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Friends, kin and votes: some preliminary observations of electoral orientation among young voters in Leigh, Lancs.

The observations which I discuss in this paper were made in the course of a local study of social stratification and mobility, of family life and domestic organisation, and of social relations outside the workplace and the home¹.

Voting and political parties were examined in so far as they appeared to have a direct bearing upon our major interests, and our observations of electoral activity tend, therefore, to be incidental rather than systematic. We did, however, as part of the main study, attempt to explore the substance, if any, of such notions as 'the traditional working class' and also to ascertain 'Tory working man'. Here I present a preliminary account of these observations in relation to the development of electoral orientations among young voters.

My working hypotheses are four. First, that young people growing up in industrial towns with comparatively settled populations acquire an electoral orientation in the course of countless social interactions: second, that this orientation is one of a series acquired in this way; orientations to jobs, to homes, family life, marriage, parenthood, to religion, to recreation, to friendship and kinship, and to the society in which these activities and relationships occur: third, that at any one time these manifold orientations tend towards consistency, and to the extent that they are consistent, they reinforce one another: fourth, that where these orientations already exist in a particular milieu, they are acquired by learning. It is often convenient to isolate a single activity, for instance voting, for the purposes of study, but we need not suppose that this isolation is more than a conceptual convenience.

Among the many metaphors used to describe social life, that of inheritance is sometimes applied to a whole complex of practices, opinions, and values, in short to custom. Sometimes Leigh people themselves appear to use this metaphor in discussing their own political opinions, and many other matters too: 'We were all Labour at home'; 'Father was always a true blue Tory'. The metaphor, then, raises the

problem of how custom is transmitted. Electoral opinions, however, are not inherited like genes or property. Nor is there any evidence from our study to suggest that people who vote like their parents do so out of filial piety.

Of all the people with whom an individual interacts, parents may be the two most influential in the acquisition of various orientations, but this influence is not necessarily decisive. Siblings, other kin, friends, schoolmates, workmates and, later, husbands and wives, may, in aggregate, be more important. The importance of parents springs not only from their opportunities to present constantly their own views and values, but also from their presentation of other people's views and values. Equally the significance of friends may derive as much from their part in transmitting other people's opinions as from the contribution of their own. Thus the metaphor which I am proposing owes more to communications engineering than to genetics or jurisprudence. I may add that the communications in question do not require the services of engineers.

These hypotheses do not imply that in growing up individuals automatically accept the values current in their several milieux, nor that everyone in these milieux operates with exactly the same set of values. Often, most of the people that an individual knows do hold similar values, and in this situation he or she is perhaps more likely to accept them as they stand. Many people however grow up in milieux in which conflicting opinions and values are held, and in order to ascertain the types of mechanism which may be operating in the transmission of orientations it is necessary to examine both kinds of situation.

One of the most widely reported orientations to social stratification in British industrial towns is the dichotomy between 'us' and 'them'. From the point of view of individuals or small groups in Leigh, the category 'us' comprises close kin and intimate friends with whom they interact frequently and intensively. In some contexts, the category is expanded to embrace more distant kin and acquaintances, and, still further, to include 'the likes of us'. At this point the membership group becomes a reference group. These overlapping sets of social relations can also be envisaged as the cores of a status group. They possess two of the prime attributes of Weber's category, a common style of life and, among persons of the same generation and sex, willingness to associate on the basis of equality. There are corresponding extensions of the opposed category 'them'. For most manual workers an 'us' consists

predominantly of other manual workers and their dependents. 'They' are people in authority, often given to the arbitrary exercise of this authority, folks with 'plenty of brass' and 'cash in the bank', 'the bosses', and people who are 'in with the bosses'. In the constant warfare between 'them' and 'us', the Labour Party has come to stand for 'us'. People who neither vote nor interest themselves in party politics can nevertheless unhesitatingly describe themselves as 'Labour and working class'. For smaller sections of the population in Leigh, the Conservative and Liberal parties may equally represent 'the likes of us'.

A number of features of the recent history of Leigh are relevant to these hypotheses. The main industries in the town, which has a population of some 46,000 and lies just outside the Manchester conurbation, are coal mining, engineering and textiles, three fifths of the 25,000 or so jobs available in the town. The National Coal Board is the largest employer of male labour, and mining accounts for 1 in 3 of the 15,000 jobs available for men². The engineering industries are now, overall, the largest employers in the town, and between them account for 1 in 5 of the jobs available for men and almost 1 in 4 of those for women. The textile industry, which earlier in the century had been the only large-scale employer of female labour and the second largest employer of male labour, still accounts for more than 1 in 10 of the jobs available for men and 1 in 3 of those available for women³.

In very broad terms, Leigh was a boom town from about 1870 to 1920, and a slump town from then until 1940. In common with most coal and cotton towns, unemployment and short-time working were prevalent for much of the 1920s and 30s. Since 1940 it has been a town enjoying fairly full employment⁴ and there has been a measure of industrial and occupational diversification, the main effect of which is to be seen in the occupational distribution of those entering the labour market since the war. Thus, although there are fewer white-collar and technical jobs in Leigh and towns like it than there are in the larger towns and cities, in the 1950s there were half as many non-manual jobs again available for men as there had been in the 1930s and twice as many for women. In the sub-sample of young voters 22% of the men and 43.5% of the women were themselves in white-collar or sales jobs, but only 12.5% were the sons and daughters of men in such occupations.

The greater diversity of jobs available in and around Leigh appears to have provided post-war entrants to the labour market with far more scope for manoeuvre in getting better paid jobs or better working conditions. To some extent it also enables them to choose between

these alternatives. Men who had entered the pits before the war often commented; 'There was nothing else – you had to'. Young miners today are more likely to emphasise the higher earnings that they are getting or hoping to get. Ring spinners and weavers made similar comments. Moreover, although not invariably available, it is often possible to supplement basic earnings with the 'golden hours' of overtime. Among married couples, the opportunities for wives to continue working also contribute an important element to the domestic standards of living to be observed.

In the sub-sample, almost all the wives without children were working full-time and one half of wives with one or two children were also working either full-time or part-time. It was largely from the ranks of these households with two earners that the 56% of owner occupiers and the 25% of car owners among married respondents were drawn.

From the First World War onwards, the local Council has been active in house-building and, in 1961, one third of all domestic dwellings in the Borough were owned by the Corporation. The Corporation has also been an important agency in advancing mortgages to owner occupiers. Thus although the chronic shortage of houses in Britain is noticeable in Leigh, it is far less acute than in the larger towns and cities. Given the availability of jobs and homes in and around the Borough, and an attachment to kin and friends, the population, particularly in the younger age-ranges, is increasingly becoming a settled one. Seventy percent of the sub-sample had been born in Leigh and a further 20% had been largely brought up there. Only two of these respondents had come to live in the town after marriage to individuals who were likewise incomers, and they came from towns near Leigh and similar to it. Most respondents in the sub-sample had both parents, and in the case of married couples all four parents, living in or near Leigh. The median size of the families in which they had been brought up was three and one third of respondents had three or more brothers and sisters. Again, these for the most part live in Leigh or nearby. This combination of sets of kin and of friends from school, and neighbourhood with a locality promotes the development of highly reticulated social relations such that the relations between any two persons can rarely operate independently of the other persons with whom they are involved. There is an incessant flow of information, evaluation, and commentary through these networks of social relations, and this running commentary on everyday life at work, in the home, and elsewhere, is a major factor in

the presentation of opinions and values. Among the mass of actions and opinions transmitted and evaluated, electoral opinion and political acts appear from time to time.

The electoral history of Leigh can almost be summed up in a phrase: Liberal until 1922, Labour since⁵. Inevitably such a phrase over-states the rapidity of electoral change. A Labour candidate, sponsored by the miners, first stood in the constituency in the first election of 1910, and polled one quarter of the votes cast. It was not until 1924 that the Labour candidate polled an absolute majority of votes cast, and it was only in 1945 that a Labour candidate, for the first time, obtained the votes of more than half of the registered electorate. Moreover, although there were occasions during the 1920s when the Labour party commanded an absolute majority on the Borough Council, it was the mid 1930s before the party finally achieved a settled majority.

In the whole sample, two thirds of these disclosing some kind of electoral preference supported the Labour party, one quarter the Conservatives, and the remainder the Liberals⁶.

Despite the relative prosperity of the respondents under thirty, the higher proportion among them who were in non-manual occupations and the lower proportion who were miners or miners' wives, almost four fifths of those disclosing some kind of electoral preference described themselves as Labour. However, only 75% of the under thirties compared with 86% of other respondents said that they were likely to vote, and vote for a particular party, and if likely Labour voters as a proportion of the whole of each category is taken as the basis for comparison, the difference largely disappears. Fifty nine percent of all respondents in their twenties would vote Labour, if they voted, compared with 55% of all respondents aged thirty and over⁷. Nevertheless, there is certainly no evidence to suggest that the young voters who have started work since the war and whose incomes and spending power show a substantial improvement on those of the parental generation, who started work in the 1920s and 30s and whose votes brought the Labour Party to office in the constituency and in the Borough, were less likely to support the Labour Party. Yet the local society of Leigh in the 1950s was less obviously polarised and, in Weberian terms, the class situation of manual workers less transparent than it had been thirty years before when, presumably, the major electoral re-orientation had occurred.

Thus the 1920s were the years of the two national lockouts (or strikes) in the mining industry, and of the General Strike. In their wake as many older people in Leigh assent, came victimisation; victimisation not only of active trade unionists in mining, in engineering, and in textiles, but of active members of the Labour party. The general opposition between 'bosses' and 'workers' appeared in a variety of economic and social settings, and the use of local idioms and dialects by the former hardly disguised, and may indeed have emphasised, conspicuous differences in their respective styles of life and chances in the market. Changes in the organisation of economic enterprises, in their conduct of negotiations on wages and working conditions, related changes in the organisation and operation of trade unions, the virtual disappearance of the owner-manager from the town, and increased scope for collective bargaining, especially nationally, have all tended to remove the most readily visible elements of class conflict out of Leigh. With the partial exception of the mining industry, industrial bargaining has become bureaucratised and centralised. What this tends to leave locally is some scope for manoeuvre by small groups on the actual applications of national and district agreements, and opportunities for individuals to move from job to job. Again, locally, trade unions and Labour party can less readily appear as the industrial and party political wings of a unified Labour movement confronting a single class enemy.

The opportunities for young people in Leigh to modify their immediate economic and social situations depend to a considerable extent upon the operation of a range of social relations within a fairly wide acquaintance which can provide them with information about jobs and earnings, about housing, about leisure activities, about the activities of a great variety of people, and which can also furnish various kinds of practical assistance, especially help in actually getting jobs, and in domestic assistance.

I can perhaps exemplify these processes by setting out some of the details of the social situation of one of our respondents. He was an examiner in his late twenties, whom I shall call for convenience Len Clough, and I take him as an instance partly because many of the elements in his social situation were fairly typical of respondents in the sub-sample, and partly because his father and one of his father's older brothers also appeared in the main sample. Both Clough's parents had been born in the same part of Leigh in which Clough himself had grown up. Both of his grandfathers had been miners. His father and three of

his four paternal uncles had been miners and two of them still were. Three of his four paternal aunts also lived in Leigh. A fourth aunt, also married, lived away from the town. His mother had only one surviving sister; she too was married to an ex-miner and lived in the same part of Leigh. Just as most of the men in this kindred were miners, so most of the women were or had been textile workers. Clough's mother had worked in the mill off and on for 35 years. Perhaps the only unusual feature of the 'demography' of Clough's immediate kin was that both his grandmothers had died before he was born. Clough has one older brother, a bricklayer who lived with his wife and two children on a council estate on the other side of the town. Clough himself was married to a garment machinist, the daughter of a colliery deputy, and they were buying an old five roomed house fairly near the centre of the town. They had no children, and Mrs Clough was working full-time.

Thus, Clough had grown up in a family grouping which consisted, in the ascending generations, of two grandfathers, his parents, seven uncles and aunts, and their respective husbands and wives, most of whom lived in the same part of the town. In his own generation, in addition to his brother, he had fifteen first cousins, most of whom had attended the same school as himself, and nearly all of whom still lived in Leigh.

His wife, also born and brought up in Leigh, came from a somewhat smaller family circle. Although her father had himself been born and brought up in Leigh and her mother had come to the town as a child, only her parents and one maternal uncle and his wife and children actually lived in the town. Her elder sister and her other uncles and aunts lived away from Leigh, and although most of them had attended the wedding reception, Clough said that, apart from his wife's sister and her husband, he wouldn't be able to recognise any of them if he met them in the street.

Apart from the time that he spent with his wife, Clough spent much of his leisure-time with his two 'big mates', both married men like himself and of much the same age. One of these friends Clough had known for many years since they had attended the same school and started in the pit at almost the same time. This man, who was still in the pit, lived near Clough's uncle and they sometimes went to the local Labour club with him. The other man, whom Clough had originally got to know in the pit, had subsequently become a bus conductor. He lived in the next street to Clough's elder brother and was a 'boozing pal' of

his. Thus both of Clough's oldest friends interacted with other members of his family independently of their relationships with Clough himself.

Clough usually called in to see his parents on his way home from work at least once during the week, and he and his wife sometimes called over to see them on Sundays. Mrs. Clough's parents drove over to see her sister every other Saturday or Sunday. Clough and his wife usually spent Sunday afternoons at his wife's parents' house when they were there. Mrs. Clough's mother, who was not working, also visited her daughter when Clough himself was unlikely to be there. Of his close kin in Leigh, therefore, Clough only saw at all regularly his parents, his brother and sister-in-law, his wife's parents, and somewhat less regularly, one of his paternal uncles. Nevertheless, in addition to chance encounters in the street or in a club with the others, those kin that he did see regularly provided him with news and views about the others. Similarly, although he only saw two friends regularly and frequently, he knew of the doings of many more through these two.

Like many another miner, Clough's father had always said that neither of his lads were going down the pit, and when they left school his elder brother (i.e. the boy's uncle) 'spoke for them' to men he knew and succeeded in placing both in jobs with a view to apprenticeship. Clough's elder brother became an apprenticed bricklayer but Clough himself could not settle so readily and after trying four different jobs in less than three years finally went into the pit, where he spent nine years. He said that he had intended to leave the pit before he was injured and 'go on the buses', and after his friend had indeed done just that he began to look around for a job 'on top'. Finally he had seen a newspaper advertisement, had gone along to see the labour officer, and had simply 'got on' as a semi-skilled operative in a factory just outside the town. His wages there were substantially less than he had been getting in the pit and from time to time he thought of returning to mining but 'the wife's dead against it'. His parents and uncle had also urged him against returning to colliery work.

Clough described himself as 'Labour - of course', like most of the people he knew. However, he had not actually voted at the last Parliamentary election and on further inquiry it turned out that he had not voted in the 1955 election either. He had voted once in a local election. From his father and uncle we gathered that all the men in this family were firm Labour supporters, but that some of the women were

somewhat less sympathetic and one of their sisters, Len's Aunt Rose was 'a right Tory'. This woman was the last of the sisters to marry; she had stayed on in the family home to look after her widowed father, and when she married, her husband, an engineering labourer, went to live there. This man was a Catholic and Aunt Rose had 'turned' to marry him. He had actually died shortly after Clough's grandfather, but Rose had obtained the tenancy after her father's death and still lived in the house, alone. Her marriage was childless and after she retired from the mill her two main activities, according to her brother, were visiting her brothers and sisters, and a variety of church activities. This woman then had a number of characteristics which set her apart from her kin; she had married late in life, she was childless, she was a widow, she had 'changed her religion', and she frequently attended church and was active in organisations connected with the church.

At the same time she was the member of the family who saw most of the others, both in the original family home and elsewhere. As a child, for instance, Len Clough and his brother saw more of this aunt than any of his other relatives since when his mother was working in the mill he called in to see her and his grandfather most days on his way home from school, and often had tea there. Although Aunt Rose was the only member of the kindred specifically described as a Conservative, her brother suggested that their mother, a keen Methodist in her youth, had been largely unsympathetic to the Labour movement, especially during the 1920s, and that another sister probably held similar views. Rose however, was the only one who frequently aired her views in the family circle, which were a matter of comment and on occasions of some amusement on the part of Len's friends, one of whom described Len and his brother as 'the Macmillan men'.

Reviewing a number of instances of situations like Clough's I suggest that it is not necessary to suppose that the acquaintance within a network operates in a completely homogeneous way in respect of occupation, standards of living, or such items as denomination and political opinion. On the contrary, even where homogeneity in some of these respects is most likely, there will probably be an element of diversity in others.