



Wales: Culture and identity

The issue of class in Wales

NEIL EVANS

Class was in many ways the classic difference in the study of Welsh and British society. When sociology developed the subject in the post-war period it was often seen as being obsessed with class perhaps to the extent that it crowded out other kinds of difference. And what has happened in recent years of course is that we've become more aware of other kinds of difference in Welsh society particularly gender and race. And these are very valuable perspectives to have. I mean clearly it makes no difference if you are a worker in Wales whether you're black or whether you're white as well. It can't simply be an issue of class. I think the downside of it has become that class has now become sidelined for many people. It's seen as something which is not relevant anymore and yet while this has been happening in the last twenty to thirty years or so what we've seen in Wales is that differences in income have greatly increased. Inequality has become much greater in Wales. So class I think is still a very relevant issue even though it's very important that we don't make it the only kind of difference there is in Welsh society.

One of the things that's distinctive about class in Wales is that the majority of the population identify themselves as working class. That's not the case across the rest of Britain. It is in some regions but not in other parts of Britain. And that I think tells us something about the kinds of subjective feelings that people have. To say you're working class means that you think you come from the same kind of community as other people; have the same kinds of experiences. The kinds of communities we have in Wales are very much small towns and industrial villages or what were once industrial villages. And it always seems to me that if you meet someone in Wales one of the first questions is always 'where do you come from?' and I think we identify ourselves in that ways. But saying that you come from a particular place - Senghennydd - where I come, from identifies you are coming from a working class background because there is no other class in a place like that and the same would be true in Bethesda, Llanberis or in many other areas of Wales.

Focusing on a particular study of class in Wales it's a remarkable feature of social research in Wales that Swansea and it's general region have been the focus of study on several occasions starting with Brennan, Cooney and Collins' social change in south west Wales in the 1950's going through to Rosser and Harris's classic study Family and Social Change in the 1960's and of course it's recently been re-studied by Nikki Charles, by Charlotte Davies and Chris Harris again in 2008. Now as the title suggests class isn't the only issue in those books but they all give us important perspectives on the nature of class. They look at different kinds of communities within the city and that means sometimes middle class areas like Skelty which is covered in all the books and working class areas. It was Morriston in the original study and so we learn a lot about class from detailed studies like that.

I think my favourite kind of social research is always going to be the detailed local study which gives insight into the way people live and help us to relate our experience to the wider study of society.

When we put the three studies together we see some quite remarkable things, the changes in the occupational structure, which has been massive since the 1960's. So there is a great shift from manual work into white-collar working, non-manual working and also the feminisation of the workforce, which really is the biggest impact on the social structure. Of course that has implications of class as well as for gender and it really brings home I think very clearly what the massive changes have been in the post-war period in Wales.

HUGH MACKAY

How is the difference between qualitative evidence and quantitative evidence shown in chapter 5?

NEIL EVANS

I think the really interesting issue about quantitative and qualitative evidence in the chapter comes very early. I present the results of surveys into people's self-identification of class: that is they regard themselves as middle class or working class? And that produces a precise set of statistics for the whole of Britain. You can see how many people think of themselves as working class or middle class in Wales and compare it with other areas. But then when you look at the evidence of why people answer that question in a particular way, it almost dissolves before your face. When we look at some evidence from Swansea of the way that people regard themselves as working class or middle class it's clear that that's in no way an objective measure. It's not the way they would be classified by the registrar general's categorisation of the population at all. But does that mean that we throw the statistics out and they're meaningless? I think no, they're not and that's why they're there. But what they really tell us is the way people regard class in Wales and it's very important to have the statistic for that because it shows you why Wales is different say from the south east of England. But of course you shouldn't confuse it with actually being working class in the way that you can count the size of the working class from official statistics.

Quantitative evidence is very good for showing us the general pattern of a society, how many people are in the working class or in particular occupation groups. How many people are in the middle class or professional groups? It's vital to get a hold on what the overall shape of society is. But of course it tells us nothing about the experience of class. What does it mean in people's lives? And there we can only use qualitative evidence to get at issues like that I mean one classic sociological study referred to the hidden injuries of class. How do you find hidden injuries in official statistics? Not very easily I think but you can find them through literature like the writings of Rachel Trazese which are used in the chapter or in studies which use interviews with people to draw on their subjective experiences.

A particular researcher could use quantitative evidence alone and rely on other people's qualitative work and vice versa. After all the subject is bigger than any single individual. If we want to study class in Wales it's not done by one person. It's done by some collectivity or scholars and researchers.