

In Their Place

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The Imagined Geographies of Poverty

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PlutoPress

www.plutobooks.com

First published 2017 by Pluto Press
345 Archway Road, London N6 5AA

www.plutobooks.com

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978 0 7453 3683 1 Hardback
ISBN 978 0 7453 3679 4 Paperback
ISBN 978 1 7868 0119 7 PDF eBook
ISBN 978 1 7868 0121 0 Kindle eBook
ISBN 978 1 7868 0120 3 EPUB eBook

This book is printed on paper suitable for recycling and made from fully managed and sustained forest sources. Logging, pulping and manufacturing processes are expected to conform to the environmental standards of the country of origin.

Typeset by Stanford DTP Services, Northampton, England

Simultaneously printed in the United Kingdom and United States of America

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Introduction

The Spaces of Others

The idea of difference is at the basis of the very notion of space, that is, a set of distinct and coexisting positions which are exterior to one another and which are defined in relation to one another through relations of proximity, vicinity, or distance, as well as through order relations, such as above, below, or between.

Pierre Bourdieu, 1996.¹

THE OTHERS

Space has been called ‘the fundamental stuff of geography’,² and many influential geographers such as Henri Lefebvre, Doreen Massey, David Sibley and Edward Soja have written extensively on the importance of space and the ways in which it is socially produced and reproduced, shaping and being shaped by our relations with each other. By way of example, in her book *For Space*, Doreen Massey articulated three ‘opening propositions’: space is the product of interrelations and is constituted through interactions, whether global or intimate; space is the sphere of possibility and represents multiplicity, heterogeneity and plurality – a site where individual trajectories co-exist; and space is always under construction, never finished and never closed.³ There is, then, general agreement that the concept of space as a dead, fixed and immobile place is no longer relevant. Massey stated in *For Space* that it may therefore be productive to think about space differently. This book attempts to think differently about the spaces associated with people living in poverty. There is, however, no grand narrative, or meta-theory being advanced here. Instead, the intention is to draw attention to the ways in which various groups of people, such as politicians, academics, policymakers, journalists and social reformers use spaces in different ways, doing so, more or less explicitly, to support and augment their arguments and perspectives on poverty.

The alleged behavioural failings and moral inferiority of people living in poverty have attracted a great deal of academic and political scrutiny over the course of the last 400 to 500 years. Researchers have argued that the conflation of poverty with criminality can be traced back to ‘the happy sixteenth-century custom of chopping off the ears of vagabonds, rogues and sturdy beggars.’⁴ Other issues such as poor parenting, drug addiction, a less than enthusiastic approach to work, sexual promiscuity and poor financial management have also been advanced as causes or ‘drivers’ of poverty on a fairly regular basis. These insinuations are examples of how people experiencing poverty are Othered by the rest of society, or those who do not experience such hardship. In this way, the alleged behaviour of ‘the poor’ help to establish them as a distinct group, a separate social entity different and inferior to ‘the non-poor’. Othering has been described as:

A dualistic process of differentiation and demarcation, by which the line is drawn between ‘them’ and ‘us’ – between the more and the less powerful – and through which social distance is established and maintained. It is not a neutral line for it is imbued with negative value judgments that construct ‘the poor’ variously as a source of moral contamination, a threat, an ‘undeserving’ economic burden, an object of pity or even as an exotic species.⁵

Baroness Lister, who has written extensively about poverty and the negative representations of people living on low-incomes, describes Othering as a ‘discursive strategy that magnifies and distorts difference’ and one that has material effects on poor people.⁶ How we refer to people, the names or labels we attach to them, has implications not just for how they are treated by wider society, including its institutions, but also for how those labelled see themselves. Importantly, when powerful groups such as politicians and/or policymakers name something or attach a label to a group, it removes the right or the ability of that group to name and define themselves. The French anthropologist Colette Petonnet, in her book *Those People*, a study of residents of a French public housing project she called La Halle, highlighted how:

Lumped together under the same scorn and sadly surprised by the names they are called, the residents of La Halle have no alternative

but to recognise themselves as the group they form in relation to the outside world.⁷

A contemporary example of the labelling of disadvantaged groups, that also has a long history, can be found in the UK government's Troubled Families Programme. Following riots that broke out in England in 2011, David Cameron, the then prime minister, sought to blame the disturbances on a small hard-core group of trouble-making families. He launched the Troubled Families Programme shortly afterwards and said:

Let me be clear what I mean by this phrase. Officialdom might call them 'families with multiple disadvantages'. Some in the press might call them 'neighbours from hell'. Whatever you call them, we've known for years that a relatively small number of families are the source of a large proportion of the problems in society. Drug addiction. Alcohol abuse. Crime. A culture of disruption and irresponsibility that cascades through generations.⁸

Cameron used research that estimated there were around 120,000 families that experienced 'multiple disadvantages' such as poverty, material deprivation, maternal mental health issues, and poor housing in 2004/5 to support his case that there were the exact same number of families involved in crime, anti-social behaviour, truancy from school and where at least one parent was in receipt of out-of-work benefits in 2011.⁹

Labels similar to 'troubled families' have been around since Victorian times when there was a concern about a 'social residuum' and a 'submerged tenth' of the population. The desire to split 'the poor' into 'deserving' and 'undeserving' groups can be traced back to the 1834 Poor Law. Since then, the belief that there is an 'underclass' in British society, cut off from the rest of 'us' and displaying different norms, values and customs, has been recycled on a fairly frequent basis, with slight changes in emphasis or labels at different times.¹⁰ Not all of these labels have received 'official' status from the government, but many have captured the imagination of the wider population. Viewing some people living in poverty as a 'threat' to wider society has obvious implications not just for the types of policies that are developed to address poverty, but also for the media headlines that are generated in discussions about poverty and the type of support that is offered to such groups.

The process of Othering people living in poverty and of recycling and reconstructing the ‘underclass’ thesis has continued in spite of a lack of empirical evidence and over a century’s worth of academic research in the UK that suggests that structural and political issues such as low pay, a lack of good quality jobs and low levels of state support for those people out of work are, and pretty much always have been, the main causes of poverty.¹¹

In addition to the causes of poverty, spatial inequalities in the concentration of poverty are also well documented, dating all the way back to Charles Booth’s colour-coded poverty maps of London in the 1880s and 1890s. Today, colour-coded, computer-generated ‘heat maps’ of the UK are often used to highlight the poverty and other assorted problems faced by deindustrialised areas in England’s north-east and north-west, and along the ‘M62 corridor’ between Leeds and Manchester. Poor neighbourhoods have also been extensively researched, with a long history of ethnographic studies, where the researcher immerses themselves in the daily life of a district and its inhabitants, on both sides of the Atlantic and beyond. Friedrich Engels, the German philosopher who worked closely with Karl Marx, famously spent nearly three years living in Manchester in the 1840s and published an account of his observations and experiences in *The Condition of the Working Class in England* in 1844. From the 1920s onwards, sociologists and students from ‘the Chicago School’ have been encouraged to view their city as a ‘living laboratory’. The sheer output of many of these researchers, keen to ‘better understand’ the daily lives of ‘the poor’ or ‘the disadvantaged’ sometimes gives the impression that the streets of poor or ‘deprived’ neighbourhoods are crammed full of sociologists, geographers and anthropologists lurking on street corners, undertaking participant observation.¹²

Researchers are, of course, not the only non-residents with an interest in these areas. In Victorian times, London’s middle classes went ‘slumming’ – visiting the poorer East End of London – for a variety of reasons, including for entertainment purposes as well as for research, philanthropic and charitable reasons, an interest that has been recreated in a recent BBC television series called *The Victorian Slum*. Journalists were some of the most active ‘slummers’, often going in search of good copy and keen to tell tales of debauchery and depravity. Contemporary newspaper reports of ‘ghettos of welfare scroungers’ and the investigative journalist Donal MacIntyre’s ‘expose’ of street mugging in Brixton suggest that some things never change.¹³ Visits by politicians and

their ‘special’ advisors to poor neighbourhoods are often used as the political setting for, or precursor to, speeches, policy announcements or think-tank reports about poverty and how best to address it. These visits, and the political rhetoric that accompanies them, purport to ‘tell it like it is’, with the politicians keen to be able to claim that they have seen the effects of poverty ‘first-hand’ and ‘with their own eyes’. And yet, almost without exception, the political (and media) construction of these neighbourhoods, and their residents, ends with them being at least partially blamed, more or less subtly, for the problems associated with them.

Such visits are part of a longer history of the discrediting of entire neighbourhoods, helping to portray them as ‘dreadful enclosures’ or ‘phantasms, which feed on emotional experiences stimulated by more or less uncontrolled words and images’.¹⁴ The geographer David Sibley, in his book *Geographies of Exclusion*, noted that this history of ‘imaginary geographies’ helps to cast minority groups as threatening Others and ‘polluting bodies or folk devils who are then located elsewhere’.¹⁵ Parts of the East End of London, for example, were likened to ‘darkest Africa’ and its inhabitants likened to pygmies and ‘wandering tribes’ in Victorian times. The American sociologist E.V. Walter, who attempted to expose ‘the myth of the dreadful enclosure’, wrote in 1977 that:

In all parts of the world, some urban spaces are identified totally with danger, pain and chaos. The idea of dreadful space is probably as old as settled societies, and anyone familiar with the records of human fantasy, literary or clinical, will not dispute a suggestion that the recesses of the mind conceal primeval feelings that respond with ease to the message: ‘Beware that place: untold evils lurk behind the walls’. Cursed ground, forbidden forests, haunted houses are still universally recognised symbols, but after secularisation and urbanisation, the public expression of magical thinking limits the experience of menacing space to physical and emotional dangers.¹⁶

More recently, the concept of ‘territorial stigmatisation’, which draws attention to the way in which urban areas and neighbourhoods can come to be associated with problematic groups and behaviour, has been advanced by the urban sociologist Loic Wacquant.¹⁷ He, like Walter and others before him, highlights the way that impoverished areas can become ‘spatially tainted’ by political and media discourses linking them with a wide range of social problems. The stigmatisation of an entire local

area ensures that its residents are presented as a homogeneous group and tarred with the same brush. Wacquant reels off a list of neighbourhoods across different countries which are synonymous with disorder and deprivation:

In every metropolis of the First World, one or more towns, districts or concentrations of public housing are publicly known and recognised as those urban hellholes in which violence, vice, and dereliction are the order of things. Some even acquire the status of national eponym for all the evils and dangers now believed to afflict the dualised city: Les Minguettes and La Courneuve or the Mirail housing complex in Toulouse for France; South Central Los Angeles, the Bronx and the project of Cabrini Green in Chicago for the United States; Duisberg-Marxloh and Berlin-Neukölln for Germany; the districts of Toxteth in Liverpool, Saint Pauls in Bristol, or Meadow Well in Newcastle for England; and Bijlmer and Westlijke Tuinsteden in Amsterdam for Holland ... Whether or not these areas are in fact dilapidated and dangerous, and their population composed essentially of poor people, minorities and foreigners, matters little in the end: the prejudicial belief that they are suffices to set off socially noxious consequences.¹⁸

The concept of territorial stigmatisation, which is discussed in more detail in Chapter 4, 'spotlights space as a distinctive anchor of social discredit'.¹⁹ Wacquant, in developing the concept, drew on Pierre Bourdieu's concept of 'symbolic power' and melded it with Erving Goffman's influential work on stigma. Goffman, who has been called the most influential American sociologist of the twentieth century, wrote about the ways in which people attempt to manage their 'spoiled identities' when they fail to live up to other people's standards in an effort to avoid social discredit. Bourdieu, perhaps the most influential sociologist of the last 50 years, described symbolic power as the 'power to construct reality',²⁰ a 'power of creating things with words' and 'a power of consecration or revelation, a power to conceal or reveal things which are already there.'²¹ Bourdieu argued that this power to bring things to life was available to certain people who had earned or were granted the authority to talk about things as if they were experts, such as politicians, journalists, academics and others in positions of power. These people could use this power to shape other people's perceptions about the world,

creating a ‘vision of divisions’, as he called it.²² Bourdieu also used the concept of ‘symbolic violence’ to highlight forms of soft, coercive power, which are often used against people with their consent, or ‘the violence that is exercised upon a social agent with his or her complicity’.²³

THE IMAGINED GEOGRAPHIES OF OTHERS

Despite the Othering of people living in poverty being extensively documented, and places of poverty, most notably disadvantaged neighbourhoods, being sites of a great deal of political and academic scrutiny, many spatial aspects of Othering have remained, by comparison, relatively unresearched. There are, however, some obvious exceptions. In *Orientalism*, the Palestinian public intellectual and professor of literature, Edward Said noted that:

A group of people living on a few acres of land will set up boundaries between their land and its immediate surroundings and the territory beyond, which they call ‘the land of the barbarians’. In other words, this universal practice of designating in one’s mind a familiar space which is ‘ours’ and an unfamiliar space beyond ‘ours’ which is ‘theirs’ is a way of making geographical distinctions that *can be* entirely arbitrary.²⁴

Said argued that discourses circulating about objects and places did not result in a ‘delivered presence, but a *re-presence*, or a representation’, which often relied little on reality and ‘excluded, displaced, [and] made supererogatory any such *real thing* as “the Orient”’.²⁵ There were ‘supreme fictions’ that portrayed people and cultures of ‘the East’ as inferior and more primitive than allegedly more civilised Western societies. Although his focus was on the way that the West ‘exoticised’ Oriental Others via this discourse, his arguments and observations carry similar weight when examining how ‘the non-poor’ represent ‘the poor’, and the idea of representations of spaces will be returned to throughout this book. Said highlighted that there was a ‘large mass of writers’, including

poets, novelists, philosophers, political theorists, economists and imperial administrators [that] have accepted the basic distinction between East and West as the starting point for elaborate theories, epics, novels, social descriptions, and political accounts concerning the Orient, its people, customs, ‘mind’, destiny, and so on.²⁶

Whilst highlighting the strength of the discourse surrounding the idea of the Orient and the fact that men (*sic*) not only made their own history but also their geography, Said argued that although the Orient was ‘essentially an idea,’ it was not ‘a creation with no corresponding reality.’²⁷ Thus, the spaces and places of the Orient existed, as do poor neighbourhoods and other spaces inhabited or frequented by ‘the poor’ that are discussed in this book, but the representations of these places by powerful people do not necessarily reflect the ‘reality’ of them. In another important point that is relevant to the discussion in this book, Said argued that ‘ideas, cultures, and histories cannot seriously be understood or studied without their force, or more precisely their configurations of power, also being studied.’²⁸ Discourses about the Orient were, he believed, ‘something more formidable than a mere collection of lies’ and that their ‘sheer knitted-together strength’ needed to be understood and respected. A large part of this discursive strength came from the ‘very close ties to the enabling socio-economic and political institutions, and its redoubtable durability.’²⁹

Said argued that every space was, in some way, linked to another one and that there were no totally ‘isolated’ or ‘pure’ spaces, or spaces that were not ‘represented’ in some way. In a similar vein, the Canadian sociologist Rob Shields argues in his book *Places on the Margin*, that:

marginal places that are of interest are not necessarily on the geographical peripheries but, first and foremost, they have been placed on the periphery of cultural systems of space in which places are ranked relative to each other. They all carry the image, and stigma, of their marginality which becomes indistinguishable from any basic empirical identity they might once have had.³⁰

Thus, it is often the cultural properties associated with spaces, and representations of these spaces, that marks them out as different or marginalised, rather than the physical location, properties or empirical realities of the spaces themselves. A third example of a work that examines aspects of spatial Othering is David Sibley’s seminal book *Geographies of Exclusion*, mentioned above, which begins with the statement that ‘the human landscape can be read as a landscape of exclusion.’³¹ Sibley attempted to ‘foreground the more opaque instances of exclusion’ that are taken for granted and accepted as part of everyday life, and highlighted the implicit forms of inclusion and exclusion that exist in the design

and use of space.³² Sibley's work highlighted the symbolic importance of boundaries, liminal spaces, 'imagined geographies' and 'clean spaces', free from 'polluting populations'.³³ He believed it was 'necessary to examine the assumptions about inclusion and exclusion which are implicit in the design of spaces and places'³⁴ and suggested that 'the boundary question' – the 'sense of border between self and other' – was a 'traditional but very much under-theorised concern in human geography'.³⁵

The ways in which everyday, mundane spaces such as the front door of the family home, 'the house(hold)', the street corner, the local shops and the local school, are symbolically constructed, and how they can contribute to the Othering of people living in poverty has not attracted as much attention or comment. These taken-for-granted spaces have all been put to use in different ways by politicians and media commentators, not to mention researchers, yet they should not be regarded as mere backdrops to the alleged deviant or problematic behaviour of people living on low incomes. Just as the putative behaviour, habits and customs of disadvantaged communities and populations have been used to create distinctions between 'us' and 'them', so have the 'imagined geographies' used, traversed and inhabited by such groups. People living in poverty are expected to be found, or indeed kept, in certain places and, by extension, they also face symbolic and material exclusion from occupying or moving through other spaces.

This book, then, intends to examine how spaces and spatial metaphors are deployed in discourses that circulate about people living on the margins of our society and, more specifically, those that live in poverty. It aims to highlight how various 'imagined geographies' associated with poor populations are brought to life by people in positions of power. These symbolically potent spaces and boundaries help to Other 'the poor' and bring them to life in the minds of 'the non-poor'. They strengthen political discourses surrounding poor individuals, families and communities. Such images and metaphors can be used to keep or 'fix' people in their place, to exclude them from other spaces and thus make sure that people living in poverty *know* their place.

A quick and contemporary example to demonstrate how local, everyday spaces can create distinctions and draw a line between 'them' and 'us', thus helping construct our views on reality, can be found in a statement made by the then chancellor of the exchequer in the UK, George Osborne. In a section of his speech to the Conservative Party

conference in 2012, Osborne talked about fairness in the welfare state, and rhetorically asked:

Where is the fairness, we ask, for the shift-worker, leaving home in the dark hours of the early morning, who looks up at the closed blinds of their next door neighbour sleeping off a life on benefits?³⁶

This single sentence manages to bring imagined people and spaces, and their relationship to each other, to life. The exact details of the images in people's heads may differ, but everyone listening to the speech or reading about it afterwards is encouraged to imagine a member of a 'hardworking family', who crosses the symbolic threshold of the family home in the cold, dark hours of the early morning to go out to work. In the house next door, according to Osborne, his neighbour lies snuggled up in bed, lazily enjoying the trappings of a life paid for by other people's taxes and with something to hide, or be ashamed of, behind closed blinds.

The use of the term 'shift-worker' implies unrewarding and repetitive work. The 'look up at the closed blinds' suggests that he or she is annoyed at the unfairness of their neighbour being asleep at this time. The safety and security of a bedroom is contrasted with the cold, dark outside. The social distance between the two people mentioned is in stark contrast to the physical proximity: this is a 'striver' living not just on the same street as a skiver, but right next door to them. This proximity is important in attempts to create a 'vision of divisions'. Living next door to someone 'sleeping off a life on benefits' must, we are encouraged to think, be much harder than being aware of these people existing in some far-off estate in another part of town. Familiarity breeds contempt.

Pierre Bourdieu suggested that '[t]he preconstructed is everywhere'³⁷ and that it was necessary for sociologists and other critical scholars to break with common-sense views and widely used classificatory systems. He urged social researchers to reject the opportunity to simply ratify the social problems that the state presented them with, including 'false oppositions' such as 'deserving' and 'undeserving' poor, and engage in research that can 'twist the stick in the other direction'³⁸ and think differently about the world. Bourdieu, in taking his own advice, often took as his subject 'precisely those attitudes, dispositions, and ways of perceiving reality that are taken for granted by members of a social class or a society'.³⁹