Pity about the city

Relating the collapse of industrial jobs to just the inner city is a convenient but misleading simplification.

Colin Ward

1986-05-23

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This was at a time when what was know as the trade revival had filled the docks and warehouses and the specialised firms that surrounded them. Just a few years later, in 1943, I arrived as a conscript at St Enoch's Station, Glasgow, with my pack on my back and my Lee-Enfield on my shoulder, and was besieged by a team of barefoot boys yelling "Gie's a penny, sodjer." They were signals of a culture of poverty far more obvious than that of West Ham in London, yet this was at a time when the Clyde's heavy industry was booming in a way that hadn't been known for generations, before or since.

The benefits of full employment (even when we had anything remotely like it) were ill-distributed, and, just as we have created a myth of an idyllic rural past—when for most the reality was squalor and hardship—so we compare the urban present with a romanticised past when the workshop of the world exported everything to everywhere—while its urban manufacturing population actually lived in poverty, even when employed.

Today, with our gift for simplifying problems, or for reshaping the intractable ones by attributing them to environments, or education or administration, or to people's moral shortcomings, rather than to poverty, we have chosen to relate our worries about the collapse of industrial jobs to one particular environment: the inner city. This attracts interest, publicity and research funding, but it leads to misleading stereotypes and misunderstandings.

In the last century, when social Darwinism was an acceptable philosophy, observers used to blame the problems of our mushrooming cities on the riff-raff of the population that was immigrating from depressed rural areas. They suggested that the country was exporting its thriftless, footloose elements to the town. At the very same time, observers of what was seen as the crisis of rural life were lamenting that the able, enterprising , stable, bright and adventurous members of the village population were those who emigrated, leaving behind those who lacked these qualities.

A century later it was the cities that were losing population rapidly. The word was spread around in the academic chat shows that this was a disaster, and that the government sponsored new towns were to blame, stealing people and jobs from the cities. In vain, the advocates of the new towns pointed out that this planned dispersal had absorbed only an eighth of the enormous outward movement from London, or that of the jobs generated in Milton Keynes, for example, one sixteenth were exported from London. The nineteenth-century stereotypes were then brought into play, but in reverse. The new-found friends of the urban poor claimed that the new towns had taken on only the skilled and enterprising, while teachers and social workers in the new towns themselves would take me aside and confidentially explain, in the shining new schools, that "we have a terrible lot of problem families with very little motivation and ambition."

All these subjective impressions are relative of course, and many are based on nothing more than our well-known English snobbery. Ex-urbanite commuters from towns and villages beyond green belts wouldn't be seen dead in anything so plebeian as a new town, precisely because the planned new and expanding towns provided housing for rent for people who at the time could not conceivably hope to buy.

It was Stephen Holley, for years the general manager of Washington New Town in County Durham, who summed up the intellectual doublethink of our approach to urban problems in the mordant lines:

> Isn't it a pity about the Inner City?

People leave who shouldn't ought
And that affects the rate support.
If only those who stayed behind
Had left instead, no one would mind.

And Maurice Ash, chairman of the Town and Country Planning Association, roundly declared that the combination of attempts to shore up the inner cities amounted in practice to nothing less than a conspiracy to *contain* the disadvantaged: "a conspiracy because it suits the policies of our centralised state to keep the cities as prisons for the poor. It suits both those who want to manipulate the poor for reasons of power, and those who want to keep them from the preserves of the rich."

By now we have a growing mountain of research—far more than any individual could hope to read—on inner city issues. The Department of the Environment's Inner Area Studies were followd by the eleven research papers from the Social Science Research Council Inner Cities Working Party at the end of the seventies. In its final report, *The Inner City in Context* (Heinemann 1981), Peter Hall tried to sum up. He reminded us that it was still possible to have a decentralist vision of a dispersed low-density regional city in which the decline of inner area population and employment "might be regarded as a good thing rather than a bad thing," and that mistaken prescriptions could result from our stereotypes of the inner city population since "a majority of inner city people are not poor" and since "most of the poor live outside inner cities."

Peter Hall and Derek Diamond, in their agenda for further research, underlined once again that "an exclusive inner city focus is misconcieved and misleading"—however much it might appeal to politicians wanting to appear to be doing something. They also urged that "the impact of unemployment may be quite different now from what it was 30 to 40 years ago, because of the possibility of spending time—and generating income—within the informal economy." But, once again, politicians and public servants, who can only see the informal economy in terms of tax evasion, scrounging or sweatshops, find it hard to grasp Hall's wish for a focus on "the individual and his relation to the two economies" and on "the subtle and shifting boundary line that separates the formal from the informal economy for different groups of the urban population."

The SSRC's successor, the Economic and Social Research Council, has followed up the Diamond and Hall agenda with another eleven volumes of research findings on economic change, jobs and public policy, three of which—on London, Clydeside and Bristol—have just appeared. Fact-packed and full of sharp judgments on the actual effect of policies, they had heeded many of Peter Hall's strictures. But I hope that somewhere in the series there will be room for a study of how people make out on the fringe of the visible economy and how, as Hall put it, "individuals move from one economy to the other." Whether we like it or not we have a polarised labour market, and it is important to know whether policy helps or hinders people's efforts to get by, or for that matter, to get out.

The first three volumes of the ESPC Inner Cities Research Programme are published by OUP at £7.95 each. They are *The London Employment Problem* by Nick Buck, Ian Gordon and Ken Young; *The City in Transition* by William Lever and Chris Moore; and *The Sunbelt City? edited* by Martin Boddy, John Lovering and Keith Bassett. The TOW report *Whose Responsibility? Reclaiming the Inner Cities* costs £4.45 by post from 17 Carlton House Terrace, London swl.

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