

Dorling, D. (2016) Housing is fundamentally a debate about social goods and social evils, Taxpayers against poverty Blog 6, November 11th, <http://taxpayersagainstpoverity.org.uk/news/provision-of-housing-is-a-moral-issue>

Housing is fundamentally a debate about social goods and social evils

Danny Dorling argues that the provision of housing is a moral issue like the provision of food, fuel and water. That we should not be afraid of using the word “wicked” to describe the selfishness of an immoral minority who profess a moral superiority while profiting from the housing crisis. We need to rekindle our understanding of kindness as our normal responsibility for each other in spirit and in law. A few people have grown very rich, in monetary terms if not in social standing. They have almost always done this by being greedy and having been allowed to be greedy. A few more people have third and fourth homes. Millions of others pay far more to be housed than their parents did, often with less security of tenure and peace of mind, often more overcrowded, often in worse material condition, and increasingly beginning to understand that this is not due to immigrants (getting on their bikes!), or welfare cheats, or their own lack of entrepreneurial spirit – but because they are being ripped off by the immoral minority. When they come to cut first they come for the weakest.

The provision of housing is also a moral issue

[Danny Dorling - 11th November 2016](#)

Too many of us are too polite in the UK. We don't like to use the words 'good' and 'evil'. A political party is called 'nasty' if it behaves in the most antisocial of ways, rather than be labelled 'profoundly immoral' or 'wicked'. We should, of course, be extreme careful with our use of language, but we should not be afraid of using the right word in the right place, and we should watch very carefully for how those who are wicked often use words to slight those who are good

'Do-gooder' has become a term of insult in the UK. To advocate being kind is portrayed as some indication of weakness today. Too many people say we want strong leaders rather than good leaders. Our thinking has become so twisted in Britain in recent decades that an argument has grown dominant which suggests that to help others would harm them, would make them weak and

reliant. By this way of thinking it was wrong to think too much of each other and how we might better live together. It is better to each just try to look after ourselves as best as we can and occasionally tell the others to get on their bikes.

One collective end result of decades of portraying selfishness as good has been the current housing crisis. A few people have grown very rich, in monetary terms if not in social standing. They have almost always done this by being greedy and having been allowed to be greedy. Former prime ministers now own 'property portfolios'. A few more people have third and fourth homes. These are residences that they can visit when they are bored with their first or second residence. Millions of others pay far more to be housed than their parents did, often with less security of tenure and peace of mind, often more overcrowded, often in worse material condition, and increasingly beginning to understand that this is not due to immigrants (getting on their bikes!), or welfare cheats, or their own lack of entrepreneurial spirit – but because they are being ripped off by the immoral minority.

The immoral minority who believe and claim they are morally superior

The immoral minority have their own warped language that allows them to live with a false consciousness. It allows them to tell themselves and their friends that they are a force for good. They talk of 'civility' as a great asset that they possess: the ability to be polite and courteous as they take more and more. They see incivility in society as the great social evil of our times. People not knowing their place, not being deferential, being rude about them, not simply and quietly accepting their fate.

The immoral minority condemn food banks as simply pandering to the lazy and encouraging profligacy. When they are angry they are very careful not to express their anger too forcibly. They say they are 'disappointed' when they are actually 'livid'. This is partly because they have learnt to hide their true feelings. By hiding what they really think they do not have to deal with being confronted with disapproval themselves. They discuss matters of state with their affluent friends, family and colleagues – who largely agree with them. They tell each other that they are good.

The immoral minority see homelessness as inevitable and even necessary; “You have to break eggs to make an omelette” is a phrase that you can only apply to people if you do not see them as people. Without the threat of homelessness why would their tenants pay the rent, they quietly mutter to each other. If they are private landlords then it is in their financial interest that social housing is undermined so that the price of their product can rise. Their product is someone else’s home. They know to not yet say their views out loud too often. But listen carefully to the property investor, the speculator, the new slum landlord and the housing minister who says that if you cannot afford to live in a city you should not be there, and hidden between their words are their underlying beliefs. For their own gain the immoral minority have airbrushed the kindness out of the heart of Adam Smith’s arguments. They present human economic behaviour as being purely motivated by self-interest. However, even Adam Smith also argued:

“By necessaries I understand, not only the commodities which are indispensably necessary for the support of life, but whatever the custom of the country renders it indecent

for creditable people, even of the lowest order, to be without. A linen shirt, for example, is, strictly speaking, not a necessary of life. ...But in the present times, through the greater part of Europe, a creditable day-labourer would be ashamed to appear in public without a linen shirt ...

Custom, in the same manner, has rendered leather shoes a necessary of life in England. The poorest creditable person of either sex would be ashamed to appear in public without them. ... Under necessaries, therefore, I comprehend, not only those things which nature, but those things which the established rules of decency have rendered necessary to the lowest rank of people.”

[Wealth of Nations, part 2 article 4.]

Those that advocate social evils as necessary did not just dream up such ideas in a vacuum. They come from an aristocratic tradition. This is the tradition that saw a certain level of unemployment and destitution as necessary to ensure comfort for the people at the top of society because people at the bottom of society would take work so low paid and demeaning that no one with a free choice over whether to do such labour would do it. They come from a tradition that earlier promoted hunger as a far more efficient means to force people to labour than the

‘overseers whip’ used on slave plantations. They come from families in which they tell themselves that they are special and others are weak, are beneath them, and need to be treated as such. Small government means “government which does not tie me to the common good”. This attitude is carried into the corporations that they run, and in which private gain is allowed to run rough shod over the common good. The social responsibility departments of the banks focus on the small finance of charitable giving rather than the economic state of the nation and its peoples. The churches and big builders manage huge property portfolios for their own purposes rather than promoting the provision of affordable housing. That is structural evil that arises from the current structures of British society. It is often driven by apathy and unquestioning adherence to conventional wisdom. Land is in finite supply; but conventional wisdom has applied a fundamentalist free market ideology to land – with catastrophic results.

The provision of housing is a moral issue. Most of us no longer accept that hunger is acceptable in our society, or that people should go cold in their homes if they are too poor to be able to heat them, or even that such poverty

itself should be permitted. We do not accept that people should have to wear rags if they cannot find work that will allow them to afford to cloth themselves decently. We need to re-learn that exactly the same argument applies to being able to house yourself decently. And we need to recognize that among us are people who may never understand this and will always fight against kindness. However we also need to rekindle our understanding of kindness as our normal responsibility for each other in spirit and in law; an understanding which maybe we never have fully learnt or that we have been taught to forget. Many of us have forgotten what our grandparents and great-grandparents learnt and fought for.

Armistice day and the winning of peace, rights, and homes

Today is Armistice Day, the 98th anniversary of the end of the First World War. Just a few babies born on that day and in the immediate years that followed it will still be alive today, but as UK life expectancy among the elderly falls, due mainly to cuts in health and social care spending, we have fewer and fewer survivors from those times to tell us of what we really won 98 years ago. The war itself was a disaster in Europe. What was won was the peace that

followed that first all out war. The peace was won through rents strikes, winning the provisions and improvement of council housing, the friendly and building society movement, housing associations that did not operate as businesses, the provision of pensions, eventually winning full employment, and rent regulation. A great deal has been lost, and when they come to cut first they come for the weakest.

For chronically ill and disabled people they introduced the dangerous and bogus Work Capability Assessment, the loss of the Independent Living Fund, the removal of the Disability Living Allowance all to be replaced by the critically flawed Personal Independence Payment. For those reliant on social housing they brought in the dreaded bedroom tax. For those who could not find decent work they introduced sanctions, workfare, and this led to the rise in food banks followed by further cuts to public services. We are heading back to soup kitchens and workhouses, to rough sleeping and day labouring. The immoral minority's use of verbal trickery has turned the word 'cut' in 'reform'. Now we see reforms of everything from education to housing benefit, which make the poorest tenants pay unaffordable rent, and a "spare room

supplement” or pay more because of the “Benefit cap” and the “Local Housing Allowance”.

Until the rich stop becoming ever richer, until we stop under-taxing people with more money than anyone can need, until families are properly housed, children’s schools are properly funded, until health care and social is properly provided – as other countries, less well off than Britain is currently, achieve – until our elderly live as long and as well as in the rest of Western Europe, until we have learnt again that there is such a thing as society then call social evil by its name. But do so with kindness, because most people can change, whole countries can change, and do change every time the immoral minority have held control for too long.

They were mostly only made immoral by how they were brought up and taught – and then allowed to get away with such immortality – in some cases even praised for it. Be kind and try to understand them, but hold them to account day and night, for their mistaken beliefs, greed, and moral laziness.

First published on November 11th, 2016