The Long Resolution? Responding to economic and social change in postwar South Wales

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How external economic actors have led to profound changes in the lives of generations of people in South Wales.

This article argues that there was a resolute political will powering regenerative initiatives in South Wales from the late 1950s to the early 1970s - what I call (after Raymond Williams) 'The Long Resolution'. Whilst many decisions were taken within South Wales itself, there is also evidence that many of the choices about investing in the future were made at a UK-wide level and were balanced against options in other places. An aim of this article is to examine the long-term impact on later generations of political decisions made in a previous era. Another is to explore people's personal responses to the major changes in their lives resulting from such developments. As well as adapting a well-known Williams concept for the title of this article, I also draw on his concept of structure of feeling as way of seeking an understanding of the way change was experienced.

Though the main focus of this article is on the period following the Second World War, decisions that were taken in the 1920s and 1930s continued to underpin later developments. Unemployment was high in South Wales during the interwar period, due to recession and a significant decline in coal mining and heavy industries. However, it took some decades for solutions to be shaped and resourced. The measures that were adopted after the war form a particularly interesting case study of social change, especially since, in South Wales, the new, and very different, economic and housing landscape was shaped in locations geographically close to existing places. Williams writes in *The Long Revolution* that: 'a new generation will have its own structure of feeling, which will not appear to have come "from" anywhere' (p65). Part of my concern is to try to understand where the new structure did come from.

Thinking in terms of a structure of feeling is a way of revealing and presenting the affects and culture(s) that relate to a certain time and place. In this article I am particularly interested in the longevity of such feelings. In his novel *Border Country*, published in 1960, Williams expresses this longevity in depicting the social unrest experienced by the protagonist's father, a railway signalman. The long-term consequences of the 1926 General Strike bleed into the cultural context of the late 1950s: the village railway station closes and so people and goods are henceforth transported by road.[1] One reading of *Border Country* is that it traces a shifting structure of feeling, as collectivist approaches give way to more individualistic ways of doing things. The 'Long Resolution' extends some of openings made in *Border Country*, and considers whether such changes happened over an even longer time period.

The first section of this article discusses the forces driving change in South Wales in the immediate postwar period, and notes the effect of population movements in prompting political action, as well as the effect of political decisions on population movement. The second section discusses some of the major economic and planning interventions into South Wales in the postwar period: the large steel works built in Port Talbot and near Newport, and its effects on the fortunes of Ebbw Vale, and the development of a new town in Cwmbran. In this section, voices from my own research provide colour and depth to the statistical evidence.

Places and regenerative interventions: economic geography and population movement

The forces driving change

Raymond Williams's *Long Revolution*, published in 1961, sees the long revolution as a process of democratisation driven by developments from below, and as unfolding in the three spheres of economy, politics and culture. Democratic change would come from civil society, small-to-medium-sized companies and local authorities, rather than from centralised governments.[1]

For a dozen years my work involved coordinating efforts that aimed to follow community-led approaches in response to economic, social and other challenges, researching, designing and delivering schemes for local authorities, charities and businesses. We worked alongside different levels of the state, including the Welsh and UK governments, and the European Union. To further my understanding of how these forces related to each other, and culture at a local level, I took a part-time master's degree alongside my day job, and my subsequent dissertation researched the economic history of Maesteg, a South Wales valley settlement.[1] In my analysis I found that the local population grew, alongside a buoyant economy, from the 1860s through to the early twentieth century. Through the latter period I found that exogenous influences had influenced most economic decisions. However, these externally-located owners did not invest in the 1920s, and a period of decline lasted until World War Two. More local initiatives played a role in the later development of the region, and this, combined with a relative stability of the population, shaped how people responded to the challenges they faced.

In the decades post-1947, a time of major nationalisation, what happened in Maesteg fitted with Kevin Morgan's assertion that the guiding - or, perhaps better put, *commanding* - role in determining a region's future during this period was taken by 'nationalized coal and steel industries and foreign inward investment from the US, Europe and Japan'.[1] On the other hand, Graham Humphrys's 1972 book *South Wales* details the ways in which local government created estates for light industry in the 1950s and 1960s - potentially an opportunity for local economic diversity.[1] Indeed, in my research I found that locally-owned businesses and social enterprises enhanced people's long-term sense of connection to a place.

In the period from the late 1950s to the early 1970s, South Wales diverged from the broad trend of population movements in Great Britain.[1] In places like East London or Glasgow, urban policies supported slum clearances, and people moved away to new towns and previously rural areas. South Wales was different: more people stayed relatively close to where they had been born.

Population movement in South Wales from the 1920s to the 1960s

The geography of South Wales is formed by valleys: resources such as water, and wealth derived from coal, have for a very long time run down the valleys in a southerly direction towards the sea. Pooley and Turnbull's statistics seem to show that the local population in South Wales was fairly stable from 1890 to 1994 (see note 6 for reference), but a closer investigation shows that something dramatic happened between 1921 and 1931.

Coal exports slumped after World War One, and a quarter of all Welsh coalminers were unemployed in 1925.[1] Analysing the consequent depopulation is aided by John Webb's 1963

typology, which considers both inward migration and emigration, and sets this alongside natural gains or losses through childbirth or deaths.[1] Across England and Wales, the most notable inward movements nationally were to the London boroughs. During this period, in manufacturing areas like Coventry, Derby, parts of London and the port city of Southampton, natural gain was a more important element of growth than inward migration, suggesting a more sustainable growth. However, for the most part, South Wales was continuing to lose a significant number of inhabitants during this period. In the coastal areas, such as Swansea, Cardiff, Barry and Llanelli, the picture was different: natural gain exceeded net out-migration. But the predominant pattern in the region was of net out-migration exceeding natural gain. This is what happened in the coal-mining areas around Aberdare, Caerphilly, Ebbw Vale, Maesteg, Merthyr Tydfil, Pontypridd and the Rhondda. Furthermore, two coastal towns in the region, Port Talbot and Newport, fell into the same category. These towns, which were within twenty miles of valleys settlements, were to become critical in postwar plans to ease employment problems; they were part of a wider pattern of coastal developments coordinated to support the valleys. For example, new steel production created demand for coal mining and supported new industries in the valleys.

Investment in South Wales through the late 1950s to early 1970s

Moving for work

There was a degree of population movement in South Wales from valleys to the coast. Though it did not involve long distances, it nevertheless affected people's lives profoundly. Through my own interviews, alongside other research and some broadcast media, a structure of feeling running alongside these developments can be tentatively identified.[1] My first round of interviews was undertaken during 2019, where I met over twenty older residents in and around Newport.[1] The second round was carried out during the lockdown in 2022, when people joined me online and used maps to show me places important to their life stories.[1] This second stage extended the geographical remit to cover Port Talbot and Cwmbran.

The first account comes from Gerald (pseudonym) born in the early 1920s, who has memories which bridge nearly a century. He recalled the atmosphere of his youth, near to Beaufort at the northern edge of the coalfield, where his 'destiny' was seemingly shaped by the stopping train down the valley to Newport. Gerald started his working life as a teenager in the steelworks in Ebbw Vale, then owned by Richard Thomas. The site had been extensively developed through government intervention in the 1920s, largely in response to the Great Depression. Many people travelled twenty miles or more to work there in the 1930s. He recalled people coming up for the week from Swansea and Llanelli (places noted for their metalworking heritage) and then returning home for the weekend. His story of everyday life in South Wales involved strong social bonds, life in close proximity to family, and local traditions around chapel and societies. However, things changed when he moved twenty miles from Ebbw Vale, down towards the coast, to work in the newly constructed Spencer Steelworks, near Newport, in the early 1960s, which had been backed by public money. These steelworks were owned by RTB, a company formed by the amalgamation of Thomas's company with Baldwins, another major steel producer. The new steelworks were later renamed Llanwern and are now owned by Tata.

The second interviewee, Pat, was born in the late 1930s. Though she has lived most of her life in Newport, she told me about her early years in Port Talbot.[1] This coastal town is one of the places identified as having had a decreasing population throughout the 1920s. Pat

remembered cycling home from school one day to find that diggers had levelled the sand dunes at the end of her road. The Sandfields housing estates, where construction started in 1947, were being built to provide accommodation for thousands of returning World War Two soldiers, and unemployed people coming down from the nearby valleys. Most of them would work in the newly expanding steel plant in Port Talbot, the Abbey Works (now also owned by Tata). Pat remembered the poverty in the area around Port Talbot, recalling in particular the mud floor in the house of a childhood friend who lived in the nearby village of Cwmavon.

The expansion of the steel works was very significant to South Wales development in the postwar period. In 1951 RTB was nationalised by the Labour government, alongside the whole steel industry.[1] Then, when the incoming Conservative administration of 1951 reversed nationalisation, RTB was prepared for privatisation, but the company did not find a buyer; consequently it remained in public ownership until the industry was re-nationalised by Labour in 1967.

Stephen Barry describes the political debates of the early 1950s: whether to build a significant blast furnace plant for steel production in Wales or in Scotland. The Spencer Steelworks in Newport emerged as the victor, and this is where Gerald would work for over twenty years. It is important to stress the fact that the Spencer Steelworks was backed by public money. In 2023, the fate of UK steel production is still the subject of intense political contestation.

The Spencer Steelworks at Newport

When the Spencer Steelworks was built, with work for over 10,000 people, there was a clear desire to not create a new town overly-reliant on one source of employment. This sentiment is voiced on a contemporary film made by Monmouthshire County Council in the early 1960s.[1] Administrators and policy-makers had also learned from the experiences of extending Ebbw Vale steelworks in the 1920s. People in that valley location had fulfilled the employment demand, but geography had made it hard to turn a long-term profit. This more localised decision-making was important to the 'Long Resolution' - Monmouthshire County Council took pride in claiming to have invested more money than the steel company in establishing schools, building roads, and supporting district councils around Newport to construct socially-rented housing for the families that would work in the steelworks. Jim Kirkwood, a councillor for Caerleon Urban District, proudly recalled in 1997 that his town had 'played an important and active role in housing part of the large influx of personnel'.[1]

Of note, a similar vision underpinned the steelworks at Ravenscraig, near Motherwell in Scotland. Writing about Ravenscraig, Russell Leadbetter states: 'It's easy to forget that this place was once a symbol, in the words of Arnold Kemp, a former Herald editor, of Scotland's "traditional industrial virility"'.[1] This makes me reflect that my own account, from a Welsh perspective, of postwar renewal, and the subsequent fight to keep what had been gained, could also be written from Scotland. Indeed, I was in the audience when the thought-provoking play *Yes! Yes! UCS!*, about the battle to keep ship-building on the Clyde in Glasgow, was performed as part of the 2021 Raymond Williams Centenary in Manchester.[1] There were threatened job losses in many industries in the late 1970s, and they often led to significant strikes, including in the steel industry - as Gerald, who was eventually made redundant in the 1980s , reminded me.

In 1980 the UK's Conservative government decided to prioritise Llanwern, and Ravenscraig eventually closed, in 1990. Ron Davies, Labour Secretary of State for Wales (1997-98), reflected on that decision in Richard King's book *Brittle with Relics: A History of Wales 1962-1997*.[1] He commented that 'Wales, particularly South Wales, had done quite well on the strength of the Labour Party influence'. He added that the decision taken by the Conservatives in the 1980s had reinforced the need 'to do something about the unbalanced Welsh economy', which was also feeling pressure in the mining industry.

It is important to understand how dramatic this period would have been through the affective language of those who lived through it. Gerald stated that he had 'migrated' to the new steelworks. Another interviewee, Maria (pseudonym), said that her family was 'imported' from twenty miles up the valley 'to serve the opening of Spencer Works'. Maria had arrived in Caerleon at the age of twelve, in 1962, as her father had transferred from Ebbw Vale, similarly to Gerald. The family had experienced a short stay in a rented house provided by Caerleon Urban District Council, and then bought nearby on a privately-built estate. Before she turned twenty, Maria and her husband had arranged a mortgage and bought their own semi-detached home. Her account helped me to see that people were staying in physical touch with the old version of South Wales whilst at the same time gaining some material prosperity - something which Raymond Williams advocated.

Opening up ways to move more easily, confronting the physical constraints of the geography, is important to the 'Long Resolution'. For example, building the motorway in South Wales supported people in commuting to work and travelling to visit family. They were therefore able to sustain close connections.

Material wealth, motorways and Cwmbran New Town

The stretch around Port Talbot was one the UK's first planned motorways. Martin Johnes describes how the new road cut rather unsympathetically through the town.[1] The feeling of disruption this engendered was still evident in National Theatre Wales's 2011 public theatre piece *The Passion*, in which locally raised actor Michael Sheen played a leading role. In one of the scenes in the documentary that was made about *The Passion*, people are seen looking out from their terraced houses to face their long-gone neighbours - moved to accommodate the express road.[1] Turning cultures which are no longer lived into traditions develops an idea articulated by Williams.

Another significant part of the regional development plans in the postwar period was the designation of Cwmbran, in a valley six miles north of Newport, as a 'New Town', in 1949 - the only such Welsh example. Road connectivity was critical to this project from the start. Indeed, the community-led history is aptly titled *The Trains Don't Stop Here Anymore*.[1] Nearly four decades after its publication, I interviewed the co-author of this book, Mel Witherden. Mel had been brought up in southern England and arrived in the Cwmbran area during the early 1970s. His recollection helps an understanding of the structure of feeling apparent at that time. He described a place which was 'marvellous', as it provided modern housing for people. Indeed, nearly fourth fifths of people in the 1960s rented modern housing from the local council or the Cwmbran Development Corporation. Local employment was fairly buoyant, with 6,500 jobs created between 1961 and 1973. There was significant new employment within the service sector, demonstrating some diversification away from heavy industry. Looking back over his fifty years in the town, he estimated that a third of the people in Cwmbran new town were local, a third from the valleys, and a third - like him - from

England. Later in our conversation Mel asked himself a rhetorical question: why the populations from up the valley 'hadn't slid further down from the valleys to the coast?' His words conjure an image of time and place: people resisting the move down towards the sea. After a pause he answered his own question by saying: 'Because these communities do have that stability about them. People that have been rooted very much in their communities, and that's always struck me as being, you know, a pretty interesting feature of South Wales.'

This outsider perspective, albeit from somebody who has stayed half a century in South Wales, reflects a relative stability, as compared to contemporary experience elsewhere in the UK. The period from the late 1950s through to the 1970s saw many people from across Britain move from the bigger cities to suburban and rural locations, as part of a modernising drive towards new industries, and a more car-based organisation of place.[1] But in the late 1970s and through the 1980s - in another example of the formation and long-term effects of political will - urban policy changed towards corporate development within cities, through property-led and neoliberal regeneration initiatives.[1] A clear example is Canary Wharf in London. Such measures demonstrate a 'revolution from above', as opposed to Williams's notion of democratic change from below. There followed a period of sustained depopulation through the 1980s and 1990s in the large cities of Birmingham, Manchester/Salford, Liverpool, Newcastle, Glasgow and Belfast, something which is often overlooked.[1]

There was a further policy change when the 1997 Labour government gave architect Richard Rogers responsibility for leading a new Urban Task Force, which produced a report entitled *Towards an Urban Renaissance*. In itself, the word 'renaissance' conveys a feeling of optimism and of different futures. Indeed, Rogers wrote in the *Observer* that: 'This will require a clear vision and a commitment to long-term action by the Government: It is only the Government that has the democratic mandate to take the long-term view'.[1] Though major cities did grow after the Millennium, we cannot be sure if political decisions are the main reason.

Concluding thoughts

South Wales was, and remains, shaped by a challenging physical geography. Valleys with rivers running north to south were mined for coal in the nineteenth century, populations grew sharply, and railway communications to coastal settlements allowed exports. But, as coal declined after World War One, there was a need to find new employment. Localised population declines during the 1920s made it clear that the economies in these areas were suffering. This article has charted some of the responses to this problem.

It is worthy of note that, notwithstanding the fact that Wales has been a devolved nation since 1997, important interventions still appear to require resources allocated by the UK government.

The plans implemented through the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s kept populations stable, albeit being over-dependent on road connections between the valleys and coastal towns like Port Talbot - and between South Wales and the rest of Britain. Many new homes were built by local government in places like Cwmbran and around Newport, and economic expansion was fuelled by a revival in the steel industry and some diversification. It is important to note that, whilst Labour governments nationalised the steel industry in 1951, and again in 1967, Conservative administrations also helped in the implementation of the 'Long Resolution'.

They also took tough decisions which favoured South Wales over other parts of the UK, notably Scotland.

As I write this piece, Port Talbot has two of the last four remaining blast furnaces in the UK. The Tata Group, the steel plant's Indian owner, is threatening its closure due to rising energy costs and the estimated £3 billion needed to make it carbon neutral; an example of what Nick Stevenson calls globalisation putting the long revolution 'into reverse'.[1] However, an ITV broadcast from January 2023 captures the feeling of what remains a local issue.[1] A trade unionist states that the steel plant is near the brink of no return, and Labour MP Stephen Kinnock laments that more government support is required. One of the people interviewed at a nearby café says that Port Talbot with no steelworks would be 'lost' and 'another empty town'. This returns to the feeling about towns being dependent on one industry, expressed by Monmouthshire County Council in the 1960s.

In other ways this sense of loss amplifies Raymond Williams's writing about culture and tradition in the *Long Revolution*. As with the coal industry, there are 'selective traditions' that ignore the early deaths, the lives limited by industrial accidents, and the many illnesses people have suffered because of air pollution from chimneys and motorways. Indeed, as was widely publicised at the time, in 2018 graffiti artist Banksy created a mural on a local garage wall which depicts a child catching both snow and falling ash in his open mouth.

An art dealer bought the Banksy piece from the garage owner. After failing to extract money from the local council to keep the artwork displayed in the town, he commented that: 'Nobody stops here out of choice. I wanted to make Port Talbot a go-to place, not a go-through place.'[1] To me this sounds like another voice from outside; a new kind of rentier class, who have their say on local lives.

The Port Talbot steelworks symbolise the 'Long Resolution': a culture of heavy industry only just surviving in South-Walian minds, and potentially near to joining the long-closed Ravenscraig in Scotland or the substantially scaled-back Llanwern in Newport if there is no forthcoming of significant state support. There remains an ongoing challenge for politicians on the left to respond to the ideas spelled out in Williams's *Long Revolution* for democratic change developed from below, within civil society.[1] Committing to the environmental and economic welfare of people in South Wales could be central aims within a new resolution.

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Notes

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[1] Raymond Williams, *Border Country,* London, Chatto and Windus, 1960.

[1] For a more detailed discussion, see Michael Rustin, 'The Long Revolution Revisited', *Soundings* 35, 1997, pp16-30.

[1] The dissertation was based on action research with the New Economics Foundation: NEF Consulting, *Bridgend County Borough Council: Ensuring money spent in the local economy stays in the local economy,* 17 December 2013: https://www.nefconsulting.com/bridgend-county-borough-council-ensuring-money-spent-in-the-local-economy-stays-in-the-local-economy/

[1] Kevin Morgan, 'The learning region: institutions, innovation and regional renewal', *Regional Studies*, Vol 31 No 5, 2007, 1997, pp491-503, https://doi.org/10.1080/00343409750132289.

[1] Graham Humphrys, *South Wales*, Newton Abbot, David and Charles 1972.

[1] Colin Pooley and Joan Turnbull, *Migration and mobility in Britain since the eighteenth century*, London, UCL Press 1998.

[1] BBC, *Wales History: War and Depression (Part 2)*, 21 May 2014: https://www.bbc.co.uk/wales/history/sites/themes/guide/ch20_part2_war_and_depression.shtml.

[1] John W. Webb, 'The natural and migrational components of population changes in England and Wales, 1921-1931', *Economic Geography*, Vol 39 No 2, 1963, pp130-148: https://doi.org/10.2307/142506.

[1] This approach to some extent responds to historian Martin Johnes's argument that Wales lacks contemporary social surveys from the postwar decade: Martin Johnes, *Wales since 1939,* Manchester, Manchester University Press 2012.

[1] I visited many streets on outdoor participatory walking interviews, enjoyed sat-down biographical conversations, sampled public responses in two events where I worked with a performance artist, and made a three-minute film. The main features of this approach are explored by James Evans and Phil Jones, 'The walking interview: Methodology, mobility and place', *Applied Geography*, 31, 2011, pp849-858; see also *Walking through Caerleon in the 1960s and 1970s*, Tree Top Films, *ESRC Festival of Social Science 2019*, November 2019: https://vimeo.com/373090583.

[1] Aled Singleton, 'Spatially-led video interviews, 2021-22 *[Data Collection]*', 24 February 2023, Colchester, Essex, UK Data Service: doi:10.5255/UKDA-SN-856012.

[1] See examples from online spatial interview. Aled Singleton, *Using Video to Facilitate and Record Spatially-Led Interviews*, 12 July 2022, Social Science Space: https://www.socialsciencespace.com/2022/07/using-video-to-facilitate-and-record-spatially-led-interviews/.

[1] Stephen Parry, *History of the Steel Industry in the Port Talbot Area 1900-1988* (PhD thesis), Leeds, University of Leeds 2011: https://etheses.whiterose.ac.uk/2591/1/parrystephen.pdf.

[1] 'Work begins at Llanwern', *South Wales Argus*, 25 October 2012: https://www.southwalesargus.co.uk/video/123199.

[1] Norman Stevens, *Caerleon: Scenes past* Abertillery, Old Bakehouse Publications 1997.

[1] Russell Leadbetter, 'Ravenscraig: 30 years later, the death of a "symbol of Scotland's industrial virility" still hurts', *The Herald*, 26 June 2022: https://www.heraldscotland.com/news/20235132.ravenscraig-30-years-later-death-symbol-scotlands-industrial-virility-still-hurts/.

[1] For background on the show: http://www.townsendproductions.org.uk/shows/uppper-clyde/.

[1] Richard King, *Brittle with Relics: A History of Wales 1962-1997,* London, Faber 2022.

[1] Martin Johnes, '"M4 to Wales - and prosper!" A history of a motorway', *Historical Research*, Vol 87 (237), 2014, pp556-573: https://cronfa.swan.ac.uk/Record/cronfa17492.

[1] Rupert Edwards, *The Passion of Port Talbot. It Has Begun!*, 2013: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=99b9C4POEIk.

[1] Jonathan Preece and Mel Witherden, *'The trains don't stop here anymore ...' A pictorial history of Cwmbran from the 1930s to the present day*, Cwmbran, Village Publishing, 1985.

[1] Chris Hamnett and William Randolph, 'The changing population distribution of England and Wales, 1961-81: Clean break or consistent progression?', *Built Environment*, Vol 8 No 4, 1982. pp272-280.

[1] Andrew Tallon, *Urban Regeneration in the UK*, London, Routledge 2010.

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[1] Richard Rogers, 'Delivering the urban renaissance', 21 July 2002, *Observer*: https://www.theguardian.com/society/2002/jul/21/regeneration.comment, accessed 25 February 2023.

[1] Nick Stevenson, 'The long revolution in the global age', *Soundings* 54, summer 2013, pp66-76: https://doi.org/10.3898/136266213807299069.

[1] ITV News, 24 January 2023: https://www.itv.com/news/wales/2023-01-24/another-empty-town-fears-from-port-talbot-if-plans-to-save-tata-steelwork-fail.

[1] Steven Morris, *Guardian*, 8 February 2022: https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2022/feb/08/port-talbot-says-bye-bye-to-its-banksy-as-art-dealer-brings-in-a-crane.

[1] Michel Rustin, 'The long revolution: Why the left needs a strategic and long-term perspective', *Soundings* 77, spring 2021, pp121-134: doi:10.3898/SOUN.77.09.2021.