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## Council Estates, Culture and Shameless Spaces

Beth Johnson, University of Leeds

**‘Council estates are nothing to be scared of, unless you are frightened of inequality.’<sup>1</sup>**

Set on the outskirts of modern-day Manchester, the television drama series, *Shameless*, aired on Channel 4 from 2004-2013. Its Northern council estate setting, ironically named the ‘Chatsworth’, was pushed front and centre from the opening credits of the first episode via the visual dominance of tough terrain, specifically, what Steven Baker describes as ‘a montage of tower blocks and council housing recall[ing] the milieu associated with “social exclusion”, “welfare dependency”, petty criminality and violence’.<sup>2</sup> While Baker’s claim hints at a keen understanding of the complex links between place, space and social standing, my aim in this chapter is to mine these connections and look more intently at the Chatsworth as an architecturally and socially determined site of exclusion and segregation. The Northern space that the Chatsworth estate occupies is also important. As noted by Sally Munt, the North has a specific affiliation with class (or indeed, the lack of it): ‘in British culture since the Industrial Revolution poverty is read spatially, and ‘northern’ is a pseudonym for ‘working-class poor’ and a host of associated meanings’.<sup>3</sup> The faceless tower blocks of the Chatsworth estate can be understood, I will argue, as high-rise signifiers of social failure; the rows of dark wood and red brick houses, uninviting Northern edgelands, bereft of civic purpose and industry.

Seen as a threatening and ugly mix of battered buildings, concrete, pebbledash and Northern scrub(bers), the Chatsworth is designed to be perceived (from the outside at least) as a place that is not really a place at all; a non-place,<sup>4</sup> haunted by chronic financial lack, the loss of working-class industry and the absence of ‘decent’, traditional working class families. Instead, the traditional working classes have, in *Shameless*, been replaced by a doubly distanced group - Northern workers whose work (theft, drug dealing, insurance scams, selling sex, benefit fraud and child-rearing) is not recognised as legitimate. While emblematic of social failure on the one hand then, this chapter will also examine if and how the residents of the Chatsworth resist social stratification and what role the estate plays in this resistance.

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<sup>1</sup> Lynsey Hanley, *Estates: An Intimate History* (London: Granta, 2012), 5.

<sup>2</sup> Steven Baker, ‘*Shameless* and the Question of England: Genre, Class and Nation’, *Journal of British Cinema and Television* 6/3 (2009), 455-6.

<sup>3</sup> Sally Munt, *Queer Attachments: The Cultural Politics of Shame* (Hampshire and Burlington: Ashgate, 2008), 133.

<sup>4</sup> I am not using the phrase ‘non-place’ in the terms of Marc Augé’s description of spaces of supermodernity (2009), but rather as a description of a place deemed to have no or very little cultural value.

In her book *Estates: An Intimate History*, Lynsey Hanley notes that: ‘housing seems to have been the one great failure of the welfare state, [...] the one area where public investment intended to narrow the gap between rich and poor eventually served to create a firm and visible wall between them.’<sup>5</sup> For many reasons, but primarily because Hanley’s understanding here is so patently accurate, I want to use this quotation as a springboard, a metaphorical jumping off point in this analysis of the (e)state of play represented in and through the serial drama, *Shameless*.

*Shameless* as a drama occupies a difficult and complex territory. Aired on Channel 4 from 2004 to 2013, the drama was the longest and most successful in Channel 4’s history, spanning 11 series and 139 episodes. Its Northern creator, Paul Abbott is a high-profile name in the world of television – arguably one of the few British television auteurs – and yet, despite early critical acclaim, (a BAFTA for Best Drama Series in 2005), its longevity and strong audience figures, and the fact that it has inspired a successful US remake that airs on ‘Showtime’, it is often cited as a text that, whilst having good early intentions (particularly in relation to making visible social inequalities in contemporary society), later fell into decline. Speaking of the series in 2013 at the Royal Television Society Hew Wheldon Memorial Lecture series, social commentator Owen Jones noted that:

Channel 4’s longest running series *Shameless* is not [...] some straightforward case of the privileged mocking those without power. Its creator, Paul Abbott, had a turbulent childhood as a working-class boy in Burnley, and originally intended the series to be a gritty, semi-autobiographical drama. It was transformed into a comedy with larger-than-life characters, but initially had nuances. For example, one of the main characters develops into a bright university student. But with each successive series it has become cruder in portrayal, especially when the spotlight falls on the notorious anti-hero of the series, Frank Gallagher. The Frank Gallagher character has been used by various newspapers as the poster boy for Britain’s feckless poor. Abbott would be appalled but Gallagher has probably been quite effective in influencing public support for recent welfare cuts.<sup>6</sup>

Jones’ explicit nomination of *Shameless* as a series that has aided a demonization of the working class speaks not only (according to the author) to the deterioration of the quality of the drama, but for Jones, is aligned to the degeneracy of the cultural and moral representations of the working classes that he initially considered to be the political point of the series. While it is fair to say that there was a notable downturn in the quality of the drama when Abbott stopped writing for the series, I want to suggest that Jones’ reading of the series is one that fails to recognise the importance of place. In particular, I want to suggest that Jones’ mis-reading of *Shameless* (particularly the later series) stems from his failure to take into account the importance of the Northern territory – the council estate that grounds it - or to consider the ways in which the decline in what Jones notes as ‘character nuance’ was

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<sup>5</sup> Lynsey Hanley, *Estates: An Intimate History* (London: Granta, 2012), 97.

<sup>6</sup> Owen Jones, ‘Totally Shameless – How TV Portrays the Working Class’, *The RTS Hew Wheldon Memorial Lecture* [online] 14 January, 2013. Available at: [www.rts.org.uk/rts-huw-wheldon-memorial-lecture](http://www.rts.org.uk/rts-huw-wheldon-memorial-lecture)

replaced by a determined and decisive focus on the social landscape. What I aim to argue is that as the series progressed, class, rather than being represented through complex characters, was built into the multifaceted physical landscape of *Shameless* effecting, on the one hand, a 'further entrenchment of the class system through housing'<sup>7</sup> and on the other, an eventual revolt against and resistance to social stratification.

### **The Chatsworth Estate**

The Chatsworth estate is, from the off, showcased as that which it is not. Unlike the English heritage house situated in the Peak District National Park, home to the Duke and Duchess of Devonshire, the Chatsworth estate in *Shameless* is dominated by social housing. Each episode opens with views of the grey tower blocks, scrubland, cheaply made single-storey houses and concrete walkways. Rather than boasting one of the country's most important art collections, 105 acres of gardens, stunning architecture, stables and a 1000 acre park, the *Shameless* Chatsworth has a shop, a pub and a chemist, each protected by heavy metal shutters and barbed wire. Like Chatsworth House however the *Shameless* Chatsworth is a 'real' place, a real council estate, located in West Gorton (formerly known as 'the workshop of the North')<sup>8</sup> on the fringes of Manchester. Speaking of the estate in 2005, journalist Amena Saleem noted its complex and problematic history, marred by industrial decline:

At the very heart of the Industrial Revolution, [West Gorton] was a successful, vibrant place to be. However, the two main factories, Gorton Tank and Beyer Peacock, closed in the 1960s, laying off thousands of men, and were never replaced. The rot set in and the West Gorton area is now scarred by the consequences of decline – high unemployment, a massive crime rate, drug problems and the unenviable tag of the ASBO capital of England. To date, twice as many anti-social behaviour orders have been issued here as anywhere else in the country.<sup>9</sup>

While the two Chatsworths are geographically close, a mere 40 miles apart, their metaphorical distance is extensive. One is palatial, sprawling, visible, associated with Royal lineage and a key part of a Northern English heritage. The other is poor, ramshackled, grey, on the edge of its nerves, associated with stigma and failed citizens. The plenty of one points to the lack of the other. *Shameless*'s Chatsworth is haunted by what it is not and what it has not got. Birthright seemingly ensures the continuation of both via structural privilege and structural inequality.

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<sup>7</sup> Hanley, *Estates: An Intimate History*, 18-9.

<sup>8</sup> Eric Allison, 'Crying Shame', *Guardian* [online], 12 January, 2005. Available at: <http://www.theguardian.com/society/2005/jan/12/socialexclusion.media>

<sup>9</sup> Amena Saleem, 'Virtual Reality', *Inside Housing* [online], 8 April, 2005. Available at: <http://www.insidehousing.co.uk/journals/insidehousing/legacydata/uploads/pdfs/IH.050408.020-023.pdf>

As I have argued in earlier work on *Shameless*,<sup>10</sup> despite the clear problems associated with social inequality, the first four series of the drama aired between 2004-2007 beautifully convey the richness of the community and its inhabitants, engaging in important socio-political discussions without being either nostalgic or didactic. Where the drama seemed to critically and politically 'fall off', was Series five (2008), at the very time when it moved from being filmed on the streets of West Gorton to a specially made replica set in Wythenshawe, a Southern district of Manchester. It was both at and after this point that some cultural commentators noted a decline in quality, a change from characterisation to caricature. Writing for the *Guardian*, Julia Raeside (2010) noted that:

The rot has set in. [*Shameless*] has become an increasingly long parade of more and more outrageously dysfunctional characters who, without the moderating voice of the straight-man (or woman) are becoming less funny, less driven by narrative and more "ho ho ho, look how grotesque and drunk these common people get".<sup>11</sup>

Though the term 'rot' points to a fundamental decay at the material heart of *Shameless* (for Raeside, its characters), for me, while the absence of strong characterisation from Series five can certainly be understood as a narrative problem, it was not a structural death knell. Instead, it brought to the fore a more conscious focus on place – in particular – the place of the estate in the series (and indeed in British society more generally) as a primary source of shame.

Writing on social abjection and resistance in Neoliberal Britain, Imogen Tyler notes that in the late 1990s the council estate 'became metonymic shorthand for [a] 'new class of problem people', and the poverty associated with these places was imagined as a self-induced pathological condition'.<sup>12</sup> In short, people living on council estates were encouraged to feel ashamed of themselves. They were (according to government rhetoric) deserving of their own poverty. They had the power to engage in 'useful', productive social activities but had chosen not to, had chosen to be anti-social or anti-society and were thus, failed citizens. Of course, what Tyler so cogently argues is that these failed citizens were not and are not responsible for their own material or 'aspirational poverty', but rather, can be understood as part of a political but powerful myth, disseminated by the media concerned with creating a 'pathologization of the council estate [and a] moral panic about the 'culture of worklessness' which estates were said to both represent and reproduce' under the New Labour Government.<sup>13</sup> The positioning of estates as liminal and antisocial places was in fact explicitly addressed by Tony Blair in his 1997 speech just hours after winning the general election. Housing estates and their inhabitants had been, he noted, 'forgotten by [the previous

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<sup>10</sup> Beth Johnson, *Paul Abbott* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013); Beth Johnson, 'The Fantastic Style of *Shameless*' in Jason Jacobs and Steven Peacock eds., *Television Aesthetics and Style* (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2013a), 227-237; Beth Johnson, '*Shameless*: Situating Sex Beyond the City' in James Aston, Basil Glynn and Beth Johnson eds., *Television, Sex and Society: Analyzing Contemporary Representations* (London and New York: Continuum Press, 2012), 3-16.

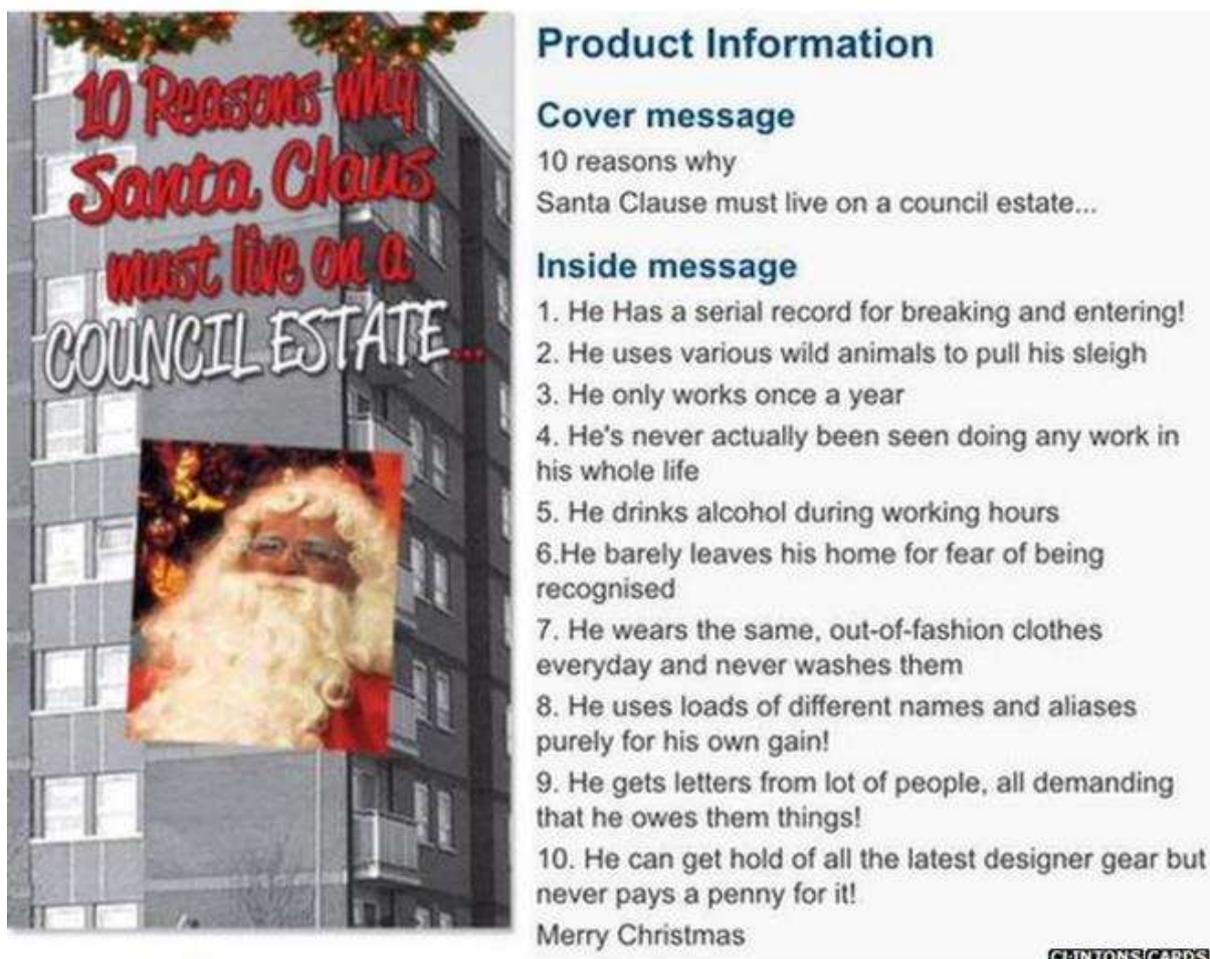
<sup>11</sup> Julia Raeside, 'Stop it, *Shameless*, We've Had Enough', *Guardian* [online], 26 January, 2010. Available at: <http://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/tvandradioblog/2010/jan/26/stop-it-shameless>

<sup>12</sup> Imogen Tyler, *Revolting Subjects: Social Abjection in Neoliberal Britain* (London and New York: Zed Books, 2013), 162.

<sup>13</sup> Tyler, *Revolting Subjects*, 160.

Conservative] government, [...] left out of growing prosperity, ignored [...] except for the purposes of blaming them' (2013: 159). Yet, though potentially radical, seemingly about to acknowledge the ways in which poverty is perpetuated through structural and architectural inequalities (space is after all a social construct), Blair went on to bring no new understanding, but rather followed the former Conservative lead, 'redesigning citizenship around the double axis of inclusion/exclusion and work/worklessness'.<sup>14</sup>

In terms of inclusion/exclusion and work/worklessness, under New Labour a toxic rhetoric continued to emerge in which the homes funded by the State (social or council housing) and indeed their inhabitants, were stigmatized and branded as shameful, without class and disgusting. This rhetoric was and continues to be powerful within British society. The visual of the tower block that opens each episode of *Shameless* is such a potent signifier of cultural deficit and stigma that it was used on a Christmas card sold by the British retailer ' Clintons ' in 2014. With the image of a bleak grey tower block dominating the front of the card, the anchoring text stated '10 reasons why Santa Claus must live on a COUNCIL ESTATE'. Inside the card listed these as follows:



**Product Information**

**Cover message**  
10 reasons why  
Santa Clause must live on a council estate...

**Inside message**

1. He Has a serial record for breaking and entering!
2. He uses various wild animals to pull his sleigh
3. He only works once a year
4. He's never actually been seen doing any work in his whole life
5. He drinks alcohol during working hours
6. He barely leaves his home for fear of being recognised
7. He wears the same, out-of-fashion clothes everyday and never washes them
8. He uses loads of different names and aliases purely for his own gain!
9. He gets letters from lot of people, all demanding that he owes them things!
10. He can get hold of all the latest designer gear but never pays a penny for it!

Merry Christmas

**CLINTONS CARDS**

The offensive nature of the content led to the card being withdrawn by Clintons in December 2014 but nevertheless, this discourse – a discourse characterised by the shaming of those

<sup>14</sup> Tyler, *Revolting Subjects*, 161.

living on council estates - demonstrates the association between place and pejorative judgements aimed at deepening socio-economic and cultural divides. Here class (or indeed the implied lack of it), is symbolized through the image of the council tower block as well as being identified in moral terms by worklessness, dirtiness, theft, drinking and debt. While poverty is clearly inherent in these '10 reasons', the structural inequalities that work to create poverty are not and as such the architecture of the tower block is bound together and haunted by the laughter of outsiders, looking in, with contempt at the 'unfashionable', feckless inhabitants. As Rhian E. Jones notes: 'portrayals of an idle, stupid, semi-criminal underclass, 'disrespectable' and therefore immoral, make it possible for [...] the media to present the economic position of these groups as self-inflicted and deserved, logically consistent with their lack of input and contribution to society.'<sup>15</sup>

### **The Chav: Cultural Configurations of the Underclass**

As well as the terms 'idle', 'stupid' and 'underclass' a new powerful and pejorative term came into being in the first five years of the twenty-first Century: chav. This term permeated and quickly dominated public discourse. The term 'chav' explicitly and pejoratively brought together the supposedly shameful identities of council housing and its inhabitants. As noted by Tyler:

The word 'chav' alongside its various synonyms and regional variations (including simply 'council') was a [...] ubiquitous term of abuse and abhorrence at Britain's poor. Widely understood to be an acronym for 'Council Housed and Violent' or 'Council-Housed-Associated-Vermin', chav was the popular (con)figuration of that imagined 'underclass of people cut off from society's mainstream, without any shared sense of purpose', that Blair had first bodied forth in his maiden speech (Blair 1997).<sup>16</sup>

These cultural territories of them and us, the 'chavs' and the 'chav-nots', are important in terms of recognising the ways in which social and economic poverty came to be defined through council housing. In 2009, Simon Fuller described Frank Gallagher thus in his web article 'Chavs on TV': 'patriarch of the show's large Gallagher clan, a working-class family who are dysfunctional to say the least. A heavy drinker, but chock full of witticisms, Frank may not be a young hoodie, but he epitomises the 'council' background often presumed to go hand-in-hand with the chav.'<sup>17</sup> While both texts – the card and the television show – invoke discursive strategies of shame as connected to and grounded in the council estate to engage audiences, I want to suggest that where the above card seeks to reaffirm the myth that the poor are deserving of their poverty, *Shameless*, on the other hand, points to the ways in which these assumptions are mis-placed.

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<sup>15</sup> Rhian E. Jones, *Clampdown: Pop-Cultural Wars on Class and Gender* (Hampshire: Zero Books, 2013), 12.

<sup>16</sup> Tyler, *Revolting Subjects*, 162-3.

<sup>17</sup> Simon Fuller, 'Chavs on TV', *CultureCompass* [online], 16 March, 2009. Available at: <http://www.culturecompass.co.uk/chavs-on-tv/>

While the representation of the council estate in *Shameless* is pictorially similar to the image above, seen initially from an outsider perspective that as Tyler notes encourages audiences to take a ‘moral high-ground’,<sup>18</sup> it is important to recognise that the perspective of *Shameless* firmly works to establish the show, as Glen Creeber notes, as a ‘portrayal of social class that conceives it from a primarily internal [...] perspective’.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, the breadth and depth of the show garnered through all 139 episodes provides an intimacy with and points to the complexities of the Northern environment and the characters. Yet, while the social focus is tight, it is not insular in terms of failing to recognise how it is perceived by those on the outside of the estate. Indeed, as the various series move on, one of the key points of focus that increases in strength concerns a growing recognition by the characters of how they and their homes (or perhaps themselves because of their homes) are seen.

If the North is the geographical location of the serial, its home, then class is its primary axis of orientation, its critical landscape. The self-conscious title of the serial, *Shameless*, speaks to these issues and environs, addressing and responding ironically to the outsiders of poor Northern communities who attempt to impose shame upon them. As has been well documented, the creator of the semi-autobiographical serial, Paul Abbott noted that he: ‘hung on to the title *Shameless* for its irony, the kind of accusation outsiders would have chucked at my family back in the seventies’.<sup>20</sup> Like Abbott however, the show (and in particular the later series) demonstrate, via their focus on the place of the estate, how the architecture of social stratification can be turned back upon those who attempt to use it as a stick with which to beat the poor. Though social housing is certainly not confined to the North of England, the Northern setting of the Chatsworth as a site and source of supposed shame is significant in that it can perhaps be understood to symbolise a larger (albeit crude) cultural divide between the poor North of England and the more affluent South. As Christoph Ehland reminds us: ‘the harsh economic prioritising of the Thatcher years made th[e] North-South divide or gulf, more visible than it ever was’<sup>21</sup> and it is in part this visibility – visibility of social housing as a means of social stratification in the North - that *Shameless* spotlights.

The opening credits of the series – credits that introduce the first 33 episodes of the show and foreground the dominance of social housing on the Chatsworth – change in the last episode of Series 4. While multiple shots of social housing, in particular the real-life West Gorton Wenlock Court and Armitage Court tower blocks as well as single-storey social housing still open the show, more attention to the spaces and places of the estate follows. This contrasts with the previous credits whereby the focus after initially being on the outside moved inwards towards the family and its various members. From Episode 8 of Series 4, the estate is magnified and clearly situated as the socio-political fabric of the show, over and above its characters. Though Frank Gallagher’s (David Threlfall) voice still guides the viewer, his

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<sup>18</sup> Imogen Tyler, ‘Pramface Girls: The Class Politics of ‘Maternal TV’ in Bev Skeggs and Helen Wood eds., *Reality Television and Class*. (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 216.

<sup>19</sup> Glen Creeber, ‘The Truth is Out There! Not!: *Shameless* and the Moral Structures of Contemporary Social Realism’, *New Review of Film and Television Studies* 7/4 (2009), 434.

<sup>20</sup> Johnson, *Paul Abbott*, 108.

<sup>21</sup> Christoph Ehland, ed., *Thinking Northern: Textures of Identity in the North of England* (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2007), 15.

oration is not utilised to provide a source of instability between the image and its meaning (as occurred previously), but rather, is utilised to directly address and engage the spectator in the politics of shame:

Tickets this way to the Chatsworth Express! Come and watch pikeys making a mess of the lives they were given by him upstairs, and kids they're convinced aren't actually theirs. What sounds on earth could EVER replace kids needing money or wives in 'yer face? 'Cause this, people reckon - and me included - is why pubs and drugs were kindly invented. To calm us all down and stop us going mental. These are Chatsworth estate's BASIC essentials. We're worth every penny for grinding your axes. You shit on our heads, but, you pay the taxes. Imagine Britain without Chatsworth buccaneers, who'll cum on your face for the price of a beer. Make poverty history. Cheaper drugs now!

What is particularly striking about this opening is not just Frank's awareness that viewers may consider the Chatsworth residents as 'revolting subjects'<sup>22</sup> or 'chavs', but the focus beyond the dialogue toward the image and the representation of the estate as part of a larger picture, a larger narrative about the state of the nation.

In clear terms both via dialogue and pictorially, the Chatsworth estate is represented as a site of struggle. The struggles are represented as various; struggles of perspective, of politics, of power, of and between family members, struggles of responsibility, struggles to escape, struggles to separate, stay together and often to survive. Struggles in *Shameless* take on many forms from fist fights and head-butts to segregation and separation and yet, the 'estate' is often dis-placed from this arena, made invisible despite its presence when considering critical readings of the show. In the new opening credits of Series 4, Episode 8, the estate is seen in close-up. The repeated focus on its scrappy edges, dark fences, cracked paving stones, metal railings and concrete walkways gives over however to a notion of community expressed through equally repetitive shots of togetherness, people in the pub, talking around the kitchen table and playing football in the street. What binds the different groups of people and the different types of sequences is twofold, on the one hand place, the recognisable confines of the Chatsworth and on the other the joy of the people, the constant laughs and smiles. The joy, indeed, their enjoyment of life is to be understood in spite of their position on the Chatsworth and yet it has often been cited as this joy that has problematized the representation of the show and its 'underclass' characters. It is this enjoyment that has been perceived as shameless.

The complex territory of *Shameless* means that the serial is at once a struggle of shame and of joy for its characters, but also a site of struggle for its audience who are perhaps more used to council house inhabitants being represented as either deserving of poverty or deserving of pity. In this sense the 'struggle of poverty' that Owen Jones might expect is muddled here, replaced by struggles of culture and morality. The show's characters are not homogenous but instead, represented as complex, diverse and contrary and yet, what links them is place – the

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<sup>22</sup> Tyler, *Revolting Subjects*.

council estate. Indeed, it is through the council estate that the disparate inhabitants of the Chatsworth are drawn back together. It is through the prism of pejorative ‘council’ associations that they are judged and classified. As Hanley notes:

There is one phrase in the English language that has come to be larded with even more negative meaning than ‘council estate’ and that is ‘tower block’. There has to be some reason why people who waited years for a coveted home from ‘the Corpy’ wouldn’t wish the same for their own grandchildren; some reason why the word ‘council’ has become a pejorative term, which can be used to ridicule people’s clothing, their hairstyles, their ways of speaking, the brands of cigarette they smoke and the alcohol they imbibe.<sup>23</sup>

This culturally divisive separation between those who live in council-owned accommodation and those that do not, the ‘them’ and ‘us’, is addressed on multiple levels throughout the series. Indeed, Series 9 of the show addresses the divide explicitly. Episodes 9:1 and 9:2 operate serially to foreground the significance of resistant strategies to austerity and shaming, imagining a multi-agency crackdown on ‘benefits culture’ entitled ‘Operation New Start’.

### **Class Struggle as Close Analysis**

Episode 9:1 opens with Frank having his eyes tested before he is heard in voice-over::

Society is dead. It was all a big fucking lie anyway, so save your tears, don’t mourn. Schools, hospitals, pensions, care for the wrinklies, all that ‘cradle to the grave’ shite was just an expensive luxury. What were we thinking? It IS survival of the fittest. To paraphrase the one good scouser, ‘I don’t believe in government. I don’t believe in society. I just believe in me.’

While Frank’s oration sets the scene of the episode, seemingly expunging a class or social-care narrative, a contrast between his individualist focus and a collective focus is seen soon after when a team of approximately ten men and women, smartly dressed, enter the estate on a co-ordinated mission. At the Gallagher’s house, in response to knocking, Patty (Valerie Lilley) opens the door, (Frank is stood behind her) and the woman caller, Daniella Feeny (Judy Flynn), announces her objective: “Operation New Start. These [she holds up a clip-board] are court signed documents ordering you to vacate these premises with immediate effect. You’re being evicted.” As Frank and Patty question their eviction a second woman, Carmen Kenaway (Morwenna Banks), the Head of the operation enters the property. Patronisingly, Carmen attempts to simultaneously gentrify the action of eviction and blame Frank for it by engaging in a shaming discourse of criminality and debt: “We have to look at this as an opportunity. It frees you from that cycle of debt and dependency, free to pursue, earn a new start.” Later, after they have been evicted, Frank is seen dressed in a white robe sitting in Carmen’s plush hotel suite. Joining them mid-conversation the divisive discourse of

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<sup>23</sup> Hanley, *Estates: An Intimate History*, 97.

'them and us' aforementioned is in operation. Interestingly however, it is Frank rather than Carmen who is insisting on it as a means of demonstrating class politics as a lived experience rather than as 'policy':

Frank: "Don't pretend you are 'of' the people. Your fucking shoes alone would buy a 3-bed semi in my street."

Carmen: "Oh come on. People are tired of this 'them and us' aren't they?"

Frank: "It always seems to be the old Etonians telling the rest of us that we live in a class-less society, as they pass laws to deregulate around their investments."

Carmen: "The old divides don't apply. It's about survival nowadays. Hey, your neighbours weren't slow to cast you out, hmm? Do you think they're worried about what's become of you now?"

Frank: "I suspect not."

Carmen: "We want the same thing. You scratch my back..." [She offers Franks several cases of beer].

In next scene, Frank is shown lying down on the comfortable sofa, clearly inebriated while Carmen and Daniella secretly record his insider information on a dictaphone:

Frank: "Derek Moronari, what a fucking chancer! Puts in a shift at Meinhoffers and then heads out to the bookies all day, only stepping out to sign on every Thursday."

Carmen: "Bet he's not the worst..."

Frank: "Oh, nooo. Not by a long shot! I tell you who is a lying twat, he never shares his smokes; Biscuit arse Pettigrew. Ronnie to his mother. Apart from having BO that could fell a fucking buffalo at twenty paces, he's claiming on four different addresses. And does he share the goodies around? Does Jesus have a rubber cross?"

The underhand tactics employed by Carmen are clearly successful because of Frank's individualist (notably Thatcherite) values which, of course, have already been set up at the beginning of the scene. Yet, though Frank demonstrates individual weakness, others within the community demonstrate resistance to 'Operation New Start', supporting one another and functioning as a collective. For example, the local landlady of The Jockey, Karen Maguire (Rebecca Atkinson), tells all evicted residents of the Chatsworth estate that they can stay in her pub. Later, she is seen dishing out soup and bread to those evicted, clearly having set up the pub as a temporary soup kitchen and shelter for the community. It is also Karen who tells the residents who have not yet been evicted not to answer their doors to Operation New Start staff, halting the evictions and causing Carmen to call a town hall meeting.

At the meeting, both the interactions and the spatial relations are important to note. While Carmen is heard speaking first, telling Chatsworth residents (or evictees) that "seventy-five% of benefit claims in this area are fraudulent", her 'truth' is contested by Karen who notes that:

“They’re not fraudulent. They’re rejected. There’s a difference.” As Carmen appears to have no response to Karen’s correction, she utilises space and official procedure as her retort in order to silence Karen. Interestingly, while Carmen, Daniella and other members of Operation New Start are elevated on a stage at the front of the large hall, the residents/evictees of the Chatsworth are seated on plastic chairs on floor level and set a significant distance away from Carmen and her cronies. When Karen talks, she is seen in a high angled shot, essentially from the perspective of Carmen who is ‘looking down’ upon her. This angle is reversed when Karen and the residents are forced to ‘look up’ to Carmen in order to talk back, with the camera set low, angled upwards towards the stage. In addition to these clear spatial power politics, Daniella scolds Karen for replying uninvited to Carmen, noting that as the event is public, she must: “follow Parliamentary procedure. Miss Kenaway has the floor. If you want to make an interjection, you approach the microphone and the chair will recognise you.” Such invasions and rigid organisations of space demonstrate a lack of desire for actual dialogue or useful exchange, instead ironically enforcing dominant power relations to ‘teach’ (lesser) subjects how to be self-sustaining. As Laurie Ouellette and James Hay argue, such tactics can be understood as ‘authoritarian governing techniques - “home visits”, [...] surveillance, pedantic lecturing... in an effort to produce self-sufficient citizens who are “free” because they do not rely on the State or any other institution for discipline, care or sustenance.’<sup>24</sup>

The next dialogue exchange is also particularly revealing in that Carmen nominates the Chatsworth estate as a “failed estate.” In response to calls for the multiple agencies that Carmen represents to invest in the environment and make it a better place to live, Carmen simply states that she is aware of the criminal behaviour of residents (the information given to her by a drunken Frank), and as such, implies that the estate and its residents do not deserve investment: “No one wants to move here. You can’t expect the authorities to just keep throwing good money after bad!” This type of nomination of residents’ supposedly shameful behaviour in order to justify a withdrawal of government support is, as Hanley notes, significant and can be understood as reinforcing social prejudice. Referring to the real policies that the show is invoking here Hanley notes that:

It became an article of faith, brandished in particular by those ministers with harsh inner-urban constituencies, such as David Blunkett and Hazel Blears, that any government spending on, any attention paid to, people living on council estates was conditional on their behaving well [...] Governments seek to criminalise people at the bottom of the pile for making bad decisions without acknowledging the paucity of options available to them, or the policy decisions which led to, or at least exacerbated, that paucity. The French sociologist Loic Wacquant, who has based much of his work on the study of people living in socially marginalised areas such as housing estates, described the phenomenon as ‘punishing the poor’.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Laurie Ouellette and James Hay, *Better Living Through Reality TV: Television and Post-Welfare Citizenship* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2008), 65.

<sup>25</sup> Hanley, *Estates: An Intimate History*, x-xii.

It is at this point in the exchange that Karen's husband, Jamie (Aaron McCusker) stands up and speaks for the first time: "Stop punishing people who can't defend themselves." Carmen's response is one of denial: "We're not punishing anyone." Later in the episode Frank's rejection of a free beer in the pub (through guilt) reveals to the community that Frank has betrayed them by giving Carmen insider information. His genuine remorse leads to the group sending him back to Carmen as a 'double agent' in order to find out the 'real' aim of Operation New Start. It is not Carmen however but her colleague, Daniella, who, when drunk, reveals to Frank the sad truth: "You're all stuffed. You know that? It's political, like immigration. No government can be seen to be supporting benefits. The underbelly is a cancer." Stealing operational documentation out of her bag while she visits the ladies toilet, Frank finds out that the aim of the operation is to evict as many tenants as possible and keep the houses empty so that they rot at which point Carmen can 'shut down the whole estate.' In response, the community draw together and come up with a plan to prevent the continuation of evictions – that they all move, under the cover of darkness into each others' houses making the information that the operation is working from such as bank account details, Work and Pensions, Inland Revenue, Council Tax and immigration documents, useless, thus forcing Operation New Start to stop. The collective action takes place over the next episode (9:2) and is successful, resulting not only in the Chatsworth surviving but Carmen being bribed to delete all of the information that she holds relating to the estate and its residents. As the estate is saved, Frank is also metaphorically saved by his discarding of individualist values and his embrace of the power of the collective. His closing voiceover acknowledges this:

OK. So maybe I was a bit premature. These are difficult days. You know, post banking crisis, post comprehensive spending review, cuts, cuts and more cuts and kick the living shit out of the underbelly cos they're least equipped to defend themselves. The more things change, the more they stay the same. Society is dead. Long live society!

### **Conclusion: Class as Community, Class as Cultural Geography**

If the destruction of the estate was to be understood as a eulogy to the age-old notion of community, the residents' refusal, via collective action, to let the government destroy the Chatsworth is an important socio-political message. This critique of urban policies serves to key out the North (and its people) as sites of resistance, resistance achieved through what Gill Valentine refers to as 'adaptive survival strategies'.<sup>26</sup> These strategies are elided with the grit and determination of the North, its rough character, its outspoken and evident 'otherness'. While the inhabitants of the estate have very little power as individuals, their collective action, often established because of their shameful treatment by those in positions of political power, can be understood as their greatest strength. What is made visible here then and through the later series of *Shameless* more broadly, is the suggestion that the lingering shame of inequality should rest firmly with those in power rather than those who are, economically

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<sup>26</sup> Gill Valentine, *Social Geographies: Space and Society* (London and New York: Pearson Press, 2001), 214.

at least, powerless. The residents' refusal to be a loci of shame is powerful, inspirational and socialising. Unlike the tower-blocks and the environs that are designed to contain and deaden them, the residents are not static but are dynamic and effective. In this sense the cultural stigma and social rupture attached to and associated with council estates is shown as a political weakness for those in power, rather than a source of strength. Though what we see in *Shameless* is clearly a case of dramatic licence, it intends to be a clear cultural intervention. As Don Mitchell reminds us: 'arguments over culture are arguments over real spaces, over landscapes, over the social relations that define the places that we and others want to live.'<sup>27</sup> *Shameless*, for all of its flaws, for all its status and stigma as a drama and a Northern one at that, clearly had its sights set on intervening in the politics of the real.

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<sup>27</sup> Don Mitchell, *Cultural Geography: A Critical Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 3.

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