

Alan Sandry, *Plaid Cymru. An ideological analysis* (Cardiff: Welsh Academic Press, 2011) 234 pp., ISBN 9781860571169.

Review by **Daniel G. Williams**

Alan Sandry's *Plaid Cymru. An ideological analysis* is both interesting and, at times, illuminating. He adopts the work of political scientist Michael Freeden as a basis for his 'ideological analysis' and asks two fundamental questions: whether nationalism constitutes a political ideology, and whether Plaid Cymru is primarily a nationalist party. 'Ideology' is, of course, one of the most complex and contested terms in cultural studies. Freeden does not relate ideology to the 'pejorative Marxist usage' where it refers to 'distorted consciousness, reflecting exploitative and alienating power relationships that can be overcome in a socialist society'. Rather, he relates ideology to human practice, 'as those actual and composite thought-patterns of individuals and groups in a society which relate to the way they comprehend and shape their political worlds, and which supply us with crucial clues for understanding political conduct and practices'.

Sandry deploys Freeden's participative definition of ideology to good effect as he draws on extensive interviews with some of the key politicians and supporters of Plaid Cymru to delineate and define the dominant ideas and values that have informed the party's policies and actions. The book offers useful, brief overviews of some of the key intellectual and political traditions that have informed the party's thinking, from liberalism to socialism, from linguistic conservatism to environmentalism and feminism. His goal, in keeping with Freeden's work, is to ascertain what constitutes Plaid Cymru's 'core' values, and thus central ideological convictions, and which ideas constitute 'adjacent' and 'peripheral' forces which interact and shape the core ideas in significant ways. Sandry's key finding is that 'if it is necessary to classify Plaid Cymru's thought-practices in terms of the existing and standardised political ideologies, then it would be far more accurate to describe Plaid Cymru's ideology as being akin to

socialist ideology than it would be to match the party to a nationalist ideological standpoint'. Following Freedon, Sandry sees nationalism as reliant on other 'host' ideologies such as liberalism or socialism in order to be socially and politically effective. Plaid Cymru, from this perspective, is a party whose nationalism is attached to a socialist core.

This is an interesting, if controversial, thesis. But this is not all that Sandry has to say on the question of ideology. Perhaps equally insightful is Sandry's tracing of Plaid Cymru's ideological history. He argues that up until the 1950s 'the promotion of the Welsh language would be classified as a core concept' within the ideological framework of Plaid Cymru. By today, following the establishment of Cymdeithas yr Iaith Gymraeg (The Welsh Language Society) in 1962 which campaigned specifically on Welsh language issues via a policy of civil disobedience, and a broader range of positive attitudes towards the language embraced by all political parties since political devolution in 1997, 'the pressure valve on Plaid Cymru has been discharged' and the 'Welsh language, therefore, can be viewed as a peripheral, as opposed to a core, concept within Plaid Cymru's thought-practices'. Welsh nationalism is therefore envisaged as a 'thin' ideology, which turns to other political and intellectual traditions to give it substance. While Sandry discusses the ways in which liberalism, environmentalism and feminism have played this substantive role during periods of Plaid Cymru's history, it seems that the dominant historical narrative is one in which a linguistic 'core' becomes 'peripheral', and 'devolutionary socialism' (present in the 1930s work of D.J. Davies but kept peripheral during the reign of the party's first President Saunders Lewis) becomes central. Although he doesn't explicitly connect the two processes, it seems that what Sandry is describing is a shift in what constitutes the key components of Welsh nationalism, from language rights to devolutionary socialism.

In developing his analysis Sandry makes it clear that there is much to be gained from Freedon's rejection of the Marxist definitions of ideology as, on the one hand, the beliefs characteristic of a certain class, and on the other, the system of illusory beliefs – fake ideas and false consciousness – which dominate in a bourgeois capitalist society. Rather than conceiving of ideology as an impersonal force imposed from above, or a power

unconsciously internalised by social 'subjects', Sandry follows Freeden in emphasising the role of human agency in the construction of political ideologies. The result of this approach in Sandry's book is that a great deal of the analysis is dependent on knowledge gleaned from interviews. It depends on our believing and accepting what the interviewees are telling us. In an age of cynicism towards politics and distrust of politicians, this approach is profoundly refreshing. But it does have its limitations. There is little doubt that the majority of Plaid Cymru activists would like to think of their party as contributing to a wave of devolutionary socialist movements with international connections with Leftist minorities in Western Europe and with struggles for self-determination across the globe. But to what extent is this self-description persuasive? To what extent might we be dealing here with 'ideology' in its older Marxist sense of false consciousness?

Edward Said argued that 'the starting point of critical elaboration is the consciousness of what one really is, and is 'knowing thyself' as a product of the historical process to date, which has deposited in you an infinity of traces without leaving an inventory'. Much the same could be said of political movements and a 'deposit of traces' will, by definition, lie beyond the conscious grasp of the key participants in any political movement. It may be worth recalling that Freud's biographer, and the leading populariser of his ideas, Ernest Jones, was an early member of Plaid Cymru. A very different kind of ideological analysis might be seen to derive from the fusion of psychoanalysis and Marxism characteristic of much contemporary cultural criticism. Slavoj Žižek makes a useful distinction between 'symbolic history' – defined as 'the set of explicit mythical narratives and ideologico-ethical prescriptions that constitute the tradition of a community' – and its submerged Other, the unacknowledgeable 'spectral, fantasmic history that effectively sustains the explicit symbolic tradition, but has to remain foreclosed if it is to be operative'. In the shift from linguistic conservatism to devolutionary socialism which Sandry describes, the language issue moves from the realm of the 'symbolically acknowledged' to the 'spectrally unacknowledged', but that is not to say that its role in setting limits on the party's ideological make up is diminished. A comparison of two periods

where the party's membership and support increased significantly, 1959 and 1999, might illustrate this point.

When invited to speak about the development of Plaid Cymru from 1966 at a Commemoration of the fiftieth anniversary of Plaid Cymru in 1974, Phil Williams argued that Plaid Cymru President Gwynfor Evans's victory in the Carmarthen parliamentary by-election of 1966 was not the key turning point in the party's history, but was rather the culmination of a series of transformations that had begun with the election of 1959. The party fought more than half of Wales's seats in 1959, and the total of votes gained (78,000) was higher than in the general elections of 1964 (69,000) or 1966 (61,000). 1959 saw 'a new influx of members forming a completely new element within' Plaid Cymru, recalled Phil, and 'many of us had been in the Labour Party for years and were political to the fingertips: above all we understood that politics was about power – that was the one lesson the Labour Party had never forgotten.' For the first time there was a large influx of members that could not speak Welsh. Plaid was at last becoming a party for the whole of Wales. These were the years in which Plaid moved from being a pressure group to being a political party. But the strains caused by rapid growth would soon show themselves. In 1962 Lewis delivered his electrifying speech 'Tynged yr Iaith' (The Fate of the Language) which called for the adoption of revolutionary strategies to secure a future for the Welsh language. The speech led to the establishment of Cymdeithas yr Iaith Gymraeg, but its intention was to change the direction in which Plaid Cymru was travelling. Lewis's intention was to reinforce the centrality of the Welsh language in the nationalist party's thought. In terms of galvanising a generation of Welsh youth the speech was a celebrated success, but in terms of its intention to change the priorities of the party that Lewis had lead until 1939, it was a failure.

A similar pattern of electoral advance followed by a linguistic backlash occurred in 1999. In the first elections for the National Assembly for Wales, which took place in that year, Plaid Cymru achieved 290,572 votes, and a 28.4 share of the vote – a result that has not been equalled since. As in 1959, new elements had been attracted to the party as it proceeded to win seats in the old industrial constituencies of Llanelli, Rhondda and

Islwyn. Yet by 2002 Plaid Cymru found itself again at the centre of a bitter row regarding the language. Dismayed at the perceived unwillingness of the Welsh Assembly to do anything about the 'swamping' of his Welsh speaking community in north-west Wales by English incomers, the Plaid Cymru councillor Seimon Glyn gave vent to his feelings on a morning show on Radio Wales. The intemperate nature of his language led to his being branded a 'racist', and the construction of the 'nationalist racist' became a useful tool for the Labour Party to attack Glyn and his supporters specifically, and the Welsh nationalist movement more broadly. The lukewarm and limited support given to Glyn by the Plaid Cymru leadership exacerbated the sense that the party had turned its back on its core supporters in the Welsh speaking areas in order to gain electoral advance. The letters of support that Glyn received from all parts of Wales were collected in a volume that testified to the fact that a number of people were profoundly distraught that Plaid Cymru had turned its back on the cultural philosophy of its founders in becoming a pragmatic cog within an establishmentarian political machine. While the interventions of Lewis and Glyn were different in both significance and effect, the period from electoral breakthrough to linguistic backlash was virtually identical in 1959 and 1999. This is the internal tension within the intellectual and political thought of Plaid Cymru. The transition from one core concept to the other, from language to socialism, was never neat nor complete. There are no references to Glyn in Sandry's analysis of Plaid Cymru, despite the fact that this episode revealed in a particularly stark form the seemingly incompatible ideological strains that are woven into the fabric of the party.

Indeed, while Sandry recognises that Plaid Cymru's founders placed linguistic continuity above political autonomy in the party's list of priorities, he seems unable to read the myriad Welsh language publications produced by the party throughout its history. A reading knowledge of Welsh is a necessary skill for anyone writing an analysis of Plaid Cymru. At his worst, Sandry is similar to Jack Gladney, the non-German-speaking director of 'Hitler Studies' at a university in the American mid-west in Don DeLillo's acerbic social satire on postmodern academia, *White Noise* (1985). Where Welsh language words and concepts are included in the discussion they are misspelt. Davies's economic vision

based on 'cydweithrediad' appears as the meaningless 'cydweitbrediad' in both the text and the index. The book is poorly written in places, and carelessly edited. It was Perry Anderson who once bracingly suggested that 'it should be a matter of honour for the Left to write at least as well as its adversaries'. The same goes for Welsh studies. The Welsh Academic Press needs to raise its game in this respect.

But the truth of Sandry's suggestion that Plaid Cymru now draws on a socialist core to give meaning to its nationalism was reinforced recently as the self-defined socialist Leanne Wood was elected leader. Wood is the party's first female leader, the first with her roots in the South Wales Valleys, the first to be a learner rather than a fluent speaker of Welsh. She has the potential to appeal well beyond the party's traditional supporters. If Wood is able to sustain a commitment to linguistic development and expansion while forging a redistributive economic policy with a wider appeal, then Plaid Cymru may expect some future successes. The record suggests that it is in periods of success that the party's ideological fault lines become apparent, however. It seems that what is 'core' and 'peripheral' is in fact historically contingent, and can vary according to social circumstances. The internal life of a political movement is more conflicting and contradictory than the somewhat desiccated world of the political theorist.