

Book Reviews

Urban Nightmares: The Media, The Right and the Moral Panic over the City

Steve Macek, 2006

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The right-wing backlash by conservative politicians, media commentators and assorted pundits and political analysts that followed Hurricane Katrina's devastating impact on New Orleans in August 2005, illustrated in very stark terms the hostility that exists within certain sections of US society for contemporary urban life. In this very readable and well-researched book, Steve Macek charts over the past two decades some of the key elements which underpin conservative discourses on the city and the populations living therein. Such views

paint a picture of the nation's cities as violent and out of control, as populated by murderers, muggers, drug addicts, and lowlifes, as places where the rules of normal, decent behaviour no longer apply (p. viii).

Such were the sentiments which accompanied 'Hurricane Bush' following Katrina. Yet as Macek shows, these views have a much longer and more complex history in the US.

The right-wing moral panic which Macek argues has gripped much of television and mainstream film portrayals of the American city has strong echoes of the moral panic that developed around 'mugging' in UK cities in the mid 1980s. Written almost two decades after the seminal critical exploration of those events, Stuart Hall *et al.*'s *Policing the Crisis*

(1978), one is immediately struck that the same racist, classist and generally hostile values also feature in the many rich examples of the right-wing assaults on the city provided in *Urban Nightmares*. Macek argues that his work seeks to update Hall's study for the last two decades of the 20th century, but there are other influences in this study—notably, Robert Beauregard, Noam Chomsky and Herbet Gans and others from whom Macek builds his analysis.

The central argument developed in this book is that

the dominant representations of the American City circulating through the media and public discourse in the 1980s and 1990s framed the poverty stricken centres of our urban areas in ways that obscured 'the actual causes of our discontent'. (p. 291).

Neglecting wider structural and political economic accounts of the decline, deprivation and dereliction facing many residents in US cities in the last quarter of the 20th century, instead the rise of 'underclass'-related arguments and a language which speaks of welfare dependency, moral bankruptcy, permissiveness and immorality extended beyond the worlds of narrow conservative thinking to influence wide sections of US civil society including among 'progressives' and liberals. This is the language of the likes of Charles Murray, Nicole Gelinas, Nicholas Lemann and many others.

The growing dominance of anti-urban, victim-blaming explanations of poverty, unemployment and other social problems which characterise much of US urban life had important concrete effects, finding expression in successive presidencies as federal financial support for cities was drastically cut, housing and welfare budgets slashed and instead a harsher more punitive welfare regime put in place.

Macek succinctly explores the ways in which the vision of an urban nightmare informs mainstream US cinema in a chapter entitled 'The cinema of suburban paranoia' and reflected in films such as *Batman* (1989), *Grand Canyon* (1991) and *Seven* (1995). Here, urban violence, gang warfare and an apocalyptic story of urban breakdown are dominant. However, arguably these films are also influenced and shaped by a recognition of the rapidly growing divide between 'rich and poor' in US (and other) cities during the 1980s and 1990s, an issue that Macek tends to by-step. Yet the concern with 'suburban paranoia' does not end here.

While Hollywood is charged and found culpable in its adoption of right-wing framing, it does not stand alone. In the final substantive chapter with the wonderfully evocative title 'Wouldn't you rather be at home? Marketing middle class agoraphobia', Macek argues that it is a suburban fear of crime culture and ethos, which works to shape US marketing and advertising strategies, that is to the fore in conservative discourses. This fear of crime has also been considered by others, most notably Mike Davis in his analysis of the 'ecology of fear' (1998). This fear of crime is also reflected in the multibillion-dollar home security industry, the appeal of gated communities and in the market for 'secure' vehicles, SUVs (that is, a market that existed before the sub-prime crisis, general economic slump and rising oil prices of 2007/08).

Given the careful attention Macek devotes to exploring the influence of right-wing conservative discourses in Hollywood and in advertising and marketing, he overlooks another and, arguably, an increasingly more powerful and insidious conduit for such thinking—the Web and video home entertainment. Numerous video games also both rely upon and work to reproduce anti-urban visions of social breakdown, anarchy and violence. As in the dominant representations of the social ills of US urban life that pervade much of public commentary and political punditry, such visions are also racialised, although more often it is a Latino-gang discourse—the

ubiquitous Cuban gangster, for instance—that is mobilised, replacing that of urban Black crime. On the Web—and in the UK as much in as in the US—we can find hostile accounts of disorderly life in particular towns and cities and, more importantly perhaps, also of people who indulge in supposedly dysfunctional behaviours and lifestyles. Indeed, much of the conservative backlash against the victims of Katrina was played out on Internet forums. This reminds us that the Web and video media represent other battlefields for ideas that we cannot afford to neglect.

Across the urban US today, and not only in post-Katrina New Orleans—and to a much smaller extent in other cities across the UK, elsewhere in Europe and in many other cities around the world—through policies which promote 'planned shrinkage', 'planned demolition' and 'clearing the slums', the forcible removal of poor people is once again taking place. These are some of the clearest illustrations of the ways in which right-wing neo-liberal policy-making, built on the kinds of language and thinking detailed in this book, are working to reshape urban life. Macek's study is rooted in the recent experiences in the US. However, the right-wing onslaught on the city and on poor urban populations which he carefully details here has a much wider resonance. One does not have far to look in the UK or across other parts of western Europe to discover similarly hostile and pervasive discourses that speak of dysfunctionality, criminality, lawlessness and so on, which find expressions in assorted underclass and 'broken-windows'-inspired types of thinking. Macek has done a great service to those who are at the forefront of attempts to push back such conservative and neo-liberal attacks on the city and on disadvantaged and oppressed populations.

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Cities in a Time of Terror: Space, Territory, and Local Resilience

H. V. Savitch, 2008

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Hank V. Savitch's book, *Cities in a Time of Terror*, makes a timely contribution to a burgeoning literature on urban security and local resilience. Paying particular attention to the perceived heightened threat from 'terrorism' (in its many guises) in the late 20th and early 21st centuries, Savitch discusses how cities are both the subject and arena of such conflict. The book provides a useful and detailed insight into the devastating rationale of terrorist campaigns as manifest in several places across the world, focusing on 'mega-cities' such as London and New York. The main premise of the book is that those engaged in such activity

understand their environments and figure out ways in which the overwhelming conventional power of their foes can be turned against them in a form of 'military jujitsu' (p. 49).

Savitch, approaching the topic from a distinctly urban geography stance, details how the 'virtues' of urban areas—such as anonymity, multiculturalism and cosmopolitanism, vibrancy, connectivity and sheer global recognition, to name but a few—can be inverted and subverted, essentially forming part of the arsenal of those who wish to make a political or religious statement through violent coercion.

The book, essentially a research monograph, begins with a short preface which details how Savitch (who personally witnessed an attack by

the French group Direct Action upon a Jewish restaurant in 1981 in Paris), collated and generated the data, predominantly secondary, that inform the book. The book is separated into four key parts and eight chapters. Part 1 (containing the first three chapters) provides the background to the subject. Chapter 1 'sketches' urban terrorism by detailing the practical and ideological rationale for the targeting of cities, though also recognises that the actual scale and intensity of the contemporary threat are difficult to identify accurately and may in fact be exaggerated. This, according to Savitch, creates a 'contradiction' whereby the threat to global cities is at times overstated, yet remains very real (p. 13). Chapter 2 builds upon this basis by charting the 'evolution of urban terrorism' through the provision of a wide range of statistics and insights that construct a composite image of terrorist attacks according to place, severity and casualties. The third chapter, 'The Fear Factor', establishes the phenomena of terrorism within a wider context by outlining its effect on governments and statutory institutions, on the media and upon wider society. In essence, it critiques how the fear of attack, as well as attack itself, undermines liberal democracy and dominates political agendas. In so doing, the chapter documents the use and misuse of the 't' word in such discourse, but notes that this is not merely semantic, adding that

words chosen to describe a critical event have a profound impact on how that event is internalized, perceived, and ultimately treated (p. 45).

In doing so, Savitch displays his deeply held contempt for 'terrorists' and launches an assault upon the use of 'euphemisms' such as 'fighters or armed factions' which, in his view, serves only to propagate terrorist propaganda (p. 46). This chapter additionally considers how the impacts of attacks, and the fear of them, are compounded by the overreaction of statutory agencies and the security forces (p. 49) producing the contradiction that

by embracing public restrictions for the sake of quelling public fear, we undermine the very kind of public we seek to preserve (p. 60).