

Towards a new ancien régime?

Steve Hanson



nowt press

A deracinated present

Mark Rainey alerted me to a street in Manchester where advertising hoardings surround the site of some projected 'state of the art' apartments, offices and a hotel. This project isn't unfinished, it is effectively un-started, the foundations are in place, but nothing else. Mark Rainey has written about this site on his blog¹ in terms of 'degentrification':

'Construction cranes once meant success. On a city skyline they were symbols of regeneration, redevelopment and investment. Then the recession hit. Many building projects went bust and some, like the Origin development on Whitworth Street in Manchester not only lacked the finance to finish the project, but also lacked the money to remove the cranes from the building site. For three years the towering construction cranes stood silently in the sky. They were reminders that work had ceased. They became symbols of the recession.'

Mark describes the hoardings, which, suddenly inverted by the recession, 'détourned', in the language of the Situationists, begin to speak the new poetry of degentrification. I went to the site myself to note the slogans: '30-something, "A" list lifestyle & 5 star home', 'efficient, effortless & individual' and the even more darkly poetic, 'homemaker, risk taker & heartbreaker'. Again, Mark explores the narratives of youth and success communicated by these slogans via the Situationists, in light of our contemporary situation:

'In his *Society of Spectacle* Guy Debord wrote that capitalism portrays itself as young, as youth characterises its dynamism. The images of relationally and professionally aggressive young people on the hoardings along the abandoned development seem to act this out in the most obvious fashion. But there is a bitter irony here. This portrayal of youth is "by no means proper to people who are young" - the lost aspiration symbolized by this out-of-date advertising reflects the loss of opportunities available for young people. The slogan, "Live, Relax, Work", on the hoardings takes on new and twisted meaning as unemployment reaches 2.68 million with young people hardest hit. The cranes have gone, but the advertising remains. What once may have been fashionable, now seems embarrassingly out of place.'

The 'ancien régime' is the political and social system that existed in France before the Revolution of 1789, but the term has also become shorthand for a sociopolitical or other system that only exists in fragmentary or ghostly forms. It might be tempting to think, at moments such as these, that we are catching sight of the rise of a new ancien régime in the ruins of the present.

The term 'liminal' relates to the point beyond which an experience becomes too faint to be experienced. The word is constructed from the Latin 'limen' or threshold. In Sharon Zukin's definition, 'liminal' means temporary spaces, for instance, warehouses taken over for raves, spaces whose uses change, and Zukin's term has been applied to urban edge zones, places of 'underdevelopment', which might become spaces of hope and change for anarchic urban groups².

But the Origin development on Whitworth Street isn't a liminal space in Zukin's sense: Charlie Meecham recently explained to me how developers will somehow find the money for a good fence, even if their situation isn't 'liquid' enough to do anything with their land³. Here is a liminal space in the sense that what the hoardings designate is now reaching the point where it becomes too faint to be experienced by the large majority of the population.

But care must be taken with this kind of perverse triumphalism, not only because recession causes suffering, but because it risks suggesting an erroneous map of the processes at play here. Rainey uses Neil Smith's theory of 'uneven development'⁴ to suggest that 'decline always already accompanies transformation and while degentrification may be at its most obvious in a recession environment, it is also present alongside the very process of gentrification itself.' This was backed up by Peck, Ward and their contributors in *City of Revolution*, a neat decade ago.⁵



work
live
relax

30-something_
'A' list lifestyle_
& 5 star home

origin-princessstreet.com

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Still, Britain is in recession. On the radio today, Mervyn King explained that an 'alternative strategy' is now urgently required, after quantitative easing failed to make the necessary difference. Yet an alternative, King admits, is not in sight. Robert Galeta recently pointed out⁶ the hypocrisy at play when politicians describe the 'Arab Spring'. They talk of 'democratic freedom', 'the people' and 'their future', when the people they actually represent seem to be in a permanent, very bad present. We have just been through the Libor scandal, where tweaking led to massive profits for the elites, to the detriment of the masses. Why is this kind of systemic manipulation not used in a large-scale and radical manner to shift those people away from that permanent bad present? I am, of course, asking a very naive question here on purpose.

Fredric Jameson⁷ talks of 'scarcity' as the condition of life in the west, even if one is rich, he says, this condition is produced by scarcity. Scarcity, in Jameson's description of it, saturates social life, the 'individual' views the other through the lenses of scarcity. This un-reciprocal view must be overcome before the the Origin development on Whitworth Street in Manchester can be declared a relic of the new ancien régime.

Notes

1. Rainey, Mark (2012) <http://edifyingdiscourse.wordpress.com/>
2. Zukin, Sharon (1991). *Landscapes of Power, from Detroit to Disney World*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
3. Hanson, Steve (2012) 'Rewriting the Oldham Road', in *Oldham Road - Second View*. Oldham: Oldham Gallery.
4. Smith, Neil (2008) *Uneven Development: Nature, Capital and Production of Space*. Third Edition. University of Georgia Press.
5. Peck & Ward (2002) *City of Revolution*. Manchester University Press.
6. Letter to the author, received 07/07/12.
7. Jameson (2010) *Valences of the Dialectic*. London: Verso.

