

UK: In The Valleys

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The former mining communities of Wales have been deliberately devastated for a generation - but their proud history of socialism and solidarity has not been so easily wiped away.

Driving into the village of Crai in the Brecon Beacons, at one point the land beside the road falls away, opening up the view. A rounded field, like the indent left by an ice-cream scoop, leads to a sheer, jagged grey cliff-face.

The Brecon Beacons mark the end of the Welsh Valleys. Gwyn Alf Williams' famously asked 'When was Wales?' but an equally valid question is 'Where is Wales?'. Any nation includes within itself many nations, all nationalism is a matter of political, rather than material, reality. In Wales, there are about five different Waleses: West Wales (rural/touristic, nationalist, Welsh-speaking); Mid Wales (rural/touristic, sparsely populated, monied); North East Wales (suburban, depressed, arguably Scouse), Glamorgan (urban/suburban, poor and/or smug); and The Valleys (rural, ex-industrial, insular). A plurality of Welsh people live in the last two regions, with most of those living in Glamorgan.

However, in Wales' self-perception and the understanding of Wales globally, The Valleys stand in for Wales. Most Welsh people outside of Wales will have been asked if they're from The Valleys. The Valleys form the backdrop of almost all film and television shot in Wales — from *How Green Was My Valley* (1941) to MTV's *The Valleys*. Often, film and television will use locations in The Valleys to stand in for quite different places — *Twin Town* (1997) and the extremely good *Submarine* (2010) both did this, perhaps fearing that Swansea didn't feel quite Welsh enough.

The two most successful, and, in Wales, beloved, Welsh bands of the past few decades have been Manic Street Preachers and The Stereophonics, bands that didn't just come from The Valleys, but made a point of it — the Manics by rejecting small town life and shooting for American glamour, The Stereophonics by singing in tiresome detail about small town life.

It is useful, therefore, to think what The Valleys represent, given that they represent Wales. They represent, variously, working class pride, deprivation, community ties, anti-social behaviour, respectability, chapel and cider. The Valleys, by virtue of being in the foothills of the Brecon Beacons, are often more disconnected from each other than from the market and port towns that they traditionally served, but there are commonalities between the different towns.

The Valleys, as currently conceived, exist due to the vast importance of Welsh anthracite coal to the European and global economy in the late 19th century up until the late 20th century. To take the town of Maesteg as an example, its population grew from less than 4,000 in 1810 to over 26,000 in 1910. This pattern was repeated broadly across the region, as migrant labourers from rural Wales, Ireland, Italy and sometimes further afield arrived in the hope and expectation of well-paid and regular work. In *Wage Labour and Capital*, Marx argues that rapid economic growth provides for workers a greater increase in social pleasures, luxury and wealth — on the most basic level, it was probably

easier to get a pint, buy a shirt or the ingredients for a meal, or find a sexual partner in the Maesteg of 1910 than it is in the Maesteg of 2017 (pop. 20,000, 45% of working age individuals in work).

On the other hand, economic growth, as Marx notes, also leads to a greater awareness of injustice, of the visible and invisible impacts of inequality. Miners were politically key throughout this era due to their economic importance, but also due to their awareness of something which is forgotten now that the memory their importance has faded into nostalgia — that mining, like much industrial work, is shit work. Physically demanding, ruinous to health, isolated — its one saving grace being that it provides exceptional conditions for political organising.

The conditions of close contact, reliance on each other for life-saving, and clandestinity, coupled with the desire to limit the physical risks and increase the reward for such shit work, led to networks of local and international solidarity that remain visible to this day. Throughout The Valleys there remain hulking buildings, the remnants of millenarian religious organisations from the turn of the 20th century, large libraries funded by union dues, workingmen's clubs, Liberal clubs, Conservative clubs. There are even several 'non-political clubs', such as that found in Nantyllyn, a paradoxically collective response to the overwhelming collectivity and democracy of the culture of the time. Miners, individually and collectively were involved in acts of international solidarity. Without wanting to list these, it's enough to say that the park in the town centre where I grew up contains a memorial to the dead International Brigade volunteers of the Spanish Civil War.

In 1984, the decision was made to destroy the mining industry in the UK, a primarily political decision taken by Thatcher's government. There was nothing to be lost politically from doing this (The Valleys, as in other areas which depended on mining, had voted Liberal and changed to Labour when that party emerged). The Great Strike of 1984-85 was a bitter defeat, which was conceived of (correctly) in class terms by those who took part, but few could have predicted the impact on The Valleys as an area. Merthyr Tydfil saw its population decimated in the 10 years after the strike, and it has only now begun to recover to pre-Strike levels.

The physical isolation of The Valleys is a product of the growth of the coal industry and, now that the coal industry has disappeared, a trap. The Valleys have lower life expectancy than any other region of Wales. The Stereophonics and Manic Street Preachers may share little in common besides the mutual use of guitars and a region, but their music, written in the post-Strike era, shares two common themes — nostalgia and suicide. The Bridgend Suicide Cluster of 2007-2009, where came not from Bridgend itself, but from The Valleys towns that used to feed it.

This dire economic and social situation has led to another situation, wherein anything that might bring growth, wealth and work back to The Valleys is embraced wholeheartedly, particularly, it seems, by the Welsh government. Schemes less plausible, less beneficial and more obviously flawed than the Springfield Monorail are reported nightly on the national news. An international racetrack is proposed for Ebbw Vale. The steel unions oppose even temporary nationalisation of the Port Talbot steelworks on the grounds that it may deter potential investors. Hope is important, but hope on this scale can only be the product of desperation.

The Valleys vote Labour. The Valleys also voted Brexit. Jonathan Edwards of Plaid Cymru referred to a potential Hard Brexit as "the greatest job killing act in Welsh history". Of course, to the subjects of the greatest job killing act in Welsh history (the rapid diminution of the mining industry), this is laughable — there is very little left to lose. It is inarguable that many people voted Brexit because of the spectre of immigration, and in The Valleys, it is just that, a spectre. The Valleys have not experienced any real immigration since their glory days, the forging of their identity as a recognisable and formidable region and culture. Any anti-immigration sentiment coming from The Valleys is a spurned bloke in a pub, after getting rejected, telling the woman in question to fuck off.

Or maybe, when the economic and social forces that linked you to the world, to Paul Robeson, to Arthur Scargill, to the Spanish Republicans, have disappeared, all you have left is a desire to keep yourselves distinct and separate. Maybe, when many of the same class of gurus and wonks who decided that the mines were uneconomic, that Britain had to modernise away from any sense of workers' power over their living conditions, were warning that leaving the EU would be an economic catastrophe, people were less than receptive to their arguments.

On my drive to work, in a Valleys town, there are two banners in close proximity. One opposes fracking, one demands the continued funding of a community centre and library. It is now clear that continued use of fossil fuels is a nightmare from which humanity may never awake — we cannot and should not reopen the mines. It is clear that capitalism is a system of creative destruction, which displaces people, which destroys areas for a profit, and, in the case of the Thatcher government's closing of the mines, destroys areas to prove a point. It is now quite close to destroying large areas of the habitable world due to climate change. However, in the struggle to prevent further environmental damage, and to protect social services, there is the smallest glimmer of hope of replicating some of the collectivity and political culture that defined The Valleys.

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