The sound of the suburbs

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Rupa Huq argues that we need to reconceptualise suburban life

In many ways the essence of 'Englishness' is encapsulated in traditional understandings of what constitutes 'suburbia'. But these twin concepts, evoking landscapes frozen in time, have little to do with twenty-first century multi-ethnic suburbia. Old associations of suburbia - ageing residents, net curtains, clipped hedges and whiteness - are in desperate need of updating as twentieth-century migration has given birth to the multi-ethnic twenty-first century suburb. Far from being settled and stable, the suburbs are now places of diaspora and in-betweenness.

Looking at contemporary suburbia conjures up a range of issues relevant to the debate on national identity, against a backdrop of globalisation. It also raises socio-cultural questions about the places that are beyond the metropolis so beloved of popular culture and academia: the suburbs provide a rich diversity of experience that is often ignored. Its dynamic social and cultural spaces are as much part of the risk society as the more commonly studied inner city - with all that means in terms of individualism, change and the collapse of tradition.

Suburbia in fact and fiction: popular stereotypes

The July 2005 *Daily Mail* headline 'Suicide Bombers From Suburbia' was clearly designed to shock. The sentiments are clear: old certainties are undergoing a

process of fracture, a fundamental break from the norm. Suburbia, a place always seen as archetypically English, now harbours a new enemy within. The things that we have comfortably associated with suburbia - stability, safety, respectability and whiteness - no longer epitomise the English suburb. Instead risk and danger lurk around suburban corners. The suburbs, previously associated with the ordinary and mundane, are now a site of extraordinary happenings, thereby calling into question received notions of Britishness. And it is not just suicide bombers (Beeston, Leeds) that are disrupting our sense of the suburbs; they are now places where playground stabbings take place (Edgware, Middlesex), where the police carry out dawn raids (Forest Gate, East London) and where the far right thrive politically (the next-door town of Barking, Essex).

It is unsurprising that the suburbs have become the place where the extraordinary happens, as it is here that the masses now live All this is in strong contrast to the state of affairs noted by Medhurst: 'what one might call the *newslessness* of suburbia … a cornerstone of the vision of tranquillity that sold the suburban dream'.[1] The *Mail*'s sense of affront is a predictable response to this upsetting of boundaries. Once seen as the home of the middle class, the suburbs have changed demographically, as class boundaries have become less clear - both economically and culturally - and as our definitions of what constitutes the suburbs have widened.

Suburbia has always been more diverse than the stereotype, and has elicited a wide range of responses. The safety and conformity of the suburban myth may be cherished by the *Daily Mail*, but their alleged conservatism and repression have been criticised by many. They have also been an object of derision for urban elites - as seen in the frequently pejorative meaning of 'suburban'. You can hear the sneer in George Orwell's reference, in *Coming up for air*, to 'the inner-outer suburbs. Always the same … Just a prison with the cells all in a row. A line of semi-detached torture chambers'. Stevie Smith is similarly disparaging:

> There is far too much of the suburban classes
> Spiritually not geographically speaking. They're asses.
> Menacing the greatness of our beloved England, they lie
> Propagating their kind in an eightroomed stye.

Sociological literature has tended to echo this metropolitan elitist snobbery, with a disproportionate amount of attention focused on urban locales at the expense of suburban settlement. According to popular wisdom, the inner-cities have an edginess that is missing from the cloying comfortableness of suburbia. At the same time there is a sense that people want to escape from the inner city to the suburbs, that they represent a place of exodus from the metropolis. This ambivalence is partly reflective of the diversity both of suburbia and of the inner city.

Defining the suburbs

The notion of 'white flight' adds an ethnic dimension to this - the implication being that it is the minorities who are left behind in the inner cities. However this ignores the fact that many of those that move are not white - the suburbs are becoming increasingly multicultural in character. Nor does it account for the increasing gentrification of inner-city areas. Neither the inner city nor the suburbs can be fitted into this simple picture.

The suburb as the heart of English ordinariness, dull but somehow desirable, implicitly white, was evoked by Brixton-raised John Major when he predicted a lasting future for Britain as a country of long shadows on county cricket grounds, warm beer, invincible green suburbs, old maids on bicycles et al. This was roundly attacked for its cultural Canutism and white leanings, but it could be read as a simple celebration of mundanity, appropriate to a prime minister who was caricatured as a grey individual and seemed to cultivate an image of ordinariness. By contrast, Major's predecessor Margaret Thatcher memorably remarked in 1987, on winning a third successive electoral term, that something should be done about 'those inner cities' - the losers under Thatcherism. Neither prime minister had much sense of the complex actualities of life in the country's cities and suburbs.

In fact, defining suburbia is problematic: definition seems to result from a process of elimination. We know that the suburbs are not the country and not the city. And it seems that we know what suburbia is through what it is in opposition to. Though an over-simplification, one could construct a list of oppositions between the suburb and inner city. In such a list, the merits of the semi-private spaces of suburbs are also their demerits: their supposed dreariness is derided but aspired to.

Common associations of suburb and city

SUBURBAN	INNER CITY/URBAN
White	Ethnic mix
Quiet	Noise
Space	built-up environment
Aspiration/affluence	multiple deprivation, decay
Choice	Constraint
Uniformity	Difference
Homogeneity	Quirky
Conformist	Bohemian
Boredom	Excitement
Fuddy-duddy	Youth
Privatised space	Community

Public policy thinking of recent years has tended to treat the inner cities as a problem, to be approached in problem-solving terms, for example through initiatives such as the Urban Task Force, supported by the Office of Deputy Prime Minister. New Labour's respect agenda, and earlier emphases on social exclusion and anti-social behaviour, also implicitly target the inner-city population as opposed to those in the suburbs. By setting up a series of oppositional definitions, both the city and the suburb are misrepresented. In this case, the inner city is misrepresented as the place of problematic behaviour, whereas the suburbs are misrepresented as the place that doesn't need resources. The exclusionary rhetoric leaves behind those in the suburbs.

Moving to the suburbs

Progressive outward diffusion of ethnic groupings from inner-city areas to suburban areas has been longstanding in the UK. Thus, for example, a large proportion of the Jewish population of the old East End are now settled in the London boroughs of Hackney, Redbridge and Barnet. There is an argument that as these processes of dispersal take place the ethnic group concerned becomes 'whiter'. In the US 'whitening' has happened to various ethnic groups, for example the Italians; this describes a prcoess whereby settlers begin to access structures of

comparative privilege. Suburbanisation is a key component of this process. British geographer Ceri Peach some years ago made the observation that British Asian groups were split between the prospect of an Irish future (ghettoisation, lack of mobility) or a Jewish one (suburbanisation).[2] Peach has also observed an outward movement by Caribbean settlers. Routes often follow familiar transport and road links - e.g. from Paddington to Brent along London Underground's Metropolitan line, or from Brixton to Croydon, via the overground railways and the A24.

In fact movement has always been a characteristic of suburbs; people move out to them and the city moves out through them. Transport has been one of the defining features of suburban London, as seen, for example, in the coining of the concept of Metroland in 1915 to describe the area to the north west of London in Middlesex, Hertfordshire and Buckinghamshire through which the Metropolitan Railway operated and served

Willmott and Young's 1960 book, *Family And Class In A London Suburb,* following on from their classic *Family and Kinship in East London*, notes the interplay between inner east London and the outer eastern suburbs of Essex; such districts are part of a suburban drift, but one in which connections remain. The return to the city is part of this movement: one of Willmott and Young's respondents describes Woodford as 'the place I've been looking for all my life - a nice country village within easy reach of London'.

Commuting - the movement between the suburb and the city - features as an integral part of suburban life in popular culture. On their 1995 album 'The Great Escape' Blur paint a pen-portait of 'poor' Ernold Sane, commiserating with him for his sad repetitive life of drudgery '… Ernold Sane caught the same train/ At the same station/ Sat in the same seat/ With the same nasty stain/ Next to same old what's-his-name/ On his way to the same place/ With the same name/ To do the same thing/ Again and again and again.' There are fewer representations of the journey of those escaping, but the links worked both ways.

This movement to the suburbs has been well represented in fiction. Hanif Kureishi's widely acclaimed 1990 novel *The Bhudda of Suburbia* drew on the author's background of being a youngster of English/Pakistani parentage in Bromley on the south London/Kent border. Some years later there is now a new generation of black and Asian chroniclers of suburbia - often reminiscing about their own childhoods. Around the time of New Labour's election and the associated cool Britannia rhetoric

it sometimes seemed as if Asians had gone from invisibility to hyper-visibility.

Recent events in the suburbs have led to a revisiting of these scenes, sometimes in the spirit of 'the Return of the Native'. Sarfraz Manzoor's recent book reinterprets his own childhood in Luton in light of the fact that the 7/7 bombers came from the same setting.[3] At a book-reading event held at the British Library in October 2007 he told the audience that, although Luton was only a twenty-minute train journey away from King's Cross, it felt much further when he was growing up there; he commented of suburbia 'You can see the bright lights but you can't reach them'. *The Hidden Jihad*, a 2002 Channel 4 documentary by second generation Asian journalist and DJ Imran Khan, showed the hip specimen retracing his steps to his childhood hometown of Peterborough to find (to his disbelief) that his male contemporaries had all turned away from clubbing and women to become devout Muslims.

Generational and cultural changes, alongside the shifting patterns of urban migration, interact in complex ways within the wider context. For example there is an interesting story to be told in 'consuming suburbia', in the way that the old suburban high streets have been affected by the growth of out-of-town shopping and the advent of the retail park, linked closely to the coming of the car economy. The individual character of many towns is evaporating, and this is reflected in their suburbs. (Though even superstores can be sites of unruliness: in 2005, when Swedish furniture store Ikea opened a branch in the north London suburb of Edmonton, riots ensued in the scramble to seek bargains. Five were hospitalised and several injured.) Here too the picture has been affected by the 'ethnicisation' of the suburbs. Ethnic commerce has reinvigorated many suburban high streets, including Rusholme, scene of Manchester's 'curry mile', and Green Street in East Ham, London. Further examples exist in Ealing Road in Wembley and Southall.

Representing suburbia

Fictitious portrayals of suburbia have tended to reinforce stereotypes of suburban drabness and drudgery. A litany of UK situation comedies have portrayed the suburbs as entirely in keeping with the table sketched out above, and the genre has tended to reinforce the dullards of suburbia as the object of ridicule. Terry and June lived behind net curtains in Purley. The ahead-of-their-time eco-warriors of

The Good Life experimented with sustainable living in Surbiton. Both are south London suburbs. Indeed such fictitious mass-media depictions have contributed to the images of places in the popular imagination: successful suburbs, it seems, have tended to be concentrated in the south. Northern urban areas have tended to be represented in different ways (see, for instance, *Shameless*).

There is a rich vein of English pop documenting the daily mundanity of English suburbia, including tracks by Morrissey, the Kinks and the Beatles; while the Pet Shop Boys had a hit single in the 1980s entitled 'Suburbia'. In 1970 George Melly observed: 'Despite his carefully grubby and poverty-stricken appearance, and painfully restricted vocabulary, the average young pop fan today is drawn in the main from a middle-class or suburban background and is educationally in one of the higher streams.'[4] For all its urban posturing, punk was an intrinsically suburban phenomenon in the 1970s. The South London 'Bromley contingent' were thus called because they were based on the South London/Kent border which had earlier spawned David Bowie. Billy Idol and Siouxsie Sioux were among members. Here again transport played a key role in the production of suburban youth cultures. Accounts of the punk Bromley contingent commonly describe how the British Rail line to London Bridge threw a lifeline to the nascent punks from deep south London suburbia.

The practitioners of Britpop, also revelling in urban chic, had mostly suburban roots, though these included many different types of suburb. The Gallagher brothers grew up in the suburbs of Manchester, spending their formative years in the council cottage estate of Burnage, based on the garden suburb model. John Savage traces the roots of the Gallaghers and fellow Mancunians Morrissey and Johnny Marr (of the Smiths) as Ireland via council estate Manchester suburbia.[5] He calls the latter 'a step up' from inner-city ghettos such as Moss side and Hulme, describing the 1930s semidetached suburbs of Burnage and Stretford and the garden city of Wythenshawe as 'ambiguous zones, far from the city centre; superficially pleasant, yet also prone to inner-city problems: broken homes, poverty, unemployment'. This is another case of immigrant experience being filtered through suburbia. And the idea of escape from suburban chains figures strongly in this music. Morrissey sings, in *Paint a Vulgar Picture*: 'In my bedroom in those ugly new homes /I danced my legs down to the knees'.

Individualisation and suburbia

Willmott and Young flag up as a key difference between Bethnal Green and Woodford the split between public and private. In their words: 'In Bethnal Green people are vigorously at home in the streets, their public face much the same as their private. In Woodford people seem to be quieter and even more reserved in public …' - appearing to endorse Lewis Mumford's description of suburbs as the apotheosis of 'a collective attempt to lead a private life'. However this move to the private could also be interpreted as part of a wider move to individualisation, and this may hold some clues in explaining the unsettled nature of modern suburbia.

Beck's sociology of the risk society argues that there has been a breakdown of tradition; people have been set free from the old social forms of industrial society, and aspire to a greater degree of individualism. Unsurprisingly, this detraditionalisation of society has affected the suburbs. Suburban subjects, as much as any one else, are susceptible to the social and cultural changes of post-fordism. Changes in family life - particularly in the role of women, and the move away from the 2.4 children model; in educational structures - especially in the numbers staying in further and higher education; changes to working lives, including the effects of de-industrialisation and the flexibilisation of working hours - all these have entailed major shifts in the way suburban life is lived.

As Beck has said, 'individualisation means the variation and differentiation of lifestyles and forms of life, opposing the thinking behind traditional categories of large group societies - which is to say classes, estates and social stratification'.[6] Social class has long been bound up in academic considerations of suburbia. Its replacement by other forms of identification has wide-ranging consequences, including for those living in suburbia. Some of these new forms of identification may, of course, be in reaction to risk and the excesses of consumer society: it seems to have been the traditional structure of religion that threw together the networks that gave rise to the personnel of 7/7.

The cultural cartography of twenty-first century Britain

Any conclusions to be made about the suburbs are complicated by their complexity. Certainly recent events demonstrate that the suburbs are a much more dynamic

place than they have long been given sociological credit for. Indeed they are sites in continual flux, including in their ethnic mix. And British Asians following the pattern of suburban drift are not the most recent arrivals, having been joined by Somalis and Eastern Europeans. New Labour's obsession with middle England is focused on a very particular view of what goes on there - strongly informed by the Orwell/Major fantasy. My argument is that, in fact and fiction, the much overlooked terrain of suburbia has been an active and dynamic site of popular culture and politics since well before 1997.

Beeston is not the same as Surbiton, which is not the same as Blackbird Leys or Chadderton - the list could go on. By attributing a singular identity to all suburbs, whether in a positive or negative sense, we overlook the diversity of practices within them. Urban renewal means just that. So mock-Tudor semis were decried by urban sophisticates at the time of their building in the 1930s, but they are now highly desirable, marketed as 'period properties'. Meanwhile twenty-first century new-built architecture harks back to an age before the ribbon developments of the 1930s, with Victorian-style heritage lamp-posts frequently adorning new inner-city housing developments. Perhaps we are seeing a convergence of styles: formerly suburban styles of living are permeating the inner-city, and formerly urban lifestyles are now common-place in the suburbs.

There are many aspects of the suburban question that space has not allowed me to deal within the constraints of this article. In France, for example, the Gallic model of urban relations offers a different perspective of the ethnicised suburb, as was evident in the riots in banlieux. This a further graphic demonstration of the need for new ways of conceptualising suburbia in the multiethnic set-up that is the new Europe, against a backdrop of globalisation. This is a field that is central to twenty-first century society, and one where new research is much needed.

Notes

1. A. Medhurst, 'Negotiating the Gnome Zone: Versions of Suburbia in British Popular Culture', in R. Silverstone (ed), *Visions of Suburbia*, Routledge 1997, p244.

2. C. Peach, *Ethnicity in the 1991 Census, Vol 2: the ethnic minority*

populations of Great Britain, HMSO 1996; and 'Does Britain have ghettos?', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 21(1) 2005.

3. S. Manzoor, *Greetings from Bury Park: Race, Religion and Rock 'n'* Roll. Bloomsbury 2007.

4. George Melly, *Revolt into Style: the pop arts in the 50s and 60s*, OUP 1970.

5. J. Savage, *Time Travel: pop, media and sexuality 1976-96*, Chatto and Windus 1996, p393

6. U. Beck, *Risk Society: towards a new modernity*, Sage 1992, p98.