tenants need is the right attitude (being more aspirational!) and a more ‘forward looking’ frame of mind.

Council estate living can be tough – especially when living on low incomes and in acute material poverty – but to suggest that there is a council estate frame of mind (my words not hers) implies something that is not quite the norm; whatever that may be. As we have seen, language is an important part of the battle around poverty, inequality and social justice that can legitimise and exaggerate already prefigured prejudices. This means that we need to be continually alert to the ways in which it can be used to ‘other’ particular groups.

Urban Apartheid UK Style

“Council 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.”

Hanley recounts the infamous story of Cutteslowe Walls. Cutteslowe was an area of Oxford where adjoining council and private estates were built in the early 1930s to accommodate the growing population of the town, then prospering on the expansion of the first generation of motor factories. These two estates were basically indistinguishable but the developer behind the private estate thought differently and without planning permission constructed in 1934 two walls (spliced) across the whole of the area, the pavements and gardens 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 arranged 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 Thacherism in the form of ‘right to buy’, lack of investment, and the ensuing realisation of council estates has contributed to the problems of concentrated poverty, 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. This 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\(^{28}\) 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! – 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.

**Landslapes of Class**

"...these entrenched quarters of misery have ‘made a name’ for themselves as repositories of 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 conspicuous connections to the reality of everyday life in them. A pervading territorial stigma is firmly affixed upon the residents of such negation of the varieties of socioeconomic exil that adds its burden to the disrepute of poverty and the resurging prejudice against ethnic minorities and immigrants.\(^{56}\)" – Loic Wacquant, ‘Urban Marginality in the Coming Millennium’

The “urban outcasts”\(^{57}\) of the US inner city and UK council estate have become the stuff of parody, of ridicule but also of vicious class hatred. Where working-class conditions (of hardship, exploitation and so on) as the particular ways in which they are constituted are not seen to warrant ways of thinking. Put bluntly, where working-class people are themselves are in receipt of benefits in the face of mass privatisations of sections of the Department for Work and Pensions, particularly the functions of jobcentres, Mark Sowerby 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/uk.whitlehall


14. Macek, p.110

15. Macek, p.110

16. Macek, pp56-58

17. Hanley, p.7

18. Hanley, p.20


20. Macek, p.xviii


22. Hanley, p.20


24. As Unison declared in 1999: the “Scottish Executive is budgeting for further real cuts in public investment in social housing”, and “Past under-investment means there is a massive repair backlog”. http://www.unison-scotland.org.uk/respons/ghosting.html

25. Hanley, p.11

26. Hanley, p.149

27. Hanley, p.4

28. Hanley, p.5


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).\(^{41}^{40}\)

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 crystallising 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 re-introduction 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.

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