

BETWEEN TWO LEGAL WORLDS

FRED DUBOW

Jerry White. *The Worst Street in North London: Campbell Bunk, Islington, Between the Wars*. (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, History Workshop Series, 1986). xiv + 312 pp. Tables, notes, bibliography, index. \$19.95 (paper).

Every large city has one or more neighborhoods that have a reputation for being particularly dangerous. Such places are often viewed as havens for illegal behavior lying beyond the reach of routine law enforcement. From the 1890s until World War II, Campbell Road, known as "Campbell Bunk," acquired the status as the "worst street in North London." It had a reputation for violence, for harboring thieves and prostitutes, and for resisting the imposition of external controls. It was a place where strangers rarely went and police entered cautiously, generally in pairs.

Jerry White, the editor of *History Workshop*, a journal of socialist and feminist history, presents a description and an analysis of the familial, communal, political, and occupational dimensions of the lives of Campbell Bunk's residents. He seeks to explain why people chose to remain there and how the street's reputation was a source of both pride and stigmatization.

This neighborhood was inhabited by many who rejected the traditional labor market in favor of a variety of illegal ways of making a living. It played a special role in the housing market by catering to the very poor with extremely overcrowded, substandard tenements and rented rooms.

Campbell Bunk was not only dangerous for outsiders. The closeness of the community supported resistance to the police and other agents of external intervention, but it did not protect residents from each other. Violence was a potent force in the lives of many families. Of fourteen long-term families on whom descriptions of parental relationships were available, thirteen reported fighting between spouses and "at least seven men could reasonably be called wife-beaters" (p. 139). Women residents of the Bunk often found ways to obtain incomes superior to their men and were willing to fight back physically to hold on to what they had. White explains much of this violence in terms of efforts by men to find a sense of worth and an area in which they could exercise control in their lives. The men emphasized physical prowess as a

way of proving their masculinity and used physical means to dominate their families.

The residents of Campbell Bunk had a tradition of opposition to more traditional societal norms. Within this larger oppositional orientation, White (p. 123) interprets the commission of many crimes, particularly certain kinds of thefts, as inchoate "politics and practice of rejection," a vague way of hitting back at oppressors. The struggle against landlords and employers included thefts, destruction of property, and assaults on rent collectors as among the few weapons available to tenants and unskilled laborers who felt otherwise powerless. White amply documents the existence of such motivations on the part of some Bunk residents, but there is insufficient evidence to determine whether these were generally shared by most of those who engaged in activities outside the law.

While the descriptive detail is vivid and provocative, the analytic points of most relevance to an understanding of law and society are not particularly new. White misses an opportunity to compare and contrast his findings with closely related ideas in the work of the American sociologist Gerald D. Suttles (1968; 1972), which is based on the perspective of the Chicago School within urban sociology in contrast to White's Marxist perspective. Suttles's concept of the "defended neighborhood" in which, in the absence of a reliable and sympathetic response from formal law enforcement agencies, the community (largely through male gangs), provides its own version of control primarily by protecting the neighborhood from outsiders, has elements that parallel White's findings. Besides assuming some responsibility for policing themselves, the residents of Campbell Bunk actively resisted interventions by the police when residents were involved. There was, according to White (p. 118), a custom of allowing those fleeing the police to enter residents' homes and pretend to be relatives or guests of the family. If arrests were made, the police had to be on their guard against collective resistance from the crowd. The police were mistrusted by Bunkites and viewed as enforcers of an alien moral code, but when the weak needed protection, there were few other places to turn.

The description of the Bunk's relationship to the law suggests one of the last stages in the domestication of London by state authority. These people stood on the threshold of inclusion in the official legal order. They defied it, they fled from it, yet they found themselves increasingly using its services despite themselves.

When the Bunk's inhabitants ventured out of the neighborhood to find jobs, they often hid their place of residence from wary employers. This feeling of stigma experienced outside the neighborhood enhanced a defensive pride when Campbell Bunk's residents stood together and faced the rest of the world. They felt a sense of community and, like the residents of similarly regarded

neighborhoods in this country, felt that their street was not as bad as those who did not understand the street's collective supports believed. By the late 1930s large societal changes undermined the economic base of Campbell Bunk as young women found increasing work opportunities outside the area and the neighborhood was caught up in larger efforts at slum clearance and urban renewal in the postwar era.

While it suffers from an intellectual insularity with regard to related work in this country, White's study provides valuable insights into neighborhoods that aggressively stand on the margins of the law.

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