Urban Nightmares and Dystopias or Places of Hope?
Gerry Mooney

Estates: An Intimate History
Jynes Hanley, Granta Books, 2007

Urban Nightmares: The Media, the Right and the Moral Panic over the City
Steve Macek, 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) may be made to pay the costs of dependency and social division. This was met with widespread criticism, 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, a report by 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 media and by Hollywood to conjure up a vision 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 robustly reject 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’, 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 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 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 depeared 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 predilection 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 robustly reject ideas, and discourses, to reject victim blaming and individualist understandings wherever they emerge.

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 shame 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 so 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 Hill, 2003

“Ghettos of the workless and the hopeless.”
Polly Toynbee, 1998

In these brief extracts there is a shared view across the mainstream political spectrum of the council estate as a place of ‘worthlessness’, ‘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.

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.

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A Failure of American Liberalism?
The dominance of conservative and right-wing views circumscribing the city, disadvantage, and poverty, is accompanied for Mackey 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 that asks its 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 and also unruly youth.

The emergence of something approaching a joint conservative-liberal consensus (reflected in the popularity of ‘poverty’ arguments, 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 suburban US life. 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, a lack of respect for those who by chronic poverty and the human mind caged by the rigid bars of class and learned insecurity”...

“…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, fierce pride.”

In the 1950s ‘concerns’ were being voiced that council estates were characterised by ‘invisible barriers’ to self-improvement and social mobility. 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 also always playing 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 self-improvement and 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, typical of the North West or Darney 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 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 the market provision. This was closely followed in the late 1990s and 2000s by an eclectic stock transfer of council housing ownership to private landlords (much of it to nationally-based private landlords), 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. For peak in the late 1970s housing nearly 50% of the population, by around 2004 this had declined to between 12% and 20% (although this is unevenly geographically).

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 urban life, it is paved with metal spikes; 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 tantalizing carrot.

A Wall in the Head?

“To be working-class in Britain is also to have a wall in the head”. Here we have the idea that council estate living is a state of mind, one typified by a Weberian notion of status – for Weber, as a

Frequent complaint that they have too much freedom to "sap the spirit, suck out hope – and to social mobility. Council estates create and reproduce what she terms a ‘wall in the head’.”

There is a tendency to indulge in a pop social-psychology 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.

As we have seen, language is an important part of the battle around poverty, inequality and social justice that can legitimate 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 neoliberals. 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 cuts through estates. Cuts to the USA, over the past decade or so 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:

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“One of the most important issues at the heart of the debate about council estates is the issue of how to deal with these places. In recent years there has been a lot of discussion about the extent to which council estates are isolated from the rest of society.”

One of the Cuts: Cuts to council housing residents.

Housing the poorest sections of the population is a major part of the battle around poverty, inequality and social justice that can legitimate 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.

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landscape 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 only tenuous connections to the reality of everyday life in them. A pervading territorial stigma is firmly affixed upon the residents of such neighbourhoods and is constructed and represented often as evidence of the pathology of working class housing, and is voted against council housing. The construction and representation of particular places as problems does not happen in isolation from the wider class relations which permeate and shape 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 in western urban 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 way in which places are interpreted are often today no more 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 and 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 free market policies have failed. In the face of the utter destruction – but this is also tied to a wider struggle for meaning in contemporary Britain. What is needed now is a vast investment in social housing, and ‘Past under-investment means there are a massive repair backlog’. 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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