

A history of oppositional Salford: from dirty old town to splintering post-industrial city

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Oppositional Salford: Dirty Old Town to Splintering Post-Industrial Metropolis (Keynote Address)

Oppositions Conference, University of Salford

Radical Studies Network and College of Arts and Social Sciences

This paper presents a history of the City of Salford from the Industrial Revolution to the present day. Focusing in upon the city's explosive growth throughout the Victorian period and the social horrors that accompanied this development, I will examine development of early radical politics (Chartism, the Suffragettes, Trade Unionism, Engels and Marx) and the ways in which working class organisation was often inhibited by other social cleavages (especially anti-Irish feeling). Nevertheless, it will be contended that by the middle of the twentieth century the city experienced something of a golden period, whereby full employment, commitment to progress and the solidarities formed through the experience of the second world war stood in stark contrast crushing poverty that had hitherto defined Salford, but also to the processes of social fragmentation that would latterly develop. Perhaps first amongst such processes was the restructuring of the city in response to political, technological, economic and cultural change.

On the one hand grassroots political mobilisation pressed for improvements to housing conditions, which given the paucity of available land (Salford being the most densely developed authority in England outside of the East End of London) led to policies of overspill to the periphery and high-rise development in the inner city. Carried through with a Modernist bent that overlooked the realities of actually existing social relations, these changes served to fragment familial and wider social networks, while policies around the 'separation of uses' physically fragmented urban space and the often cheap, poorly maintained system-built housing estates soon presented a multiplicity of problems to their residents.

On the other hand, the socially mobile increasingly fled the inner cities for purpose-built suburbs and more individualised lifestyles. Political-historical research tells us that it was around the late 1960s when the organisational capacity of the local Labour party (and perhaps more generally, organised labour as such) began to collapse, there was a marked change in the demographic profile of officials, and the old social networks upon which organisation had been built in the past no longer functioned.

This was of course followed by the Oil Shock 1973. While the city remained radical in cultural terms, unemployment raged through the city leading to a multiplicity of personal tragedies, while the decentralisation of the city continued apace, and national and local political elites were seemingly becoming ever more detached from some of the communities they supposedly represented. In the 1980s Salford attained a national reputation for its 'high crime estates' and a number of research projects were conducted in the early 1990s subsequent to disorder in the city. Nevertheless, this 'inner-city' problem was far from unique to Salford and by the time of the 1981 riots the solution was already being articulated by the incoming Conservative government: Enterprise Zones, governmental technologies for dis-embedding urban space from local democratic control as part of a push towards the 'entrepreneurial city'. Subsequently followed through with a plethora of related policy tools, Urban

Development Corporations, Urban Regeneration Companies and Housing Market Renewal Pathfinders, amongst others, these policies have amounted to 'gentrification by capital', annihilating swathes of city space, leading to displacement and spatial exclusion. Research on the development of Salford Quays tells us that promises made to the deprived communities of the inner-city regarding the benefits of regeneration were scarcely believed by the political and bureaucratic actors making them, while the ethnographic research of myself and others in the city suggests widespread cynicism amongst local residents.

The reality of the solution to the urban crisis has been the diffusion of gated communities, which housing researchers have referred to as dormitory estates for 'city-centre tourists', who in the 1990s and 2000s spilled out from the regional centre itself, as the policies around city-centre regeneration of the Major and Blair governments (largely predicated on retail and the euphemistically titled 'Night-Time Economy') led to property saturation. The fact that the majority of these incomers spend their disposable income in the regional centre or out of town retail parks belies any talk of a 'trickle-down' inspired multiplier effect. Similarly, commercial development in the special economic zones has been heavily based around services, offering limited employment opportunities for an inner-city working class who occupy a residualised position as a result of suburbanisation, the deterioration of public services in the inner-city and increasing territorial stigmatisation.

I argue, following ideas developed by gentrification researchers, that social relations in Salford today are characterised by 'tectonic interactions', whereby the dislocation (related to the destruction of communities, cynicism over broken promises, as well as the erasure of the built environment as a locus for memory) and immiseration of the working class, and distance in social space (fuelled at a national scale by the increasing denigration of the working class in popular culture) fuels local conflicts over the use of physical space. In the context of revanchist policies to retake the city for capital, this is countered by state-derived policies of securitisation and exclusion, expressed in Salford through the use of dispersal orders, the proliferation of private security companies and surveillance technologies and forms of policing that are subordinate to the demands of 'regeneration'.

I conclude this talk by exploring the unfolding of the riot event in the vicinity of Salford Precinct within the context of the August 2011 English riots. I draw on both my own research that reveal local grievances between marginalised working class groups, the police, public authorities, incoming residents and political elites. I explore the extent of detachment between large swathes of the community and those who claim to represent them, drawing on evidence from community forums, policing partnership meetings and an evaluation of the city's attempts at participatory budgeting. Finally, I review the lessons of two hundred years of Salford's history that teach the importance of understanding the ways in which social relations are spatialised, the importance of social networks to political mobilisation, as well as the need to overcome barriers to class consciousness in order to forge collective action.