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Howard Newby
Life story interview with Ray Paul

2009
Principle investigator's thematic highlights

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Sir Howard Newby

Interviewed by Ray Paul

9 November 2009

1: Schooling

I went to local schools. I was brought up, really, as an only child, because the ten year difference between me and my brother - by the time I was five, he'd already got a girlfriend, so I was well out of it! Went to the local primary school in Littleover, then to the junior school, which was a Church of England Junior School. And then I passed the 11+. I was the only one in my family who had done this, my brother failed the 11+, even though he was just as intelligent as I was, and he went on to work as a fitter at Rolls-Royce. In fact, his oldest son still works as a fitter at Rolls-Royce, and no doubt that's where I would have worked as well, had I not passed the 11+. So I went to a local brand new grammar school, called John Port Grammar School, in Etwall, which is a suburb of Derby...

I got used to playing sport with older boys, whether it was football or cricket, and learned how to hold my own in that. Then at school, I think yes, because I was quite good at both, but also clever with it – “clever” is not necessarily a term of endearment – but I think the fact I was good at sport protected me from some of the adverse reactions to being clever as well. So I think it's a mixture of just - I don't know, some innate inner ambition. I think this kind of “inner loneliness” I would describe it now, drove me, and I think even from quite an early age I wanted just to better myself. (pp. 2, 6)

2: Atlantic College: towards sociology

When I got to the first year sixth at grammar school, I was selected, by the school, to go for an interview at the Derbyshire County Council offices in Matlock, because Derbyshire County Council offered, every year, a Scholarship to what was then a new school called Atlantic College, in South Wales, and they ran a competition, every school nominated

somebody – my school nominated me – and I went along really without giving it any thought whatsoever, it was just a practice for what I thought might become a university interview, and to my utter astonishment was offered a place at Atlantic College. My parents actually were quite - looking back, I think they were quite worried about some of the cost implications of this, certainly my mother, I think, was quite reluctant to let me go. In the end, she was persuaded I would go.

So I went to Atlantic College. Now, Atlantic College was founded, actually, by Kurt Hahn, so it was an outward bound college in a castle in South Wales, which had originally been owned by William Randolph Hurst in the 1930s, who'd restored St. Donat's Castle. It was an international sixth form college. It had students from all over the world. It was actually the college which was the guinea pig for the International Baccalaureate, so I will often say to people, nowadays, "I'm the only person you've ever met, probably, who did year zero on the International Baccalaureate", and also London University Overseas African syllabus 'A' Levels. I think the international aspects of Atlantic College, were a bit of a non-issue for me, really. I mean, given my upbringing, I didn't really have any international prejudices to remove.

But what I did have was a very strong Derby accent, about which I had my leg pulled incessantly. Atlantic College really plucked me completely out of my background, and for the first time exposed me to not just middle-class ways of life, but, I think, really quite upper-class ways of life. Some of the kids there were very private fee-payers, were very rich indeed. We did a lot of outward bound work. We were called out to Aberfan, to the Aberfan mining disaster, in the middle of the night. We worked on what was called "the face", digging bodies out, and also up on top of the mountain, manning a klaxon to warn of further slides. That was quite an emotional experience, as you can well imagine.

And as part of the IB, you had to do a project - you had to do two, actually, one in the first year, one in the second year, and in the first year I went to work with a probation officer in Birkenhead, and actually stayed – and this is rather ironic in where I am now - in digs in Upper Parliament Street in Toxteth, in Liverpool, and I spent a week working with this probation officer. It was very good, and I was inspired by this to want to be a probation officer, so when it came to selecting a place at university - Atlantic College, being what it

was, I was being heavily encouraged to go to university – I decided I'd read sociology. (pp. 2-3)

3: Upward mobility and lacking self-confidence

I think my most traumatic experience as a Ph.D. student. Colin encouraged me to go and give a seminar, a Departmental Seminar, at Swansea, where he had been a lecturer, I duly did. This was my first ever academic presentation ever, and I gave it, and in the audience there was Margaret Stacey, Chris Harris etc., etc.. The paper itself actually went down quite well, but in the questioning, I can't even remember what the line of argument was I took, I took a line of argument which I realised, after about two minutes, was wrong, but didn't have the confidence to backtrack, and they just absolutely tore me to pieces! They absolutely destroyed me. I went back, I was so down, and I talked to Colin about this. He picked me up and jollied me on. At that point I was almost on the verge of giving up. I thought, "Oh God! This is dreadful!" Because again, you have to understand, given my background, I didn't have any really academic self-confidence. I had a lot of ambition but not a lot of self-confidence. I always felt I'd get rumbled one day! That's a very common characteristic of upwardly-mobile people, I think. Nevertheless, *The Sociological Review* accepted it, thanks to Ronnie Frankenberg, which cheered me up enormously. (pp. 11-12)

4: Fieldwork to understand rural deference

I wanted to find a place which had quite a lot of farm workers, because I wanted to talk to a lot [of them], I needed to have, for reasons I'll come on to in a minute, I needed to have a variability of work situations. That really meant East Anglia, which was convenient, being at Essex anyway. I wanted, too, to have a place which could give me a range of community situations from the commuter type villages that had been overrun, through to what one might call traditional agricultural communities where the commuters hadn't yet penetrated. That took me to Suffolk...

One other factor, in particular, which drew me towards Suffolk, was the work of George Ewart-Evans, the oral historian. I knew George by then, had read his books, starting with,

Ask the Fellows Who Cut the Hay, and in a way it was those oral histories which began to make me understand I needed to do some fieldwork, I couldn't address the problems I was interested in – namely the issue of deference – without actually not only talking to farm workers through some sort of questionnaire, but also living there and observing the community life. So I gravitated to Suffolk, and then did quite a lot of statistical analysis on the Census, actually, to define the area, and I ended up with 44 parishes north of Ipswich, in East Suffolk. I ended up living, for those six months, in a tied cottage with a farm worker and his family, just outside Framlingham. And I was put on to that through the Trade Union. The local District Organiser was very helpful. I talked to him a lot about the study, and he put me on to this family who he thought would look after me, which they did.

So March 1972, I moved into this little tied cottage in a very remote part – it wasn't in a village, it was actually out on a farm, about two miles north of Framlingham – and with Fred and Margaret Melser and their two little girls, and they were the – unbeknown to me – they were the best informants I could ever have wanted! I got on so well with them, kept in touch - they're both now dead, sadly, kept in touch with them over the years. They were just wonderful to me, not only in feeding me, but also in just talking to me, helping me to - remember, I had no knowledge of farming. I couldn't, to use an epithet they used in Suffolk then, I "couldn't tell wheat from barley"! But through them, I could tell wheat from barley, and I did quite a lot of anthropological fieldwork in the area as well – one particular incident I'll come back to in a moment.

I spent a lot of time with them in the community, simply observing. I can fast forward a moment. Even after I'd talked to a lot of - even after I'd interviewed 270 farm workers in these 44 parishes, but was still having difficulty understanding how farm workers could identify, so closely, with their employers, when, objectively, they were poorly paid, living often in not the best of conditions, in tied housing – they had no security of tenure then, they did later, but not then. It was one of those fieldwork events, really, which you often find in the literature. Every year the local estate had an annual cricket match between the farmers and the farm workers. It wasn't actually the farm on which Fred Melser worked and on which I was living, but it was nearby. And it was quite an annual event, and it was played in the ground of Framlingham Castle, and I went along to this and sat on the boundary, with Margaret, watching the game.

I noticed - I was sitting to the side of the pavilion, and the pavilion was entirely occupied by the farmers and landowners, drinking their beers and chatting to each other, but what I noticed was that every time one of them came out of the pavilion to perhaps go and get something from the car, or just to walk around the boundary, they stopped and talked to Margaret and to Fred. They didn't have to do that, but they did.

I began to think carefully, "Why were they doing this? Why were they doing this?" And in theoretical terms, this led actually to, I think, really, the only kind of theoretical piece I've ever written that's any use. It led to an article in *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, which I published in 1976, called "The Deferential Dialectic". I began to understand that, actually, what deference is, is a dialectical relationship that involves identification and differentiation at one and the same time. These interactions were both reinforcing the differentiation between employer and employee between, frankly, upper class and working class rural inhabitants, but at the same time was cementing the identification between them. If they'd walked past without saying anything, that would have been a huge social faux pas. It simply was not done, because there were these bonds of identification which, at the same time, ironically, reinforced the differentiation and vice-versa. Farm workers knew their place, and these sorts of interactions simply reinforced that sense of social place. And then it all sort of came together like pieces of a jig-saw, really, and then both the fieldwork and the interviews all began to make some sense, and that was written up as *The Deferential Worker*. (pp. 12-14)

5: Interviewing farm workers

When it came to talking to farm workers, well, they were, of course, on the whole – not always, but on the whole – really quite shy individuals, and to some extent inarticulate – although I don't want to exaggerate that, once you got them going, they would talk quite a lot. I think my own background helped. I could relate to them in the sense that I'd come from a very urban background but, nevertheless, I'd come from a working-class background, and to that extent could not patronise them. [I could] be quite genuine with them. I would sit them down and explain the purpose of talking to them, which was largely, I have to say, in terms of me at the time being a student who wanted to study

social change in the countryside, and I wanted to talk to them about a range of issues so that I could understand better what was going on – that’s how I put it to them. They were terrific, actually. It wasn’t a problem to get them talking, but you had to find a territory which they felt comfortable with, and which would give them the confidence to speak. I don’t think they were at all intimidated, they weren’t fearful about anything getting back to their boss or anything like that, I never really sensed that. It was more an innate shyness, and just to get through that.

Actually, playing the slightly urban, as you knew, wasn’t a bad tactic! It wasn’t entirely disingenuous either! I didn’t know much about farming, and farm workers actually, and farmers too, in fairness, took great pride in their work on the farm and on the land, and they would take me round and show me round, and I was actually quite interested, because I didn’t understand or know any of this. I didn’t know, actually, very much at all, at that stage, about the political economy of farming. I didn’t understand that the real output from Suffolk actually is Wall’s pork pies and sausages, because most of the arable crops that were grown in Suffolk actually were fed to pigs, and the real output from Suffolk was pig meat. I didn’t know, either, about the way in which Birds Eye, as it then was, organised the pea harvest. I didn’t know very much about – although I’d read it up historically – but I didn’t know very much about the modern crop rotation systems. I didn’t actually even know very much about modern farming methods more generally. All of this I learned, and they were very happy to have a willing pupil, if you like.

So I think that certainly helped break the ice. And it was genuine. I was very interested, actually, and began to be able to read a landscape, which I can still do. I mean, that, itself, is a skill. You can look over a landscape and read it. Once you can read it, you can discern the quality of the farming, you can understand whether something’s being overgrazed or undergrazed, you can even read into the landscape something of the modern history. All of that I learned by doing the fieldwork.

Now, what were the areas in these interviews where you had to tread gently? Where were the tensions? Where did you feel, “I’ve really got to watch how I put this”? Did you talk about class, in a way, or any topic like that, that you felt you had to be more cautious?

I never really used the word “class” myself, explicitly, but they often used it. I think the most sensitive area related to housing, and through housing, the relationship with the boss. Because this was before the 1976 Act which gave farm workers some security of tenure, so they were very very vulnerable, they knew if they lost their job, they lost their house. Simply exposing, getting them to talk about that vulnerability, was a very sensitive area, because, again, it slightly counteracted the - I wouldn't say the myth, it wasn't mythical, but it counteracted something of the official credo of it being a “happy community where we all get on together”. And at the level of social interaction, a lot of that was true, actually, but underneath this, there was still this class division which was epitomised by their housing situation – the fact they had no security over their housing whatsoever, so when they came to retire, let alone if they decided to leave their job, they would have to leave their house as well. And there was nowhere for them to move into, they weren't guaranteed council housing or anything of that kind at the time....

But also at the same time, what was very easy to get them to talk about was the newcomers, the impact of the newcomers, so that you didn't need to prompt them very much on that, and they would go on at great length about the problems over disputes over street lighting, or they would talk, also at great length, about some of the negative impacts – the closure of the local school, closure of the village shop, which did hit them very hard...

I think the bigger difference between the farm workers themselves was actually between what used to be called the “roughs” and the “respectables”. Because I did a lot of interviews in their homes as well as in the workplace, and people on the same wage, or even on the same farm, you could walk into one house and it was absolutely spotless and pristine, and you could walk into another one and it was a tip, and actually, reputationally amongst the farm working community themselves, they knew who the roughs and the respectables were. I think, in that respect, that was a far more meaningful division to them than comparing themselves with social groups who they just saw completely off the radar screen, including the newcomers. I mean, they just - in every respect, income, lifestyle, consumer behaviour, they were almost on another planet.

Could we just have a quick word about gender? You were talking mostly to men, I assume?

Yeah, they were all men. [But gender] just simply wasn't part of the problem I was looking at. Most of the farm workers' wives did not have full-time employment of their own. They were living at home, they were bringing up the kids and looking after their husbands, a very traditional kind of working-class family pattern, and I'd read things like *Coal is Our Life* and so forth where, you know - it wasn't to say there were not matriarchal families within rural Suffolk, there certainly were, but gender relations were something I simply didn't explore.

So would you say, if one wanted to be reflexive and slightly self-critical, that you plucked the agricultural workers out of their family context?

I think that's undoubtedly true, what was driving me was an understanding of the agricultural work situation and this shifting in social divisions between an orthodox class-based division to one that was equally divided, but not along orthodox class lines. That's what fascinated me, and gender relations were a complete blind spot, and were left out of that. And I would be entirely self-critical of that one. (pp. 20-24)

6: Interviewing farmers

Give me something of the flavour, in the way you did earlier about the farm workers, of how these interviews actually went. You said that the farm worker's wife introduced you to the front parlour, can you bring alive the interview situation with the farmers?

I think the farmers, on the whole, were rather more suspicious, actually, of what we were up to than the farm workers had ever been! They were concerned, I think, that we would produce some sort of slanted exposé, in this case about how all these rich farmers and landowners were living off the fat of the land. This was a period when there was a lot of public debate about farm subsidies and we'd just joined the EU, so there was a transition to the Common Agricultural Policy, all these things were current, and so somebody going around talking to farmers and landowners about their businesses, was treated with some inherent suspicion. I think there was a lot more formality about these interviews, which is why I would hesitate to call this a qualitative study really. It was a quantitative study with

a bit of local colour added. The relationship was very much that of interviewer and interviewee. It was very much a sample survey, as I said earlier, unadorned by really any sense of participant observation. (p. 33)

7: Exchanging ideas in an academic community

[Essex] was very much, in that sense, an academic community. I think what I want to stress is simply the breadth. It wasn't, in some respects, it wasn't just a Sociology Department. We had philosophers, historians, people who worked in social policy/social administration. And as a real key thing, actually, of those days, was the coffee break. Every morning – and this seems like another world now – but someone came along from the Catering Department in the University, and wheeled in a trolley with coffee on it, and we all broke to have coffee together, for half an hour at least, every morning, and that – it was a bit like being at the village pump – you gossiped, you talked a lot, and actually, one of the things, though it might sound strange now, it forced me to read all sorts of things, just to keep up with the conversation over the coffee, that I wouldn't have read about before! Someone would come along and say, “Have you read x, y, and z?” And I'd sort of stare at my kneecaps or something, and then go away and read it, in order to participate in the next conversation! Now, I don't want to get a bit cynical, at that time, there were always these rather obscure Continental European sociologists who had never, of course, published in English, who someone had read, and by the time they were published in English they were regarded as passé, and you had to go and read somebody else – usually in German or French, most likely French. I got a bit cynical about that over the years. But nevertheless, it did force me to read around. They were interleaved with all the gossip, there was some genuine intellectual conversation which I gained an awful lot from.

(p. 37)