

A COMMUNITY WORLD

Talk by Sel. Williams June 16th 2011

Speaker's background

'Jack of all trades...'. Academic background in biology and economics. Lecturer at the Normal College and Bangor University. Main focus over last few years has been on learning for community development. Retired 3 years ago so as to be more meaningfully engaged with education and community development. Still working part-time with the Community Development Unit in the Lifelong Learning Department at Bangor. Lifelong community activist.

Contact: sel@bangor.ac.uk

Aim of talk

Look at environmental aspects, particularly tourism and leisure, in a specific community, Bro Ffestiniog, in a wider philosophical and political context.

Philosophical foundations

An integrated and holistic perspective is used, in contrast to the reductionism and intellectual division of labour which so characterises the culture of late capitalism. Put in other words:

According to Lenin—"The task of the bourgeois academic is to hide the forest behind the trees".

My gran would say, "malu glo mân yn glapiau" which is virtually untranslatable.

Poet Waldo Williams—"Rhag y rhemp sydd i law'r dadelfennwr
A gyll rhwng ei fysedd fyd".

which can be translated as:

'Save us from the disaster that lies at the hand of the reductionist
Who loses between his fingers a world'

Several dialectical features and tensions pertain to this talk, including those listed below.

1. Theory and practice.
2. Reductionist and integrated.
3. Part and whole.
4. Local and global.
5. Top down and bottom up.
6. Talking and acting.
7. Uniformity and diversity.
8. Capital and community.
9. Economy and environment.
10. Democracy and bureaucracy.
11. State and community.
12. Capitalism and 'cymdeithasiaeth'.

Basically it makes little sense to separate the environmental, economic, social and cultural.

Pengwern Cymunedol

The historic Pengwern Arms Hotel in Llan Festiniog closed its doors in February 2009. The villagers formed a community co-operative, an Industrial and Provident Society, and have now bought the building, partly renovated it and have reopened the pub last month. Some 150 locals have bought shares in the company and some 80 people volunteer their labour in different ways. Comprehensive architectural, business and marketing plans have been formulated to develop the venture so that eventually there will be a restaurant, function room, hotel, 'ecommodation' and micro-brewery. Currently a multi-faceted environmental plan is being developed.

Pengwern Cymunedol's vision encompasses environmental, economic, social, educational and cultural aspects. As well as serving the needs of the local community two further vital features of the venture are green tourism and cultural tourism. Some of the elements of these types of tourism are noted below.

1. The area has important attractions such as wildlife and landscape and outdoor activities such as walking, climbing, fishing, mountain biking, canoeing and so on.
2. In the Ffestiniog valley there are a number of interrelated tourism and leisure developments being planned by community organisations including various bicycle tracks and a velorail which Antur Stiniog are promoting.
3. Pengwern Cymunedol is planning to cater specifically for the needs of outdoor activity visitors e.g. safe place to keep mountain bikes and hostel type ecommodation'.
4. As regards the buildings Pengwern Cymunedol is looking at several aspects of conserving and producing energy as part of a comprehensive environmental plan for the whole project.
5. Local procurement and emphasis on local food produce and local employment.
6. Educational opportunities to enable local people to work in the outdoor activities industry. Courses, such as Cynefin a Chymuned (Habitat and Community) have been developed and delivered in conjunction with Bangor University, the Snowdonia National Park Study Centre at Plas Tan y Bwlch and Coleg Harlech/WEA.
7. Training to work in the tourism industry based on the ideas of Croeso Cynnes Cymreig (warm Welsh welcome).
8. Co-operating on environmental, tourism and leisure plans for the Ffestiniog valley with other community organisations including the Green Town initiative, Blaenau Ymlaen and Cynllun Cymunedol Bro Ffestiniog (integrated community plan for the valley).

9. Networking and sharing with similar ventures across Gwynedd, Wales and Europe e.g. the European Union project called, 'Places to Be', which links community tourism ventures in different parts of the Union.
10. Developing and promoting cultural activities for the local community with an emphasis on Welsh culture.
11. Promoting Welsh experiences for visitors with an emphasis on the environment, history and culture of the area.
12. Throughout the project consideration of the moral and ethical aspects of the development.

Political lessons

Several political lessons are inherent to the experience of Pengwern Cymunedol.

1. The dialectical relationship between community and state. Valuable support has come from several state agencies including the Wales Co-operative Centre, the Welsh Government, Gwynedd Council and the local housing association Cymdeithas Tai Eryri. The state, by its very nature, takes a top down approach with different agencies and departments within organisations taking responsibility for their own silos. Very different is the community experience which sees and acts according to an integrated and more holistic perspective. From the point of view of the community there are no divisions or tight boundaries between environment, economy, society, language and culture.
2. Learning for community development is essentially integrative, eclectic and dialectical. To understand community one needs to see the relationship between geology, geography, history, economics, sociology, culture and so on. This is quite different to education for the needs of capital which is characterised by an intellectual division of labour, narrow specialization and a tradition of learning more and more about less and less.
3. The relationship between enterprise, capital and community. There is a tradition of social enterprise in Wales in the modern period and there is an opportunity to build on this for the future.
4. There is hope that community ventures will spread and co-operate more and more enabling the community sector to grow. An increasingly powerful community sector in Wales would influence the Welsh Government so that it would be possible to integrate regional and community development in an effective way. In other words, push government in Wales more in the direction of serving community than capital as such.
5. Given the increasingly critical nature of capitalism's environmental, economic, social and cultural problems the community sector can offer a significant contribution to what the New Economics Foundation, amongst many others, is calling for, a 'Great Transformation'.
6. When you come to raise a glass in the Pengwern you will, at the same time, be contributing to the process of creating a communal world to displace the capitalist order which is well past its sell by date. Thus, you are cordially invited to come and raise a glass to say goodbye to the old order and to hail the embryonic new community age. Iechyd da to all the community minded!