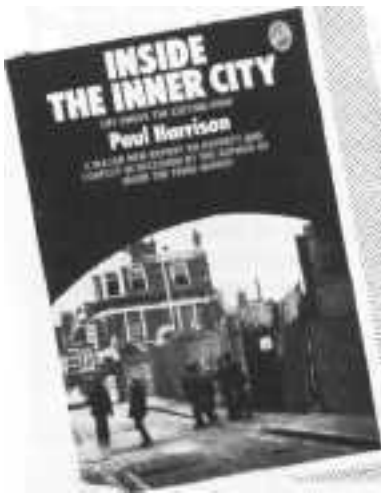


REVIEWS



**INSIDE THE INNER CITY:
LIFE UNDER THE CUTTING EDGE**
Paul Harrison

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For many people who read this book it will confirm their worst fears about life in a British inner city area. From the unemployed to the Asian businessmen, from the refuse worker to the secretary, almost any of the inhabitants you choose lives their life under continuous pressure, under the 'cutting edge'. Each case history that Paul Harrison presents seems to exude a physical and mental tension which is only just under individual and collective boiling point. At least that's the impression conveyed in his writing and in the way he portrays these riders on the storm of the urban crisis; out on the streets, on the estates, in the sweatshops.

Inside the Inner City represents a two year voyage into the heartland of this urban crisis. Harrison has succeeded in describing a picture of the marginalised sections of the Hackney people who (according to government and EEC statistics) live in the most deprived of our inner cities. He puts human flesh on the statistical bones of this

deprivation in the London Borough of Hackney, and for this, albeit with reservations, his book will become a benchmark in poverty studies.

Writing the history of urban expansion Harrison describes an all too familiar pattern of disparate and random growth of the inner city; he clearly exposes the absence of any concept of development which bears an imprint of human social need or rationality. The 'rationality' which governed this growth and provides its direction, now as then, is the familiar if still misunderstood impact of 'market forces'. The cycle of industrial, commercial and trading patterns, regulated by supply and demand, and its necessary labour reourcing, locates the populations of the inner city at the centre of a constant restructuring. The effects of this uneven process have been shattering. Harrison plumps for a decisive 'hour which came and went': the result of a developing rail network bypassing the inner city on to the suburbs beyond. Those that could afford to, moved up and onwards to ever greener pastures of respectability and security. And it is this inexorable movement in consumer affluence which has left us with the present social formation of today's inner city.

A real weakness of the book is that the appalling structure of poverty in contemporary Hackney becomes the object of policies conceived only on the basis of spending more public expenditure. But the problem of 'social wage slavery' is not only about the money received in the weekly giro. It is also about politics; it is here the analysis is less firm. The central issue of contemporary urban life is the inability to develop an alternative to 'subalternity'; that is to say, the people portrayed implicitly and explicitly in the book are victims, a class of citizens to whom things happen; hopeless beings trapped by their inability to become protagonists able to exert their own will over events, other social forces and institutions. It is a politics which superimposes new strategic goals and forms of struggle upon the political terrain of the inner city that is needed. For each class fraction, racial group, sex and social group in the inner city will have to come to terms with their own self-organisation and political advocacy. They must also recognise that political power rests on competence as well as effort; the competencies of government in the broadest sense, in self-administration, in involvement and participation, in popular administration and strategic and tactical political calculation. This learning through

experience must come through political ideological and economic combat.

The fatal weakness in the book's analysis is the inability to perceive that such abilities do exist amongst the citizens in their social and political movements in the inner city. Instead of examining what is possible within the current situation we are constantly told what is impossible. It is this depressing overstatement which seems to close off the alternatives for change that exist despite a Conservative government. Isn't this argument ultimately saying that things will only get better when a different (Labour) government gets elected so that they will do the right things for the people in the inner city? If so, it is a classic restatement of social democratic politics, one very much in evidence on the hard left of Labour, today's left social democrats.

Historically, Labour has attempted to resolve urban crises through various central government initiatives. Under the 1974-9 Labour government this took the form of the Urban Programme which gave boroughs such as Hackney 'Partnership Status'. This status was an attempt to reorientate main line programmes of central and local government expenditure, to coordinate the local state agencies of health, education and the local councils with the Department of the Environment, bringing them together with the rapidly expanded voluntary sector. Six years later this approach has all but failed in its objective of a strategic attempt to clear up inner city deprivation. The categories of 'social need' and 'economic development' which the Urban Programme sought to impose on Partnership Authorities have become a bureaucratic straightjacket and the relevant agencies still operate in a self-interested and divergent way; the voluntary sector has become tied to a funding process that effectively sets them against each other and the much sought after strategy of coordination has been unsuccessful. Harrison's book partially investigates this experiment and as he shows, despite the very best endeavours on behalf of town hall administrations, we are still waiting for a policy that works. To take Peter Shore's words, 'Taking the postwar period as a whole, the most striking thing has been. . . the failure of public policy to recognise the central fact of the economic decline of the inner city'.

Paul Harrison's book provides the stimulus for new inquiries but it won't provide the alternatives for a radical urban politics for the 1980s.

Alan MacDougall

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