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
Jynsey 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 now ‘prove’ that they are not too ‘deserving’ or that their homes are too ‘wasteful’, has been 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 home 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, 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 council estate as place 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. 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 a duty to challenge and root out 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. The stigma 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.”

Jolly Sykes, 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.12 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.13 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 depraved 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 disorganisation 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-poverty 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’, 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”.14 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 “apocolyptic 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 stripdown welfare apparatus”.15

‘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 pervasive US media 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’.16 In an evocatively entitled section which explores ‘The Cinema of Suburban Paranoidia’, 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 apocolyptic urban social breakdown provide the backdrop. But if the racialised discourse is couched in other terms, on the blogsphere, 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 Macek by the collapse of US liberalism. In particular, the Clinton Presidency went beyond 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 airs the moral poverty’ which in turn fed a language which spoke of ‘criminogenic environments’ and ‘superpredators’ (or in the term favoured by right-wing criminologists: ‘superpredators’) but which also deployed a range of ‘biologically-derived’ metaphors which worked to demonize teenage mothers, the young and the unruly youth.

The emergence of something approaching a joint conservative-liberal consensus (reflected in the popularity of books like poverty argument, 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 Places

“Play word association with the term ‘council estate’. Estates mean alcoholism, drug addiction, relentless petty crime. The view of council estates is informed by chronic poverty and the human mind caged by the rigid bars of class and learned incapacity.”[22] “you only have to say the word ‘estates’ for someone to infer a vast amount of meaning from it. It’s a bruise in the form of a word; it hits the nerves that register shame, disgust, fear and, very occasionally, force pride.”[23]

A Failure of American Liberalism?

Council estates have long been vilified, likewise estate residents have rarely been viewed in positive terms: ‘sick estates’, ‘problem estates’, ‘deprived’ and ‘degraded’ estates. As in the USA,追溯 decades we can observe a change in public housing stock which she claims will help to remove some of the misconception that council estates have diverse cultures and the idea of ‘the council tenant’ as a monolithic whole is absolutely right to talk of a sense of exclusion and of alienation but she is on dangerous territory here – and territory that I fear she is not always successful in traversing. Hanley is well aware council estates have diverse cultures 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 cringeworthy language, as well as the underlying inspired thinking that favours so much reportage of council estates. In talking of a ‘wall in the head’ or of council estate residents as ‘a state of mind’, this 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 legitimises and exaggerates 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[24].

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 and accommodated a growing population of the town, then prospering on the expansion of the first generation of motor factories. These two estates were clearly distinguishable but the developer behind the private estate thought differently and without planning permission constructed in 1934 two walls (one red, one blue) across the common land. This is the kind of thing 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.

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.”

A Wall in the Head?

At the core of Hanley’s story is her description of the ways in which the monotony of the built environment, which characterises many of the council estates dotted around the UK, helps to create and reproduce what 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.”

But the sense of a wider world 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 on dangerous territory here – and territory that I fear she is not always successful in traversing. Hanley is well aware council estates have diverse cultures 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 cringeworthy language, as well as the underlying inspired thinking that favours so much reportage of council estates. In talking of a ‘wall in the head’ or of council estate residents as ‘a state of mind’, this 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.

One of the Cutteslowe Walls (left) standing, (right) demolished.
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 plans29 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 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 negatively labelled areas of socioeconomic exile that adds its burden to the disrepute of poverty and the resurgence 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 taboo – of ridicule, but also of vicious class hatred. As such the class-basis of these discourses are somewhat neglected by both Maccek and Hanley.

The construction and representation of particular places 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”25 or “slum poor” has a long and pernicious history in the UK. Its burden to the disrepute of poverty and the resurgence prejudice against ethnic minorities and immigrants. As in some ways less adaptable and ‘conservative’ in that they are unwilling to change recalcitrants, as in some ways 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 poor people is increasingly the order of the day.

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Notes

3. Many benefits and social policies are more complex 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/drugpolicy.welfare?ustx=rss&feed=uknews
4. The Blair government created 3.522 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 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 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/wk.whittlehall
16. Maccek, p.65
18. Maccek, p.135-6
19. Maccek, p.110
20. Maccek, pp56-58
22. Hanley, p.20
25. Hanley, p.11
26. Hanley, p.149
27. Hanley, p.4
28. Hanley, p.5