Re-Placing Poverty

Poverty in the extreme?

Over the past three decades, the UK government has honed a statistical measure that reduces poverty to a singular cartographic ranking. The resultant 'Index of Multiple Deprivation' draws on seven separate 'indicators' of poverty, which are then weighted, totalled and mapped to produce a single enumeration of 'deprivation'. One county consistently occupies the position at the lower extreme of this measure: Blaenau Gwent—the most deprived place in the United Kingdom.

The Welsh name for Ebbw Vale, the largest settlement in Blaenau Gwent, is 'Glyn Ebwy', which roughly translates as 'valley of the wild horses'. If one surveys the town from the Manmoel mountainside, as I did at the culmination of fifteen months of ethnographic fieldwork in the county, then Glyn Ebwy appears to be a an entirely apt place-name. After I had climbed through the steep, winding streets of the Hilltop estate, classified as one of the most destitute settlements within Blaenau Gwent, I arrived at the top of a valley-side inhabited by two things: huge quantities of fly-tipped rubbish, and herds of wild horses. It was a sudden transition from the grey and ageing housing stock to the bare and craggy mountainside, as views of the entire Ebbw Fawr valley, from Cwm through to Beaufort, opened out. This panoramic view of the valley was incredibly ambivalent: it felt both disorienting and familiar, detailed and distant, as I sharpened the focus of my gaze on those buildings, streets and alleyways I was acquainted with, whilst my eyes passed over those whose intimacies remained locked. As I looked down, I recounted the moments of closeness with people and places I had felt during my research, but also experienced a sense of alienation with how little of this valley, or perhaps any valley, I felt I 'truly' knew.

Our understanding of the world is indelibly ascribed by the position from which we contemplate. This can be in terms of the physical vantage point one occupies as a researcher, but is also just as much to do with the epistemological positioning determined by the sorts of statistical indicators, practical methods and theoretical tools we use to describe and know places. Such positionings have a politics. Just as my viewpoint from the mountainside opened up certain vistas whilst closing others, so too does a statistical method.

According to the Index of Multiple Deprivation, deprived life is marked by relative lacking in terms of income, employment, education, health, housing and the environment, as well as a higher prevalence of criminal activity. The data for these variables is drawn from national census and state department sources, which are each given a different weighting in the model's algorithms. However, these broad, nebulous categories are both very difficult to reduce to a numerical figure, and of markedly different importance to those in various positions, places and life circumstances. Poverty means different things based on one's age, gender, education, health, background, and so on, and not only varies between areas, but also within them—even for those living within the same town, street, or household. Consequently, the Index conceals these specific, granular variations that mark lived experiences of poverty in different places. Despite this, rankings of deprivation inform national, regional and local policy, and are drawn upon by institutions including universities, hospitals and the police.

These statistical methods introduce a particular ontological framing of the world around us: of norms and deviations, averages and outliers, standards and extremes. As the philosopher Ian

Hacking has argued, "defining new classes of people for the purposes of statistics has consequences for the ways in which we conceive of others and think of our own possibilities and potentialities."[1] In other words, the measurement and ranking of poverty through the Index of Multiple Deprivation is both descriptive and prescriptive. The Index is produced by a statistical rendering of impoverished places, but measuring deprivation simultaneously *produces* deprived life. It not only seeks to render poverty knowable, but also to intervene in poor areas in particular ways. In so doing, such portrayals shape the types of resources, support and opportunities that are available to those living in deprived places.

But those in Blaenau Gwent supposedly leading deprived lives also directly and deliberately escape these measures. This is *their* Blaenau Gwent. How might the area appear if we step away from the statistics—if we descend from our panoramic view at the top of the mountainside—and engage with them in their everyday lives?

Jeff

Every Tuesday and Thursday, Jeff can be found volunteering at the largest food bank in Blaenau Gwent. "If I can't make it, I'm either dead or dying," he quips. It is impossible not to get on with Jeff. His fondness for practical jokes and friendly demeanour are matched only by his commitment to his work in and around the food bank. However, his forthcoming manner belies a sense of anger, frustration and hopelessness.

At the age of 61, Jeff feels like he has been abandoned by local services and the economy. He moved to Blaenau Gwent seven years ago having secured a high-ranking local job in the electronics sector. Just six months after Jeff arrived, the company he had joined went under. He was made redundant, having now committed himself to the area financially and without the capital at his disposal to move elsewhere. Given the ongoing deindustrialisation of Wales, electronics is a sector which has all but disappeared not just from the valley, but the entire country. Total employment in production industries fell by over 20,000 between 2001 and 2015 in West Wales and the Valleys, whilst manufacturing employment similarly declined by 30,000 over the same period[2]. Due to these shifts, Jeff feels that "there's nothing in the Valleys for me," as deindustrialisation has meant "Blaenau Gwent is now basically the unemployed centre of the world."

What these statistics do not reveal is an understanding of everyday life for those marooned by geographical shifts in production. Jeff currently receives Jobseekers Allowance (JSA), an out-of-work benefit payment that amounts to only £73.10 per week, or around £10 per day. Jeff explains that "when you're living on minimum finances, you can only do certain things. And those certain things mean that you're spending half your time looking for work, the other half you spend trying to support yourself enough to eat. Which means, basically, you're cooking the longest and hardest way

[1] Ian Hacking (1990:6): *The Taming of Chance*; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
[2] Total employment in production industries has fallen from 123,000 in 2001 to 101,300 in 2015 in West Wales and the Valleys, whilst manufacturing jobs fell from 114,300 to 86,900 over the same period. Statistics taken from StatsWales (2016): "Employment in public and private sectors by Welsh local authority and status"; accessed April 2017; accessible at: https://statswales.gov.wales/Catalogue/Business-Economy-and-Labour-Market/People-and-Work/Employment/Persons-Employed/publicprivatesectoremployment-by-welshlocalauthority-status

possible. Which means it's taking you a lot of time and a lot of money, especially in gas and leccy [electricity]. Which eventually means you're out of heating, or out of something."

Jeff's minimum finances were made all the more minimal when he was 'sanctioned'[3] by staff at the Jobcentre (the government institution responsible for regulating those claiming JSA). "I was sanctioned for failing to turn up to an interview. An interview I didn't get the letter from because my house burned down and they sent the letter to my old address, not my new address, which they had been given! So as a result, I ended up on a two-month sanction for something that was not my fault, living without any cash of any description." This sequence of events left Jeff not only without an income, but homeless.

After being abandoned by the government and state support, Jeff turned to the local community for support. I asked him how he survived for those two months without income. "Food bank, basically. With no gas, no electricity. It was hard, but you do what you have to do. You bum off friends to have a cup of coffee. You take your coffee around to them, because they can't afford it either because all your friends are basically unemployed. So you supply the materials, they supply the drink. And that's the best you can do. And that includes meals as well. For three weeks I had no bath facilities while I was trying to get the gas sorted out. Now, I would not want to employ me if I went to an interview if I stunk. End of. I wouldn't employ me. And as I used to be in the employment side of things, I can see all the problems I've got that's against me before I even start."

To understand these punitive operations of the state requires an engagement with the ontological and epistemological framing of 'poor places' like Blaenau Gwent. The construction of the region as an extreme—as *the most* impoverished place—serves to justify these interventions. Numerical measures of deprivation frame the problem of poverty in an abstract register, where the consequences of these coercive techniques are concealed. Jeff's hunger, anger and declining bodily hygiene are simply not captured by these enumerations of poverty. Those devising national policies in the Houses of Parliament and regional interventions in the Welsh Assembly in Cardiff do not bear witness to the visceral intensity of Jeff's experience. They cannot feel the gnawing of his hunger, the smell of his unwashed body, or the blush of his embarrassed skin. However, whilst these corporeal effects evade the state's gaze, they are combated by Jeff's local community. He may have been cast-out from state provisions of care, but communities here in Blaenau Gwent ensure that individuals like Jeff are not left abandoned.

Norman

On one of our numerous trips through the mountainsides of Blaenau Gwent, Norman paused ahead of a stunning view. From our vantage-point, all three valleys of the county were visible to us. Norman narrated the landscape for me: to the south was a colony of ancient woodland, clinging to a limestone escarpment; to the west was evidence of an industrial tramline stretching high into the mountainside, cutting into the sheer rock face; to the east a lone standing stone that held a long association with local spiritual folklore.

[3] To be 'sanctioned' is to have one's benefit payments frozen due to an apparent reneging on an aspect of one's commitment as a claimant.

The portrayal of the county as the most deprived in the country circulates an image of impoverished bodies with needs not abilities, places with pathologies and problems, not homes and communities. Norman finds this mainstream coverage of the county—of a depressing, dangerous and disgusting area—to be a slight against both him and the place he holds so dearly. "I think Blaenau Gwent is one of the most under-rated, under-valued places in the country. I think it's tremendous! You've got the clash between the natural beauty and the industrial ravaging that has gone on. It's one of the best places to live in."

Nevertheless, MTV's recent mockumentary-style television show "The Valleys"[4]—a programme that follows a group of young adults from the region as they move to Cardiff—is the latest in a long line of stigmatising representations. Take the trailer for the first season. Bass-heavy dance music plays throughout a long extended montage as the characters are deliberately and crassly presented by the show's producers in selective moments of exaggerated vulgarity and debauchery. As the scene unfolds, the audience is shown individuals removing each other's tops, suggestively riding atop a toy sheep and sharing alcohol-fuelled kisses in an expensively decorated apartment building. A female and male—with lipstick stains covering his mouth—venture coyly into a bedroom before slamming the door shut, whilst another pair of females cover themselves in whipped cream. As the party goes on, the characters are pulled explosively from the room through doors, windows and walls, with one female character clinging to a doorframe as she complains that she's "just had her nails done." Once all have been hauled from the room, they are montaged falling from the sky into a field full of sheep with rural mountainsides in the background. The narrator proclaims that "the harder they party, the harder they fall. Will they make it to Cardiff, or will they just end up back in the Valleys?"

Through the scripting, production and distribution of the trailer, the actions of those on camera are suggested to the audience as being tacky, lewd and vulgar. In so doing, the producers of the show remove the subjectivity of those portrayed by reducing them to their sexualised bodies—and their sexualised bodies alone. By exaggerating these behaviours, along with a repeated focus on the consumption of alcohol, any other elements, characteristics and experiences these individuals may have are concealed. By extension, stigmatising them similarly serves to frame the Valleys as a whole in a tactless, asinine fashion. This portrayal of a seemingly bawdy and gaudy Valleys is indicative of a particular projection of poverty—an apparent poverty of *taste*, incorrect judgement, and undisciplined behaviour. As a result, the show aligns the Valleys with gluttony, whether it be sexual, alcoholic or an extreme focus on personal appearance. These scenes of bacchanalian excess are constitutive of a placing of the region as beyond the pale of the 'normal': as feral, errant, and undomesticated.

The projections of excess in "The Valleys" are aligned with those of lacking as displayed in the Index of Multiple Deprivation, to the extent that they are deemed dialectic. However, rather than accepting this territorial stigmatisation, Norman instead evokes a different Blaenau Gwent: *his* Blaenau Gwent. "We have a wonderful trail—the Harford Trail—that cuts through four counties, comparing the industrial land with the beauty of the natural landscape. It's a wonderful area, but I think it's stigmatised before people have actually come. We can walk anywhere in these mountains. We can roam amongst the beauty." For Norman, it is those who produce misleading representations of the area that are to blame, and it is this group he attempts to influence, regularly writing to

[4] The MTV series ran between 2012 and 2015.

television producers and studios to encourage them to portray *his* Valleys. "You email them, and they say that they'll pass it on to the producer, and that is as far as it gets. And yet I'm calling the BBC, calling them over. You try HTV, and you can't even get through to the producer to give the ideas! These producers could do more for the Heads of the Valleys area, that's the point."

Norman does not allow these rejections to put him off writing. It seems to bolster his determination. He feels it is his own personal duty to reject the stigmatisation of Blaenau Gwent in popular culture and in the extreme "statistics and damn statistics. But, having been to a lot of places, it is a lot better here than some of the areas I've seen. And, with the right political motivation, it could be even better." Norman is engaged in an act of place-making: to craft and intervene in the spatial and representational economy that is building an alien and abject version of Blaenau Gwent that does not match his own. He is attempting to not only speak against the statistics and negative portrayal of the region, but to reclaim the necessary agency to portray Blaenau Gwent in his own terms and through his own experiences. Extreme portrayals of debauched excess and utmost deprivation are not passively accepted, but resisted, negotiated and altered. When summarising his thoughts on Blaenau Gwent, Norman explained that "the only word that comes to mind is love. I love the area. I love the people."

Andy

"We're living in a shit hole. Pardon my language, but it is." Andy, a fourteen year old secondary school student, explains that Blaenau Gwent is "infested with drugs", "riddled with crime" and strewn with rubbish. "I think the only good part is the McDonald's. Truthfully." He longs to get out.

Andy's portrayals of abjection operate through two proxies, which he uses to construct a common-sense understanding of poverty. They align the county not with the problem of extreme relative deprivation but rather the personal fault, failing and fecklessness of certain members of the community. He is quick to divide the local population into those deserving and those undeserving not only of state support, but of his own personal respect and acknowledgement[5]. "Some people, half the people I talk to, you know, they're really kind. They're friendly, they love having a laugh. But other people, they just act like they're too big for their boots around here. They can act like proper dickheads when they don't even know you."

The first proxy is the figure of the foreign migrant[6]. Despite having one of the highest rates of white Welsh people as a proportion of the population in Wales, Andy describes Blaenau Gwent as being "invaded" with groups from elsewhere in Europe. "It's a nice place when it wants to be. But, other than that, it is Polish taking our jobs. Polish and other people coming in to our country, nicking our jobs so there's literally no place to get a job. Because there's so many people from different countries just coming here to nick our jobs." Underlying this argument is a fear over employment—a fear which echoes Jeff's earlier testimony. Whilst Andy overstates the linkage between immigration and joblessness, his testimony reveals an anxiety over the labour market, livelihoods, and his own personal future.

[5] Notions of a 'deserving' and 'undeserving' poor have long marked understandings of poverty as a social and moral problem. The historian Gertrude Himmelfarb draws attention to these categories in her 1983 book *The Idea of Poverty*, as do many other authors before and after.

[6] Whilst Andy's views may appear unwarranted given the demographics of Blaenau Gwent, his ideas are indicative of a rising anti-immigration common-sense in many parts of the United Kingdom.

The second proxy is the figure of the over-reproductive, fecund poor mother. Andy fastens the problem of poverty to population and, by extension, his neo-Malthusian logic suggests that Blaenau Gwent's deviation from the norm is reproduced—quite literally—by the actions of a select proportion of local females. "They basically claim money because they've got over four kids, something like that. Then, other people are working here, mind the language, but working their bollocks off, just to basically survive. And then there's them, just sitting back, relaxing, while every other thing is done for them." It is the immobility of this gendered population—an immobility that is apparently engendered and encouraged by provisions from the state—that Andy draws on when marking them as abject.

Both these proxies are a means for Andy to find someone to blame, acting as more tangible figures for him to attach his anxiousness and uncertainty over the future to. Yet, despite these pathologising and problematic portrayals of Blaenau Gwent, Andy still maintains some pride in his area. "At the end of the day, we're living here, we need to embrace where we're living. If you don't embrace it, it's literally like you're walking round the streets with pure hatred in your blood. But if you embrace it, you can actually walk around the streets feeling happy."

Conclusion

The poverty of Blaenau Gwent looked different after descending from the summit of the Manmoel Mountain. As I returned to my fieldwork base that day in the last week of my research, one of my neighbours was sitting out in the street. I pulled up a chair and, as we chatted, she revealed her hopes for the future, fond memories of the past, and present day concerns. Our conversation drifted freely, broken only by the playful yaps of her dog and the excited voices of local children as they raced one another up and down the street on skateboards.

As the evening drew in, I said goodnight and began composing my fieldwork diary for that day. As I wrote and recorded people's stories and their varied experiences of impoverishment, I kept returning to a definition of poverty proffered by Jeff. For him, to be in poverty meant "not having enough money to survive." His words revealed what was at stake in his impecuniousness: life itself. And yet, Jeff did survive—as did so many others in Blaenau Gwent. They were able to endure this struggle because of the myriad acts that were shaped by the intricacies of the local area and community.

The view from 'ground-level' alongside and amongst people as they went about their daily lives was attuned to recognising and studying these acts of survival. It revealed the often contradictory moments of conflict, contest and conviviality that marked experiences of poverty in Blaenau Gwent. Moreover, it allowed one to see a place not as a numerical, disincarnate matrix, nor through the institutional, panoramic gaze of the state. Instead, the ethnographic gaze is one that is both human, and humanising.

It is due to these qualities that ethnography is able to lay bare the shortcomings of policies and interventions designed and instigated from a distance. So too do these qualities reveal the complexities of poverty that are only ever partially captured by either stories or statistics alone. By taking into account the insights that ethnography affords, policy might instead be devised through an engagement with a middle-scale—somewhere that is neither at the summit of the mountain nor at its base. Rather, it is where the bottom-up and the top-down might meet—a zone where one

might peruse a plethora of ways of seeing in order to pursue, both in vision and in practice, a form of social justice that re-*places* poverty.