Britain: Labour's proposed urban regeneration plans highlight the growing social divide

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Last month, Britain's Labour government released a paper on urban development entitled *Our Towns and Cities: The Future*. This comes 18 months after the Urban Task Force, chaired by the prominent architect Lord Richard Rogers, recommended urgent inner-city regeneration in its report *Towards an Urban Renaissance*.

Chronic levels of under-investment over the last 100 years mean England has the worst cities in Western Europe. Infrastructure, housing and public services have deteriorated to such an extent that England has fallen behind countries like Greece, in terms of urban social conditions.

New Labour says the solution to this is to create “Cities for the many not the few”, which will be achieved by eradicating “social exclusion”. The latter term has been adopted by the Blair government in Britain and the European Union, who claim it is a more accurate measurement of deprivation, as it extends beyond cash poverty to incorporate social, political and civic "exclusion from mainstream society”.

While poverty and deprivation are certainly multi-dimensional phenomena, the term *social exclusion* detracts from the crucial understanding that multiple deprivation usually has one source— a shortage of cash, whether by virtue of poverty level wages, low pensions or unemployment. This is especially true in today's society where market values determine all areas of service provision.

More fundamentally, the discourse over social exclusion consciously avoids the study of capitalist social relations and the inequalities this generates. Prime Minister Blair has famously pronounced the death of class as a means of understanding social inequality. Society is now said to consist of a new type of poor, the "underclass", and everyone else. By perniciously focussing attention at one pole of society, it avoids addressing the common difficulties faced by most working people and their families, and diverts attention from the enormous enrichment of a tiny layer at the opposite end of the social spectrum.

This is the meagre intellectual and theoretical legacy that informs New Labour's “urban renaissance”. The government report makes only five concrete recommendations. Everything else is a miasma of vague promises and guarantees. One recommendation is the establishment of five more "millennium villages" around the country. These are to be based on the Greenwich Millennium Village, built as part of the Millennium Dome project, the government's failed exhibition centre.

This development in London was originally trumpeted as an egalitarian mix of public and private housing, which would coexist without visible distinctions. By placing better-off layers in close proximity to those in public housing schemes, the idea was that this would stop the development of an "underclass culture". However, private financial interests prevailed once it was time for bricks and mortar to be put in place and the housing developers insisted on a large reduction in the number of social housing units, squeezing those finally built out onto the estate's periphery.

Over the last decade certain inner-city areas have been transformed by the construction of strategic commercial sites and waterfront locations—along with new shops, cafes and fashionable apartments. Often located on sites formerly occupied by dilapidated

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warehouses, old office blocks and disused factories, this "gentrification" has been greeted with breathless excitement in the pages of the Sunday supplements and up-market fashion magazines.

Attempts to capture a certain gritty urban “feel” (repackaging it for privileged consumption) and the location of many ex-industrial properties scheduled for refurbishment mean many of the new exclusive developments are situated within or close to unfashionable working class areas. The stark contrast of expensive new apartments and exclusive commercial facilities cited next to dilapidated terraced streets and public housing brings into sharp focus the enormous inequalities that characterise English cities.

But the geographic proximity of such disparate social layers is a conscious policy on the part of planners and politicians alike. The occupiers of the expensive new apartments and swanky office blocks need access to cheap labour, which can be employed in low-grade service functions such as cleaning, providing security, catering, etc. The poor may be allowed to continue to live in some of the newly gentrified urban areas, but only as a new servant class.

One problem that has already emerged out of this schema is that in upgrading an area, working class people find themselves squeezed out as property prices rise and local amenities and services are oriented towards higher income groups.

New Labour is promoting the arrival of a section of the young and privileged upper middle class to inner-city areas as the birth of a new layer of "urban pioneers". The similarity of such a discourse to development of 19th century colonialism is not unintended. In the minds of politicians, the inner-cities are hostile environments that must be tamed and reclaimed by the influence of private investment and desirable social layers. The term also insinuates that those currently inhabiting these areas are not much more than savages, reinforcing the imagery associated with the "underclass".

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