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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 manage their own 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 ‘underclass’.

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 ‘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 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 sources, 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’, 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 lawless, 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 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 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 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 thatails, the ‘moral poverty’ which in turn fed a language which spoke of ‘criminogenic environments’ and ‘superpredators’ (or in the term favoured by right-wing commentators, ‘superpredators’) 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) on what was built on a particular story of urban chaos and disorder in the ‘inner city’, contrasted with the assumed tranquillity and normality of the DCMS. 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, vandalism, idleness induced by chronic poverty and the human mind caged by the rigid bars of class and learned incuriosity.”[15]...“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, heroic pride.”[16] Lynsey Hanley, ‘Estates: An Intimate History’

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, in the 1940s and 50s, it seems that there has been a growing consensus among right and left-of-centre politicians, policymakers and political commentators on council estates. Take the following from ‘leftish’ journalist and commentator Will Hutton in the aftermath of several teenage murders in South London in February 2007:

“The current social condition that the extravagant charge made by David Cameron last year was an affront to worthy people up according to how much money they have to spend on shelter.”

Lynsey Hanley, ‘Estates: An Intimate History’

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 strikingly distinguishable but the developer behind the private estate thought differently and without planning permission constructed in 1934 two walls (one metal, one brick) across 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 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 realisation of council estates has contributed to the problems of poverty, 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. But 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 workspace 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, 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 of 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 negativities, and is constitutionally so formed, that it serves to disempower the disrepute of poverty and the resurgent prejudice against ethnic minorities and immigrants.”

Loïc Wacquant, ‘Urban Marginality in the Coming Millennium’

The “urban outcasts” of the US inner city and UK council estate have become the stuff 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 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’ 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 values which it carries are only too evident in the context of the neo-liberalism of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Such poor and biased-avaged groups are portrayed as recalcitrants, as in 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 euphemisms. But hidden not so far 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).”

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 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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