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Review

**Matthew Taunton, *Fictions of the City: Class, Culture and Mass Housing in London and Paris*
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Matthew Taunton looks at the way that writers and filmmakers have dealt with cities and mass housing in this thought-provoking study. Some good readings of novels and essays by H.G. Wells and George Orwell, Émile Zola, the situationist-influenced Georges Perec, Christiane Rochefort's novel of life on welfare in the housing projects outside Paris, *Josyane and the Welfare*, and films by Jean Renoir, Jean Luc Godard, Ken Loach (*Cathy Come Home*) and Gary Oldman (*Nil By Mouth*) are cross referenced with a broad range of social policy studies, including those of the Garden Cities movement, Le Corbusier and the more recent offerings of Lord Rogers' Urban Renaissance Task Force.

Taunton is interested in class, but argues with sociological analyses (well, with Karl Marx, mostly) for missing out the 'fundamental role that housing types and tenures play in class formation' (169), and he insists that 'class is more tied to place than many theories' allow (2). Against Marxist schematics, Taunton argues that 'novelists and filmmakers have often proved to be more sensitive to specifics and it is for this reason that fictions of the city prove to be such a potent resource in addressing these issues' (4). Using illustrations from fiction to examine housing policy in these two capitals, Taunton's shows that where you live has been an important marker of class. Taunton is interested particularly in the way that overcrowding, suburbanisation, council estates and the Parisian Banlieues have been dealt with in fiction and policy.

Ideas about writers and about housing are similar in that people take them both very personally, and have strong opinions, most often based on their own impressions and preferences, that they nonetheless think of as obviously true and universally applicable. The rule 'I don't know much, but I know what I like' seems to apply in both spheres. Taunton questions many of these presuppositions, inviting us, for example, to look at the domestic lives behind the shopping arcades that so bewitched Walter Benjamin, and to think critically about the pseudo-rural promise of the suburban home. There is a great

deal here to delight and surprise, but there are also some arguments that seem more debatable than he allows. Often, it seems that Taunton is advocating for some kinds of dwellings and against others in ways that seem unnecessarily polarised and normative, as if a modern and complex society did not need many different ways of living. One shortcoming of fiction as a source is that it is not always clear whether it is evidence of facts or prejudices (though one could say the same of many policy documents, too). Looking at the film *Nil By Mouth*, for example, one has to ask whether this is an objective social document, or an overwrought caricature of working-class degradation.

In particular, Taunton has a reactive distaste for English suburbanites, whom he calls 'the relentless sprawl' (5), a 'rash' (60), 'sprawl' again (61), 'low density suburban gravy' that, mixing metaphors, threatens to 'swamp the countryside' (93), 'a fungal growth threatening to choke the countryside', based on 'bogus dreams' (94), and once again 'endless residential sprawl' (185). These prejudices are not exactly unfamiliar, but they are, all the same, stark in their contempt for the lives of millions of people. To get a measure of how such words sound, try using them to describe the people of the inner city housing estates: a 'rash', a 'sprawl', 'relentless', 'fungal', 'urban gravy'. Taunton might say that these are characterisations of the conditions not the people, but they work by dehumanising 'the suburbans' using metaphors of disease or organic, and therefore unthinking, growth. Nor is this as peripheral a group as one might think. There are perhaps questions of definition, but the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions estimated that fully 43 per cent of the population lived in the suburbs – quite a large proportion of the population to dismiss (Todorovic).

Slipping into these derogatory metaphors of human sprawl is all the more surprising since Taunton is clearly familiar with John Carey's book *The Intellectuals and the Masses*, which first pointed out how so many writers were gripped by this revulsion at the 'bungaloid growth' of the suburbs, and the way that their snobbish language diminished people. Taunton writes about Carey's book, dismissing it with a rather cliquish assumption that most readers in the know would understand that the wise and humane Carey was in fact a flawed character because he thinks that popular and high culture are distinct. Taunton has read Carey's evidence that intellectuals unthinkingly dismissed the suburban masses, but failed to recognise any problem with such a view, because it is his own.

Underpinning Taunton's contempt for the suburbs is the belief that such growth is eating up the countryside, one that he carries over uncritically from Orwell and others. It is a widespread belief: an opinion poll for the Barker Review found that 73 per cent thought that fully one quarter of England is built on, and more than half thought that more than half of England was built on. In fact just one tenth of England is developed (44). The mismatch between people's belief that the countryside has been concreted over and the vast span of England's green countryside would surely have been an interesting study, and it is a shame that Taunton prefers to dwell in ignorance.

Alongside Taunton's disdain for 'the suburbans' is a prescriptive belief that people ought to live in high density urban settings: 'The challenge is to find ways of building at high densities that are comfortable, convenient and homely, not to blandly insist that the suburban semi suits us well enough' (96). This is a dogma that Taunton has inherited from Lord Rogers' Urban Task Force: 'We must give priority to creating higher-density, compact developments in existing urban areas' (46).

The prescription to 'build up, not out' that the government, and the Greater London Authority took from Sir Richard and made their policy, has been sharply tested in the years since. The premise of the argument, that 'to accommodate the world at suburban densities would be a social and environmental catastrophe' (96) begs so many questions. Who wants to accommodate the world at suburban densities? 'There are also,

as Richard Rogers and James Lovelock have argued, compelling environmental reasons for resisting land-hungry, low density development' (185). Since then James Lovelock has retreated from his argument that climate catastrophe is upon us as 'alarmist' and 'extrapolating too far'. In any event analysis of the Australian Conservation Foundation's Conservation Atlas prepared for the Residential Development Council shows, surprisingly, that per capita greenhouse gas emissions are *lower* in suburban areas than city centres ('Greenhouse Gas Emissions, Tonnes per Capita, Housing Form in Australia and its Impact on Greenhouse Gas Emissions' 11).

Taunton is let down here by his 1950s vision of the suburbs as dormitories serving urban industry. In 2004 Terence Bendixson of the Independent Transport Commission published a report, *Suburban Future*, according to which: 'Suburbs and exurbs are not predominantly dormitories for city centre office and shop workers. Most of their residents live, work and play in the suburbs and visit city centres only from time to time.' Against Taunton's expectations, industry has tended to move with the population into the South East, out of London, so that even the one remaining magnet of diurnal commuting, the financial district in the Square Mile, is today giving way to shopping centres, as banks and insurance companies move out to Canary Wharf.

As *Suburban Future* makes plain, commuting is quicker in the suburbs than in cities. It takes residents within the suburbs and exurbs 24/25 minutes, 34 minutes for residents within cities like Bristol and Birmingham and 43 minutes for those living and working in Greater London. Another reason for the lower carbon emissions in suburbs is that newly built homes on green field sites tend to be more energy efficient than Victorian-built homes.

Taunton's view of the supposed social catastrophe is confused, too. He writes about a 'slow migration of the middle classes into affluent suburbs' (97). Is that what is happening? Tim Butler, Chris Hamnett and Mark Ramsden's analysis of London's employment in the 2001 census shows that outer London and the South East is more working class than inner London. Inner London had more large employers, professionals and managers than outer London and the South East. Outer London had more routine, semi-routine and technical or lower supervisory workers than inner London. Inner London did have more unemployed than outer London, and outer London had more self-employed than inner London. This employment profile was new, following changes that took place after fifteen years of economic growth, say Butler and his colleagues (see especially page 72). When Taunton writes, arguing with Marx, that 'far from withering out of existence, the petty bourgeoisie (middle class owner occupiers) and the lumpenproletariat (economically inactive council tenants) now dominate the landscape' (169), it is perhaps a portrait more specific to inner London's peculiar development than to the country as a whole (where employment has climbed from 23 million in 1983 to 29 million in 2009).

The vision of the middle classes abandoning the inner cities to poverty that Taunton repeats was always one-sided, missing out, for example, the movement of London's adventurous or desperate poor into the unplanned plotland settlements like Pitsea, Laindon and Jaywick Sands, such that '...by the end of World War II there was a settled population of about 25,000 on 75 miles of grass-track roads, mostly un-sewered and with standpipes for water supply' (Hall and Ward 76). In 1949 this site was designated as a new town, Basildon. Other overspill sites like Thurrock and St Albans are more working class than stockbroker belt.

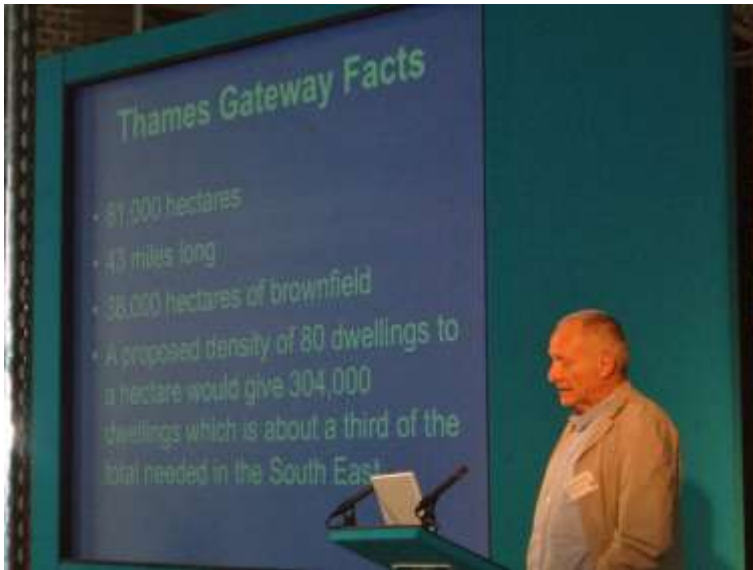


Figure 1

Richard Rogers getting his sums wrong ($80 \times 38,000 = 3,040,000$)

[Photo © James Heartfield 2013]

More recently, though, the imposition of Richard Rogers's policy of restricting 'suburban sprawl' has created a social catastrophe of its own – the increasing gentrification of the inner city, raising the prospect of 'social cleansing' as the working poor are forced out by excessive house prices. The additional planning restrictions under the Urban Task Force plan succeeded in strangling outward growth, but 'upward' growth has not filled the gap. Overall the absolute number of homes built in Britain has fallen to its lowest level since the Second World War. A real housing shortage in the UK led to a marked rise in house prices (made worse by the availability of credit, though its restriction since the 2008 crash has not seen a corresponding fall in house prices, suggesting that undersupply is the fundamental problem). Average London house prices are above £400,000, putting them beyond the pocket of working-class Londoners. Taunton has an answer to those priced out: 'it is important to recognise that the supposed advantages of owning a house as opposed to renting from a private landlord or local authority are not a given' (53) – though in truth the advantages are that rents are around 16 per cent higher than mortgage repayments, and they rise in tandem with house prices (Wiseman). For those poorer Londoners who do not move out, the consequence is overcrowding, with homes split into more and more sublettings, grown-up children unable to move out, and, near me, a couple living in a garden shed – the inevitable outcome of these spiralling prices and rents. According to the Mayor of London 'around 207,000 of London's households are overcrowded... a third higher than ten years ago' (7).

Taunton argues that the drive to the suburbs in England is all part of the lingering influence of the aristocracy, echoing the thesis put forward by Thomas Nairn and Perry Anderson of Britain's incomplete and compromised bourgeois revolution. Certainly the Nairn-Anderson thesis has become a model for those on the left who hoped to redirect the movement away from socialism towards a programme of modernisation, like Gordon Brown and Tony Blair. There is some basis to the argument that the aristocrats' monopoly over land was an important precondition for the creation of a landless working class to fill the cities, and that aristocrats were able to translate their feudal holdings into capitalist wealth in the first half of the nineteenth century (see Saville, chapter 4). However, the aristocratic monopoly over land came to an end with the passing of the Settled Land Acts of 1882 which reversed the restrictions on sales (apart from the family seat): 'The aristocratic share of the acreage of the British Isles fell from four-fifths in the 1880s to no more than a quarter a century later' (Hobson 79).

Since then elites have struggled to find a justification for keeping working people off the land. That was the backdrop to the great outcry against suburban sprawl, driven in part

by a fall in land prices after the war, in the early twentieth century that Taunton echoes. The answer to the problem of keeping the *oiks orf are land* was the Green Belt tied around London and other cities under the Town and Country Planning Act passed after the Second World War. During the Second World War, the Uthwatt Report on post-war house building argued for the power of the government to stop speculators hanging onto the land and profiting from the demand for new homes after the war. The goal was a massive house-building programme. But Uthwatt was not implemented. Instead the Labour government caved in to Tory pressure to pass a compromise Town and Country Planning Act that would contain any new housing in demarcated 'New Towns'. The aristocratic impulse is more evident in the laws reining in suburbanisation than it is in suburbanisation itself.

The full measure of the Green Belt was felt the summer before when Basildon Council (forgetting its own origins in unplanned settlement) enforced an eviction order against the gypsy settlement at Dale Farm. Around a hundred people who had bought their own land, built their own homes and made their own community were violently thrown off by police and security guards, to the horror of the world's media. Council Leader Tony Ball insisted that his action was to protect the Green Belt from unplanned development – where the Dale Farm settlement showed that ordinary people were better at sorting out their own problems than waiting for Basildon Council to do it for them.



Figure 2

'Don't make us part of the housing problem'

[Photo © James Heartfield 2013]

Taunton's comparisons of Paris and London are interesting, but one has to ask whether he has succumbed to the narcissism of small differences. He restlessly contrasts London with its suburbanisation to Paris with its Haussmann-erected city limits, Paris with its poorer suburbs and overpriced inner city, to London supposedly the other way around. But all of these differences seem to fall away on closer inspection. Today more than 80

percent of Parisians live in the suburbs and exurbs. The ville de Paris has fewer than 2.2 million people, while the rest of the urban area has nearly 8 million people. In fact the trend towards greater dispersion and lower density living claimed here to be an Anglo-Saxon vice has been repeated across Europe, from supposedly compact Barcelona to Stockholm (see Demographia.com for the statistics). Inner London, it turns out, is just as overpriced as central Paris, and there are some deprived estates in London suburbs, such as St Helier in Merton, which are basically suburban dumping grounds. Taunton's tales of the poor moving to makeshift 'Bidonvilles' outside Paris is striking, but not that different from the Plotland movement in Essex.

The reason that there are different kinds of tenure (privately or publicly rented, mortgaged, owned-outright) and different architectural answers to housing people (flats, terraces, semi-detached, bungalows) in different kinds of settings (village, exurb, suburb, inner city) is that there are many different circumstances. There has for the last fifty years been an underlying trend, on the average, across the developed world, towards more rather than less dispersed living, which has been driven by better transport, and more land coming available as farming becomes more intense. Municipal authorities have at times tried to limit that trend through legal restraints, but the results, as London's overheated property market shows are not usually that good, or even that effective.

To champion one kind of housing against another loses sight of the dynamic way that cities grow. There are not in truth 'suburbs' and 'inner cities' at all. As Robert Bruegmann has explained, all urban districts were once suburbs, and the city's expansion has always provoked anxiety, mostly unfounded. In the 1829 print 'London Going out of Town - The Invasion of Bricks and Mortar', George Cruikshank shows an assault on the pristine fields of Islington, which today is counted as urban inner city.

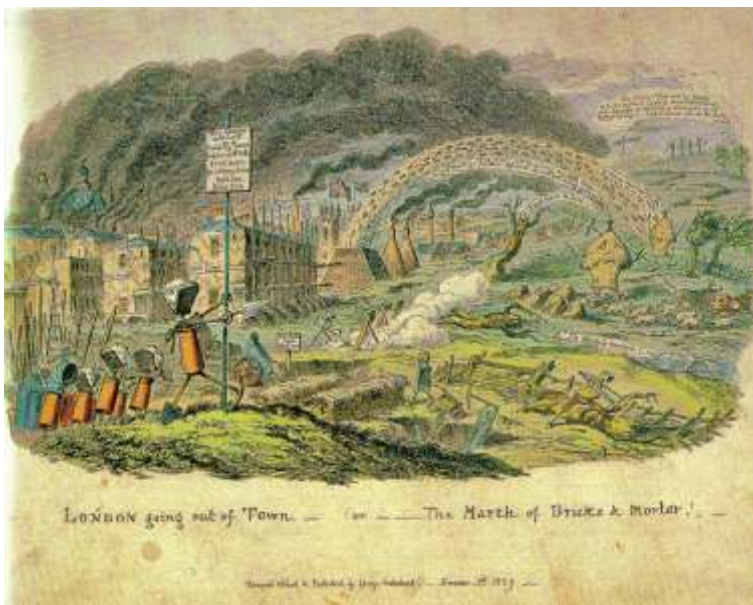


Figure 3

George Cruikshank, 'London Going out of Town' (1829)

From the author's private collection. Reproduced with permission.

Insisting that all homes should be of one kind rather than another is to demand that the millions of Britons, French or others should all be the same. Worse, it speaks of a solipsistic view that everyone should be like you, when there are many different reasons that people live where they live, from financial limitations to work, age and family circumstances.

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