CYMUNED (COMMUNITY)

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Although 'cymuned' ('community') is a familiar word in contemporary Welsh political life, it does not appear in the most authoritative Welsh dictionary available - Geiriadur Prifysgol Cymru (University of Wales Dictionary of the Welsh Language). This is surprising, given the way in which the term envokes a sense of history, duration and tradition, and the way in which it circulates in Welsh-speaking everyday life, as in a recent TV advert by the building society Principality, 'yn cefnogi ein cymuned' ('supporting our community'). When the appropriate section of Geiriadur Prifysgol Cymru was published in 1958, this word was not known to the editors, or at least, it was too obscure to be included. 'Cymuned' only begins to appear in dictionaries and terminology guides from the late 1950s onwards. The first example of 'cymuned' may be traced to a quote by the Professor of Education and expert in bilingualism, Jac L. Williams in an edition of Y Traethodydd from 1957; indeed, he may be responsible for coining the term.[1] Interestingly, and perhaps not surprisingly, Jac L. Williams used the word 'cymuned' in describing the relationship between the Welsh people and the Welsh language. In this particular context, the word 'Cymuned' continues to resonate deeply, as affirmed by the way in which the pressure group, 'Cymuned' adopted this word as its name: Cymuned was established in 2001 to raise attention to the declining use of the Welsh language as a living medium of communication in mid and north Wales. This keyword therefore implies much more than a 'number of people who live in the same place' - which is the definition of 'cymuned' offered in Y Geiriadur Mawr.[2] It suggests that 'cymuned' is a concept that matters politically.

As well as implying more than a number of people who live in the same place, the idea of a 'cymuned' implies more than a 'society'. This distinction between 'community' and 'society' can be traced back to one of the first sociologists, Ferdinand Tönnies, who wrote a book titled Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft (Community and Society) in 1887. While Margaret Thatcher famously announced that there was 'no such thing as society', the idea of 'community' is currently promoted through the rhetoric of the 'Big Society' by the Conservative-led Westminster government. 'Community' thus also forms part of the language of government and of governing, and in the case of the 'Big Society', a tool for promoting a neoliberal agenda. The idea of a 'community' should not therefore be mistaken to be something that predates or transcends the state: it is often the state that invents 'communities' which then form objects for the state to define, measure, and where necessary, place under surveillance. Take for example the idea of 'Muslim communities' that was widely talked about in the aftermath of 9/11. While the formation of such a community may represent an important move in offering recognition to a minority group, people do not necessarily choose to understand themselves as belonging to a community. Thus, although the technique of addressing different 'communities' may appear to

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[1] Vol. xxv, 1957, p.122.

[2] H. Meurig Evans and W. O. Thomas, with Stephen J Williams, *Y Geiriadur Mawr. The Complete Welsh-English English-Welsh Dictionary,* Christopher Davies & Gwasg Gomer, Llandysul, 1983. The dictionary is presented 'I Werin Cymru' (For the Welsh Folk), another concept that has strong associations with 'Cymuned'.

acknowledge differences, it also serves to erase differences, by suggesting that particular people share something in common. In the context of the War on Terror, this technique worked to castigate the 'Muslim community' as different, and as potentially representing risk, threat and danger. There is perhaps a similar risk with the idea of 'deprived communities'.

How is it, then, that 'cymuned', a word that does not have a very long history, paradoxically seems to carry this weight of history? Or why is it that some people seek to 'stay in their communities' whilst others can't wait to get away from their community? In modern times, community appears as a paradox – something we both desire and struggle against. It has also come to be understood by many as antithetical to the idea of a city. However, this opposition between a community and a city is also a recent invention and derives from what Raymond Williams describes as a 'Romantic structure of feeling'[3]. Williams identifies this structure of feeling in the works of Blake, Wordsworth and Shelley, but it also courses through the poems of countless beirdd and underpins a great deal of Welsh language political activism. This view of the world understands the rural, pastoral community as the natural home of the poet (and perhaps the National Eisteddfod?) and suggests an impassable distinction between nature and industry, poetry and trade, community and the city. [4] Williams goes on to argue that this outlook understands community as the 'idealization of settlement', suggesting that the best way of living is to stay in one place. For Williams, this notion of community is limited, conservative and represents 'an insolent indifference to most people's needs' because it ignores all the reasons why people often have to move from their 'communities'.[5] Yet the problem with the idea of community as settlement involves more than the question of whether we get to choose to stay or not. After all, a pressure group such as Cymuned, would agree that staying or leaving one's 'cymuned' is not simply a matter of choice and that is precisely why they campaign against economic pressures that compel people to leave y 'Bröydd Cymraeg' (see Ned Thomas's Welsh Keywords article on 'Bro' in Planet 207). The key point, then, is that this image of community as 'settlement' cannot be the 'only reality of community'.[6] This particular way of imagining community, which relies upon a Romantic structure of feeling, forms a dominant way of seeing but there are many other ways of imagining community. If community did not imply the 'idealization of settlement', then, how else might 'cymuned' be imagined?

In pausing briefly on the example of the Welsh language pressure group, Cymuned, we might ask: what images and narratives are invoked when we frame the complex yet interrelated issues of housing, local economies and the Welsh language in relation to a 'cymuned'? Why is it that the notion of 'cymuned' immediately conjures images of insiders and outsiders? In suggesting something solid, bounded, historical, durable and continuous, 'cymuned' appears to be something that has been around for a very long time, yet this forms a relatively recent way of understanding our 'togetherness'. In implying a depth of feeling and of belonging, this notion of community lends itself easily to nationalist rhetoric, and invokes the idea of a border between 'us' and 'them'. What difference would it make to address the politics of the Welsh language using another understanding of

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[3] Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City,* London: The Hogarth Press, 1985.
[4] Williams, *The Country and the City*, p.99
[5] Williams, *The Country and the City,* pp.106-7
[6] Williams, *The Country and the City,* p.106

relationality, such as, 'associations', 'webs', 'assemblages' or 'networks' of Welsh speakers? In which ways would another image of what it means to live together and share a language avoid the nationalistic and insular connotations of 'cymuned'?

There is an inherent connection between nationalism and the idea of a community/cymuned. This is because all nationalisms (be they of the good/bad, ethnic/civic, or Welsh/British variety) must be directed towards a community, which it seeks both to address and to bring about. To put it simply, without an assumed 'cymuned', nationalism would make no sense – 'patriotism's appeal would be addressed to no one'.[7] All nationalisms therefore need to invent a community of addressees. And in doing so, we enter into the problem of inclusion and exclusion. Some people assume themselves to be 'guardians' of the community, or rightful inheritors of the community, while others feel on the margins of a community, or feel unable to acquire full access to the community (however long they live in a country, speak the language, practice good citizenship, etc). While we can work hard to try and address these exclusions, to bring 'others' in – work that is unquestionably important – the basic problem lies with this way of seeing, and with this understanding of community as settlement, which necessarily implies a border between insiders and outsiders. However well-meaning different attempts at 'reaching out' may seem, they nevertheless assume that some people are the 'hosts' inviting others in only as their 'guests'.

That the concept of 'community' lends itself to nationalist thought is not simply the result of the 'idealisation of settlement', however. It is also tied into the etymology of both 'cymuned' and 'community'. The key issue here lies with the idea of a 'unit' or 'uned' that forms the stem of this word. This 'unit' can either imply territorial boundedness or sociocultural homogeneity.[8] Take for example the National Assembly of Wales's proclamation that this five year term will represent an 'Assembly of Communities' and that this will 'not be limited to geographic communities, but will include all cultural, interest and demographic groups'.[9] In either sense, what is crucial is the assumption that something must be shared in common. It is no accident then, that 'cymuned' shares its roots with 'cymun' (communion) and its associates: Cymundeb (1567), Cymundebol, Cymundod, Cymunfa, and also with Cymuniaeth (1851) (meaning communism). All these concepts carry with them an assumption of insiders and outsiders. Of course, the idea that we share something in common is comforting when we feel we want to 'belong' to one group or another. But it can also be exclusionary and uncompromising, as demonstrated in Caradog Pritchard's Un Nos Ola Leuad (One Moonlit Night), when Gres Elin is refused communion and excommunicated from both the church and the village.[10] Thus while this directive by the National Assembly to 'celebrate Wales's diversity' by creating an 'Assembly of Communities' is well-meaning, it also forms an example of the problem of understanding

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[7] Étienne Balibar in Étienne Balibar and Immanuel Wallerstein (eds), *Race, Nation, Class: Ambiguous Identities,* London: Verso, 1991, p. 96.
[8] Gideon Baker and Jens Bartelson (eds) *The Future of Political Community,* London and New York: Routledge, 2009, p. 2.
[9] 'Senedd to mark the beginning of the Assembly of Communities', 6 June 2011. http://www.cynulliadcymru.org/en/newhome/new-news-fourth-assembly.htm?act=dis&id=216913&ds=7/2011
[10] Dew, biti drosti hi, medda Huw.
Ia achan, medda finna. Ond arni hi oedd y bai yn mynd i Parc Defaid.

identities according to 'units'. It leads towards a way of reading politics through group-based identities, which are understood to be distinctive, historical and autonomous, and which then come into contact with other 'units'. This way of imagining what it means to have an identity bears very little resemblance to how people organise and assemble in contemporary times, where postcolonial communities or communities of the world wide web are formed not so much around continuity, duration and depth but through travel, multiple associations and unpredictable encounters.

How might we then begin to think 'cymuned' without assuming an 'uned' – or, to think 'community' without 'unity'? This way of conceiving 'cymuned' is ultimately indebted to a geographical imagination that places the individual at its centre. It is bound to the assumption of 'settlement', which can only conceive of relations with others as a process of extending outwards along a scale, from the individual to the family, community, nation, and world. In contrast, we can argue that we are always already mixed up with others, in local and transnational networks that are complex, contingent and cross-cutting. This view of the world fundamentally challenges the opposition between 'individual' and 'society' because 'being' necessarily means 'being with others'. It also challenges the distinction between 'community' and the 'city'. In opposition to the 'romantic structure of feeling', writers who have sought to capture the urban experience, including Walter Benjamin and Georg Simmel, have argued that the transitory associations and accidental encounters that we associate with life in a city do not form the antithesis of community but rather, offer another imagining of community. These are communities that form as quickly as they collapse, and crucially, they are not based around an assumption of commonality. Urban communities may be contingent and unexpected, and throw us into contact with people who live in ways that are beyond our immediate understanding, but that doesn't necessarily mean that they are any less 'meaningful' or ethical.

What would it mean, then, to begin to think politically, and perhaps, about the future politics of the Welsh language, without assuming that this is something that belongs to a 'cymuned', and thereby, to a distinctive 'unit'? Demographic shifts have made Welsh a language of the city as much as of the country, as Huw Lewis, a former Chair of Cymdeithas yr Iaith, argued in an online article on Planet's website in 2011 [insert reference and url in end-notes]. This suggests that Welsh language activism must reorient itself to a different imagining of community. The critical task is to ask what a future politics of the Welsh language might look like if conceived in relation to associations, webs, and assemblages that complicate the assumption of a common unit.

Biography

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