Better Times Than This

Youth Homelessness in Britain

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To my mother and father

Difficult to say what all of this is all about.
Being young.
John Ash, 'Poor Boy: Portrait of a Painting'

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Introduction

Leaving central London by train, a journey of a little over half
an hour brings you to the town of Southerton. From the train
station in Southerton it is no more than a couple of minutes'
walk to Lime Street, and halfway down Lime Street is a hostel
providing emergency accommodation to the young homeless. I
made this journey in 1993, having spent several weeks in the
capital city's resettlement units.[1] However, very few of the young
homeless who come to stay at the Lime Street hostel arrive, by
train or otherwise, from central London. Nor do many travel in
the opposite direction, leaving Southerton and making for the
hostels, night shelters and streets of the capital (although some
do). Youth homelessness in Southerton is a local problem; those
using the emergency accommodation that the Lime Street hostel
offers are, by and large, local young people – they are homeless
at home, in their home town.

Southerton has a population of just under 50,000 people; the
town is part of a larger and expanding conurbation lying outside
the M25. It is a busily provincial place. The town centre is
smallish: a pedestrian high street walled by banks, building
societies, department and chain stores and fast-food franchises;
and, adjacent to this, an indoor shopping centre with the usual
combination of concourse, escalators and balconies. A multi-
storey car park, various commercial offices and public buildings
– magistrates courts, housing and social services departments –
and a municipal park with bright flowers arranged in orderly
beds: these complete the picture. Leaving the town centre on
foot, shopfronts soon give way to houses and gardens; ten
minutes' walk brings you to residential streets, corner shops and
muddy playing fields.

The Lime Street hostel, a large, converted, terraced house,
stands at just that point where the commercial streets end and
the residential ones begin. The properties to either side of the

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1. The old 'spikes' of George Orwell's time down and out in London.

hostel and across the road, like most this close to the noise and traffic of the town centre, are houses of multiple occupancy. There are properties like this in every town and city in Britain, divided into as many single bedsitter rooms as is practicable, each room let out separately to tenants at the bottom end of the private housing market. The houses on Lime Street are typical, if a little shabby-looking, some of them. Ill-fitting curtains are pulled across grimy windows; doorbells with obsolete or indecipherable name tags give little or no clue as to who is in residence. As elsewhere throughout Britain, young people make up a significant number of the total occupancy of these rooms. Many of those who come to stay at the Lime Street hostel are already familiar with rented bedsit accommodation, and the majority of residents eventually move on from the hostel to bedsit rooms nearby, sometimes on Lime Street itself. There is rarely any alternative. A number of these properties must count among the worst maintained in the local private rented sector; the turnover of tenants is high, as invariably evidenced by the piles of 'undelivered' mail in manila envelopes stacked by the skirting boards inside the front doors.

The Young Homeless

When I first arrived in Southerton, Britain was in the grip of a considerable anxiety about its young people. The rise in the incidence of youth homelessness was a particular cause for concern. For those ready to entertain the idea that Britain was host to a burgeoning underclass, the presence of teenagers begging a living and sleeping rough on city-centre streets seemed persuasive evidence – a sign of the times. And as the decade progressed it became apparent that the young homeless numbered many more than those to be seen on the streets of London and a handful of other cities; that, in a less stark and spectacular form perhaps, youth homelessness went much wider and deeper than this; that an unofficial or 'hidden' homeless population numbered

> not only the 2,000 or 3,000 who sleep rough on the streets of London, nor even the 5,000 others who join them on most nights on the pavements of Exeter, Oxford, Brighton, Leicester

and almost any other provincial city ... [but] also the 50,000 mostly young people who are living in squats; the 11,000 in bed-and-breakfast rooms; the 10,000 in hostels for the homeless; the hundreds of thousands cramped on sitting-room sofas and on the floors of friends. (Davies, 1998: 239)

The count dips and spirals. Pat Carlen opens her account of youth homelessness with the assertion that there are over 150,000 young, single adults homeless in Britain (1996: 1); the National Inquiry into Preventing Youth Homelessness puts the figure at 246,000, about one in every thirty young people in the UK between the ages of 16 and 25 (see Evans, 1996: 24). Policy Action Team 12 of the Social Exclusion Unit prefers to cite a source from 1993, which puts the figures at 32,000 homeless 16–21-year-olds in Britain (see Social Exclusion Unit, 2000).[2] Whatever the headline figure, no one doubts that there is a problem, that the numbers are large – alarmingly so – and that youth homelessness in Britain has increased substantially since the 1970s. The background reasons why are well-established. Young people's position in the British housing market, never a particularly strong one,[3] has further weakened as competition for rented accommodation has intensified over the last twenty-five years or so. A general erosion of young people's economic position over much the same period of time, and the contraction of benefit support for the young unemployed, has made things harder still; and for some more than others. Those worst affected by the economic and occupational restructuring, and successive recessions, of the 1980s and 1990s were those poorly qualified school-leavers who could previously have been expected to move directly from school into unskilled, manual work, switching

2. Estimates as to the size of the 'hidden' homeless population are only ever that, and they vary widely. Hutson and Liddiard conclude that the figures available 'tell us very little about the actual problem of homelessness and much more about the organisation collecting them and how it defines homelessness' (1994: 33).

3. Like others disbarred from owner occupation by the high entry costs, young people generally rely on rented accommodation to meet their housing needs; and with no significant access to council housing, it is the private rented sector, in particular, to which most young people turn. Within this sector, they tend to be over-represented as bedsit tenants in houses of multiple occupancy, where conditions are frequently at their poorest and tenure at its least secure (Thornton, 1990: 14).

between a succession of such jobs if they so desired, the compensation for lack of long-term prospects being good money at a young age (Roberts, 1993: 239). Without either prospects or 'good money', some of these young home-leavers have since found themselves struggling to gain any first foothold in the housing market.

Why leave home at all under such unfavourable conditions; why not wait? Why not go back home, if and when (and as soon as) things don't work out? This has been the preference of successive governments; that young people not in work or education, and unable to support themselves financially, be warehoused on training schemes and kept at home – anywhere but on the streets.

Doubtless many young people have done just that; delayed, marked time at home. But leaving home is not something that they can be expected to set aside indefinitely. Patterns of leaving home in Britain have varied over time and according to social background and gender, but doing so – leaving home – has consistently featured as a central element of most young people's move into adulthood, and as such it has a head of normative steam behind it (see Morrow and Richards, 1996: 56). And almost any young person can leave home, even if, and sometimes because, they can do little else; they know where the door is. Added to which 'there are clearly situations where young people leave home because they have to rather than because they want to' (Jones and Wallace, 1992: 108).

Leaving home has become a difficult move, then. Not difficult to do, but difficult to do right; difficult because of the conditions young people face when they leave, and especially difficult for those leaving in a hurry, at a bad time and without much of an option of going back or asking for help.

Us and Them

Homelessness is nothing new of course. There has always been a substantial minority of the population that has struggled to compete effectively in the housing market (Greve, 1991: 4). And young people have always been among these, and have as such figured consistently, perhaps disproportionately, in public anxieties about indigence and the urban poor. Consider, for

example, the prominence of children and adolescents – 'street urchins' or the young homeless – in the written and photographic records of nineteenth-century urban destitution (see Hebdige, 1988: 20). Which is not to say that homelessness today is the same as it was a hundred or so years ago. The young people coming to stay at the Lime Street hostel in Southerton are not the 'street-arabs' of Victorian London, in jeans and trainers. But there are continuities. Certainly so in the ways in which (youth) homelessness, now as then, has been woven into wider public anxieties about the 'undeserving' poor.

> Under the Poor Law Acts, passed through the 19th century, paupers or the unsettled poor were put to work in the workhouses. Most were seen as responsible for their position in so far as their poverty was seen to arise from their idleness and fecklessness ... In the 1990s, homelessness is not associated with the housing needs of the majority but with a minority who are still seen as idle and feckless. Public attitudes towards these people today echo earlier sentiments. (Hutson, 1999: 2)

Moral judgement as to the (bad) character of those at the bottom of the social pile has always informed public debate about poverty and the poor; it does so at the present time, just as it did in the Victorian era. The most recent *succès de scandale* in this longstanding debate has been that enjoyed by the American social scientist Charles Murray, whose essays on the emerging British underclass (see Murray 1990; 1994) provoked some comment throughout the 1990s, generating considerable heat if rather less light. In the first of these essays, Murray makes it clear from the outset that he is writing about a poverty that has less to do with low incomes than it has to do with behaviour. His position is unequivocal: 'the "underclass" does not refer to degree of poverty, but to a type of poverty' (1990: 1); its members choose to live as they do, either this or they know no better. If it is the supposedly disaffected young who have provided the sub-text to much of the British underclass debate over the last decade (see MacDonald, 1997: 18), then the young homeless have loomed larger here than most: our most vivid reminder of social exclusion, and exemplars too of the feckless, wilful poor – idle, irresponsible and up to no good; at home (comfortable, that is) at the margins.

Consider Yourself: At Home

This book, an account of youth homelessness, is a work of
ethnography; a product of fieldwork.[4] As it happens, I set about
fieldwork as a student in a department of social anthropology. It
may be that fieldwork and ethnography – as process and product
(see Agar, 1996: 53) – are constitutive of anthropology in a way
that is not as true for other disciplines (see Wade, 1997: 10), but
I do not intend to be jealous about this. I am writing and
teaching now as a sociology lecturer in a school of social sciences,
and I am happy to have this study fall anywhere within, or
outside of, the academic division of labour.

As it happened, I was the only one in my cohort of students
not to get on a plane in order to do fieldwork, and in this sense
I did my anthropology, my ethnography, at home. Yet fieldwork
begins (ought to, ordinarily) with the unfamiliar. The ethnogra-
pher, away from home, tries to work through and past this
unfamiliarity towards an eventual understanding; towards a
point at which he or she is 'at home' in a given research setting
perhaps. What then for the ethnographer who has not left home
to begin with? The answer, of course, is that there are more ways
than one to leave home, and one does not have to pack a
passport to do so.[5] Ethnographic exploration on the social
margins – the other side of the tracks, not the other side of the
world – has a history as long as that of anthropological fieldwork,
and the two projects share some of the same strengths and
frailties. Each has been informed by a powerful democratic
impulse: to take seriously the lives of others. Each has struggled
with the tensions and awkwardness, the implicit hierarchies, that
come with representation.

The golden age of social exploration – ethnography at home –
was the nineteenth century. But, as a mode of inquiry and a
genre of writing – with its own distinctive metaphors and

4. I stand by these terms as defined respectively by Maurice Freedman and
    Anna Grimshaw in *The Fontana Dictionary of Modern Thought* (Bullock *et al.*,
    1988).
5. Social anthropology has of course been coming home in a number of
    different ways for many years now; this move has raised a host of knotty
    problems and continues to provoke interesting discussion (see Jackson,
    1987; Amit, 2000).

concerns – it is very much alive today. *Dark Heart: The Shocking Truth about Hidden Britain* is a work of contemporary social exploration, published in the late 1990s by Nick Davies, a journalist for the *Guardian* newspaper; the book reports on an extended foray into what Davies calls the hidden country of the poor. Borrowing freely from the literary strategies of nineteenth-century social explorers, Davies begins the book with a geographical conceit, as follows.

> I set out to explore this place, pursuing rumours and news reports, and being passed from one contact to another, looking for patterns and themes, trying to record everything I saw like some Victorian explorer penetrating a distant jungle. (Davies, 1998: viii)

The reader is supposed to sit up and take notice. We are about to enter foreign territory, a far away and primitive world that Davies describes as 'utterly different in its way of life' (1998: viii). *Dark Heart* is a sensational and a harrowing book, and Davies is a campaigning journalist concerned that his readers should understand how extraordinarily bad things have got for the poorest of Britain's poor; but these are chancy turns of phrase – a hidden country, a distant jungle, a people whose way of life lies beyond easy comprehension and sets *them* apart from *us*.[6]

In reality (and this is the point, after all) Davies has not had to travel much more than a couple of hours by train to reach any of the places he is writing about. Nevertheless, he insists, these remain hidden territories to the extent that well-meaning people have, for too long, masked the truth about what is happening

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6. Compare George Sims' *How the Poor Live*, from 1883, which begins as follows: 'In these pages I propose to record the result of a journey into a region which lies at our own doors – into a dark continent that is within easy walking distance of the General Post Office' (Sims, 1976: 65; originally 1883). Or this, from Jack London's *The People of the Abyss*: 'O Thomas Cook & Son, pathfinders and trail-clearers, living sign-posts to all the world, and bestowers of first aid to bewildered travellers – unhesitatingly and instantly, with ease and celerity, could you send me to Darkest Africa or Innermost Thibet, but to the East End of London, barely a stone's throw distant from Ludgate Circus, you know not the way!' (London, 1998: 11, originally 1903). The message is clear: London's East End is further from the civilised society of the day than the very fringes of the Empire; its inhabitants akin to savages (see Kuklick, 1991: 85).

there; have not faced up to the uncomfortable fact that, in various pockets around Britain, poverty has inflicted a deep social damage,[7] which, at its extreme,

> involves the mushrooming of what academics like to call sub-cultures ... little colonies, looking inwards at their own values and rituals, their own ways of surviving. (Davies, 1998: 236)

This is the nub of Davies' argument, and it brings us back to Charles Murray and the dark heart of contemporary underclass fears: the possibility that there are those among the poor who have taken a turn for the worse and can't find their way back, or no longer want to. Murray too insists that this uncomfortable truth has been ducked for too long, if not by well-meaning people then by 'intellectuals'.[8]

Murray and Davies are an unlikely pair; hardly a pair at all. In the final pages of his book Davies dismisses Murray's line of argument as obviously flawed, confusing cause and effect and blaming the poor, where the real culprit is poverty. But Davies has already used this language himself, describing a situation in which 'cause and effect become hopelessly embroiled' (1998: 237). Both writers, either for effect or as part of a wider allegation, portray an exotic world, set apart yet too close to home, where life has settled into some reprehensible, regrettable pattern that will not easily unravel. The implications are far-reaching.

In contrast, the focus of this book is narrow: a few score young people growing up in the same town, most of whom were homeless when I first met them, and many of whom remained intermittently homeless throughout the twelve months that I was in contact with them, moving between episodes of rooflessness, temporary stays in emergency accommodation and serial residency in a succession of (at best shabby) local bedsit rooms. Nonetheless, the book takes its shape against Davies' scenario –

7. The list of social damage is wide-ranging: crime, drugs, truancy, teenage pregnancy, 'broken families' and also 'a surge in "runaways and throwaways" – children who either fled from their homes or were ejected onto the street' (Davies, 1998: 237).
8. Murray's essay contains a barbed anecdote about a sociology professor who talks with enthusiasm about the 'nice little world that the poor live in', but elects to sit in his car rather than join students on a class exercise canvassing a poor neighbourhood (1990: 17).

little colonies, turned inwards; and it does so questioningly. What is the shape and pattern of life for these young people, homeless off and on and in a host of other difficulties some of them; how are they living, and what, if anything, does this have to do with why they are homeless? These are the questions I hope to answer.

In the Field

What does an ethnographer, a participant observer, do all day? Those engaged in ethnographic research can employ a number of strategies and techniques; for my part I was neither innovative nor exhaustive in my approach. I determined, simply enough, to spend as much time as I could in the company of, and in conversation with, those young people I first met at the Lime Street hostel, keeping a daily written record of things said and done. On arrival in Southerton I rented a small bedsit room five minutes' walk from Lime Street and spent the best part of most days and every evening visiting the hostel. Over time, I was introduced to a wider ambit of young people, and my itinerary expanded to include the high street and shopping centre, the Department of Social Security (DSS) office and the bedsits of those who had moved on from the hostel. Eventually my own room became a venue for residents and ex-residents alike, some of whom even stayed there overnight when they had nowhere else to go.

I had no carefully worked out itinerary for the weeks and months as they passed. My movements on any given day were, by and large, determined by those I happened to be with or bump into. I was probably more sociable than most, trying to make and maintain a wide circle of contacts, and keep in touch with as many of those passing through the hostel, as I could.[9] But even so, my daily round – calling in on friends, meeting up at the hostel, hanging out in the town centre – was little different from that of the majority of those that I was spending time with. Letting the hours unfold in this way, rather than attempting to

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9. In all, over the course of a year spent in Southerton I got to know just over a hundred young people, almost all of whom had at some time stayed at the hostel on Lime Street. Some I knew only briefly; others I saw regularly, almost daily, and grew close to.

direct the action or prompt events, made for a fair amount of dull repetition. I passed a good part of each day doing very little – talking about nothing much in cramped bedsit rooms, standing on Lime Street watching passers-by, fidgeting on the fixed seats in the DSS; and although this was often time spent in good company it could be desperately tedious all the same. At other times things got much more exciting and stressful for all concerned, with events racing ahead of my ability to keep track and the young people's ability to cope. My first and lasting impression of those who passed through the Lime Street hostel during the year I spent in Southerton was one of restlessness and inertia combined; time spent with them could be unpredictable and eventful and yet it was somehow always the same.[10]

If repetition is inevitable in the maturation of an anthropologist's understanding, over time, of people's lives, then it is also the case that time, however much one may have of it to begin with, is not forever on the anthropologist's side. And so it can sometimes pay to adopt a more active position, to direct conversations and ask questions; but even here the aim is to do so in as unforced a way as possible. Ulf Hannerz has described how he attempted to strike this careful balance in the course of his own research, and his comments will serve as a summary of the course I tried my best to steer.

Occasionally I tried to get natural conversations started on topics which interested me particularly. Sometimes these attempts were quite fruitful; at other times they were painfully obvious failures, in which case one could only let conversations proceed to find more spontaneous courses. Of course, I

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10. On a more trivial level, another lasting impression I have of fieldwork is of music and cigarette smoke. Each day, it seems to me now, was played out to a soundtrack of chart music, rave or reggae – ticking and fizzing from personal stereos or played loud on a brand new hi-fi, obtained from the mail order catalogue, with little thought as to how to meet the repayments. Cigarettes were also ubiquitous, an essential accompaniment to any activity: something to burn up time with when sitting alone, or to share when you could afford a whole pack; something to 'scrounge' off others when you were broke; something to calm you down after an argument; an accessory on the street, to be held in a certain way and then placed casually in the corner of your mouth or wedged behind the ear, unlit, for later on.