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Book Reviews

Narratives of Neglect: Community, Regeneration and the Governance of Security
Jacqui Karn, 2007
Cullompton: Willan Publishing.
251 pp. £40.00 hardback;
ISBN 978 1 84392 195 0 hardback

Jacqui Karn’s account of a multiply deprived council estate in the north of England is centrally concerned with residents’ and professionals’ narrations of inner-city deprivation and decline. Spending 18 months conducting ethnographic research in ‘Millton’ (her name for a neighbours that lies in one of the poorest wards in Manchester), Karn describes how she comes to know residents’ experiences of living on ‘the estate’ first through meetings (of the local tenants’ association, residents’ steering group and a recently established regeneration project) and public events, and later by visiting residents in their homes to conduct semi-structured interviews, organising focus groups in the youth centre to survey teenage views on social (dis)order and ways of life locally, and eliciting the views of professionals including police officers, housing officials and community workers (who are involved in local regeneration) on the area’s loss of fortune. These complex data provide the basis for her analysis of Millton and its socioeconomic problems. The central thesis is that despite allusions to ‘bottom–up’ participation in urban policy agendas, the capacity for local communities to influence regeneration processes is (still) limited. As a consequence, residents are disempowered and subjected to inappropriate policy measures. The neo-liberal policy focus on creating self-regulating areas capable of sustaining local markets sees residents framed as consumers, with causal explanations of market failure and solutions offered as a means of restoring conditions for successful competition.

To construct this argument, Karn immerses herself in the lives of the residents of Millton. She recounts the life stories of people living in the area and, in particular, the narratives they employ to describe life in—what Karn describes as—an ‘abandoned, yet defended’ place (a term used to connote both the deprivation of the local area and the sense of community that is found there). The book is divided into four parts. In the first part ‘Introducing an ethnography’, which consists of three chapters, Karn acquaints the reader with the estate. In chapter 1, she presents Millton in the context of the city of Manchester, outlining key characteristics of the estate alongside her reasons for choosing the area as a case study. Her tone is reflective, outlining her prior knowledge and perceptions of the area, as well as her naivety about the demands of conducting an ethnographic research project. She describes in some detail the difficulties of negotiating access to local community forums and the personal insights of Millton’s residents. Karn talks of the different roles she adopts in the course of her research and the tactics she employs when speaking to different groups. Some of these involve her placing herself (and her informants) in risky situations; hence, it was notable and perhaps surprising that this chapter did not also include a discussion of ethical considerations and the emergency procedures put in place at the planning stage.

Chapter 2 comprises a survey of debates and questions about the governance of urban communities. Noting the policy emphasis on the participation of citizens in local governance, Karn outlines the links being made between active, engaged communities and the
socioeconomic security of residents in political discourse. In the Sustainable Communities agenda, the building of safe communities is said to be dependent on grassroots activism, which is defined as a high level of resident involvement in local service delivery and community events. Juxtaposing this against her own experiences in Millton, Karn notes how the language of active participation belies the passive role that is envisaged for residents of troubled estates where communities can act only as informants of enforcement agencies and supporters of police intervention to address disruptive and illegal behaviour. These differences between policy rhetoric and reality are revealed by Karn in the course of the chapter as she moves from a focus on the internal dynamics of communities and their capacity for control to the (discursive) constitution of local problems and the establishment of relationships between residents and the authorities. This provides a useful, if rather perfunctory, overview of the context in which policies are currently formulated. Indeed, further details on the policies being implemented in Millton would have been useful in grounding the narratives of local residents and policy practitioners that form the basis of the remainder of this book.

In chapter 3, Karn explains her ethnographic approach as a means of coming to know the (socio-political) processes through which places are made and experienced. Here, she considers how residents and professionals account for the change that has been observed in Millton in recent decades. She introduces various narratives of the area’s decline. Causal explanations of deprivation are then linked to Bourdieu’s nation of ‘habitus’ (i.e. narratives are seen to be formed and enforced by experiences of social position) to introduce the reader to the remaining sections of the book.

Part 2 of the book is entitled ‘Living here’. Again divided into three chapters, it attends to the narratives of decline and change that Karn discerns through her interviews and the focus groups she organises in the local youth centre with Millton residents. In chapter 4, Karn outlines how the residents she spoke to describe the estate and relate themselves (or not) to a sense of belonging to it. There are those who she says describe themselves as ‘born and bred’ Milltonites, some of whom perceive a loss of community values in the local area and others who continue to identify with its ‘surviving community’. There are also newcomers to the area, who are divided into distinct camps. A number—Karn says—are ‘learning to be local’, while others assert that they are ‘sticking it out alone’ or ‘keeping a distance’ from the estate and its (other) residents. Here, Karn’s findings provide a rich insight into the everyday lives of people living in a multiply deprived estate, characterised by social housing tenure and high levels of crime. Her writing paints a vivid picture (the recompense being that there are few attendant statistics in the book to quantify this position).

In chapter 5, Karn probes the complex social relationships that she divines through these interviews and focus groups. She considers how residents of the estate relate to others living elsewhere in Manchester (using narratives of ‘us’ and ‘them’), as well as the divisions that exist in Millton between established residents, newcomers and ‘strangers’. These are particularly visible in struggles over rubbish, boundaries and noise, which Karn recounts in some depth. She then goes on to examine how a process of ‘othering’ serves to isolate certain local residents who are seen as ‘different’ as a result of their race, ethnicity, norms and behaviour. The implication here is that policy-makers need to take note of these stigmatising processes if they are adequately to overcome situations of social exclusion. However, this is not simply an ‘internal’ (i.e. intra-estate) concern—there is a suggestion in later chapters that officials can contribute to processes of social marking through their ‘external’ narratives of neglect in which blame is often placed with disorderly local residents.

Despite these community fractures, Karn recounts how a mistrust of the authorities often serves to unite the residents of Millton. As they seek to ‘defend’ themselves from members of the local police force, for instance, residents invoke the sense of community that is otherwise felt to have been lost. Chapter 6 deals
specifically with the relationships between local residents and the authorities. Here, Karn exposes the ways in which residents attribute responsibility for (not) dealing with local problems to government agencies and other local organisations. Hidden agendas and interests are suspected—such as a deliberate no lettings policy for vacant local authority housing—which Karn relates to the continued perception of state responsibility for resolving issues in the community (in this case, the environmental deprivation that is seen to stem from the Housing Association’s ‘wilful neglect’ of its properties). With these expressed views standing in marked contrast to the Labour government’s calls for local residents to work together to resolve issues affecting neighbourhoods, Karn questions the appositeness of a strategy of bottom–up reform. She argues that, because residents continue to place responsibility for dealing with problems with the authorities, there is widespread disenfranchisement which militates against bottom–up community action. This is a pertinent argument, which foregrounds some of the points raised in the concluding chapters regarding participatory urban governance.

Part 3—‘Working there’—has two chapters that approach issues surrounding urban regeneration, using the semi-structured interviews that Karn conducted with local policy practitioners. In chapter 7, Karn explores the causal explanations embedded in professional narratives of Millton’s decline. She argues that the planning and marketing script which now guides urban regeneration is led by ‘utopian ideals’ (with an explicit focus on residents as consumers and the creation of self-regulating areas capable of sustaining local markets in policy documentation) which misses the material and other constraints pertaining to Millton’s residents. A causal explanation of market failure is presented alongside solutions that aim primarily to restore conditions for successful competition. Illustrating this, Karn’s respondents cite the low population density of the neighbourhood as a key factor underpinning its decline (because of non-viability for shops of the local market), while the poor layout also encourages crime, makes policing difficult and prevents passing trade. From this, practitioners suggest that mixed developments are most desirable (the estate is single tenure) because it is private residents, particularly owner-occupiers, who help to precipitate processes of gentrification. In the meantime, the authorities are keen to use anti-social behaviour orders (ASBOs) as a means of controlling the image of the area and protecting (their) investment in regeneration.

The professionals’ views of the appropriate policy instruments for engendering change are followed by material detailing their understandings of the ‘community’ in which they work. In chapter 8, Karn details the implicit assumptions policy practitioners hold about the residents of Millton and nature of disorder in the estate. She distinguishes between the practitioners’ understandings of people who are ‘other’—the bad, ungovernable and difficult to police—and the community proper (which is understood to be supportive but reluctant to report any wrongdoing on the estate). This constitution of a fractured local community foregrounds Karn’s conclusion that regeneration remains a top–down instrument of governance. Despite frequent references to local participation within policy discourse, residents have little opportunity for engagement because change is seen to depend on attracting active citizen-consumers to the estate. This argument chimes with proponents of critical gentrification studies and will undoubtedly find a sympathetic audience of urban theorists more broadly. Indeed, while these two chapters—and Karn’s book more generally—are orientated towards an understanding of urban criminology (notably, it is published in a new crime ethnography series by Willan Publishing), there is potential for Karn to extend her arguments with these readers in mind.

The fourth and final part of the book comprises two chapters. Chapter 9, entitled ‘Participation?’ examines the importance of relationships between residents and authorities in areas of social exclusion. Chapter 10 draws insights
from the narration of Millton’s deprivation and decline—which pivots around accounts of the failure of the local state—to consider how local governance can become more participatory, ensuring that local communities actually feed into wider democratic and policymaking processes. Karn’s insights here are more diagnostic than remedial, with the crux of her argument being that narrations of neglect reflect the loss of legitimacy of governing bodies owing to a failure to establish genuinely inclusive forms of governance (as have been deemed necessary to overcome crime and disorder in urban estates).

Perhaps one means of developing these insights and imagining another policy trajectory would be through national (and international) comparison. In this regard, one weakness of the book is the lack of policy detail. This militates against efforts to draw conclusions that might inform policy because it renders Millton an individual, isolated case study. Communicating to practitioners does not appear to be a primary goal, however. The useful appendix to the book (which includes detailed accounts of how Karn conducted her interviews, including a sample interview schedule) indicates that Karn’s primary target audience is fellow academic researchers. For us, there is much to be gained from her painstaking ethnography, methodological insights and carefully constructed conceptual arguments.

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Three Decades of Enterprise Culture: Entrepreneurship, Economic Regeneration and Public Policy
Francis J. Greene, Kevin F. Mole and David J. Storey, 2008
Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
283 pp. £55.00 hardback;
ISBN 978 1 4039 4102 2 hardback

Support for small businesses has been a significant part of economic policy in the UK since the late 1970s, with the government spending “approximately the same amount on supporting small businesses as they do on the police service or universities” (p. 244). The aim of small business support has been to provide a framework for individual entrepreneurship to flourish in order to boost international competitiveness and improve the weak economic performance of particular regions. The commitment to business start-ups has been a contentious area of economic regeneration, attracting criticism not only for diverting significant amounts of public money from other policy options, but also for the underlying ideological belief in the regenerative powers of a mythical enterprise culture.

Three Decades of Enterprise Culture brings together an impressive range of primary and secondary research in order to explore a range of key issues related to new business formation—What sort of people get involved in setting up new businesses? What sorts of funding do they make use of? What factors contribute to the survival and growth of new businesses? And, ultimately, what judgements can be made about the effectiveness of public policy in this area? At the core of the book is a longitudinal study of the Teesside area of England, drawing on 157 interview-based surveys with new business managers in 1981, 214 interviews in 1991 and a further 320 interviews in 2001. Teesside is particularly interesting given that it moved from being an economically vibrant area in the early 1970s (when nothing was being done to help support the creation of new businesses) to endemic structural unemployment in the 1980s and 1990s when huge resources were devoted to indigenous business development. It is argued that “Teesside in the 1980s was almost a laboratory for successive interventions that sought to establish an ‘enterprise culture’” (p. 11). In addition to the main Teesside study, a further round of 300 interviews was undertaken in the 1990s in two areas: in Shropshire, in the middle range of business start-ups and affluence in England, where enterprise activity might be expected to be positive but not spectacular; and in Buckinghamshire, which has one of the highest rates of new business start-up and