

# Voyages around fathers

## *Class, community and mobility in industrial South Wales*

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### Introduction

My credentials for contributing to a volume exploring social anthropologies of the Welsh are not the strongest. I was born in Cardiff and spent the first seventeen and a half years of my life in a new town twenty miles away. But although the names of places and streets in this town were mostly Welsh, it was entirely English-speaking. Croesyceiliog Grammar School abandoned normal lessons to hold an *Eisteddfod* on St David's Day (1 March), but it was never easy to find a Welsh-speaking bard among the pupils. I had a gifted languages teacher called Idris Jones, who would undoubtedly have liked to teach us his native Welsh. In the mid nineteenth century, Welsh was apparently still spoken in this valley, but then a gradual demise was accelerated through repression.<sup>1</sup> The headmaster in Croesyceiliog in the 1960s was a chemistry graduate of Oxford University who took the view that Welsh was a dying language that had no place in our curriculum. Idris Jones therefore taught me only German and Italian.

Then I moved away. I learned to speak other European languages, and eventually family and friends joked that my accent in English betrayed more traces of Hungarian or Polish than of Welsh. But I have never ceased visiting family in Pontnewydd, Cwmbrân, where my father, born in Cardiff in 1924, still lives in the house he purchased in 1960. Reg is my main source of information

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1 Although schools in the valley of the Afon Llwyd used only English, it seems that at least some chapels continued for some time to hold services in both languages. See Harwood *et al.* (1996:233).

for this chapter. Before turning to some empirical data, I shall elaborate a little on the concepts of class and community with reference to the ethnography of Wales. After the empirical discussion, I shall return to these concepts in a broader framework, with reference to my ongoing work in Hungary, to Brexit, to human mobility and to what Raymond Williams termed the 'idea of settlement' (Williams 2016:119ff.). My aim is to pose questions with respect to Wales that have wider implications: for Britain, for the European Union, even for our shrinking and overheated planet.

### **Community and class in the anthropology of Wales**

When social anthropologists began to expand the horizons of their discipline in the middle of the last century, they realized the need to abandon a static antiquarianism and place the objects of research in historical time. Bronislaw Malinowski's self-critical appendices to the last of his Trobriand monographs set the tone – for example, when he regretted his failure to integrate the impact of colonial pearling into his accounts of the natives he observed (Malinowski 1965:479–81). Not long afterwards, Max Gluckman went much further when he famously proclaimed that 'An African townsman is a townsman, an African miner is a miner: he is only secondarily a tribesman' (Gluckman 1960:57). The assumption was that theoretical tools developed for the analysis of industrialized societies in the advanced states of Europe should be operationalized around the word as 'social change' unfolded. The implication remained that these societies had been in effect stagnant prior to the impact of colonialism and capitalism.

James Ferguson (2019) has recently questioned the implementation of this research agenda by scrutinizing the concept of the 'proletariat'. He points out that its meaning for Marx and Engels was entirely different from what it connoted in the Roman society from which we derive the term. Roman proletarians were not the dispossessed class characterized by Marx and Engels, obliged to sell their labour power to exploiting capitalists. They were citizens, with various rights and claims on imperial redistribution, though they mostly lived in what, in today's parlance, might be called precarious informality. Ferguson argues persuasively that to grasp the situation of the urban poor in contemporary South Africa, the original Roman sense of proletariat may be more pertinent than the Marxist sense that has prevailed in Euro-American social science theory.

But my focus is Wales, where the fit with Marxist concepts seems more promising. Thanks to mining and manufacturing industry in the valleys of South Wales from the late eighteenth century onwards, Wales became the world's first industrial nation (the census of 1851 recorded that more households were earning their living in industry than in agriculture). Yet when

Max Gluckman, in another innovative step, called upon social anthropologists to apply their insights from tribal Africa and other colonies to their home countries, he did not follow the logic of his implicit philosophy of history.

When Ronald Frankenberg, one of his most talented students, was prevented (for reasons to do with his radical left-wing politics) from undertaking research in the colonies, it was decided he should collect data for his doctorate in Wales instead. But Frankenberg worked not in the heavily industrialized south but in the settlement that he called 'Pentredywaith', a village easily accessible from Manchester, where he loyally operationalized Gluckman's ideas about conflict and integration in a face-to-face community divided by religion as well as language and ethnicity (Frankenberg 1990). The other major study of that generation, by Isabel Emmet (1964), was also located in the north. Both authors addressed social change explicitly. They highlighted tensions and conflict, as well as community-building and the overcoming of antagonistic class relations at the local level. But if anthropologists were now permitted to work at home and encouraged to address the entire range of human societies in time and space, it is surely surprising that industrial South Wales was overlooked by these pioneers – slate received more attention than coal and steel.<sup>2</sup>

This pattern persisted in the next generation. Anthony Cohen's research on the Shetland island of Whalsay is an outstanding example of fine-grained British ethnography (1987; see also Cohen 1982). By now the bias towards the rural meant a focus on the 'symbolic construction of community', and the aims of the original Manchester School to engage with conflict and hostility had slipped out of focus. Perhaps this trend should not be surprising. Whether or not they use and theorize the concept of community, anthropologists have by and large been more at home with holistic analyses that prioritize questions of identity and belonging than they have with the study of class and structural antagonism.

Class, regardless of whether it is defined in Marxist terms with reference to ownership of the means of production or in a more diffuse Weberian sense, where it is given by 'market situation', is primarily a term for the sociologist. Of course, we are not entirely lacking ethnographic analyses of class relations, or of the historical emergence of class consciousness in a specific class. Equally, there is no shortage of sociologists who have deployed 'community' in one way or another. But the disciplinary bias seems undeniable. Whereas other social scientists readily identify *Klassen an sich* ('classes in themselves') according to

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2 The major exception was Kenneth Little's study of 'negroes' in Butetown, Cardiff, one of Britain's first black ghettos (Little 1948). The book's curious title was an indication that the Welsh dimension was of no interest to the author.

various objective criteria, the social anthropologist has a propensity to report on the basis of field research that members of the class in question do not in fact share a common consciousness of its predicament and historical mission; in other words, it does not become a *Klasse für sich selbst* ('class for itself'), to employ the familiar Marxist distinction.

Sometimes, the concepts of class and community are creatively combined. When a common relationship to the means of production is complemented by the solidarities of households and associations, religious as well as secular, we may recognize 'working-class communities' (e.g. Kalb 1997). Countless historians, geographers, sociologists and others have shown that the South Wales Valleys were dominated by such communities following industrialization, and that they had a high degree of class consciousness in the familiar Marxist sense. It is enough to consider the militancy of the miners, all the way down to the failed strikes of the 1980s, the 'final paroxysm of classic proletarianism' (Day 2002:123). Nevertheless, in the following section I shall draw attention to certain limitations of the classic Marxist approach.

### **From 'council class' to Brexit**

Let me begin the empirical discussion with family detail. Since both my parents were born in Cardiff and large extended families were rooted there, I visited continuously throughout my childhood. We generally headed to my mother Kathleen's parents, who lived in a terraced house in Australia Road, Heath. In the mid 1960s they moved to a socially superior semi-detached house in Beatty Avenue, close to Roath Park Lake. My mother's father hailed from the mining village of Gwaun-Cae-Gurwen, from a family that sold and repaired boots and shoes and had formerly farmed. He was the only Welsh-speaker among my four grandparents. The Protestant Alfred Mark married the Catholic Agnes McClean, whose father John, a ship plater, was born in Sligo and moved to Cardiff around 1890. Of course, these two Celts could only communicate in English. When relatives from Gwaun-Cae-Gurwen came to visit in the 1930s, my aunt recalls how the guests were shunted off into the kitchen to speak Welsh with her father. To this day, my middle-class relatives in Cardiff disapprove of the Welsh language requirements that have changed public life in the city during their lifetimes. They consider themselves Welsh but do not greatly value the language and culture. A solitary cousin who chose to study Welsh and became a Plaid Cymru activist is the sole exception.

My father's side was less present in my childhood. Reginald Hann was born at his maternal grandparents home in Bertram Street, but at this point in early 1924 his parents Alfred and Lucy had already purchased their own home, 176 Moorland Road, Splott. To me, as a child, this seemed a different kind of community, more working class (a vocabulary I could not have used at