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Chapter 11

Utopian Thinking and the (Im)Possible UK Council Estate: The Birmingham Region in Literature, Image and Experience

Jason Finch

Introduction

The concept of utopia is often opposed to that of reality. The cultural geographer David Pinder, however, argues that utopian thinking can work practically by 'extending and realising the possible through struggling for what seems impossible' (abstract). Specifically, Pinder works with 'utopian perspectives' that emerge in the urban writing of Henri Lefebvre, developing the latter's assertion that city residents in general have a 'right to the city.' This chapter applies such thinking to an urban zone conceptualised using Bart Keunen's notion of 'urban states of matter': that which developed in the twentieth century era of automobility in early-urbanised zones of western Europe. As Keunen points out, 'late-modern "post-industrial" urbanity' in post-war western Europe, particularly mass automobile ownership but also large-scale motorised public transport, led to a 'gas-like state' contrasting with earlier relationship between cities and their surroundings, spawning urban areas 'in which the division between the city and the countryside is not clearly visible' (28). Pinder's sense of utopia as expansion of possibility connects the critical act carried out by this chapter with the representation of the UK's West Midlands region in the work centrally analysed here, Lynsey Hanley's 2007 memoir and polemic *Estates: An Intimate History*, updated twice in the decade after its first publication to take political and other changes into account. In *Estates*, Hanley describes her own upbringing on the Chelmsley Wood estate east of Birmingham, the second-biggest city in the UK by population and by far the largest urban centre in the West Midlands.

Pinder argues that contemporary thinking about cities among planners and in the social sciences requires 'greater openness to questions about imagination, desire and dreams alongside the more sober analysis with which urban studies has been more comfortable' ('Reconstituting the Possible' 31). This requires 'critical analysis itself to open up to the possible and what could be' (31). Marxist thinkers such as David Harvey and Lefebvre's student Manuel Castells regarded Lefebvre negatively as a proponent of 'millenarist utopias' who was, on Pinder's summary, 'too detached from empirical matters' (Smith xvi–xvii; Castells qtd in Pinder, 'Reconstituting the Possible' 31). Pinder aims to rescue Lefebvre from such a charge. He hopes, in the process, to enable critical geographers to appreciate the role of utopian thinking in progressive social change. Such an argument is rooted in the history of urban thinking, which has always involved a dialogue between ideals – or visions – and more earthly or material realities. As Balasopoulos shows, notions of the ideal city developed in the Middle Ages and Renaissance from Ancient Greek efforts to 'think the ideal city' (18). The latter consisted 'of both an ontological and political investment in absolute unity and unchanging stability and a coming to terms with the impossibility of realizing this desire' (18).

Lefebvre's post-1968 view of the 'urban revolution' and Pinder's advocacy of it in the 2010s reveal the operation in urban modernity of the dialectic Balasopoulos outlines: between a necessarily desired perfection and its necessary impossibility. Crucially, this dialectic, which Pinder calls 'the possible-impossible' ('Reconstituting the Possible' 33), functions as a driver of actual change. Urban modernity, for Lefebvre, is marked by a reversal of the earlier relationship between the rural and the urban: in it, the urban, not the rural, has become the human norm, almost a universal (*Urban Revolution* 3–4, 13–15). Searching for 'a humanising urbanism,' Pinder finds Lefebvre's attitude of openness especially appealing. Lefebvre's advocacy of openness in urban thinking, which he calls utopian, stands opposed to a view

common after the heyday of modernism in architecture and planning in which utopian thinking was not only seen as unrealistic but also linked to 'dangerous authoritarianism' ('Reconstituting the Possible' 32, 30; see also Hall). Instead, Pinder argues, 'utopias […] can embody desires for better futures through insistence that these futures are radically open, that different ways of organising urban space are imaginable and potentially realisable' (Ibid.). Ultimately, Pinder rejects the notion of utopia as 'complete break and discontinuity' ('Reconstituting the Possible' 43). This recalls Classical and medieval accounts of ideal cities, which kept them in dialogue with reality, as Balasopoulos shows (18, 26–27).

In relation to this stance of hopefulness, it would be right to confess a great deal of scepticism about any very optimistic view of the UK council estate. The term 'council estate' is still used in the UK to describe larger or smaller territories of social housing typically built between 1920 and 1975. Until the 1980s the land and buildings of almost all were owned by the local authority or, municipality – colloquially, 'the council.' Many suffered from a long-term lack of maintenance and practices of concentrating the poorest or most anti-social tenants together. In 2020, it would seem near-impossible for residents of estates to gain ownership of the estate as a fuller environment: over the world beyond their own front doors and (if they have them) front gardens. The environment in this context means both the estate itself as bounded (and stigmatised) territory, and the national, transnational or even global economic and political systems in which the individual estate is embedded. It may seem impossible that the estate, both spatially and socially peripheral, could become central in notions of urbanity. Yet, in a sense, it must. After all, *it* is the excluded portion that threatens the areas, such as Birmingham's city centre, resurgent and pedestrianised in the late 2010s, which cast themselves as more properly and fully urban. The estate is the 'dangerous supplement' of Derrida as reawakened in a literary urban context because of its continued exclusion from view while it remains home to concentrated deprivation (Balasopoulos 22).

Alongside Hanley, the chapter's view of the West Midlands region as represented and experienced is enriched by the use of another cultural representation. This is a set of photographs taken in 1990–91 by Robert Clayton of Lion Farm, an estate on the opposite periphery of the region from the one earlier inhabited by Hanley and written about by her.[1] Clayton's photographs were taken at a time when six of the ten tower blocks built as the most visible section of Lion Farm in the 1960s were about to be demolished. In the 2010s, Clayton self-published his photographs of Lion Farm as a book, entitled *Estate*. His images, which aestheticised Lion Farm as a chilly place against which the fiercely quotidian and colourful lives of starkly isolated residents, alone or in small groups, stood out, now gained a new quality as pristine relics of a lost age, that of 1980s council estate life. A further layer was provided by Clayton's marketing of the book. On his website, *Lion Farm Estate*, Clayton presents a 2015 film by the English writer and filmmaker Jonathan Meades which reads Clayton's photographs as a sort of elegy for the UK estate. Meades's film would appear to be something between a documentary – such as the very personal televisual tours of architectural sites which made him famous in Britain from the early 1990s onwards – and a promotional film publicising Clayton's photographs and book.

In this chapter, Hanley's writing and Clayton's photographs are put alongside evidence I gained in a piece of fieldwork: an October 2018 solo walk from a railway station to the estate photographed by Clayton in 1990–91 then to the city centre of Birmingham (about seven miles or 11.2 kilometres east of Lion Farm). Could walking the estate be a liberating act? Or is a suggestion like that merely patronising? In any case, academic methodologies now exist in the humanities with the capability to structure creative acts so that they become tools for investigating place, for example in the creative turn taken by some human

[1] The coordinates of Lion Farm are 52°29'33.1"N 2°02'00.0"W, and Chelmsley Wood, much bigger in area, centres approximately on 52°28'42.2"N 1°44'02.2"W.

geographers (Ward). A walk can be a deliberate and creative act. Executing pre-planned walks with particular objectives, artistic or academic, throws abstractions and structural aspects of the nation-state such as city regions into dialogue with the unexpected: the weather on a particular day; random encounters; affective dimensions of the places encountered. Pinder detects in the artistic walking projects of Francis Alÿs, for instance, an 'evocative engagement with the multiplicity of rhythms, trajectories, and narratives that constitute urban spaces, an engagement that works against these being smoothed over or dragooned into step through processes of capitalist urban transformation' ('Errant Paths' 689). I do not want to make excessive claims for my own walk through the West Midlands. It was, after all, just a walk, on an English sunny autumn weekday, at a particular historical moment. Yet it adds a layer to the analysis. By placing oneself, as a researcher, in situ, possibilities are encountered and brought forth that would not appear otherwise.

The method taken here combines materials and activities: reading Hanley as *both* literary text and political intervention; interpreting and historicising Clayton's photographs; treating Meades's account of them as a secondary source *and* a primary one; walking to Lion Farm, around it and then to the city centre of which it is a sort of satellite. Through it, Keunen's mapping of the gas-like urbanity created in regions such as the West Midlands during the twentieth century becomes more meaningful. A multiple layering that is both physical and imaginative comes into view. In the terms of Deep Locational Criticism, the approach is thus 'literary-archaeological' (Finch, *Deep Locational Criticism* 93–118, 192 s.v. *archaeology*). Lion Farm and Chelmsley Wood, as indicated by the words 'Farm' and 'Wood' in the place-names created for them by city planners, share a buried, non-urban past. They project rurality as much as they project urbanity. Both occupy land that until the mid-twentieth century was always rural rather than urban. The estates thus represent incredibly fresh urbanity compared to the inner portions of Birmingham, which was itself only a small

market town until the late eighteenth century. Pinder may have emphasised ‘the possible-impossible’ with geographers not necessarily open to ‘imagination, desire and dreams’ in mind, but the concept is also promising in literary studies of urbanity, as modelled in this volume overall (‘Reconstituting the Possible’ 33, 31).

Historical and Regional Setting

Keunen’s account of late modern urban states of matter was shaped to explain cities ‘not so big and great’ as the likes of Paris: ‘regional metropolises’ among them (21). This model applies particularly well to the UK’s West Midlands region and cultural representations of it. The West Midlands is a networked, multipolar region with nevertheless a clearly major city at its centre. As I have earlier argued, it is an underrepresented region, not often figuring in the UK’s representations of itself and, when it does, often treated dismissively or as laughable (Finch, ‘Comic Novel, City Novel’). West Midlanders’ right to the city, on the terms of Lefebvre, includes the fact that their experiences deserve the same degree of interest and respect as do those of New Yorkers, Berliners or Global South city residents. Within the West Midlands and other UK regions, the same right needs extending to people living in the lowest-status and most stigmatised sector of the region’s housing: large housing estates built on urban peripheries during the twentieth century.

Perhaps more than in any other UK urban area during the twentieth century, municipal leaders applied utopian and modernist planning principles based on visions of ideal or dramatically improved cities to transform the city of Birmingham and its environs. The Greater Birmingham Act was passed by Parliament in May 1911 turning Birmingham overnight into the second-largest city in England as it surpassed Liverpool in population by annexing large areas of what had been rural Staffordshire, Warwickshire and Worcestershire. Later in the century, as the City Engineer and Surveyor of the city between 1935 and 1965,

Sir Herbert Manzoni used the Town and Country Planning Acts of 1944 and 1947 to implement ‘on a truly massive scale’ what he had proposed in his 1939 book *The Production of Fifty Thousand Municipal Houses* (Caulcott). Administratively, the area covered by the city of Birmingham trebled between 1891 and 1931, and the incorporated lands were largely filled with roads and houses between the 1920s and the 1960s (Stephens). The next section investigates the utopian thinking that fuelled this massive and deliberate urban expansion.

In August 1905, a deputation from Birmingham City Council led by John Sutton Nettlefold went to Germany to see the application of the so-called ‘town extension plan’ (James). Nettlefold headed the City Council’s recently-established housing committee. He returned with the view that a city corporation should own as much land as it possibly could (Yelling 482). The enlargement of the city became a goal for Nettlefold, who aimed at Birmingham ‘gaining land around the periphery that the city could utilize to create low-density private housing on cheap land’ (James 2013). Nettlefold was aware of, but unconvinced by, the garden suburb movement associated with Ebenezer Howard. A few years earlier, Howard (17) had proposed in *Garden Cities of To-Morrow* the creation of a city containing ‘no smoke’ and ‘no slums.’ For Howard, ‘a better environment and provision of amenities was to be merely one product of a web of individual and collective activities and voluntary associations which would bind the community together’ (Yelling 482). Nettlefold sought instead large-scale commercial development of housing districts by private developers. On his model this would be enabled by the city corporation’s acquisition of large tracts in what had been rural areas surrounding Birmingham (James). Thus the origin of the land-grab which would later make the construction of Lion Farm and Chelmsley Wood possible was not in visionary thinking built around conceptions of ideal cities (on one definition, utopian thinking). Instead, it lay in an alternative to that, namely a capitalist belief in government’s

limited ability to make the conditions available for development by private investors who would be the direct bringers of change.

Nettlefold was a municipal official and Howard an independent reformer and writer, but they were driven by related impulses. In the words of Peter Hall, 'the concerns of […] pioneers' – like both Howard and Nettlefold – 'arose, objectively enough, from the plight of the millions of poor trapped in the Victorian slums,' people pitied but also feared by such reformers, 'obsessed' as they were 'with the barely suppressed reality of violence and the threat of insurrection' (7). But there were differences. For one thing, Nettlefold was much less of a visionary than Howard. Visionary approaches to city planning often begin by talking about a city that does not exist yet, whether created by the mind of, say, an architect or by framing it in a literary form such as the dream or voyage narrative, then use this imaginary city to intervene in real life. Lion Farm and Chelmsley Wood, by contrast, were created at the far extremes of the city expanded by the Nettlefold land-grab near the beginning of the century. They are continuations of that, formed as part of the housing-driven aggression of later leaders such as Manzoni. In *The Production of Fifty Thousand Houses*, Manzoni imagined the reshaping of the city on a model provided by the mass production of cars. Automobile production at Longbridge on Birmingham's southwestern periphery had been massively successful from the mid-1920s onwards under Herbert Austin, manufacturer of the Austin Seven, Britain's first mass-market car; Manzoni proposed the same model for housing.

Other of the City or Its Essence? Lynsey Hanley and the Estate

Lynsey Hanley's memoir and nonfiction polemic *Estates* unfolds via an autobiographical narrative. The author portrays herself as someone raised on one main type of UK estate who later lived on the other. As a child, Hanley lived in the expansive, peripheral and low-rise Chelmsley Wood, built as slum clearance by the City of Birmingham. Later, as a young

writer-researcher, she gained a 'toehold on the property ladder' as a lease-holding, mortgage-paying flat-owner in an East London inner-city development including high-rise blocks, the stereotypical dangerous concrete jungle where Chelmsley Wood was an extended world of 'anonymity and conformity' made up of cul-de-sacs and paths (Hanley 202, 34). The first chapter of *Estates* is a long, rich account of revisiting Chelmsley Wood about a decade after the author-narrator's departure for London, aged eighteen. It combines political history, personal memory and an account of a walk through 'the Wood' as it appeared in the mid-2000s.

Hanley's book has frequently been mentioned in the extensive sociological and activist literature on the UK estate and the British working class (e.g. among numerous others Back 828; McKenzie 206–07; Reay 159). The constitution and nature of the working class in Britain have generated much controversy in the era of austerity after 2010 with a great deal of intensity added following the 2016 Brexit referendum. In these accounts, Hanley's book supplies terms for use in conceptualising the estate and estate lives. These terms, like 'psycho-social bruise' as the result of coming from an estate, or 'estatism,' are not actually applied by the sociologists, rather they seem like anecdotal support to their arguments. Scholars of literature and drama in the same period have investigated council estate fictions and stage dramas (Cuming; Bell and Beswick). So far, however, no scholar has attempted a literary close reading of Hanley's book. Read as a literary text, the generic status of *Estates* emerges: it is both memoir and polemic, growing from a British social observation and cultural studies tradition that earlier contained George Orwell's *The Road to Wigan Peer* (1937) and Richard Hoggart's *The Uses of Literacy* (1957).

In *Estates*, Hanley moves from the nuanced and thoughtful place writing of its first chapter to a journalistic narrative of what is presented as the rise and fall of council housing in the UK during the twentieth century (50–147). Her two chapters in this section both refer in

their titles to the concept of the slum: ‘The End of the Slums’ is followed by ‘Slums in the Sky.’ Here Hanley argues that while the concept of the slum came into existence to protest what seemed outrageous and shameful in the wealthy but deeply unequal Victorian city, and ultimately to remove it, the large-scale construction of estates in the twentieth century led simply to a new form of slum. This is followed by a final group of chapters attempting diagnosis and action (148–233). These build on Hanley’s presentation of her own experiences in Tower Hamlets, East London, on an estate where ‘the kids are going nowhere fast, and they know it,’ leading them to rev up cars pointlessly outside the writer’s window, where there also form groupings of gamblers, street drinkers and drug dealers:

> The betting shop’s concrete awning, directly to the right of the door, shelters a six-strong array of harmless drunks day and night, but also young men in pastel tracksuits who circle the dead space outside, following the same pattern as the swooping seagulls who have followed the smell of cod and chips up the Thames. (187)

These doubtful characters ‘talk in code’; they are ‘up to something, and it so happens that they do their something between my front door and the Londis grocery twenty paces away, where I need to get my milk’ (187–88). Hanley’s account of the neighbourhood resembles literary and filmic dystopias. Yet here, in ‘more hostile an environment than any in which I’ve ever lived’ (188), Hanley and some of her neighbours begin to act together. They vote on the future of the estate, and in the action group lease-holding owner-occupiers like Hanley herself and council tenants serve together.

Overall, Hanley portrays the council estate as simultaneously a dangerous and abnormal site in UK social thinking, and also somewhere both uninteresting and peripheral in relation to most notions of urbanity. Yet in her account of it the estate also comes across as the central fact in the social life of the UK since the Second World War. It becomes a sort of other to the

urbanism of the twenty-first century, focused following 1960s and 1970s writing by the likes of Jane Jacobs, Lefebvre and Richard Sennett on the revitalisation of downtowns and inner-city areas with longer histories and variegated architectural fabrics (Jacobs; Lefebvre, *Urban Revolution*; Sennett). Hanley seeks to defend estate dwellers from what Loïc Wacquant calls 'territorial stigmatization,' as part of a 'new regime of marginality' emergent in Europe and the USA from the 1970s to the 2000s (and exacerbated since Wacquant and Hanley wrote). The examples of social housing most prominent in early twenty-first-century UK urban debates were estates in or next to city centres, particularly those most threatened by neo-liberal financialisation and gentrification in zones like inner London. Examples include accounts of the demolition of the Aylesbury and Heygate Estates in Southwark, and the 2017 fire at Grenfell Tower in North Kensington which killed 72 people (Campkin; Lees; MacLeod).

A danger in Hanley's approach is that of conflating places and social phenomena that are actually different from each other under the heading or label of 'estate.' After all, in the book she brings together the experience of living in a brutalist block in inner East London surrounded by extremely antisocial behaviour, crime and physical threat, with a childhood living in a house with a garden, in which her father went to work wearing a tie. He was a wages clerk for Birmingham City Council (Hanley 3). When as an adult Hanley visits her parents, still living in Chelmsley Wood, and writes of the experience, neighbours' respectable new cars are parked in a peaceful cul-de-sac outside (25). She identifies herself as an estate person, even though, as an adult, she is an owner-occupier who has made a financial investment in the East London estate and is therefore even an early-stage gentrifier of it, and even though it gradually becomes apparent that her upbringing was considerable more middle-class than that of most dwellers in 'the Wood.'

Hanley's claim is that an 'apartheid' exists dividing estates and estate-dwellers in the UK from owner-occupiers (17). Her analysis concentrates on a binary division between the two. For instance, she notes how boundary changes have made the largely suburban, owner-occupier borough of Solihull responsible for Chelmsley Wood, built by Birmingham City Council for rehoused city people:

> Since 1980, the Wood has been controlled – neatly and effectively, but with the same air of mortification displayed by the archetypal snob Hyacinth Bucket whenever her slovenly brother Onslow comes to visit in the sitcom Keeping Up Appearances – by the more affluent Solihull metropolitan borough council. It refers to its unrepentant problem child as 'North Solihull.' (Hanley 17)

In remarking that 'to anybody who doesn't live on one (and to some who do), the term "council estate" means hell on earth,' Hanley might seem to resemble Victorian and Edwardian slum explorers in London such as William Booth, Jack London and C.F.G. Masterman who claimed that they were doing something akin to journeying through darkest Africa (5). Such writers exoticised the zones they wrote about. But the relationship between Chelmsley Wood and the rest of Solihull, or between the estate overall and the rest of the UK, viewed more prosaically, is an example of what Pinder, developing Lefebvre, identifies as minimal differentiation: 'the expression of existing individual and group identities' rather than of much richer and more plural possible lives ('Reconstituting the Possible' 34). Hanley conceives this differentiation through the notion of 'The Wall in the Head,' the title of Chapter 4 of the book (148–84). She draws this notion from post-unification Germany but argues that it exists equally for working-class Britons, whose task becomes to 'find a crack in it and whittle out a little escape route' (Hanley 149).

Weaving a Web Around Lion Farm: Robert Clayton and Jonathan Meades

In 1990 and 1991, hearing that six of the ten tower blocks on the Lion Farm estate west of Birmingham in Oldbury, West Midlands, were about to be demolished, Robert Clayton went there with his camera. The site is as far west of central Birmingham as Chelmsley Wood is to the east. It was built for the local authority by the building company George Wimpey 'in their traditional red-brick style' from 1960 to 1964, 'on land reclaimed from old mine workings' (Grindrod). Indeed, both Lion Farm and Chelmsley Wood are formally outside the present-day boundaries of the City of Birmingham. These estate territories represent a living legacy of Nettlefold's civic expansionism and the road-building plus decanting of people from the inner city promoted by Manzoni later in the twentieth century.

Taken together, Clayton's photographs and Meades's film built around them form a more complex unity than Hanley's book, as an account of the UK estate that is both an artistic representation and a critique of national policy and attitudes. The photographs, and the pairing of them with the words and voice of Meades in the film, help understanding of the estate as a phenomenon but are multiple texts in their own right: Clayton's photographs are themselves a text; Meades's film another. The images stand alone, but also become illustrations of Meades's views about the UK estate overall. The complex of words and images created around Lion Farm by Clayton and Meades share with Hanley's account of Chelmsley Wood as both site of personal memory and representative site. All of the artistic and activist creators of these works place West Midlands localities – and their 'gas-like' region, to recall Keunen – into dialogue with the idea of the estate in the UK, including the stark division identified by Hanley with estate people on one side and owner-occupiers on the other. In Hanley's case, this dialogic treatment happens both through the historical narrative of 'The End of the Slums' giving way to new 'Slums in the Sky,' and in the relationship between 'the Wood' and its partner seen as if in a hall of mirrors, the author-narrator's East London estate with its concrete and drug dealers.

Seen in isolation from Meades's commentary, Clayton's photographs hint at a harsh and bleak sort of kitsch as the estate's key characteristic. The colour palette is striking, flat and matt, yet containing hard pale reds and greens. And yet they also give the landscape of the estate an atmosphere that is both deeply bucolic and bleakly picturesque, set in sweeping green slopes (e.g. Clayton, 'Estate Images 1990/91' – 'Cheviot House').[2] Landscape appears in Hanley's account of the estate too, but is there in a sense that 'the Wood' is founded on a sort of pretence: it counterfeits the spacious suburbs of owner-occupiers only in a narrower way, on a flat land actually suited to highways, railways and air traffic. The 'rus in urbe' pretences of 'the Wood,' Hanley writes, are exposed when 'the wind' blows through it.

> When it blows in the wrong direction, towards the house, the trickle of the goldfish pond and the twirrup of the birds gives way to the modern-day roar of the M6, M42 and M45 motorways, which converge less than a mile away. Then there is the grating pulse of intercity trains a further mile from that, and the thrust of engines from the adjacent airport. (Hanley 24–25)

Both Hanley and Clayton present views of the West Midlands which allude, however unconsciously, to traditions in viewing the region which, stretching back beyond J.R.R. Tolkien, raised there before the First World War, to the early-modern epic poet Michael Drayton, situate it as the epitome of a green and cosy England. Tolkien and Drayton were both from Warwickshire, the county within which Birmingham grew to great size. Clayton presents both landscape images of the estate and a sort of portraiture. People sit in their flats often on one side of the image, sometimes out of focus, looking just off straight into the camera, or sidelong (Clayton, 'Estate Images 1990/91' – 'Babysitting, Wilson House,' 'Resident, Harry Price House' and 'Mothers and Children, Playground, Wilson House'). His

[2] On the website lionfarm.co.uk, the earlier photographs are inside the tab 'Estate Images 1990/91' and, with gallery view toggled, can all be seen at the bottom of the window. A button labelled 'i' gives titles (e.g. 'Cheviot House') for most of the individual images.

exterior shots occupy the border dividing portraiture from street photography, in which participants are caught unawares or are even unwilling ('Cheviot House, One,' 'Moving, One,' 'Old Bike,' 'Crusader Close'). Place, as much as people, is always a central topic.

The short film written and narrated by Meades was made a generation after Clayton's photographs were taken, as part of the publicity surrounding the publication of *Estate* in 2015. Clayton himself directed it (*Estate* 16:40). In the context of UK history, it thus came after several years of austerity in public services but before the Brexit referendum. In the seventeen-minute film, Meades uses Clayton's photographs as the backdrop (literally – they are visible while he speaks) for a sweeping account of the UK council estate which he sums up architecturally, in the shape of the tower block. This interpretation derives from a position as a journalist-critic of the built environment famous in Britain as a mediator between architectural modernism and the viewing public. He finds Lion Farm as represented by Clayton a suitable site for such a critique, as perhaps he would not find Hanley's 'labyrinthine' Chelmsley Wood with its little houses of 'sandy brick' and 'net curtains' (Hanley 26, 24). The places of Lion Farm, Meades claims, are characterised by 'incoherence' and 'shapelessness' rendering them 'bewilderingly illegible': 'their identity is frail,' he claims (*Estate* 10:39). In his commentary, Meades repeatedly veers towards statements about the baleful negativity of the UK council estate which lack Hanley's autobiographical nuancing. And yet he is an acute reader of Clayton's photographs. As Meades points out, 'Clayton resists drama and melodrama, he eschews exaggeration': he refuses to 'flatter' buildings by making them 'look like standalone objects without surroundings, as conventional architectural photography does' (*Estate* 9:22).

Such statements by Meades fit into a critique of modernist centrally-planned architecture already alive and well in the 1970s when Richard Sennett spoke of the 'dead public space' created by the Brunswick Centre in London and by comparable buildings in

Paris and New York (12–16). In the UK, such critiques were often followed by statements to the effect that buildings like the ten Lion Farm blocks needed tearing down (as indeed the majority of them were shortly after Clayton's visit). Meades offers more than anti-tower-block polemic, though, in pointing out the contextualised representation of the Lion Farm blocks in Clayton's images. But the 1990–91 photographs collected in 2015 by Clayton and presented as *Estate* have qualities that Meades misses. While he critiques the decontextualising tendencies of architectural photography, which isolate buildings as the work of the creating architect, the sheer oddity of Clayton's Lion Farm, its surreal *Alice in Wonderland* quality, passes him by, perhaps because his perspective on them is fundamentally architectural. Meades misses the suggestions Clayton makes through his photography about juxtapositions – of size, object, scale, age, material (concrete, textile, vegetation) – foregrounded on the high-rise estate. These are present on the estate, Clayton's photographs show, as not in either the classic eighteenth- and nineteenth-century urban fabrics lauded by Benjamin, Jacobs and Sennett, or in the affluent suburb of privately-owned houses with gardens, the other of Lion Farm in the urban periphery.

Clayton's 1990–91 set of photographs portray the survival, perhaps distorted, of working-class pride miles outside the inner city. He leaves the audience unsure whether to worry about this place, Lion Farm, or to pity the inhabitants, or to admire them for their cool resilience. Their environment, despite its smashed windows and graffiti has something pristine and orderly about its geometry, its relations of grass, brick and concrete (Clayton, 'Estate Images 1990/91' – 'Cheviot House,' 'Moving, One,' 'Pay No Poll Tax'). The people of this Lion Farm, at the tail end of the 1980s, belong in a rock video, perhaps a post-punk one, not a sociological tract. Clayton reveals a specialness, an aesthetic dimension, in the estate which has been absent from most accounts of it. He is not the only photographer to do this: Will Faichney's photographs of London estates, for example, emphasise their spectacular

geometric qualities. It is this quality, perhaps, which could be the key that opens up possibilities in the UK estate of the sort which Pinder mines from Lefebvre. Clayton exhibits none of Hanley's part-repressed yearning for a different kind of British upbringing to that provided by the estate. For the photographer, the estate seems to offer unique qualities worth valuing. These are not completely excluded by its graffiti, broken windows and lives framed by the television and the alcohol shop (Clayton, 'Estate Images 1990/91,' 'Alcohol'). They are not reached, that is to say, by romanticising or sentimentalising the imaginative place of the estate, since the images convey the struggles and confinement of its inhabitants. Clayton's images exhibit a reluctance to pass judgement, allowing the estate to retain a quality of mystery.

In the late 2010s, Clayton returned to the Lion Farm Estate and took more photographs, nearly thirty years on from his first set ('Estate Return Images 2019'). These have a different tonality to the first set from thirty years earlier, mild and misty; less garish. Subjects' clothes tend towards navy and grey as opposed to the turquoise and coral of the late 1980s. Many of the photographs Clayton took on his return are more explicitly portraiture than those of the first set, their subject directly engaging with the camera through a strongly held gaze rather than seeming to be spied upon or caught in passing as with the 1990 to 1991 photographs. Clayton seems to have taken these photographs in autumn, perhaps the autumn of 2018, shortly after I was there, on a cloudy day. This second set, collected by Clayton for an exhibition and book under the title 'Estate Return' contains a consciousness of a duty of care towards the estate-dwellers represented, be they teenagers or pensioners, health-service key workers or EU27 migrants with small children, in contrast to the more disdainful and carefree air of the first set. Compared with the photographs I took in October 2018, Clayton's second set is bleak, soulful and far more focused on the human subject. People are actually central in many of these images, compared to Clayton's own 1990–91 images in which they most often

appear off-centre or seen at a distance. Place, this is to say, becomes less important in the second set.

The Walker-Analyst and His Problems

I grew up in the UK but not in an estate. Instead, I grew up in an older suburban house bought with inherited capital. Never a social tenant or the tenant of a municipality, I did live, for eight months in 2001 and 2002, as a private tenant in a London flat on a small 1950s estate. The flat's owner had bought it under the Right to Buy scheme in the 1980s and later lived in another part of the UK renting it out and living partly off the proceeds. I have never stayed one night in a flat or house on a large UK peripheral estate. These personal revelations appear here in the effort to ground these scholarly investigations honestly, to become aware of their inescapable perspective. My view of the UK estate, among people who grew up in England, is that of an outsider to them. I grew up within a dichotomised view of housing: owner-occupiers versus tenants, with the latter rather messily subdivided into private tenants and council tenants. Because I went to school in a comprehensive school not a private school, I went to school with people who lived on estates, but even within the school there was something of a division, almost entirely non-hostile, between people who came from owner-occupier families and people who lived on estates. Enriching and complicating this was the fact that I grew up in a suburb of outer London to which many families had moved from inner East London because of improved financial circumstances. Many owner occupiers, even the wealthiest, were seriously 'cockney,' proudly plebeian Londoners in speech and culture – but many other families had *been moved* to the area's estates, built by the London County Council, in postwar slum clearance programmes. Many of these families had come to the area from the poorer parts of London's East End. Less obviously present was the post-industrial sort of housing estate, on which many residents formerly worked for a few large employers,

typically in manufacturing or extraction, although in that sector of outer London there were clear hierarchies of status dividing estates, as well as dividing estate-dwellers from owner-occupiers' children.

Hanley uses autobiography as a mode, and so does Meades in reading Clayton. Clayton leaves his own relationship to what he depicts completely opaque. It is impossible to say, viewing his photographs, whether the photographer's gaze is that of someone who grew up in flats like these, around shops like these, or that of someone to whom this environment is completely alien. Something about the photographs, the flatness of their greens, greys, reds, the attitudes human figures strike in them, their garishness and yet dignity, manages to project both familiarity and a quality of the alienating. Meades presents himself as someone well-spoken, drawling, clearly patrician in English terms, yet claims to have had a grandmother among the 'hundreds of thousands of people' in Britain living in inadequate housing without bathrooms before the construction of estates like Lion Farm in the 1960s (*Estate* 03:58). As Eric Prieto writes elsewhere in this volume, Lefebvre's urban thinking aims 'to break out of congealed thought patterns and revise outdated theories by constantly testing them against direct experience' (x-ref). Arguably, direct experience of the estate can be had by visiting estates, rather than reading about them or looking at photographs of them. But such a practice is filled with challenges of its own. It could be regarded as 'exclusionary,' because carried out by a male scholar with the research funding enabling it, or as 'valorised' in ways that other walks (of mothers and children living on the estate; of key workers commuting by bus into Birmingham) are not (Ward 762).

Walking through the estate and physically connecting it with the city centre seven miles off, I made no attempt to understand or interpret the lives of the people who lived there. In this respect my activity was different from the work of Hanley, Clayton and Meades alike. The effort is deliberately to avoid any scholarly imperialism whatever: to avoid exoticising or

making assumptions about estate lives. This is a survey of surface topography almost in the manner of Michael Drayton, the West Midlands' poet of England. He was the author of *Poly-Olbion* (1612–22), or multiple England, a topographical verse journey in rhyming couplets divided into two parts published a decade apart. In Song 13 of eighteen in the first of these, Drayton reached his native county of Warwickshire, 'That Shire which wee the hart of *England* well may call' (Drayton 8.2). The record of my walk exists in this written account and in an online album of photographs (Finch, 'Sandwell and Birmingham').

According to Gerald D. Suttles, writing in the 1980s, 'the cumulative texture of local culture' requires attention from sociologists who have tended to see 'sentiments and symbols' as 'as a subjective and methodological embarrassment' (Suttles, 'Cumulative Texture' 284, 283).[3] Sociologists continue to see case studies as means of testing hypotheses formed in dialogue with earlier research, but recent work on the UK estate, some of it cited in this article, takes personal experience as charted by Hanley, Clayton and Meades more seriously than the field formerly did. Still, to walk in the estate or take photographs there is to make the sociological, the aesthetic and the personal meet, abrasively. One feels uncomfortable, but then one should. The aesthetics of walking through creates bodily knowledge of urban concentric rings. It forces understanding of the inaccessibility of others' lives in the large numbers of which one becomes vaguely aware moving through different zones in one metropolitan area. This contrasts with the autobiography of Hanley, the portraiture of Clayton, and the technique in classical sociological inquiry such as Suttles's earlier work on Chicago of getting to know one or two locals and reaching the meaning of a neighbourhood through them (Suttles, *Social Order of the Slum*).

The estate itself: it has a bucolic and mild air in comparison with others I have walked through, for example the Chalkhill Estate in Wembley, North West London, or the

[3] I am grateful to Jens Martin Gurr for referring me to this article by Suttles.

Buttershaw Estate in Bradford, West Yorkshire. It contains little paths bordering muddy sports grounds. Its varied jumble of buildings include small houses with gardens in curving, symmetrical streets, but also some surviving blocks, their facades renewed. One big tower, where work was underway when I visited in October 2018, stands up a slope from much of the estate, towards where a telecoms mast pokes from a stand of trees, the highest point in the vicinity. The bleakness of Clayton's interiors was not apparent, and nor were his bold and chilly primary colours. Instead, the whole feel was more mellow, grown together with the surroundings. Lush patches of wet green revealing hidden walkways passed canals and streams extending off them; there were pinkish-red masses of fallen leaves from imported tree-species (Finch, 'Sandwell and Birmingham' 3223, 3228–30, 3727). Equally marked, both within and just outside the estate itself, were some spruce and well-kept front gardens, alongside others that were untended (e.g. 3235). One was filled with ceramic animals and miniature disco balls surrounded by gravel, others were richly coniferous or simulated a Mediterranean landscape (Finch, 'Sandwell and Birmingham' 3238, 3253–54). In some sections of Lion Farm a rural feeling is conveyed by mature trees which seem to predate the roads and buildings of the estate (Finch, 'Sandwell and Birmingham' 3248–49, 3264). Such aspects of Lion Farm recall the rural fringes of Birmingham as treated by Jonathan Coe in his 2001 novel *The Rotters' Club*. As I have written elsewhere, Coe refers directly to Tolkien in the shape of his protagonists' 'hobbit-like' grandparents with their comforting rituals and unchanging routines just beyond the city's south-western frontier (Finch, 'Comic Novel, City Novel' 61–62; Coe 135).

This was just one moment, though. The weather was warm for mid-October and the sun mostly shining. It was a weekday in term-time so children, audible playing beyond a wall that I passed, were at school. Workers in shops, offices and factories were off the estate at work. Thinking of Hanley's notion of walls in the head and an 'apartheid' dividing the estate from

other sorts of British living, the walk connected the estate with its neighbours rather than dividing them. There are houses that are on the fringes of the estate but not quite of it, whose status is uncertain. The physical and territorial division had seemed starker at Wembley and Bradford than it did here. Other boundary lines hereabouts include those of local government areas: the estate is at the south-western corner of Oldbury, while Throne Road immediately south of it is in Rowley Regis; Oldbury and Rowley Regis are constituent parts of the Metropolitan Borough of Sandwell, itself one of six subdivisions of the West Midlands county. There are roads leading from here to the centres of Birmingham and Wolverhampton, and to the profoundly decayed centre of Oldbury itself, and beyond that the railway station of Sandwell and Dudley (trains to London and Scotland).

Conclusion: Shedding the Estate Skin

In visiting, analysing, depicting an estate we are looking both at an example of a category, and at a place unique in its own right, a unit whose minimal differentiation is between it, itself, and everywhere else. The conundrum is presented in books' titles: Hanley's *Estates*, plural, versus Clayton's *Estate*, singular. The estate encountered here is meaningless outside its geopolitical context. This has been a chapter with a focus on the nation-state, rather than on the individual city or global trends which come to the fore in other contributions to the present volume (e.g. Henryson, Prieto in this volume). Within that particular nation-state, the UK, the focus has been on a region, the West Midlands, early industrialised and with a very large city, Birmingham, at its heart, yet without much metropolitan status for that city even within the region, let alone the nation-state as a whole. The region is analysable in the terms proposed by Keunen for networked areas of middle-sized urban zones, yet also presents productive abrasion between that analytic tool and another focused on urban hierarchies (Birmingham is very big but, equally, is no London). The West Midlands stands out among UK regions as one

that could metonymically figure the overall national polity, in fact. It is intermediate between the oddity of the metropolitan South-East, focused on London, and the more fully provincial and peripheral cities of northern England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland (while some of those are much more metropolitan than Birmingham within their own contexts).

Pinder writes of Lefebvre's visionary urban thinking as produced at the end of the 1960s that

> in contrast to terms then current, such as postindustrial, leisure or consumer society, it spoke to a long-term process of urbanisation through a sequence of fields and urban forms, its focus falling on the most recent 'critical zone' characterised by the implosion/explosion of the city into a generalised urban fabric and by the supersession of the problematic of industrialisation by that of the urban. Lefebvre's concern was not with conventional historical analysis of urban transformations but with identifying tendencies and orientations, continuities as well as ruptures or relative discontinuities, in which the virtual enables examination of the realised, and in which the 'blind fields' that prevent the emergent reality of the urban from being adequately understood are challenged. ('Reconstituting the Possible' 33)

The history of the estate in Britain as narrated in its pain and contradictions by Hanley represents one of these 'blind fields.' Potentially, Pinder's redeployment of Lefebvre could transform the understanding of mass living conditions framed in the estate. The estate is a twentieth-century relic, which is not to say that it ought to be removed. Rather, user control of it needs establishing. The peripheral estate, in fictional descriptions such as Maureen Duffy's 1962 autobiographical novel *That's How It Was* (based on Trowbridge, Wiltshire) and Andrea Dunbar's 1980 stage play *The Arbor* (based on Bradford) is a particular type of estate (the inner-city slum clearance or bombsite estate being another). It has an externality to the city, in distance, remoteness, in being, at an extreme, positioned on a hillside facing away from the

city in the valley. Yet this is also the etymological estate in the sense of a country tract owned by a landowner: Bloomsbury in London was once one of these, and so were the peripheral estates of Liverpool, bought by a municipality from those landowners. It is on this sort of estate, perhaps, that an 'emergent reality of the urban' can grow (Pinder, 'Reconstituting the Possible' 33).

In this essay, the methodology of the physical visit and walk plus its juxtaposition with reading of multiple texts of the estate, verbal, visual, commentaries and first-person narratives, has aimed to allow this 'emergent reality' to come forward. The estate as actual organising unit of mass living needs to fall away like a shed skin, while the buildings previously labelled as such gain a new life that is more socially multiple, and more driven by inner community life. We thus end with the 'possible-impossible' imported from post-1968 by 2010s Pinder. We must desire, proclaim and demand what seems impossible, namely that the minimal differentiation of creditworthy aspirant rentier and wage-earning or unwaged estate dweller in Britain simply collapse and go away. Its replacement could be proclaimed as 'festive, creative, affective, unalienated, fully lived forms of plurality and individuality that assume rich social relations unfettered by forms of "indifference" (individualism, pluralism, imitation, conformism, naturalized particularism)' (Stefan Kipfer qtd in Pinder, 'Reconstituting the Possible' 34). In extraordinary times brought about by externalities that human beings have in fact repeatedly endured, the impossible can suddenly become possible.

Where now? Images like Clayton's with their grasp of the visual strangeness of Lion Farm as an aesthetic quality could resist more orthodox cultural representations of the estate such as those of Hanley and Meades via open-minded thinking about the estate as territory and place. This could include connecting the estate to imaginative notions of boundedness such as the fairy-tale kingdom, or the urban park. The 'impression' is not the one Meades finds 'overwhelming,' 'want and emptiness, a void in the heart of England' (*Estate* 12:16). It

is instead much more, on Lefebvre's terms, dialectical. According to Lefebvre in *The Urban Revolution*, something 'strange and wonderful, which helped renew dialectical thought' happened when cities expanded greatly (13–14). Following nineteenth-century industrialisation, 'the non-city and the anti-city would conquer the city, penetrate it, break it apart, and in so doing extend it immeasurably, bringing about the urbanisation of society and the growth of the urban fabric that covered what was left of the city prior to the arrival of industry.' Could the estate do something 'strange and wonderful,' conquering the rest of England? In the current millennial atmosphere, who knows?

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