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Slums: The History of a Global Injustice, by Alan Mayne

Is poor housing here to stay? Hopefully not, but one word associated with it has a grip on our culture, says Danny Dorling

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The word “slum” is a relatively recent addition to the English language. Alan Mayne would like to see it die out. It is an insult, he claims, although he does not draw analogies with other perhaps more obvious insults. “Urban poverty is real,” he writes, “and so are disadvantaged neighbourhoods, but slums are not.”

He has a point, but I suspect the word “slum” is too useful to lose. It is not simply derogatory; not just a deceit. I suspect we’ll see the clumsy phrase “disadvantaged neighbourhood” disappear from our lexicon much earlier than we lose the word “slum”.

“Slum” is entrenched: slum area, slum clearance, slum housing, slum landlord, slum tourism, slum youth (slumdog). It has sunk itself in too deep for the word to be quickly lost or banished; it will have to be reclaimed, like “queer” and “folk”.

“Slum” arrived in English in the 1860s or 1870s and is of mysterious origin – a word spoken long before it was written down. Shortly afterwards, or so Mayne claims, “Reformers and entertainers had together created the slum deceits” that make up the stereotypes associated with the word. Slums, he says, have connotations of deficiency: they evoke illusions of separation from the city, and of being the home of the “other”; a place that’s a breeding ground for crime.

In truth, slums differ greatly from one another. The people within them are not deficient in anything but money and luck. The city relies on the people of the slum; they are not of a separate kind, apart from the fact that they are made to appear different through stereotyping. As for crime, crime happens everywhere, but today most often and most dangerously by the people who drive cars too fast. The most common crime in the world is speeding. Slum dwellers mostly don’t own cars.

Mayne’s argument is enticing. It could be used to link contemporary campaigns against gentrification and social cleansing in London with activism against crude slum clearing in the poorest of the world’s cities today. However, he ignores the success of reformers and the reality that some journalists and writers portrayed. (A good example is Friedrich Engels’ description of the short-lived Little Ireland slum in Manchester in *The Condition of the Working Class in England*.)

For a few years as a student in the 1980s I lived in the part of the Benwell area of Newcastle upon Tyne that was later slum-cleared. It was not just the cheapest part of the city, it was also the most rundown. Property was worth little.

My mum visited one day and happened to say to the woman on the step next door: “It’s nice here, isn’t it?”

“You don’t have to live here,” replied the neighbour. Within a few years, no one did. Today the area is green fields.

My mum was not being facetious. She thought that the Benwell flats we lived in were nice and large. As a child she had seen the damp insides of the back-to-back flats near her home in Leeds. They too were almost all slum-cleared. There was no way of properly ventilating them, let alone putting in fire escapes – the flats only had a front door so there was no other way out,

and the back room had no windows. Mayne suggests that adding a bath to such housing would have made it habitable. Not by today's standards.

The Tyneside flats of Benwell had not been renovated for decades. Damp had risen to the second storeys and the roofs were getting near to being beyond repair. They could have been saved, but they had become a slum because they had been left to decay for too long. The rich of the city had neglected Benwell. The rich of England had neglected Newcastle.

Slums are not made by the poor but by the rich, or at least by some becoming richer. They are areas where many (if not most) properties are unfit for human habitation, but what is seen as being unfit – like the material goods you must lack to be seen as poor – changes over time.

As living standards improve, what was once seen as decent housing becomes slum housing. And if housing across an area is neglected, it will deteriorate into a slum. This is just one way in which the word could be reclaimed rather than abandoned and discredited.

“Unfit for human habitation” means damaging to health. Slum housing, along with sewerage and rubbish disposal, has been a public health issue for as long as we have understood the importance of public health. Mayne disparagingly points out that the term “unfit for human occupation” was still used by a British MP in 2015. He may not be aware that an annual survey of English housing is carried out to assess its fitness.

Mayne also points out that slum clearing is often an excuse for land grabbing by the rich; but it has not always been that way, and need not always be so. In the past in Britain, private-sector slums were replaced with decent public-sector housing. People could not believe they were being so well housed. In Japan, higher-quality multi-level apartments which house more people better than before replaced two-storey slums in very recent memory. But contemporary Japan is as equitable today as the UK was at the height of public home building.

Slum clearance tends to be a land grab by the rich mostly in times and places of high economic inequality. Mayne collects example after example of slum dwellers being stereotyped and disparaged, as “incapable” or “inadequate and unable to cope”. This is useful, and the quantity of such examples is shocking. But the identification of slums has not always been about shaming a group singled out as living below a line of supposed decency.

The global injustice this book seeks to address is the injustice of labelling people as slum dwellers. However, having to live in slums is at least as great

an injustice. Identifying groups of people without work has not always been an exercise in shaming the workless, or in suggesting that they do not have work because they are somehow lacking. Similarly, identifying groups of people as being inadequately housed, as living in slums, is not always an exercise in shaming the slum dwellers.

The same can be said for those who are illiterate. Identifying a group as not being able to read is not always about focusing on their being deficient but sometimes about accepting that today it is necessary to be able to read. That was not the case a century ago when many people could not read. And it may not be the case in a century's time if machines read for us.

The word "slum" and what it describes might eventually end up being temporary, as the author would wish. After all, slums are about mass urbanisation, a process that is drawing towards an end as the world's population moves to stabilise at between 9 and 11 billion, and cities no longer grow ever larger.

Slums need not always be with us. But all housing has a shelf life. Eventually it all needs to be replaced. Working out how to replace housing in future without the emergence of new slums will be part of working out how we live as an urban species. Only then will we no longer need the word "slum".

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Slums: The History of a Global Injustice

By Alan Mayne

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