‘Worklessness’: A Family Portrait

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Abstract: Inspired by the examples of Stewart (1996) and Weston (2009), this article is an experiment in narrative form. It portrays the ‘cultural poetics’ (Stewart 1996) of lives lived in and through experiences of poverty in contemporary London and considers the potential of long-term participant-observation fieldwork, and the development of relations of mutual obligation in the field, to create a collaborative anthropology defined by a politics of mutually transformative action. The article enters into debate about the effects of changing structural inequalities, which differentially impact on the post-industrial urban neighbourhoods of the U.S.A., the U.K. and Europe (Waquant 2008; 2012). Waquant’s work is taken to be a rallying cry for Europe and the U.K. to wake up from the American Dream of neo-liberalism. The ‘utter desolation’ (Waquant 2012: 66) of life in the worst of the U.S.A.’s post-industrial urban housing projects and, to an extent, in France, demands a reaction from and suggests (especially post-August 2011 riots), that the time is now to debate how to prevent further deterioration in British cities.

The article should be read as two parts in conversation with each other. The first section is an experiment in narrative form and hence the reader is asked to bear with and consider the fruitfulness of the departure from conventional scholarly form. In the second part of the article academic insight is drawn out in more standardized form, with a more usual engagement with literature, highlighting of relevant points and movement towards the formation of argument.

Keywords: action-anthropology, cities, London, poverty, social class, U.K., unemployment, welfare, worklessness

The Colour of Hope is Cappuccino: Dulux Candy 1

July 2010: A Working-class Family in Bermondsey

The council flat is in Bermondsey, central south-east London, on the first floor of an old threestorey block in the Alfred Salter style, 12 flats in all; a dozen households. It has three good-sized bedrooms, a tiny bathroom and a living room leading to a small kitchen. The flat’s balcony, which runs the length of the front of the flat, looks over the patio-like gardens of the homes below and a cul-de-sac which, later in the summer, someone takes it upon themselves to plant and turn into a lovely flower garden.

In front of the flats, beyond the garden and also to the left on the other side of the road and to the right, within touching distance of the flat’s balcony, are £300,000 apartments. Everywhere, gentrification proceeds apace. New apartments for the wealthy transform derelict industrial and manufacturing workspace into trendy accommodation for new kinds of residents. Bearing witness to a slipstream of vibrant change, local pubs and what they stand
for – the history of working-class life and labour in London – die a slow death. The nostalgic lament for their passing is an undercurrent too deep for wealthy outsiders to fathom. Insensible to the dirge for what is decaying, the relatively rich revel in the sights and sounds of a future they are forging. Along the length of Bermondsey Street, which leads to London Bridge’s railway arches and through them, to the Southbank of the Thames, a new cultural quarter takes shape – Bermondsey village – where creative 30-somethings with disposable income find an ecological niche and thrive.

Occupying the character-filled hotchpotch of late nineteenth and early twentieth-century warehouses and trades yards, in an area once known for its Tenter grounds and leather treatment workshops, new enterprise takes shape on Bermondsey Street. Gastro pubs, art galleries, cutting-edge boutiques and cafes serving continental-style coffee complement well the office fronts of intriguing ventures into who knows what. A pet shop selling designer accessories for pampered pooches tests the limits of what is possible while Zandra Rhodes’ extravagant orange and pink splash of a textile museum invites the avant-garde to colour the road Mexican. Whatever next? This is the place to be. And all around, the diversity of council estate life in Bermondsey’s low-rise garden squares sits back to back, like a Siamese twin, with gentrification, capitalizing on relics of an industrial history whose contemporary affictions are hidden from view.

The council flat is a lifeline. Without it Tracey, 24, and her younger sister, Emma, 19, would be cut adrift. Endlessly resilient, they struggle against the odds, working out how to survive from one week to the next. Living on Emma’s £50-a-week Job Seekers’ Allowance, £20 of which goes on gas and electricity meters, the sisters eat one good meal a day. There is no money for rent, council tax, a television licence or youthful self-indulgence and because of non-payment of rent the young women are about to be evicted. This is a tragic decline.

When the girls’ mother Sharon died three years ago at the age of 43, Tracey was 21 and Emma just 16. Their stepfather, who had lived with them since Emma was a baby, immediately abandoned the young women. They were distraught too about being in a permanent state of antagonism with their older sister, Sophie, who had found a boyfriend and abandoned them also despite then having had a baby of her own. The sisters’ own father, an alcoholic, had been thrown out of the house long ago and played no part in their lives. A long-standing animosity between their mother and their mother’s sisters meant that none of the aunts had come to Tracey and Emma’s assistance or had taken any care of them when Sharon had died and a funeral had to be organized and paid for. This absence of care generated in Tracey a fierce defiance about being able to prove that she could cope without her aunts and older sister and they knew nothing of the extent of her struggle for survival.

This kind of deep-rooted conflict between siblings in certain kinds of working-class families in Bermondsey is not atypical; the internal effects of class-based distinctions in the generation now in their 40s and 50s are sometimes catastrophic. One family member might be suspected of getting above themselves, doing well or thinking of themselves as being too posh to associate with their siblings who have become something of an embarrassment. Another scenario is that one sibling, like Tracey’s mother Sharon, might be resolutely ‘common-as-shit’ as she called herself, refusing to mind her Ps and Qs and seemingly uninterested in and unimpressed with the finer distinctions of house-proud women like her sisters. Their homes were spick-and-span, full of nice things and they took every opportunity to make Sharon feel ashamed of who she was – ‘common’, in their eyes vulgar, too lower class, reminding them of where they had come from. For families to hold together in Bermondsey there can be only one excuse for wealth, dispos-
able income and the prestige that comes with a degree of distinction and perhaps a house in the country, in Kent: namely that all good things must be shared with family members who remain on Bermondsey’s council estates. ‘Making good’ must never become the means for making other family members feel bad about themselves. A constant attention to the necessity to share and to care about the family and neighbourhood as the source of pride and personal identity means that even millionaires can be tolerated in families that have known what it means to have survived dire poverty in relation to Bermondsey’s industrial dockside and food-processing past. Constant teasing from below makes the relative success and ascendance of others just about bearable.

Dependent on anti-depressants, overwhelmed with grief and raging against her older sister’s refusal to take any responsibility for the family, Tracey had determined, in 2006 when her mother died, to care for her younger sister Emma and to keep the household going so that Emma could go to college. She maintained her job at the nearby ASDA supermarket, going part-time because of the disruption of grief. Trying to make ends meet on half wages, Tracey clung to the memory that her competence and previously bright enthusiasm had got her noticed and put forward as a young contender for the management training scheme. She had had high hopes once. Tracey was used to being the sole provider economically. Even when her mother was alive, Sharon had been too ill to work for a while and Tracey was used to shouldering the burden of both work and domestic care. She had always been fastidious about cleaning and took pride in keeping up with the housework every day, but now she had become the emotional heart of the family too and the strain had begun to take its toll. Emma, in contrast, had always been the baby of the family, inseparable from her mother, often skiving off school to care for her and becoming, therefore, emotionally dependable. Expecting to be pampered and not at all used to self-reliance, Emma had come to depend on Tracey in all things.

The council does not evict vulnerable tenants easily. Bearing with Tracey through the struggle of the three years since Sharon’s death, tolerating a rising level of rent arrears and instigating more intensive supportive endeavours to no avail, the last-ditch decision had been reached, in 2009, to call my number: 07717778056. Eleven digits and a bitter irony: the only person the housing authorities could think of who might care about what was happening to Tracey and Emma is an anthropologist who made their household the object of her participant observation research ten years ago. What a desperate state of affairs. What has become of the white working-class family in Bermondsey that it should be reduced, in this case, to nothing more than a sibling pair? Typically characterized by ‘born and bred’ or kinship and residence patterns of place-based community formation, predominantly white working-class neighbourhoods of London remain reminiscent of those made famous in Young and Willmott’s classic 1950s ethnography, which explained to policy makers how the poor of London survived poverty only because of the dense, localized networks of social wealth. What has become of them in this case? How sad that it takes the complete absence of familial members and neighbourhood friends to reveal the anthropologist whose method for making relations with the family turns out to have produced the only relation that now matters.

My name is there, a trace in the file, a connecting thread and proof that research methods have a social life. With unpredictable and thankfully chaotic relational consequences, social science methods distribute the ordering and disordering effects of our desire to analyse other peoples’ lives. Like a centripetal force the file pulls me back to Bermondsey and draws me in, reminding me not only that research methods are an extraordinary way to constitute relations with strangers, but also
that the kind of social science that attempts to purify matters of fact from methods that make relations, misses what is most interesting about the task at hand, which is to describe the complicated business of what, in any situation, constitutes a relation.

The file is weighty: like an anchor, it holds fast, substantiates the history of the present moment in which so much hangs in the balance. Tracey attempts to commit suicide and I am compelled to action. What has happened here? ‘Hard-to-reach’, she (Tracey) is classified as by the housing worker, Beth, who is diligent and determined to sustain vulnerable tenants in their council properties. Despite her very best efforts to engage Tracey, Beth is compelled to bring that engagement to a professional close. There is nothing more she can do. Tracey has stopped answering her calls; no one answers the door to her or responds to messages she leaves. About to give up, she takes the decision to dial my number, not expecting a reply. Aware that her call is somehow out of the ordinary, Beth explains who she is and something of the seriousness of Tracey’s predicament and, apologizing for the unexpected intrusion, she asks if I am prepared to visit Tracey and see if there is anything I can do.

My visit, out of the blue, surprises Tracey who is not expecting me and is unable to conceal the extent of her shame and despair. She has not managed to hold the household together and is resigned to her failure, physically diminished by a sense of hopelessness and obvious fatigue. Motioning at her surroundings as we sit on the sofas, facing each other, she serves me a cup of welcoming tea and asks me to witness that the flat has become what she calls ‘a shit ‘ole’. It is not that bad I reassure her: noticing only that the carpet is completely threadbare, through to the concrete floor, the walls are everywhere in need of a clean lick of paint, which I know must be mortifying to her. Tracey has obviously lost the will to keep the flat clean and tidy as she had always used to do, but none of that matters to me because my greater concern is for her state of mind and the obvious deterioration in her physical health.

I ask Tracey to explain what has gone wrong and she speaks of the disastrous effects of the conflict with her sister whose boyfriend had become violent and eventually threatened to kill Tracey, turning up at the flat, smashing windows and causing the kind of mayhem over a period of months that alienated the neighbours and led to Tracey having repeatedly to miss work either because of extreme anxiety, being too afraid to leave the flat on her own or because of the debilitating effects of the medication prescribed to help her cope with that anxiety. Far from being the passive recipient of this violence, Tracey was perfectly capable of retaliation against her sister and her own counterattacks were forceful and constitutive of the kind of self-respect that certain kinds of Bermondsey women can expect to gain when they are used to not only engaging in neighbourhood conflicts but of seeking prestige from them. Here, though, the effects of that social practice, turned in on the family itself instead of protecting and defending the family’s honour, is catastrophic. Tracey is not strong enough, physically or mentally, to cope with the energetic and emotional demands of being at war with her own sister and compromising her potential relationship with her niece. Care and compassion are in short supply in her life and Tracey is done in by the destruction of kinship and its repeating message that she and Emma are alone in the world.

The last straw, however, was, she explains, another matter. It was about a letter. Beth had asked Tracey to obtain from her former employer a letter addressed to the Council employment and housing benefit office, to explain and to corroborate why she had had to give up work due to ill health, to confirm when her last day of work had been and what her last pay cheque was and her entitlement to any outstanding monies. For four months Tracey had been trying, in one way or another, to get this letter that would mean she could ap-
ply for benefits. Without this, she and Emma were condemned to living on Emma’s benefit money alone. Tracey had promised Beth that she would get this letter, this document that could do so much, but she had failed. Animosity at work, which was the effect of the breakdown in her formerly excellent relations with her employers, meant that Tracey’s usual face-to-face, informal way of getting things done simply could not work now. The handwritten letters she had sent could produce no effect either. Ashamed of her inability to do what was required of her, Tracey stopped answering the door to Beth and ignored her calls, knowing full well that Beth was doing her best to help, but would not be able to understand what it was like not to be able to make things happen.

Moved instantaneously to abandon the formerly more objective stance with which I conducted participant observation in the household between 1998 and 2000, when Emma was just 10 years old and I was learning under Sharon’s careful tutelage about what it means to become a common woman in Bermondsey, I offered to help Tracey, knowing that by doing so I was moving into unknown territory. I agreed to visit her and Emma once a week for a few hours and to work with Beth to prevent the eviction. Tracey readily agreed to my involvement, but seemed to be without much hope and Beth warned me not to expect too much since Tracey had become so hard-to-reach. I soon realized that neither Tracey nor Emma could afford to buy credit for their mobile phones, so whilst they could receive calls, they could not call out or text and it did not occur to them to reply to letters. Their landline had long since been cut off, but through Facebook, which they were able to access and already enjoyed using at their friend’s home, we were able to strike up a more practical and continuous line of communication, especially in emergencies.

Within a week Tracey had received the necessary letter from Human Resources at the supermarket subsequent to my letter to them, explaining that I had taken on the role of family advocate, that Tracey had become a vulnerable tenant and that the Council required a letter from them specifying the exact details of the end of Tracey’s employment, and without which she could not claim any state benefits. On my next visit Tracey was amazed, asking me how I had done in a week what she had tried for four months and failed to do. I gave her a copy of the letter, which she read carefully. Noting the signature from Dr Evans, which she teased me about, she concluded, as if the letter were written in ancient Hebrew, ‘You know what language to use.’

This was the beginning of a chain of letters to and fro between myself, Beth, the employment and benefit offices and the housing office; a chain of documents that would stretch to the moon and back and which took nine months to stabilize the situation. This led to the withdrawal of the threat of eviction, which made Tracey and Emma’s meagre finances more manageable and led to the reluctant accommodation of Tracey to what she had always dreaded, which was a life lived on benefits, a life that Emma described as ‘shit’ because of its perpetual limits. This and endless cups of tea and words of encouragement, as well as money being raised to redecorate the flat with its front-room-feature-wall cappuccino, substantiated my relationship as anthropologist-advocate and trustworthy friend to the young women. Their fragile hope that things can change became the new reason for my being in their lives and marked the beginning of a question in me about what kind of ‘research’ method my engagement with Tracey and Emma has become.

It is certainly method as transformative practice, although I would argue that all methods are. It is just that in this case I am able to appreciate for the first time, consciously, that the previous transformation I experienced in relation to this household was, in the end, weighted far more heavily in my favour than in theirs. I had studied their family and helped
Emma to learn to read when she was about to leave primary school barely literate, but the real transformation for me had been the structural move that writing up my research allowed, namely the exchange of my book and its effects for a tentative place in the academy, a job, a new house, the segregation that class relations require. This new ‘research’ requires a structural move of a different kind and a material practice as directly distributive method. It is the means for me to reciprocate to the family and particularly to Sharon, the girls’ mother, the debt that I owe for my earlier involvement in their lives. The development of reciprocity and the delayed return of the gifts of my time, energies and affection have profound emotional consequences, as much for me as for Tracey and Emma, but also involve a depth of learning and understanding beyond what could have been imagined before the end of my fieldwork.

This feels like something different, a material method made, in this case, of wall paint, tea and letters, constitutive of an enduring, intimate, caring relation of mutual but unequal concern and obligation. In time, Tracey and Emma begin to insist this means that I am a member of their fragile family, not just an advocate or even a family friend as I keep calling myself and which is beginning to get on their nerves. They insist on a more meaningful label for the relationship we share. Endless cups of tea drink me into a state of fictive kinship: I am to be a godmother – a woman who cares for children in the face of their mother’s absence and especially in the event of her death.

Postscript: February 2012

In defiance of social scientists at a gathering of family policy specialists who told me forcefully that ‘this is not research’, I argue that my recent work in Bermondsey has both empirical and analytical implications beyond what so-called real social science can make possible. Although I did not plan my involvement with the family as research or seek funding for it as such, mine and Tracey and Emma’s determination for me to make use of the learning I have derived from it in order to try to make a difference to the lives of others, makes it research in the end. Beth wants to use it to think through the problem of how to work more effectively with hard-to-reach clients, particularly those who fall through the diminishing safety net of state support. What has made the difference from her perspective is the long-term development of a personalized, voluntary, friendship-advocate relationship whereas she is in every way limited in what she can achieve with any family by budget, time and impersonal constraints. We contemplate how an organization providing long-term family advocacy for a greater number of families might be created and funded.

The work also allows me to begin to explain long-term worklessness in Britain as a condition of profound vulnerability that has very little to do with ‘fecklessness’ and everything to do with the profound generational effects of social change in the post-industrial, urban neighbourhoods of Britain. Indeed, it is the extreme vulnerability of this family that raises important questions including ethical ones. How to protect the interests of informants and not cause harm when the unscrupulous might be tempted to use people’s misfortunes to obtain ever more intimate information? It surprised me when Tracey and Emma first suggested that I write about our experiences of learning how to survive extreme vulnerability, but I was honoured by their trust in me and knew that it was going to be important for them to oversee, influence and give permission for me to publish what I write. What I have managed to produce demonstrates perhaps that anthropologists never stop conducting research with their informants even after fieldwork proper has come to an end. Even when they are not formally in research mode or making field notes it all goes in and the tendency
for anthropologists to turn experience into analysis is always there. Emma, meanwhile, is determined to write her own story. She wants to start an audio diary to keep a record of her everyday inner landscape and telling the history of her life. She needs no encouragement to assert that the monopoly over the narrative of their experience is not supposed to be mine.

So much has happened in Tracey’s life since I first tried to write about the journey we are undertaking together. Clearly there are more episodes of the narrative to tell and I hope to write a short monograph relating the details of the case study to an analysis of the emerging policy context and contemporary anthropological and sociological studies of social class in Britain (Edwards, Evans and Smith 2012). I look forward to explaining in depth what happened between July 2010, when I first tried to express what life had been like for Tracey when things were at their very worst, and the beginning of 2012, which sees Tracey secure now, with a beautiful baby daughter – called Hope – and a loving and supportive partner who works as a builder, takes care of his little family and devotes himself to the task of renovating and refurbishing the flat, which is now beautiful.

Further good news is that at the end of 2011, with Christmas on their minds and an overall sense of everyone now being able to get on with their lives without the disruption of constant conflict, a fragile process of self-initiated reconciliation between the sisters began. This meant that Sophie got to meet her new niece for the first time, while Tracey and Emma could see their cherished niece again. Sophie’s daughter is now four and happy to befriend her new baby cousin. Sophie too is on more stable ground: she is working again (in a bakery), for the first time since becoming a mother, which means her finances are in a better position, and she has also made a loving home with a partner who supports her and is a good stepfather to her child. For the first time Sophie feels that something she had always craved and feared she could never realize – an independent adult life – is a viable option for her and she is determined to sustain a newly found sense of maturity.

Because she relies so heavily on her sister, Emma has benefited from the restoration of a sense of hope and happiness in Tracey’s life and the improvement in their welfare that Tracey’s new partner has bought to their everyday existence. Emma still lives at home with Tracey, is an auntie now and does her best to support her sister in taking care of Hope, but her struggles continue. Trying to find her feet and a sense of self-reliance, she has found casual work in a supermarket, but not yet managed to improve her literacy and numeracy skills in a way that could be translated into the beginnings of a realization of her ambitions. Emma is fun-loving, has a close network of friends, is negotiating the roller coaster of relations with men, but still feels the debilitating effects of physical and mental health problems. This is a constant reminder to me that there is still much to do, including trying to find a way to extend to Emma the regular one-to-one support that paid such dividends for Tracey and which feels like the only option in the face of repeated failures of state initiatives to make any difference.

When I ask Tracey for permission to publish this piece of writing she reads it through and describes her reactions:

It is upsetting, looking back, remembering how hard my life was – the money problems, the flat, my health, problems at work, my mum, my mum’s sisters, Sophie … but I can see that I am in a totally different place now. I am a different person. Everything is good.

She explains to me that if she was still in a ‘bad place’, or if things had got worse, she would not have given permission for me to publish because, she says, she would have felt too ashamed. ‘Now,’ she declares, ‘anyone you like can come up to my flat for a cup of tea and see for themselves how well I am doing.’ Tracey’s
response is a reminder that people take poverty and its associated deprivations to heart. The experience of not being able to survive and not being able to marshal assistance from among one’s own kin and wider network of relations to help in coping with life’s more difficult challenges, invokes feelings of intense rage, a sense of hopelessness and overwhelming shame. In other words, people take poverty and the suffering associated with it, personally. As if it were the outward manifestation of an internal and deficient attribute of the person, poverty is not, in Tracey’s experience, to do with politics. My writing about her life and our experience of together trying to overcome seemingly insurmountable obstacles is an attempt to politicize her story not only in order to turn it into food for thought, but also to relieve, to some extent, the burden of her sense of personal responsibility. By relating the circumstances in one family to broader reflections on the profound implications of economic, political and social change for those who inhabit the post-industrial neighbourhoods of urban Britain, I aim to put reflexive experience of poverty to good use in the analysis of the effects of structural inequality under the changing conditions of advanced capitalism in the U.K.

The Anthropology of Welfare

From this point of view, my work speaks to the emerging sub-field of the anthropology of welfare (Edgar and Russell 1998; Morgan and Mazkovsky 2003) and provides a point of comparison with Waquant’s research (2008), which invites European scholars to contrast their studies of urban poverty and exclusion with what he identifies as the extreme consequences of ‘advanced marginality’ in the U.S.A. Waquant acknowledges that there are important similarities between the European and American cases with regard to what defines the post-industrial condition, namely the withdrawal of industrial and manufacturing sectors and consequent negative labour-market effects; the withdrawal from and/or failures of the state in run-down neighbourhoods; the disintegration of civic institutions as self-organizing forms of collective neighbourhood action and increasing social exclusion. Waquant also highlights a growing sense of crisis among residents who lack the means to migrate and the demonization of the poor who, because they are barely surviving a neo-liberal era of competitive individualism, are to be blamed for the deteriorating conditions of their own lives. However, the important difference between Waquant’s work on the U.S.A. compared to his reflections on Western Europe, is the extent to which it demonstrates that, overall, Europe has a long way to go before it has created for itself an imitation of the American attitude to poverty. Hence, there is still time for Europe and the U.K. to learn what not to do and to pause for critical reflection. The moment is ripe, then, for an inter-disciplinary debate about economic, political and social life in European and U.K. cities and the focus on ‘the post-industrial’ provides the means to take the sub-field of urban anthropology in new directions (Lampere 1985).

My work reflects too Bourdieu’s sociological intervention (The Weight of The World: Social Suffering in Contemporary Society, 1999), which reveals the specific political and economic conditions of contemporary life via an investigation of what it is like to experience existence from the point of view of the most marginalized and impoverished people in our midst. However, in contrast to Bourdieu, who collects together a powerful set of qualitative interviews in order to yield analytical insight through the juxtaposition of perspectives (1999: 3), my strategy has been to present a single in-depth ethnographic case study. This is not just because I hope better to plumb the depths of the experiential or simply to experiment more creatively with the reflexive attitude, but because I aim to move beyond the qualitative interview or conventional participant observation study.
and ask what it means to take direct action in the face of suffering. What is it to hazard a risk and attempt to make a difference? What is it to engage in research methods that produce long-term, enduring relations of mutual obligation, something which is perhaps defining of anthropology, but which does not often become the subject of discussion? What does the move towards longitudinal qualitative research mean for anthropological or sociological ‘method’, for the politics of representation and the development of an interface between research and policy development?

Similar questions have been addressed by Given (1998), who has also taken a narrative approach in his work describing the politics, possibilities and structural limitations of action research on ‘problem housing estates’ in the north of England. This kind of research reflects a long history of the development of a more collaborative anthropology (Lassiter 2005) and, related to this, specific methods such as participatory action research (Greenwood and Gonzalez 1992; Greenwood and Levin 2006) in which collaboration came to be considered the ethical precondition of fieldwork in anthropology and not its unintended consequence.

Changes in the Morality of Kinship

As the state in the U.K. recoils from and attempts to reconfigure a welfare state – which was designed, originally, to lend dignity to those forced, at any point in their lives, to enter into a relation of direct dependence on government aid for material provision of housing and basic income – it behoves us to reflect on what it means for politicians to redefine the moral obligations at the heart of our idea of society. This tallies with a broader anthropological project gaining currency at the moment, which marks an attempt to think through how anthropological analyses of financial crises allow for a re-evaluation of the relationship between the state and the ‘free market’ and, as a direct consequence, the relationship between our ideas about the accumulation of wealth in society and the nature of moral obligation in contemporary times (Gregory 2004; Hart and Ortiz 2009; Graeber 2011). Important about this debate is that it does not assume that equality and social welfare are necessarily synonymous. The classic anthropological analyses of gift economies (Malinowski 1922; Mauss 1990 [1954]) in no way implied an ideal of ‘primitive communism’. On the contrary, such societies were seen to be extremely hierarchical, which suggested that morality is not given exclusively through a struggle for democratic equality, but rather through an understanding that humanity is evinced through relations of reciprocity, redistribution and mutual obligation. Hence, early works in economic anthropology, such as the Argonauts of the Western Pacific, were concerned precisely with the question of comparative investigation: how do various human societies handle the often fraught issues of differential accumulation of wealth and what it means to care about the welfare of others?

The tragedy is that Tracey’s reflection on her situation chimes beautifully with current policies in which people living in impoverished conditions are increasingly encouraged to imagine that they ought to be able to take individual responsibility for their lives. This is probably the most important insight for me about the case study: it forces reflection on what it means for a person to be an individual and who exactly in contemporary times can afford to be one. I explain to Tracey that suffering in isolation under conditions of extreme poverty is a tragedy not just because of the trauma for each particular person, but because it represents the disintegration of the close-knit families and networks that had previously been characteristic of working-class neighbourhoods in urban Britain. These dense networks of social wealth – people pulling together through relations of mutual care
and obligation² (in contrast to the impersonal, exploitative commodity-relations of industrial work and labour) were the means for those living in poverty to survive. It seems obvious to me, and Tracey’s case is the evidence of this, that once those networks of mutual support break down and sources of plentiful employment close to places of residence are gone, the most vulnerable residents of working-class neighbourhoods are going to face a very real struggle to survive. Here, then, are the fruits of Margaret Thatcher’s labours: if there is no such thing as society, housing estates are inevitably going to become characterized by collections of people struggling to become ‘individuals’. Not everyone, however, has the emotional, financial and educational resources to ‘pull up their bootstraps’ and become happily self-supporting or self-actualizing. Without family or community to turn to for support, those who flounder and fail will necessarily become more, not less, reliant on the state to be the safety net in hard times. Indeed, under New Labour, the state became more involved in micro-managing the lives of the poor whilst simultaneously failing to address the imbalance in an economy which had turned its back on industry and manufacture, cast aside or casualized its labour force and hedged its bets on the world of high finance. There is evidence that under post-industrial conditions and with high levels of unemployment and deterioration of living conditions on housing estates, dependence on government aid began to take perverse forms in urban working-class neighbourhoods in the U.K. For example, new forms of relationality included recruitment of the local state into the escalation of adversarial and often violent revenge-seeking conflicts between close residents as neighbourhood relations deteriorated over time (Koch, forthcoming).

I ask Tracey how she feels about the part of my writing in which I try to express how poverty exists in Bermondsey alongside real wealth, as if there were different worlds some-how co-existing. She says, ‘I have never really thought about it before. I just take it for granted that I am poor and that we [poor people] are, like, a separate person.’ I ask whether she ever wonders what the lives of rich people are like and she says, ‘Yes, full of money and luxury.’ She laughs and says that she dreams about winning the lottery, but the idea of being rich is categorically not about wanting to be like posh people. She insists that she just wants to have the same amount of money as them. The ideal among poor people, she emphasizes, is ‘to be common, but loaded (filthy rich)’. Tracey is under no illusions though: she recognizes that posh people’s lives are just as likely to be filled with drama and conflict as common people’s are, but that they deal with it differently and have the capacity to do so. She teases me and forces me to reflect on how, when life becomes a real struggle, I do what posh people do and marshal a ridiculous range of resources. Psychotherapy, massage, spa days, acupuncture, homeopathy, osteopathy, physiotherapy, foreign holidays, dinners in expensive restaurants and spending sprees strain a serious set of credit cards. We laugh and Tracey wonders how many rich people there are with ‘real money’ rather than the means to be able to afford to be in more debt?

After she has read my writing, I ask Tracey whether she feels what I have chosen to write about feels relevant to her life and understanding of her own experience and she says, ‘It is spot on, Gillian, you’ve got it.’ I wonder aloud, explaining to her that some readers might want to know if her situation is highly unusual or whether it is representative of what goes on for a proportion of families living on Bermondsey’s council estates.³ She replies: ‘In my experience a lot of people go through the same stuff. When I was growing up my life was the same as everyone else’s, the same troubles, the same struggles and, now, a lot of my friends don’t have family either.’ I remind her of another woman who featured in my original book – Anita – who, like Tracey’s mother, also
died young at the age of 43 and left two teenage girls behind to fend for themselves, with only one devoted uncle to keep an eye of them despite the existence of four aunts and another uncle who had been on bad terms with Anita during her life and were noticeable for their absence after her death. I remember well that Anita had lamented to me, when she was very ill and dying, that she would never get to see her grandchildren. She despaired and was angry that working-class children rarely meet or get to know their grandparents because, in her experience, working-class people tend to die young.

The Effects of Welfare Reform

With a new Conservative coalition government in power and even with the free-market economic ideology now on the back foot, following the financial recession, there is a renewed attempt to pull back and downsize the state, instigate radical welfare reform and, ironically, hand over responsibility for social well-being to the civic realm via the idea of a Big Society. This is laughable not only because it is a reversal of everything that Conservative individualism taught us to celebrate, but also because those areas of the country that best knew how to do civic society and could have taught us all a thing or two – those urban working-class neighbourhoods centred around localized work and family life – have been economically, politically and socially undermined over the last 30 years. Not only is this rarely publically recognized (Jones 2011), but the assault is magnified now that people are being asked to stand on their own two feet and reinvent conditions of self-sufficiency in times of austerity. The riots of August 2011 in English cities and in France in 2010 suggest that working-class people will not withstand unending urban alienation without protest and that politicians ignore or misinterpret this at their peril (Evans 2011).

Focusing on the kinds of resources required to support ‘troubled families’, who cannot afford the privatized means of social reproduction in hard times, recent research and policy initiatives describe attempts to make a difference in poor people’s lives. Following the riots in England, Prime Minister David Cameron, announced, for example, a new initiative to help the country’s most ‘troubled families’. In a scathing critique of this initiative, Mark Johnson, writing in The Guardian (2011) argues as follows:

The scheme aims to rescue 120,000 of the most antisocial families from themselves, delivering one caseworker per family who will help them through the maze of agencies at their disposal and form a plan of action including ‘basic, practical things that are the building blocks of an orderly home and a responsible life … like getting the children to school on time’.

Once again members of the ruling class have looked back to their own comfortable, loving childhoods and asked themselves how they can make the yobs, well, more like them … Instead of short-term targets and a rulebook devised in the cosy world of Westminster, the government should be funding proper consultation with the families themselves and those who work on the frontline. No family wants to be dysfunctional. Sensitive community and family consultation would help to define the kind of help that is really needed. This ground-up approach is the first building block in changing lives in the long term.

As for the families who will have their own ‘troubleshooter’: it will be another social worker, another day. They have long been involved with agencies and one more won’t make any difference. Getting their kids to school on time, although it ticks a few boxes, will do nothing to tackle underlying problems of mental and physical ill-health, abuse, addiction and extreme poverty.

It is time to ask why there are at least 15 agencies dealing with problem families yet none is fully engaging with the service users. The appointment of new key workers acknowledges that there is a failure – and does nothing to change it.

The real challenge is not just to think about why it might be that even a proliferation of
top-down, formalized state mechanisms of support fail to make a difference to the most troubled families, but also to consider how the experience of poverty relates to at least three decades of social, political and economic change at the local and national level (Evans 2012). The government’s publications on ‘worklessness’ (Scott and Brien 2007), for example, via the Centre for Social Justice, are deeply frustrating to read precisely because they fail to relate their sophisticated consideration of the effects of long-term unemployment to the history of Conservative free-market economic policies of the 1980s, which, on top of the pressures of rapid globalization and massive outsourcing of labour, devastated working class urban neighbourhoods. These factors led to the transformation of the labour market and urban environment through wholesale de-industrialization and the transition to a casualized service economy. The travesty is that the condition of ‘worklessness’ appears, as a result of this lack of contextual analysis, to be an attribute of the person rather than the inevitable outcome of a historically specific set of economic and political circumstances.

The government would have done well, rather than reinventing the wheel of welfare provision after the riots, to take heed of already existing initiatives with a proven track record. Madeleine Bunting, also writing in The Guardian in 2011, describes, for example, details of the Life programme in Swindon. This initiative is remarkable because it recognizes that successful intervention is not to be measured by the number of agencies involved in troubled families’ lives in poor neighbourhoods, or the cost of such support (in some cases up to £300,000 per family per year), but rather by the development of meaningful, long-term and genuinely transformative relationships. With its method of long-term participant-observation research happening at the ground level, social anthropology has the means for studying and making sense of how these initiatives succeed or fail in practice. There is reason to argue, therefore, that the development of the social anthropology of welfare is timely and, indeed, necessary. Undoubtedly the question of collaboration will continue to be at the heart of the kind of research and service provision, which make an acknowledged difference to family members seeking assistance about issues that they themselves determine to be important in their lives.

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Notes

1. See McCourt (1998) for an analysis of why we ought to be hesitant about referring to these networks of relations as ‘communities’.
2. See Evans (2006a) for an explanation of how these networks were highly differentiated both internally and externally with potentially negative consequences, for example, for ‘outsiders’ of all kinds and especially black and Asian immigrants.
3. See Evans (2006a) for a description of the diversity of kinds of families on housing estates in Bermondsey and the effects of that difference for a localised understanding of social and economic hierarchy in the working class.
4. Madeleine Bunting confirms the importance of this in her description of the Life programme in Swindon: crucially, the programme insists that the families are in the driving seat at every stage of the process. This is what sets it apart from other family-intervention projects. Families are invited to join up after they have been referred by statutory agencies and, even more controversially, it is the families who recruit the professionals who will work with them. The families then work out with the team what the priorities
are and how they want to tackle them. This could include how to sort out rent arrears, housing repairs, how to get the kids to school on time, get the washing machine to work, or even help with getting the house cleaned and tidied up. Or it could involve much trickier issues about how to manage a teenager’s violent behaviour. But the part that always startles newcomers to the programme is the emphasis on love in the relationships between the team and the families. This focus has been spearheaded by Participle, a consultancy that specialises in redesigning public services, brought in by Swindon strategic health authority in 2008 to design a new model of working. Love is not a word much used by many professionals working with vulnerable families, and one of the first things Participle had to do when training the team was to define love as trust, respect, non-judgementalism and a willingness to share who you are. Such notions turn upside down all the usual conventions of the distant professional whose job it is to make decisions. The genesis of the project in Swindon was a familiar problem: despite considerable resources and effort, intervention had had little impact on the lives of families in crisis. Swindon is relatively prosperous, but the numbers of children subject to protection plans or going into care were not coming down and complaints of antisocial behaviour were still rising. Swindon’s strategic health authority and local authority – which jointly commission family services – decided they had to try a different approach. Key to Participle’s findings was its analysis of how the relationship between the families and the various professionals trying to help them breaks down and everyone loses hope that change is possible.

References


