

# The criminalisation of places

Lynn Hancock considers how certain localities become labelled as 'criminal areas'.

This article considers key processes that have shaped the way localities have been constructed as 'problem places' and how they reflect, and sustain, a set of socio-spatial ordering mechanisms whereby dominant power-relations, authority, and status are maintained. The focus centres on labelling processes. This is not to suggest that particular locales do not suffer 'real' problems associated with 'crime' or 'anti-social behaviour'; however, they are regarded as being of an altogether different order—more dangerous, threatening, and virulent—in particular places. So-called 'dodgy' and 'rough' areas are often, but not exclusively, seen as being synonymous with 'council estates' (Johnstone and Mooney, 2007). The 'binaries' between 'normal' areas and 'pathological' ('other') places have become taken for granted (Young, 2007). Frequently, it is suggested that a warped 'culture' and the polluting influence of 'dysfunctional families' provide the explanations for crime problems in popular discourses as well as some seemingly respectable academic accounts. The public's gaze does not reflect on 'mainstream' culture, however deeply troubling (Young, 2007); nor does it focus on positive aspects of working-class cultural practices, or indeed the struggles of community groups to improve their localities and prospects (Hancock, 2001; Johnstone and Mooney, 2007). The myriad of social harms faced by residents are similarly displaced, including those that stem directly from the labelling of localities and which bear so heavily upon the lives and life chances of all residents.

## Creating the 'problem area'

The processes that result in some urban neighbourhoods being considered 'bad', 'dangerous' or 'criminal' must be understood as part of a broader set of political-economic forces which shape the spatial distribution of urban populations, and, in particular, the 'placing' of the poor in urban space. These processes involve more than central state strategies; the markets for housing and labour in periods of urban economic expansion and retraction are critical. Nevertheless, national housing and planning frameworks, wider social policies, local state policies and interventions, and the assumptions underpinning them, are as significant now as they were in earlier stages of urban development. Some cities, during their rapid growth in the nineteenth century, saw their squalid slum areas expand rather than diminish as a result of early local authority action, for example. As dwellings were cleared to make way for new infrastructure (railways, for example) and slums were demolished, without recourse to alternative housing, the urban poor were frequently forced into the squalid basements of courts and alleys in neighbouring areas because wages were low and travelling distance to work severely curbed location choices (Wohl, 1971).

Many nineteenth century commentators blamed the poor themselves for their filthy living conditions; in addition to their lack of industry and susceptibility to drink and other vices, it was asserted that the urban poor often preferred to live in overcrowded dwellings (signified by the term 'rookeries'). The

exponential growth of the industrial cities and the role of profiteering landlords were, of course, recognised by some reformers. However, emergent housing policies were deeply rooted in class ideologies and their implementation sustained power-relations based on class and, indeed, status distinctions within the working-class.

## Emergence of the 'problem estate'

During the 1920s subsidies for council housing resulted in new dwellings for the 'better-off', 'respectable' working-class. National housing policy frameworks aimed to ease the housing shortages left in the wake of world war one and to appease organised labour in a context of political unrest (Darke, 1991 and Lowe, 1991 in Hancock, 2001). The poorest were expected to benefit from the 'trickle-down' effect of new housing being made available to those higher up the social hierarchy. By contrast, in the 1930s policy focused on slum clearance; standards were poorer and rents more 'affordable'. This change, under the Housing Act (1930), and the discourses surrounding it promoted the idea that the 'least deserving' would benefit from public subsidy (Barke and Turnbull, 1992 in Hancock, 2001); the identification of council estates as 'problems' emerged from this period (Johnston and Mooney, 2007). It was not uncommon for new tenants to be 'disinfested' as the first stage in a new set of intensive social control mechanisms (Barke and Turnbull, 1992 in Hancock 2001). It was also commonplace for the *reputations* associated with the unsanitary slums to be transferred to the new estates with inward-bound tenants, especially where families tended to be large (which increasingly signified irresponsibility) and poor (Hancock, 2001).

For a very brief period, following the second world war, council housing was regarded as a high quality good, for *all* social classes (Darke, 1991 in Hancock, 2001). However, as newer estates were built, other—frequently older—estates often lost status in local

housing area hierarchies. High rise developments attracted cross-party political support, but the devastating impact of clearance policies on local communities, once the worst slums had been demolished, gave rise to large-scale protests in the 1970s (Darke, 1991 and Lowe, 1991 in Hancock, 2001).

The most unattractive and unpopular estates, whether high rise or low-rise, interacted with housing allocation processes to the effect that applicants in greatest need, or families who wished (for a variety of reasons) to live close to relatives and friends opted for these estates (see references in Hancock, 2001, chapter 3). During the 1970s, the number of homeless families housed on council estates increased. They were often regarded in the same stigmatised way as slum clearance tenants. These residents, not the difficulties they faced, were frequently regarded as being problematic. As the economic crisis of the 1970s deepened and, later, the recession of the 1980s took hold, the effects were devastating. On estates (outside London) experiencing the lowest demand, especially where city populations were in decline, younger, vulnerable, single, homeless people managed to acquire accommodation (see Foster and Hope, 1993, in Hancock, 2001), if not adequate social support. And, despite the sector shrinking in the 1980s and 1990s (the number of good quality dwellings in particular, because of the 'right to buy') and homelessness increasing at the national level, vacant properties, dereliction and vandalism became more prominent in some localities, which attracted press interest and thus promoted damaging reputations further (Barke and Turnbull, 1992 in Hancock, 2001).

The 'messages' conveyed by various national housing policies and the rhetoric surrounding them has strongly influenced the status of public housing in popular discourses. For a brief period council housing was portrayed as a desirable commodity for the fortunate and respectable; for an even shorter time it was envisaged as a means to

provide high quality housing for all, but for substantial parts of its history the sector has been viewed as a problem rather than a solution—a stigmatised tenure for the unfortunate (and, increasingly, 'problematic') few. This perception has grown ever more pervasive. Against this, home-ownership has become enshrined as the standard to which all should aspire.

### New Labour and 'problem places'

Thus, '[b]y the time New Labour came to power in 1997 there was a ready-made stock of largely negative terms, imagery and signifiers [for council housing] that were to find renewed vitality and generally uncritical usage in the early years of the twenty-first century' (Johnstone and Mooney, 2007). The division of the working-class into the 'deserving' vs. the 'undeserving'—the 'disreputable poor' who visit disadvantage upon themselves—is enduring. Moreover, in New Labour's discourse the division is spatial and (largely) tenurial, 'they' are 'cut off' from the 'mainstream'; an 'underclass' (Johnstone and Mooney, 2007).

In the current period, Registered Social Landlords also manage housing for some of the most disadvantaged groups of residents, following the transfer of stock on large and smaller scales. What is clear is that areas accommodating the most economically and politically marginal groups, whoever the landlord is, constitute 'problems' for policy makers; their concentration can symbolise 'housing market failure', particularly in the post-industrial cities struggling to regenerate. Policy-solutions focus on 're-balancing' communities through gentrification, demolition and the creation of 'sustainable communities' (such as through the Housing Market Renewal Initiative); eradicating 'dependency' through welfare reform, and promoting citizenship through voluntary action. Limiting their number and attracting middle-class residents (who are portrayed as independent, forward-looking, and enterprising) are

viewed as the main ways to create 'community' wealth in these contexts, through the now familiar 'trickle-down' effect (Haylett, 2001 in Hancock, 2007).

To provide the conditions for successful middle-class repopulation and urban regeneration that, it is assumed, will follow, formal social control has been intensified through an array of threats and measures (S30 Designated Areas, ABCs, ASBOs, CRASBOs, and the like), thus adding to already well-developed assortment of control mechanisms practiced by 'social' landlords to the extent that the urban poor are subjected to the most extensive forms of regulation outside the penal estate. Policing and regulation thus reflects and extends the core political-economic forces that are reconfiguring the 'placing' of the urban poor in British cities. In combination, these factors underpin and sustain relations of cultural domination and subordination (Morrison, 2003 in Hancock, 2007) and the criminalisation of the poor.

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