

Dan Taylor, The A13: A Giant Metaphor for Nowhere? (October 2020)

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The A13 outline: <https://youtu.be/dNvgrXMR8bA?t=899>

- What is the problem?
- The A13
- Why am I interested in it?
- What have other people written about
- Questions, Method and Outcome

The Problem

- Urban peripheries and small towns are not centres of political discourse, but increasingly centres of political change
- Metropolitan 'surprise' at far-right activities (far-left never reported); metropolitan 'disgust' at ignorance and culture – "chavs", overcrowded households, "Barnsley man".
 - Brexit often comes to mind, the narrative of 'left behind' towns in historically Labour-supporting areas that voted Leave – most recently, the Red Wall (Deborah Mattinson). This is partly a myth – but myths and collective imaginings are nonetheless real in their cultural effects and influence of self-identifications.
 - The problem of BNP support in the early 2000s, particularly local council elections in Barking and Dagenham, one of the poorest boroughs in London. Owen Jones, John Harris have visited the area more recently.
 - Historically, the two nations of England and one-nation conservatism goes back to Disraeli's *Sybil*, 1845. A genre of undercover literature, visiting and living with the exotic poor, goes from James Greenwood, 1866 to William Booth 'darkest Africa', Charles Booth 'terra incognita'. Jack London 1903 tries to get a cab...
- What is the metropole? A cultural idea of the liberal or small c conservative centre, the implied reader of the major newspapers
- More than that, a political and an economic centre that makes decisions that is seemingly distant, overtaken by complacent or even hostile elites, which exclude participation and seek to diminish democracy.

A13

- A 35-mile road that leads from one archetypal small town Basildon into Central London, via the old and new Thames docks, Tilbury, Dagenham and the Isle of Dogs and Canary Wharf
- Passes through some of the poorest communities in the UK historically and currently, both in Essex and East London. The Commercial Road from Whitechapel to the Isle of Dogs; Canning Town; East Ham; Barking and Dagenham; Rainham; Basildon and Canvey Island.

- Along the route, support for leaving the EU swung from some of the highest recorded levels nationally: 72.6% in Castlepoint to 32.5% in Tower Hamlets.
- Key sites of political struggle and social change along the route: the Commercial Road built to connect London to the East and West India docks; Ford Dagenham, the vast Beacontree Estate (1921-35), Tilbury docks and now its vast Amazon site, the Isle of Dogs and closure of the east London docks and its transformation into a financial zone. Others: the Royal Docks, Canning Town and London City Island; history of squatting, housing struggles, racism and anti-racist activity in Whitechapel; the battle of Cable Street; Great Dock Strike 1889; derelict Beckton gas works, later the film setting for Kubrick's *Full Metal Jacket*. Brick Lane; Windrush and its stowaways. "Basildon Man", the working class former-Labour voting supporter of Thatcher in the early 1980s. The road could be used to tell a story, an archaeology of the present – but the problem is, which story
- Musically: Billy Bragg, Jah Wobble, Dr Feelgood; grime in Bow; bangla.
 - Jah Wobble, A13 1990: "I want to travel the A13 for eternity // I love your oil refineries // Motor factories // Motor works // Sewerage plants // Factory farming // Theme pubs // Launderettes // Transport caffs // Haulage firms // Betting shops // People who look so dour // Swaggering aggressive young men who hate themselves'
- Wider issue: stories of change and struggle distract us from stasis, from fate and fatalism, from the fact that many people, many of us, are passive and without the power to shape our working or home lives.
- In short, an area with housing scarcity; marked by unusual poverty; marked by debt (Newham residents most likely nationally to be in debt, 1 in 4 with problem debts; with Tower Hamlets and Barking & Dagenham next highest, Money Advice Service 2017). Yet stark juxtapositions with Canary Wharf and redeveloped Royal Docks.
- Healthy life expectancy differences: men 69 in Richmond to 55 in Tower Hamlets and 59 in Barking and Dagenham; for women in Barking and Dagenham it is also 55.
- So, in short, totally different experiences of time – of life, of work, of planning ahead. As we follow the A13 then, we see life expectancies decrease, debt and overcrowding levels rise.

My interest

- Post-PhD blues; the long ride east; my own lack of housing, and the psychological effects of lacking a secure roof collectively. Shelter 2018: 1.15 million on social housing waiting lists, of which Newham is the highest (44 households waiting for each home).
- My clients, and their struggles and victories
- Like many around 2016 I began thinking about mid and long-term social futures. I understood Brexit and "populism" as reflecting forces for greater democratic participation in a period of declining democracy. I was also struck by a growing liberalism of individual rights/self-expression that was being wielded against a perceived "liberal thought-police".
- Increasing interest in ideas of fate and fatalism, and their bearing on working class life and culture.
- Backdrop: major historical movements of capital, goods, people and waste as one cycles down the road.

Existing literature

- Traditional sociology since Young and Willmot in Bethnal Green – the supposed anomie of the out-of-town council estate (e.g. Debden). But: Jon Lawrence points to desires to move out, for security, less overcrowding, privacy.
- In France, Christophe Guilluy: la *France peripherique*, that the working class in the suburbs and small towns has not only lost economic power but also cultural power. For Guilluy, the rise of support for the Far Right reflects a reaction against globalisation, with a growing divide between the rich, middle class and liberal centres (Paris, Toulouse, Nice) and the now deindustrialised, ‘desertified’ small towns defined by closed-up shops, unemployment, anger and mourning. Liberal elites in the centre sneer at them, mirroring a centralisation of power. Akin to David Goodhart, *Anywheres and Somewheres*.
- Justin Gest, *The New Minority* (2016). Focus on white working class disaffection and collapse of support for left and rise of Trump. Studies Ohio and Barking. Maps it to declining economic power and sense of helplessness/dependency on the state.
- London and housing: Anna Minton, *Capital; Regeneration Songs*; Rowland Atkinson, *Alpha City* – new work on London’s inflated housing market, the development of luxury apartments, the role of offshore finance, and the wider dynamics of private versus social housing. The wealthiest 10% of London households own more than 50% of total household wealth, while the bottom 50% own less than 10% London’s total wealth.
- Sarah Glynn, *Class, Ethnicity and Religion in the Bengali East End*. Multi-decade survey of community activism from 1970s anti-racism to problem of identity politics and conservative community politicians today.
- Jon Cruddas and Blue Labour since 2001 (MP Dagenham and Rainham)
- Tom Hazeldine, “Revolt of the Rustbelt” (2017, NLR). Trope of the ‘reactionary rustbelt’: North and South Wales against London, having faced deindustrialisation. But that’s also truth of deindustrialised East London, from the docks to Ford.
- David Widgery, *Some Lives*. A GP and writer’s observations on Canary Wharf and the effects of society on illness. My GP friend in Aveley and at the Tilbury docks – “shit life syndrome”.

Questions

- How do changes in the movement and ownership of capital explain the organisation and reorganisation of space along this route, in settlement of lives along this route?
- How does the increased mobility and freedom from regulations of capital mirror ideas of freedom, free will and liberal self-expression for people in this area?
- How do we contextualise communitarianism and a shared (imagined) sense of lost social solidarity against this?

Method

- Walk, cycle, drive, observe.
- Reconnect/connect: GP, patients, the dock; community activism in B&D; residents advocacy groups in Canning Town and Barking Reach; locales like Dagenham Sunday Market; research with Laura Grace Ford
- Research the history of the road within the context of the emergence of capitalism, from the movement of goods to the movement of services – from West India Dock to Canary Wharf.

- Focus on a conceptual relation: movements of capital and movements of people

Outcome

- First chapter of *Where are we going?*, which will give it a narrative focus – a presentation of a politics of ambiguity and confusion; of fatalism and self-expression; of resentment and material insecurity; of communitarianism and religious communities: Haredi Jews on Canvey Island; East Bengalis of Whitechapel; of dark humour. Of Sean's swim. A more conceptual article could be developed.

Responses

- David Selborne, Left Behind and series of articles in New Society

Recommendations: pitch to Thinking Allowed (Geoff) but work on the book first

- Precious, compare it to The Mighty Redcar on local people telling their stories

- Richard, think of pitching it to BBC TV. OU is normally reactionary, but we can offer things from time to time: e.g. Coast, Streets Under the Sky (?)

- Tom, who is the book for? How does it not become something just for the liberal metropolitan elite? Or, is the book for the local people who are unheard?

- Will, there is a longer backdrop of working class conservatism, it isn't a new thing at all. Leads me to compare to Merrie England and Billy Bragg.

Richard: The Stinking Political Class

- for a wider audience. Mixture of analysis, case studies and polemic.

- Uses excerpt from Network film of character who later won posthumous Oscar.

- Incorporates Iraq War, MPs Expenses, initial focus on the failure of a choice between a geriatric and a megalomaniac for presidents in 2020.

Problem is that amateurs have been governing from far too long. An issue where you have to choose the executive from the elected members of the legislature. His example is Bill Rammell, MP for Harlow and former events organiser for U London who becomes HE Minister.

100% of MPs are members of political parties; only 2 genuine Independents with no prior affiliations since 1945; yet only 0.7% population are members of political parties.

Gives examples of Ed Miliband's rise.

Cincinnatus is a good example (Roman history).

Overall: asks are these the best people we could have in government? Problem is they are usually just party activists.

Solutions

- More effective electoral representation.
- Systemic reform, looking at term limits
- Geography, tying candidates to localities.
- More focus on class and occupational background of candidates
- Selecting candidates by primaries.

Overall, preferences are being distorted by partisanship.

Peter Osborne