

# Revisiting community studies

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# The politics of method

- How do we read the archival sources of ‘classic’ studies?
  - ‘There is no document of culture which is not at the same time a document of barbarism’
- Difference between internalist readings, which identify sources and seeds, and externalist ones which prefer disjuncture and tension
  - ‘Articulating the past historically does not mean recognising it “the way it really was”. It means appropriating a memory as it flashes up in a moment of danger’ (Walter Benjamin, *On the concept of history*, 1938)

# My fieldwork

- From 2002-2009, funded by the Leverhulme, I examined the archives of UK social science sources 1950-70
  - Mass-Observation 1937-1955
  - Qualidata sources on
    - Bott, *Family and Social Network* (London 1951-54)
    - Goldthorpe and Lockwood *Affluent Worker* thesis (Cambridge, Luton 1962-63)
    - Jackson and Marsden, *Working class community* (Huddersfield 1961-66)
    - Pahl, *Hertfordshire studies, Managers and their Wives* (1961-68)
    - Brown, *Tyneside shipbuilding workers* (1968-70)
- Have also studied the *Sociological Review*, *British Journal of Sociology* and other academic journals
- I became fascinated in the history of social science methods (the community study, interview, and sample survey.....).
- *Identities and Social Change in Britain since 1940: The politics of method* to be published by Oxford UP, May 2010

# The politics of community studies

- After 1945, there was increased concern to mobilise the nation in terms of its typical, 'average' qualities. The social sciences hence – usually unwittingly - became a key agent in cold war politics.
- In the 1950s, this concern spawned exciting community studies, which appeared to depict everyday life and routines of the nation in new and powerful ways,
- Yet, by 1970, the pursuit of national knowledge had been taken over by the national sample survey, and community studies were derided.
- What kind of losses were entailed by this?

# The search for the English *Middletown*

- In the US, the Lynd's 1929 study of Muncie, Indiana, demonstrates the power of the community study to render the 'averaged American' (see Sarah Igo)
- In the UK, this draws on a powerful (middlebrow) literary current concerned with national unification through journeys to and from the emblematic place (Arnold Bennett, JB Priestley, George Orwell, Cowper Powys, etc)
- Facilitated by the rise of the motoring pastoral (H.V. Morton, Shell Guides, etc).
- This represents a very different kind of social science to the pathologising poverty studies of the British survey tradition, which persisted through the 1930s.

# Booth's poverty maps, 1880s



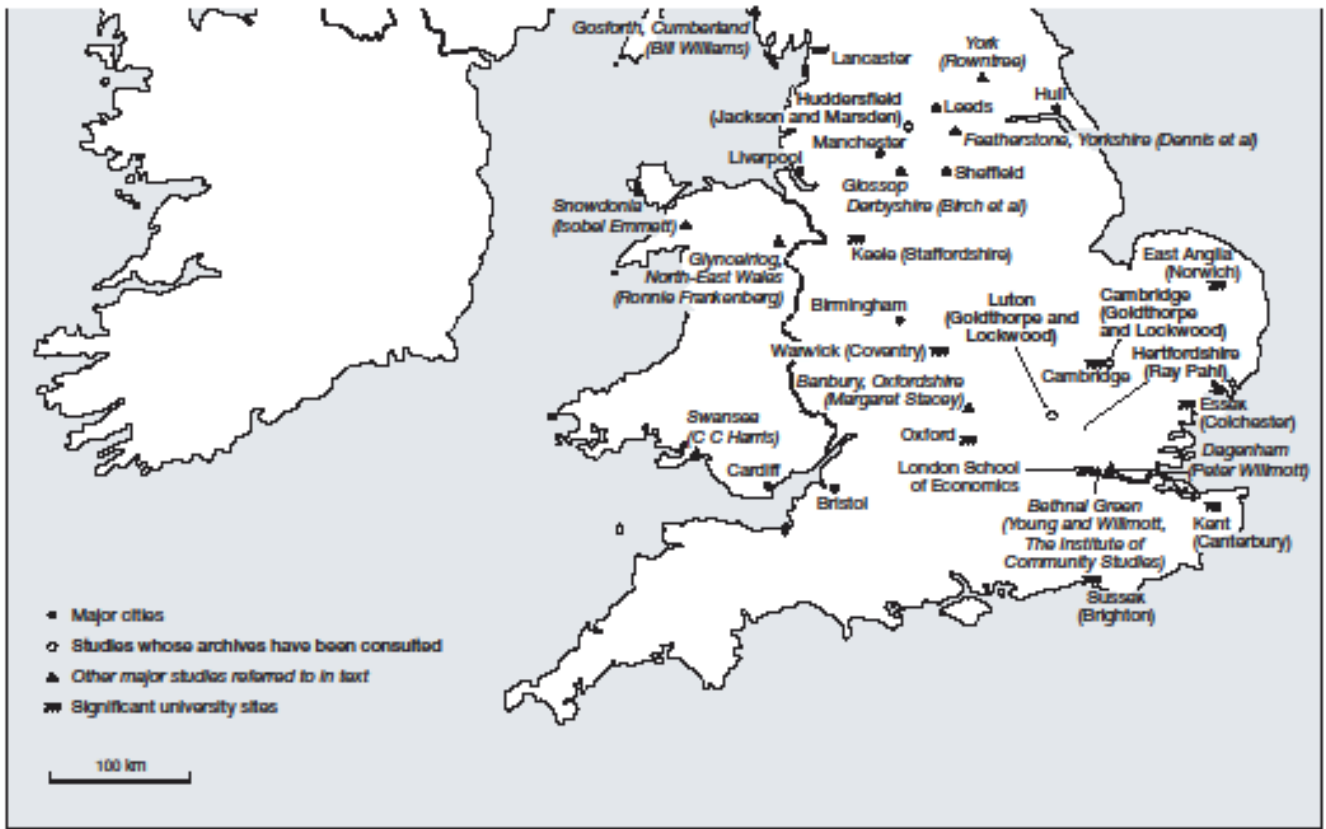
# But, where was Middletown?

- Where within the contested national spaces of the UK (England, Scotland, Wales, Ireland?)
- In the gentlemanly southern home counties, or amidst northern industrial, working class grit?
- In the Celtic mystic west, or the rational Anglo-Saxon east (David Matless).

# The quest....

- Attempts in the 1950 to deliver the 'northern town' (e.g. Glossop, Featherstone) or parts of the metropolis (e.g. Bethnal Green, London) as the national hub only succeed in illuminating specific, class based, societies.
- The search for a national model depended on tense, agonistic encounters across the Welsh marches.
- This developed a sophisticated research repertoire which – for a time – offered a distinctive analysis of social change and the nation....

# Five encounters across the welsh marchlands



# Frankenberg's *Village on the Border* (1957)

- The first reflexive ethnography in the UK which recognises the role of the 'stranger', based in Glynceiriog in NE Wales
- Frankenberg's sophisticated network framing
- Deployment of 'sociological' concepts of class and roles, seen dynamically.
- Develops a conception of change as a socio-spatial process associated with the 'urban-rural continuum' (leading later to *Communities in Britain*, 1966)
- Subject to the famous riposte by Bill Williams, 'does he speak Welsh' - the Welsh can know the English, but the English can't know the Welsh (because they can't speak the language....).

## Bill Williams, *Sociology of an English Village* (1956)

‘Although handicapped as an “offcomer”, the analysis of the social structure was much facilitated by the fact that I approached it as a Welshman who had lived for some time in southern England. The contrast between the latter and much of the social life of Gosforth, and the numerous similarities which exist between it and Wales is particularly striking’ (Williams 1956: 200).

Wales is a ... is a small country, and I grew up being accustomed to friendship networks, work networks, kinship networks and so on. And, of course, when I went to Gosforth, I regarded myself as going to a foreign country, and when I got off the bus in Gosforth, there was absolutely – I don’t think I put this in the book, I’m sure I didn’t – absolutely a beautiful example of this, which made me convinced I’d come to the right place, there was a woman coming down the road, on a white horse, and she stopped outside the shop and Mr. Barnes came out and actually touched his forehead, said, “Good Morning, Miss Keene”, and she said, “Good Morning, Barnes”, like ... (LAUGHS) ... you wouldn’t do that in Merthyr! (LAUGHS) And she then gave him her order, and he wrote it down and said, “Yes, I’ll bring it up this afternoon, Miss Keene”, and off she went. And I discovered that Miss Keene was actually the Rector’s daughter, and the Rector’s daughter clearly belonged to a different social class from Mr. Barnes. And I thought, “Here is the English class system in action!” (LAUGHS) And it ... it couldn’t be more different from industrial South Wales, where there was a strong egalitarian ethos.

- Woriginality in conducting detailed household interviews
- The role of Lloyd Warner as model
- The concern with class as a means of defining English social relations

# Margaret Stacey, *Tradition and Change* (1960)

And there was this interesting gap between the very philosophical sociological approach of Maurice Ginsberg, and the very distinct approach of Mannheim, and what I was learning in the Social Policy/Social Work area, and that really fired me up as to what I wanted to do when I'd graduated. Because I really don't remember Ginsberg really referring to any empirical [work] - well, there wasn't very much to refer to, to be quite honest, between kind of, like, '40 and '43, except for the material about class. And then the research that I would learn about in the Social Science Department would be about people who became criminals, people who were very poor, people who had housing problems, categories of people with socially defined problems. .... That was really why I finally did the Banbury Study. Because I really thought that we needed some empirical data about how "ordinary people" lived - not these categories who were presenting social problems. And it seemed to me - I wanted to link with the theoretical ideas. And the gap I just found very upsetting.

- Stacey's innovation is using surveys, and documentary research to conduct a local study.
- Her evocation of two key repertoires: class and change which are to be key in defining sociological expertise.
- Stacey's ambivalent relationship to Wales, where she could not get a job because of its male bias, and where her husband and family were based
- Stacey's ambivalence to the Swansea mix between sociology and anthropology.
- The perceived failure of the Banbury re-study draws down the curtain on a major tradition of repeat community studies

# Colin Bell, *Middle class families* (1968)

- Bell was a central figure in forming modern sociology around issues of class, power, and change. Originally attracted to anthropology, he finally decided he was a sociologist because
  - (a) if you studied modern Britain, by definition you had to be
  - (b) it allowed him to settle his ambivalent accounts with Stacey

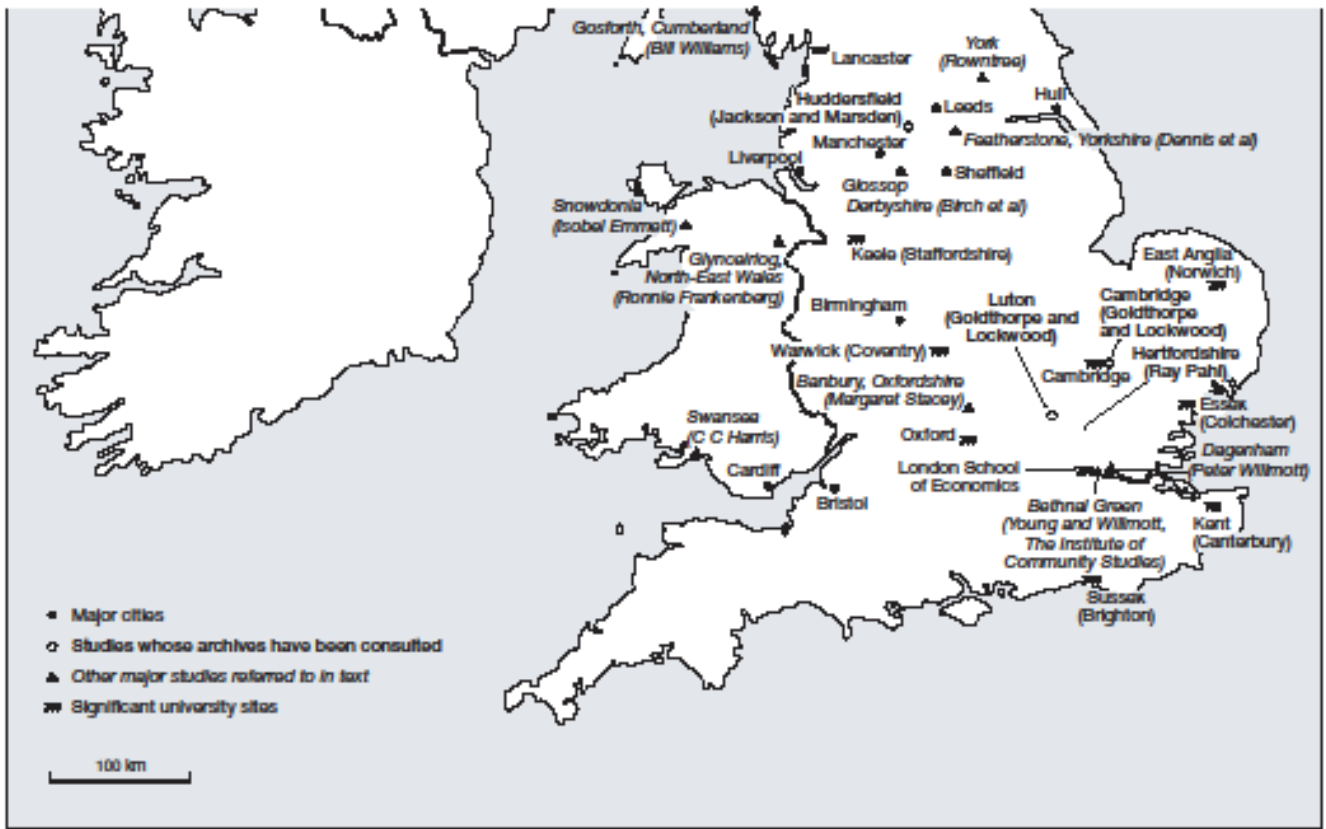
The figure of the spiralist allowed him to connect class to mobility.

Keele also taught me about the North. Don't forget, I am a boy from Tunbridge Wells... I used Stoke-on-Trent slightly unusually by UCNS standards, like I did go to the Clubs, and I even knew the odd girl in Stoke-on-Trent! And I did some fieldwork for Stan Beaver who was, in my last year, President of the Institute of British Geographers, and in his Presidential Address, which is actually published in the Institute of British Geographers, I did some of the mapping of the remaining pot banks in Stoke-on-Trent, so walked through those really benighted, Longton, Fenton, really, really desperate places, which are as desperate now..... But it was an utterly different experience, and this sounds very patronising, but it was actually quite exotic. I had a feeling about being in a different place. As exotic as going to Swansea was, which I did after Keele. I mean, Swansea was really again, a very exotic place for me. But Keele gave me an awful lot.

# Ray Pahl's Hertfordshire studies (mid 1960s)

- Pahl's innovations in the 1960s are huge:
  - In pioneering in depth interview methods
  - His influential account of the urban frontier, suburbanisation and the 'community in the mind'.
  - Recognised the significance of spiralism as changing the nature of socio-spatial social relations
  - (with Jan Pahl) the first to be seriously interested in middle class gender roles.
- His work strongly indebted to Welsh models

Most people in England nevertheless find it hard to escape from an idealised and probably sentimental notion of a "village community", in which everyone is linked in a form of "mechanical solidarity", in Durkheim's term, and held together by some archetypal *gemeinschaft*. Indeed, that was the notion that Emrys Jones, perhaps unwittingly, encouraged me to have as a graduate student at the LSE, when he advised me to read Alwyn Rees' classic study of a Montgomeryshire parish "*Life in a Welsh Countryside*". Rees appeared to want to retain an essential Welsh culture through the distinctive sets of social relationships that emerged in relative isolation. However, Emrys Jones also alerted me to the danger of equating geographical isolation with social isolation. He had spoken with old men in Tregaron who knew the haunts of Soho and the area round Smithfield Market very well. The drovers of Wales had travelled from the most remote and isolated settlements taking their livestock to market for hundreds of years.



## And two that got away....

- *Coal is our life* portrays a fixed, static, working class which stands apart from the nation, which is also a model for Jackson
- Goldthorpe and Lockwood's study of Luton begins as a community study but ends as a case study in industrial sociology, deploying survey methods. Richard Brown's study follows this path of abstracting industry from location

# The end of community?

- It proved impossible to find the British Middletown because of power of territorial politics, yet we need to recover this legacy in an era when the hegemony of the national sample survey is waning
- Community studies championed a spatialised conception of social change. The sample survey, by contrast abstracted articulated a form of 'locationless logic' which produced the 'sociological aggregate'.
- Community studies identified socio-spatial formations (the spiralist, the burgess) which offer a vital tool for contemporary research