Urban nightmares and dystopias, or places of hope?

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Urban Nightmares and Dystopias: or Places of Hope?

Gerry Mooney

Estate: An Intimate History
Lynsey Hanley, Granta Books, 2007

Urban Nightmares: The Media, the Right and the Moral Panic over the City
Steve Macie, University of Minnesota Press, 2006

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) might face more punitive work or sanctions if their homes were 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 '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, the Labour 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 targets of 'anti-social' and 'problem' families which promises to further extend the recently in July 2008, the Government in London population and that poverty and unemployment 'deserving'.

‘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 Macie'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. 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 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”.

Such sentiments have been further subsumed in the post-9/11 ‘War on Terror’ paranoia which together with other elements of anti-poor discourses have given rise to a climate of fear and hostility to the city. Steve Macie’s book Urban Nightmares: The Media, the Right and the Moral Panic over the City, explores 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. 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 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 persuasive 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 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 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’, 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...
A Failure of American Liberalism?
The dominance of conservative and right-wing views circumscribing the city, disadvantage, and poverty, is accompanied for Maczek 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 thatfails, the moral poverty which in turn fed a language which spoke of ‘criminogen environments’ and ‘superpredators’ (or in the term favoured by right-wing talk radio hosts ‘supercriminals’)” but which also deployed a range of ‘biologically-derived’ metaphors which worked to demonize teenage mothers and also youths. The emergence of something approaching a joint conservative-liberal consensus (reflected in the popularity of cultures of poverty arguments, for example), was built on a particular story of urban chaos and disorder in the ‘inner city’, contrasted with the assumed tranquillity and normality of the suburbs. 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’. Estate residents have become only too used to hearing. Stereotypes of sweeping generalisations that council tenants are supposed to ‘sap the spirit, suck out hope – and to social mobility. Council estates are a state of mind, one typified by chronic poverty and the human mind caged by the petty stupidity, a kind of stir-craziness induced by the damages of alcoholism, drug addiction, relentless ‘Play word association with the term ‘council estate’. Being an active estate resident means alcoholics, drug addiction, relentless ‘Play word association with the term ‘council estate’. Being an active estate resident mean alcoholism, drug addiction, relentless "Play word association with the term ‘council estate’. Being an active estate resident mean alcoholism, drug addiction, relentless ‘Play word association with the term ‘council estate’. Being an active estate resident mean alcoholism, drug addiction, relentless...
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 plans20 to introduce what amounts to community service punishments for those unable to find work after two years on benefit – community jobs, 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 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 no obvious connections 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.”

Loïc 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. 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 the ‘rookeries’ of London) and while the language might have changed – the sentiments and values which the cases are 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, as in some ways less adaptable and ‘conservative’ in that they are unwilling to change to face new challenges.

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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 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 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 failing here in the UK.

Gerry Mooney is Senior Lecturer in Social Policy at the Open University. He is currently writing ‘Social Movements and Welfare’ with John Annett, Alex Law and Wallace McNish for publication by Policy Press in 2007, and with Hazel Crossley and Mary Munro is working on ‘Criminal Justice in Contemporary Scotland’, to be published by Willan in late 2009.

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 drugspolicy.welfare?gusrc=rss&feed=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 “criminalized 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, particularly the functions of jobcentres, Mark Serwota 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/society.whitewall


18. Macek, p:135-6

19. Macek, p:110

20. Macek, pp:56-58

21. Hanley, p:7

22. Hanley, p:20


24. As Unison declared in 1999: the “Scottish Executive is budgeting for further real cuts in public investment and twice the rate of the previous Tory administration. “Blair’s “criminalized law making”: a new offence for every day spent in office” The Independent, Nigel Morris, Wednesday, 16 August 2006

25. Hanley, p:11

26. Hanley, p:149

27. Hanley, p:4

28. Hanley, p:5


