

Book review

Penny Fraser (NACRO), reviews 'Dark Heart: The Shocking Truth About Hidden Britain' by Nick Davies (Chatto and Windus, 1997 £16.99).

In *Dark Heart* the journalist Nick Davies sets out to find answers to three key questions. To whom should blame be apportioned for the ravages bestowed upon the social landscape in the poorest parts of Britain in the last two decades? How can the destructive manifestations of this action be explained and understood? and how should we set about the task of repairing the damage?

Through a series of case studies from several parts of England (despite its title, all the book's examples are from England) Davies develops the following argument. Firstly, the economic and social policies pursued by successive Conservative governments from 1979 onwards, have entrenched poverty. This in turn has generated a set of destructive coping strategies that some who experience this poverty use to escape its suffocating grasp (notably crime, prostitution and drugs).

The country of the poor

Secondly, politicians and the voters of middle England alike have not adequately grasped the existence of this 'other country of the poor'. The affluent can ignore the poor by driving around or quickly through certain parts of town, or by stepping over them on the Strand when the homeless refuse to be confined to their ghettos and colonise the downtown territory of the affluent. And thirdly, police, social workers and other statutory agencies and

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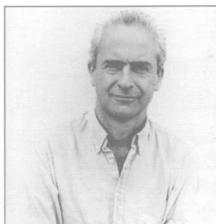
voluntary associations have all faced severe budgetary constraints over the last two decades, such that they are able to offer only 'minimal support work' to the ever-needier groups of people who inhabit Britain's most marginal localities.

Davies concludes with an attack on the Labour Government for refusing to change the system which has produced these deficiencies. An example used by Davies is that Labour has failed to grasp the choice confronting many of the young people it is trying to help through the New Deal. This choice, suggests Davies, is not between getting a job or relying on benefit, but between whether to live within the law on breadline benefit or low wages, or turn to the booming, lucrative rewards available in the drugs economy on estates.

The real force of Davies' book lies in its frank portrayal of the harm that people can (either willingly or unthinkingly) inflict upon each other when forced to live in hopeless conditions, and in its insistence that the structures that exist to protect people from each other are frequently - though seldom intentionally - not up to the task. Memorable examples of this include the system of institutional care for children, which fails to prevent the abuse of those in its care, both on and off the premises, and the criminal justice system, which lets down victims of crime by failing to offer adequate protection from intimidation and harassment by the accused and their associates.

Davies captures the tension

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that the police and other agencies frequently express, between doing something to alleviate a problem and searching for its causes, 'though of course, the cause always lies beyond their reach' (p.29). This tension is revealed, for instance, through the devastating impact of drugs - particularly the arrival in Britain of crack-cocaine in the 1980s - which is graphically described in the case-study of three generations of one Nottingham family, the trajectories of which since the family's arrival in England in the 1950s are recounted (chapters 23-25).

Stories and sources

Davies' persuasive powers as an investigative journalist have enabled him to penetrate the networks that usually remain beyond the reach of social researchers. This is a significant achievement. He is not bound by the constraints of methodological accountability that defines most academic research. One suspects that Davies is concerned to protect his informants and leave himself with the opportunity of re-entry for further investigations, and this leads to reticence about the sources of many of his stories. At times this feels rather uneven. Whereas the sources for the story of the Hyde Park Estate in Leeds are stated and it is clear to the reader that there are a number of different perspectives on what happened (chapters 4-12), the same is not true of Joey ('too small for the law')'s story or for Tina, all of whose children were taken - one by one - into care (chapter 18). One consequence of this is to give an air of over-simplification to what must have been a complex chain of events leading to their predicaments. Likewise, most of the people whose lives he documents are given pseudonyms out of a desire to protect them. Apart from, that is, where, as he states somewhat disingenuously

(p.ix) he 'set out deliberately to try to expose them (because they) were doing things so horrible'. The rationale for this can seem puzzling: why is victim Jean Ashford's real name used (chapters 4-12) and why does 15 year old Sheralee who dies of a substance overdose (p. 48-9) not have her anonymity preserved while many of the abusers are not exposed?

Early on in *Dark Heart* Davies talks of two distinct worlds (the world of children selling their bodies in a Nottingham fairground isolated from the world of 'ordinary people' going about their business). But as the book unfolds this illusion is shattered as it becomes clear that the two worlds are more intimately entwined (the rich family men who are clients of the crack-dependent prostitutes in the basements of west London are themselves frequently crack-dependent - and in their abuse of the girls they too lose their humanity). The implications of this for processes of social change are not fully explored.

One criticism I have of Davies' argument is that it does not operate at the level of a cultural analysis of violence, only an economic one. There is little attempt to understand the relationship between the community-minded female resident and 'the lads' who succeed in driving her out of her home and laying waste to her local pub in Hyde Park in Leeds, or between prostitutes and their clients, in terms of gender. The structures of social and familial responsibility and of prostitution are gendered and have more or less always been mediated through violence. Consequently, Davies gives no consideration to the role for government and other social institutions in tackling these contemporary manifestations of violent masculinity across the social spectrum.

Nevertheless this is an important book. It deserves to be read not only by politicians, but by those members of the business community who remain reluctant to take up the incentives provided by the Government to offer a different and less marginalised future to the young people whose lives Davies describes.

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