Social explorer

Nick Davies, author of *Dark Heart: The Shocking Truth About Hidden Britain*, talks to **Penny Fraser**.

Tom Miller

You quote from Mayhew and Booth at the beginning and end of your book and the book's title is an obvious reference to Heart of Darkness. Could you say something about why you identified with both the Victorian tradition of documenting the poor and with Joseph Conrad's explorer?

I like the Conrad novel. I think it's wonderful. When I was trying to find a structure for the book - which was terribly difficult - I was looking for a way to knit together hundreds of different stories into one shape so that they would all be bound together. It occurred to me that if I modelled it on *Heart of Darkness* so that it was a journey, then that would give it some sort of shape and the journey would be propelled by questions. So you'd go into one location - for example the young boys selling themselves in Nottingham - and that would throw up questions and in order to answer them you'd have to go to other locations - for example an impoverished housing estate. And then you'd see that there was damage so you'd go off and explore that.

Henry Mayhew - and Booth to a slightly lesser extent - is the first investigative journalist. I think his work is extraordinary. Apart from the fact that it's terribly revealing, it's also very well written, so that when you read Mayhew's description of poor people in Victorian times, you're there. It's almost like reading Dickens, and it's utterly authentic.

"The difficulty is that they're trying to attack poverty without spending money."

The force of your argument is that the poverty that was manufactured in Britain by successive Conservative governments during the 1980s has produced the conditions that you describe in Dark Heart. *The book was completed after last year's change of government and you throw open a challenge to Labour at the end of the book, to restore jobs and repair the welfare nets. Do you see any signs that they are meeting this challenge, one year into government?*

The good thing that they have done is that they have put poverty high up the political agenda, which is a brave thing to do and very, very different from their predecessors who were denying that there was any such thing as poverty in Britain. So they deserve good marks for that. The difficulty is that they're trying to attack poverty without spending money and without redistributing wealth. And that's a square circle - it can't be done.

In particular the problem is that they've taken on board all of the economic and social policies which created the poverty in the first place. Primarily economic policies to do with low public spending, low taxation, and low inflation, being preferable to high employment. But also social policies, the sale of council houses with the effect that that has had on communities; community care with the effect that that's had; the war against drugs. There's a whole cocktail of social policies which in combination with those economic policies have produced this poverty. And all the time that those policies are in place, they're generating poverty and damage. It's an impossible task to attack the results without going back and undoing some of the causes.

As well as the impact of poverty, you also write about the failures of formal social structures to respond adequately. For example, the lack of protection for witnesses to crime, the inability of the care system to prevent young people from abuse and prostitution and the failure of the police to protect children who are working in the sex industry. What changes are needed to ensure a more adequate response to some of these problems?

Broadly speaking you are looking for two sorts of changes. There are legal changes to do with power for those particular agencies and then there are financial changes.

So, for example, you're a police officer and you want to do something to stop children prostituting themselves. At the moment the law invites you to punish the children by arresting them and cautioning them. More and more police officers feel that that's wrong as well as being a waste of time.

The only alternative they have at the moment is to use the relatively new law on kerb crawling to penalise the punters, which is fair enough. But the big problem is that when a policeman arrests a punter with a prostitute in his car it makes no difference at all in the eyes of the law whether that prostitute is twelve years old or forty years old. It's simply kerb crawling. What they need is a new law that would allow them to penalise very heavily a punter who picks up a child (ie anybody under sixteen).

At the moment if they want to show that the punter is doing something quite serious, which is child abuse, they have to wait for an offence to occur. If police officers stand back and allow an adult to have sex with a child that is improper and wrong, and I'm glad that they don't allow that to happen. But they haven't got the legal power to intervene.

All of these institutions, these protective agencies, whether it's police or social services, are themselves impoverished as they've all been hit by public spending cuts. Social services, who have a tradition since the 1970s of working in a preventative way are now reduced to an emergency service, dashing from one crisis to another and administering first aid.

Is there a need for agencies like the police and social services to make themselves more approachable so that the children

would be more likely to report some of the things that are happening to them?

The primary thing is that, as the law stands, they're likely to be penalised, because it's against the law to be a prostitute. So there are all these reasons why children don't treat these agencies - police and social services - as allies in dealing with punters and pimps. Having said that, there are some forward thinking police forces who are trying to do it, but the law is the wrong shape.

I would think eventually Parliament will catch up. But there's this awful sort of political caution; a fear of right-wing tabloids really, that if the Government says, 'let's take the legal pressure off the child prostitutes and put it on the punters' it will be accused of being soft on crime or soft on immoral sexuality.

Do you think that this is a misjudgement of public mood or do you think it accurately captures it?

I'd like to think it was a misjudgement but I honestly don't know how people at large regard child prostitutes. People who have prostitution going on in their areas are understandably very aggressive towards the prostitutes, because they attract noise and violence and drugs and hassle.

We now have the Social Exclusion Unit, the New Deal for the unemployed and the commitment to tackling crime and harassment on estates. What in your view is the likely impact of these initiatives on the lives of the people you met during the course of your investigations into Britain's 'dark heart'?

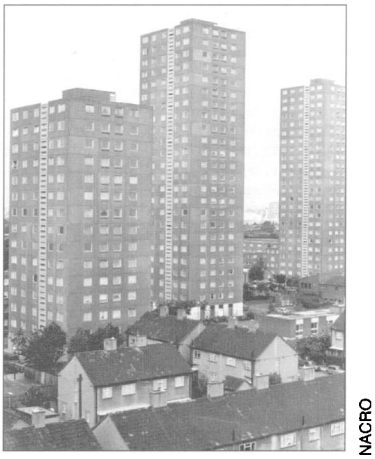
The Social Exclusion Unit is, I'm afraid, condemned to be marginal and the reason for that is that it has no power in Whitehall. It has no budget and therefore it has no strength to go in and amend the policies in all those government departments which are creating the problems. For example, if they try and deal with truancy and exclusion from schools they will find very quickly that the high rate of exclusions is a direct result of the use of league tables to decide the funding that schools have because that means schools compete with each other and they exclude difficult and delinquent children. So the Social Exclusion Unit goes to David Blunkett and says 'In order to improve this issue of social damage we want you to improve your league tabling system'. Now I would say they had no chance at all of tackling such a central policy for that big spending, heavyweight government department. And the same would apply to the war against drugs in the Home Office.

Over and over again you come up against the same problems. This isn't a theoretical point. It's already known because there are numerous Labour local authorities around the country who, during the 1980s appointed small units - usually attached to the Chief Executive's office - to patrol the other departments in search of ways of helping the poor and the long-term unemployed. And over and over again they ran into this same problem - they didn't have the power to do anything other than chase things at the margins.

The core issue with the New Deal and Welfare to Work is that you can deal with poverty and unemployment, but it costs money. And if, in trying to deal with poverty and unemployment you also cut your welfare spending at the same time, you'll get a disaster. There are successful examples of people being moved from welfare to work in the United States, for example in Wisconsin. Gordon Brown and others have cited those in their favour. But what they're not telling the public is that those were extremely expensive operations.

So, for example, if you take the lone parent who's unemployed who they want to shift back into work, they are saying at the moment, 'we'll find you a job, we'll give you advice and if you don't take the job then we're going to start cutting your benefit'. What they're not looking at is the number of hurdles that are in the way of the lone parent getting her or his job. First, child care. The provision of child care in this country is the lowest all over Europe except for Portugal; it's pathetically low. So the parent has to pay for child care, or the State has to do it for them. Then they have to deal with other problems. What happens if the lone parent is a drug addict and simply incapable of organising their life? There is expensive help to be given there. Or the single parent is clinically depressed, simply so oppressed by his or her circumstances that they cannot get out of bed in the mornings. That has to be dealt with. And what happens if this person lives in a street which is so terrorised by burglars that the person knows if they leave their house empty there is a very high chance that the house will be burgled? Well that too can be dealt with.

But each of these obstacles needs a solution. And these are real obstacles, they're not imagined. They can be cured but only with the spending of money and certainly not at the same time as they're trying to cut back on budgets. What worries me above all when they approach young people on those estates and they say 'you take the job or we cut your benefit' is that the ultimate effect of that will be to drive these young people into a third option which Gordon Brown doesn't seem to recognise. This is the drugs economy; the most important economic fact of life on those estates. You can go out and you can earn a thousand pounds in cash easily, just on the lower tiers. You get prestige, girls, drinks, nightclubs, you get a flash car and you're doing very well. So if they start bullying people without helping them to get over all these obstacles the outcome is that they will act as recruiting sergeants for the crack dealers.



NACRO

The stories in Dark Heart *depicting the networks of supply and consumption around crack cocaine suggest that current drugs policies are not reaching those networks. What would be a more effective way of tackling the hold that crack has over the lives of these people?*

I strongly believe that the whole war against drugs is a mistake; that the drugs themselves are nowhere near as dangerous as the side effects of that war. For example heroin is a benign substance. It doesn't do any physical harm to any organ in its consumer's body. It doesn't harm them emotionally or psychologically either. It is possible to overdose on it but you have to take an awful lot. Heroin is not toxic, but if you buy it on the Black Market you buy bath scourer, chalk, strychnine, that *is* toxic. Furthermore, you start using dirty needles so you get hepatitis and AIDS. And in order to get enough money to get your supply you have to become a criminal or go into prostitution. So there's this whole explosion of damage around a drug which is in itself benign. And furthermore, crucially, over and over again, the same pattern is repeated where a new consumer, in order to fund his or her habit, becomes a dealer on a small scale to sell to his or her friends. So you get this geometric explosion of drug use.

So I would go back to what they used to call 'the British System' which applied to this country until the 1960s, which was that these drugs were freely available through GPs for those who needed them. Again, I think it's very significant that the people who are most vocal in saying that the war against drugs needs to be rethought are police officers who know that it is not working and know that it is in fact damaging the people it's intending to help.

Towards the end of Dark Heart *you talk about the way in which sections of the affluent - as well as the poor - have become brutalised and treat people as objects, whether it's the commuter stepping over the homeless body on the street or the businessman buying the body of the young prostitute. It's clearly not the personal experience of poverty that has brutalised these people, so what is going on here?*

There are several things I think. One is that in order to live cheek by jowl with people who are poor and in order to walk past homeless,

sick, starving people, you have to remove your compassion. And that is a dehumanising experience.

The second thing is that poverty is a threat to almost everybody. Let's take the example of the property slump in the late 1980s and 1990s. All those people who had mortgages who had felt safe and middle class were suddenly faced with the prospect that they might blow it, that they might not be able to afford these new high mortgage payments, that they couldn't sell their house to get away from this mounting debt. And people *did* lose their homes and fall onto the welfare net with all its holes. Suddenly poverty was a real threat.

I think it's understandable that when people are threatened in that way they become a little more ruthless. 'I can't afford to help you any more, chum, I can't afford to support this charity, I can't afford to look after other people. I'm looking after myself because things are dangerous around here'.

And thirdly, the whole thrust, culturally, of the 1980s was to commercialise values. For example, road building. There was a whole bunch of people saying 'don't do this to our countryside, don't do this to our air, don't do this to our towns', and then there was a group of people who said 'we need this for the economy' - and they won. Over and over again this pattern is replicated.

But I don't think all is lost. When masses and masses of people voted the Labour Government in in May last year, and even, I think it is reasonable to say, when they reacted that way to Princess Diana's death, you were seeing the remnants of a compassionate country protesting, demanding that it be heard. Although there has been a great deal of damage done, I don't think compassionate humanity is dead.

Can I ask you what you're working on now? Where do you go once you have journeyed into the Dark Heart?

I've continued on the same lines. I'm looking at child abuse and paedophile rings and the way that the child protection system fails completely to deal with those problems. ■

Nick Davies is a freelance journalist who works for The Guardian. He is currently writing a series of five articles on child abuse for The Guardian. A review of Dark Heart appears on page 29 of this issue of CJM.

Nobody likes us: we don't care

Frank Warburton looks at anti-social behaviour and the zero tolerance of young people.

The forthcoming Crime and Disorder Act is a piece of legislation chiefly concerned with young people. Curfews, final warnings, secure detention orders and the rest of the youth justice quiver go without saying but it is also likely that the main application of the 'ASBO' (anti-social behaviour order) will be to teenagers and their parents and the statutory partnerships for dealing with crime and disorder will all have youth problems high on their priority list. The rhetoric behind this bonanza of new powers is that we need to call time on unruly youngsters already at large and nip future unruliness in the bud.

The chorus of condemnation has been characterised by close harmony across the political spectrum and has continued uninterrupted from the previous government to the evocative 'No More Excuses' produced by this one. The press continue to come in right on time, assiduously banging away on the same note of spectacular juvenile misbehaviour stories. The latest, 5 year old Dangerous Daryl, when he gets older and if he can be bothered, will be able to trace his lineage back through Ratboy to the Hooligan brothers and beyond.

Net widening

The new Act combines a tough approach to youth offending with proposals, the curfew for example, which will potentially exercise greater control over the behaviour of young people in general. This is linked to the development of legal powers to deal with behaviours not previously considered crime. 'ASBOs' have great net-widening potential and follow on from increased legal powers given to housing authorities in the 1996 Housing Act. Although there is unlikely to be a detailed definition of 'disorder' provided in guidance being prepared to accompany the Crime and Disorder Act, local authorities are interpreting it as roughly equivalent to anti-social behaviour. This covers things that they tend to get complaints about and can include noise, litter, vandalism, young people hanging about, dogs and cars.

Where has the current concern about anti-social behaviour come from? Is it an application of zero tolerance? Is it this year's moral panic? Is it based on a nostalgic notion of community life? Have conditions in disadvantaged social housing areas deteriorated to such an extent that previously tolerated behaviour is now intolerable? Is the behaviour of young people now significantly worse or have the obstacles to them acquiring citizenship increased to an extent which irretrievably distances them from the adult community? The short answer is that it is probably a mixture of some if not all of these things. There is already a rich literature about young people and citizenship and overall developments within communities. This piece introduces an account of some housing management issues and how they may have influenced relationships between adults and young people in high crime areas.

Changing patterns

There is a widespread and genuinely held belief that anti-social behaviour has worsened. This was demonstrated by a recent NACRO survey of local authority housing departments (1997). However there is little hard statistical evidence to confirm this. By and large housing departments have not kept records about complaints in such a way that trends over time can be measured and even now there is no standard monitoring system in place. However, it is known that complaints to environmental health departments about noise have doubled in the last ten years or so.

Concern about anti-social behaviour is nothing new. It forms part of the 'Broken Windows'

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David Kidd-Hewitt

depiction of high crime areas and has previously been described under the heading of 'incivilities'.

A regular feature of police consultative meetings in the 1980s were complaints about things like litter or dogs fouling the footpath or ice cream van bells. These kinds of complaint were not considered to be about crimes. The police would usually note them down and pass them on to the appropriate local authority department. Even then, they were likely to be prevalent and high volume. They would often be at or near the top of polls of what was of concern to residents because they affected everybody.

This pattern of anti-social behaviour where the bulk of the problem is about irritation and annoyance is true today. Out of the many complaints received by housing departments less than 5% result in legal action like a possession order. Many such complaints reflect the shifting relationships between different groups (particularly age groups) within increasingly pluralistic communities rather than the activities of a permanently anti-social group making life miserable for the rest. They illustrate the failure to find 'the delicate balance' (Wilmott 1987) of neighbouring influenced by increasingly privatised lifestyles and deprivation.

A delicate balance

This complex picture of neighbours and communities does not lend itself to the output driven approach proposed in the Crime and Disorder Bill. Local partnerships will undoubtedly face difficulties in setting meaningful targets and determining performance indicators for dealing with disorder because any measure will be based on the way people express their concerns and as Jock Young points out 'different audiences define the same behaviour differently". (1998)

Important changes occurred in disadvantaged neighbourhoods in the 1980s and early 1990s. The concentration of poverty in social housing increased, the average amount of resources going into the repair and maintenance of public housing stock decreased, and there was a shift toward much more tenant involvement in housing management decisions. In short, tenants are much more likely to have problems; the deterioration in the condition of the built environment combined with the other factors has contributed to feelings of insecurity and some tenants have had raised expectations that they can influence change.

It is not difficult to see that increased tenant powers will do little to affect overall employment prospects or bring about major changes to local authority capital programmes but they can influence what happens to other tenants. An early account of Walsall's decentralised neighbourhood housing management policy by Jeremy Seabrook (1987) describes how a problem tenant was neatly removed by the neighbourhood housing manager utilising a vigorous hands-on approach and responding more directly to tenant concerns.

Young people as citizens

Increased tenant involvement has had consequences for young people as well. A common feature of NACRO's work with young people at risk is to try and negotiate access for them to community facilities controlled by groups of adult residents - not always successfully. Often, youth centres which can be the focus of a certain amount of youth misbehaviour are seen as the cause of it. But exclusion can be a self defeating strategy. A stark picture of its consequences is provided in Ann Power and Rebecca Tunstall's 'Dangerous Disorders' an analysis of riots in the early 1990s which points out that the riot areas were not completely starved of capital investment or refurbishment programmes but that such programmes did not engage with or offer anything to the young men in the area.

It seems that the process where concern about youth offending feeds suspicion about young people in general is a feature of our society at all levels, but in disadvantaged areas the problem becomes worse because the resources or access to facilities to absorb the energy and the testing behaviour of the young are not there.

The term community safety arose as a way of reinforcing the local authority role in crime prevention and describes a body of work broader than policing and security measures. In a way it was intended to decriminalise crime prevention. Ironically the Crime and Disorder Act, a kind of offspring of the Morgan Report, the bible of the community safety movement, is likely to have the effect of criminalising less serious acts of anti-social behaviour carried out in the main by young people.

'Young People as Citizens Now', a policy statement arising from a symposium of leaders in the field of youth work and youth policy held in March 1997, is timely in making its first recommendation: '... policy for the majority of young people must no longer be driven by responses to the actions and behaviour of minorities of young people'. In implementing the Crime and Disorder Act care must be taken to ensure that its net effect is not to undermine other important government initiatives to combat social exclusion amongst young people. ■

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