

## Home thoughts from abroad: *Auf Wiedersehen, Pet* and condition-of-England comedy under Thatcher

*This essay is dedicated to Arthur Knowles, my dad, as a working-class man, working in a factory rather than on a building site, but someone who lived through this period and stayed afloat*

The comedy drama series *Auf Wiedersehen, Pet* (1983-1986; 2002-2004) was voted ITV's favourite programme of all time in a 2015 poll to celebrate the broadcaster's 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary. Alongside this measure of substantial popularity, it has also received critical recognition: its first series placed 46<sup>th</sup> in the British Film Institute's top 100 British television programmes in 2000. In spite of these measures of esteem, though, it has received little critical attention in comparison with its peers in 1980s television drama or comedy, something this essay aims to redress. *Auf Wiedersehen, Pet's* identity in the marketplace of early to mid-1980s British television shows its hybridity and ability to capitalise on developments in television genres, in broadcaster profiles and branding, and in the relationship between viewers, TV shows and the cultural politics of the time.

In this essay I confine my discussion to the first two series of the show, as those were products of the 1980s, being produced by Central (then holder of the Midlands ITV franchise) and screened on ITV in 1983-84 (series one) and in 1986 (series two). It is a testament to the show's enduring popularity and its position in viewers' and producers' cultural memories that it was revived over fifteen years later by the BBC, with a third series being screened on BBC1 in 2002 and a fourth, plus a concluding two-part Christmas special, in 2004. As well as the fact that this essay collection focuses on 1980s television, I am arguing that the later BBC revivals of the show, while the work of the same writers, Dick Clement and Ian La Frenais, are effectively the show's homage to itself and to the mythology of the 'Seven' set up in the original ITV series. The original format was brought to a forced end with the death of Gary Holton, who played Wayne, in 1986 towards the end of the filming of series two. As a result, the later series are compelled to envision a different future for the characters which shows how age and changing times have treated them, but which functions consciously as an echoing of the earlier group without being able to recreate that group or the specific cultural, social and economic circumstances that brought them together. My concern here, then, will be with *Auf Wiedersehen, Pet's* representation of the early to mid 1980s cultural landscape with which its protagonists are grappling, and its use of hybrid generic forms to convey the shifting aspects of its central theme, men 'out of place' in terms of their personal lives, social identities and sense of masculinity as an increasingly embattled arena of life.

As a show comprising 13 one-hour episodes in its first two series, *Auf Wiedersehen, Pet* fits unproblematically into the drama format. However, it was written by two celebrated comedy screenwriters, Dick Clement and Ian La Frenais, held in high esteem for a range of sitcoms including *Porridge* and *Whatever Happened to the Likely Lads?* As such, it occupies a hybrid position, as, I would argue, an early example of 'comedy drama' before the term of concept entered the mainstream (twenty years later, in 2013, TV critic Mark Lawson can be found referring to the 'increasingly fashionable tag "comedy-drama") which attempts not to blend the two seamlessly, but to incorporate both in order to balance out the bleaker aspects of 1980s social situations with a lighter perspective. Clement and La Frenais are documented as having 'felt liberated by the freedom of writing a series of one-hour dramas' (Roddam and Waddell, 2003, p.17) and Clement in particular stated:

There is a feeling in comedy that each page must have a laugh on it, so it was nice to get away from it and write something "real". Not that we wanted to be preachy or write a searing indictment of

Thatcher's Britain. But the politics were there and the context was a good one in which to write. (Roddam and Waddell, 2003, p.17)

Many fans of Clement and La Frenais's previous work might well content with the idea that was somehow less than 'real'; their situation comedy output has frequently been praised for its naturalistic representation of characters and scenarios, and the awareness in those representations of the impact of social change in Britain. I would argue that *Auf Wiedersehen, Pet* can be seen as very much a successor to their enduring portrait of the transitions of the early 1970s in *Whatever Happened to the Likely Lads?* (which itself can be viewed as a recreation and darker reflection on their 1960s *Likely Lads*). In short, they are drawn to refresh themes of their existing work in new series, considering as they do how the present day context is now shaping their protagonists. In addition to this, having moved to Los Angeles as a result of their success, the opportunity to write specifically about the north-east again was also an opportunity to demonstrate their continuing connection with their roots in both a regional and a political sense, as they note in their memoir:

The (mostly) Geordie brickies working the German building sites in Thatcher's Britain reminded viewers that we had not disappeared into the Hollywood Hills and were still firmly on the side of the have-nots. (Clement and La Frenais, 2019, p.5)

*Auf Wiedersehen, Pet* therefore demonstrates the writers' personal desire to be, and be seen as, socially engaged with the condition of their homeland. It also indicates the climate of TV production as one which encouraged and valued explorations of the everyday as political. Roddam and Waddell note that one obvious point of comparison with *Auf Wiedersehen, Pet* was Alan Bleasdale's *Boys From The Blackstuff*, originally a one-off play and then screened as a five-part BBC2 drama in 1982, and acknowledge that *Auf Wiedersehen, Pet* was not 'overtly political' or 'angry' in the manner of Bleasdale's work. Dick Clement, while initially discouraging comparisons of the two, then goes on to do just that, stating:

There was room for both [...] Alan's characters were in despair, drowning. Ours had taken action and got out, so they were swimming, albeit with some difficulty. I'm not saying it was better, just different. (Roddam and Waddell, 2003, p.46)

The strong presence of both anger and despair as characterising *Boys From The Blackstuff* is undeniable, and *Auf Wiedersehen, Pet* certainly handled its comparable theme with a lighter touch. I would argue, however, with regard to Clement's view of his own characters as having 'taken action' that their decision to go to Germany is a rare example of them doing so. It is a persistent lack of agency that dominates the lives of the seven protagonists, which itself can be connected to the social climate in which they are rooted and, specifically, the challenges to traditional masculinity which their situation presents. They take opportunities that turn up but do little to actively seek out ways of improving their situation; likewise, they are relatively passive in managing their relationships, often seeming to pay them scant attention until a crisis arises, as with Dennis's and Oz's marriages, and Hazel's second thoughts over marriage to Barry. Nevertheless, Clement's portrayal of his protagonists as 'swimming, albeit with some difficulty' is fitting: they experience difficulties, even crises, but ultimately, stay afloat. This precarious condition, while well aligned with the pressures being exerted at the time on working-class men and traditionally masculine fields of employment, was also a prefiguring of the more developed and recognised 'crisis in masculinity' that would only be fully anatomised later in the 1980s and beyond, of which both *Pet* and *Blackstuff* are fictional examples.

Lez Cooke notes that while *Boys From The Blackstuff* was billed, and indeed received, as 'serious arts television' it nevertheless also had impressive viewing figures for a BBC2 broadcast, with 4 million viewers rising to 8 million for its final episode (Cooke, 2015, p.141). It is important to remember that *Auf Wiedersehen, Pet* was broadcast in a quite different television context, as a mainstream ITV series, in a period when ITV was by some way the most watched of the four terrestrial channels – 70% of viewers in 1979 were estimated to be watching it (Stewart, 2012). As such, it offers a representation of Britain's social and cultural position that is less overly political, but in which, in Clement's words, 'the politics were there' for a popular audience. Philip Schlesinger, writing in the year that *Auf Wiedersehen, Pet* was first screened, assesses the commercial and audience-led context in which it was appearing:

Commercial pressures operate with particular force on the popular series and serials that are central to the rating battle between the two main networks, BBC & ITV. To attract a mass audience they need to work with images and ideological themes which are already accepted by the widest range of potential viewers. (Schlesinger, 1983, p.77)

Schlesinger argues that popular series are often assumed to be uncritically conveying 'official' perspectives, but that they can work with alternative perspectives that the viewing public have accepted, i.e. that Thatcherism can be debated, if not defeated. In this respect, *Auf Wiedersehen, Pet* plays a role that I contend is analogous to that which Ian Green (also writing in 1983) argues is found in the Ealing comedies of the post-war period. Green argues that the Ealing comedies negotiate informal and formal censorship which allows for the conscious criticism of contemporary situations, particularly of institutions: government and the state, by using comedy as a way of raising these issues but then 'drowning' them in laughter and thus dismissing active, overtly political discussion of the concerns (Green, 1983, p.207). *Auf Wiedersehen, Pet* is able in this way to frame the effects of Thatcherism as significant in the lives of its protagonists, and by implication, Britain at large, yet to distance itself from a 'searing indictment' (Clement's words again) of those issues by the deployment of comic moments in the narrative.

An emblematic example of how this operates can be found in one of the most memorable and also political monologues from *Oz*. Over the course of both series one and two, Oz is the character who articulates some of the most stinging anti-Thatcher comments, but his self-centred and prejudiced remarks provide regular comedy and he is very clearly a partisan and unreliable narrator of events. In 'The Return of the Seven: Part One', the opening episode of series two, Oz is seen delivering an angry speech to an initially unseen audience on his return to the UK from the Falklands:

You know the reason I left this country in the first place, divvn't you, eh? I'll tell you. In a word, Margaret bloody Thatcher, that's why. Because I'd had it, I was up to there with what she'd created. Bloody wasteland. Desolate. Nae joy, nae hope, nae nowt. Where kids get to 21 and have never done a day's work in their life. Honest men have to gan oot thieving to feed their families. Young bairns can buy heroin in the bike sheds at school. Oh dear. But I thought, "Nah, nah, nah. It's got to be getting better. It cannae be as bad as what it was, can it?" I was willing to give you lot the benefit of the doubt on this one, you know. But no, no, no. What happens? What happens is I've been back on my native soil for fourteen minutes, and I'm subjected to this act of fascist intimidation! 'Cos that's what it is, you know! That's what it is, and I'll be writing to my MP about this!

As Oz concludes, we see that he is naked and about to be strip-searched by a customs officer. This exemplifies the show's capacity to vocalise genuine dismay and discontent about contemporary

Britain, but then to undercut it by showing that Oz is motivated here by purely individual resentment at being singled out for suspicious treatment. Green's concept of 'drowning in laughter' is enacted here: the scenario is raised as a social concern, but no further consideration of change or resistance is developed because the comedy framing takes effect, revealing Oz's words in the context of the strip-search he is about to undergo. The 'searing indictment' of Thatcher's policies gives way to Oz as comic subject about to find himself in trouble yet again.

This pattern is one repeated across series one and two: criticisms of Thatcherite Britain and wider aspects of the current social order are present but without any sense that a solution to these problems can be found. As with their personal and employment problems, the forces imposing this new way of life on them are simply too powerful: the lads have no answer other than to drift on and wait for developments. However, while they are generally resigned to a lack of agency, along the way, small victories are possible by unified action. Working together offers day-to-day comradeship and support, and also the potential to act together to right a wrong – these are the localised, yet collective, routes to greater life satisfaction that *Auf Wiedersehen, Pet* represents as being within the reach of its protagonists.

The success of *Auf Wiedersehen, Pet* can be seen in both viewing figures and in viewer and reviewer comments on its appeal. It had been scheduled in a Friday evening 9pm slot, something which worried both Jimmy Nail, playing Oz, and the director Roger Bamford, on the basis that 'this is about brickies, about lads, and they all go to the pub on a Friday night' (Roddam and Waddell, 2003, p.48). The Friday night scheduling slot is also aligned with comedy or entertainment programming rather than serious drama. Nevertheless, it was received well by newspaper TV critics, with positive reviews in the *Daily Mirror*, *Sunday People* and the *Guardian*; perhaps predictably, the *Daily Mail's* review criticised its 'coarse language' (Roddam and Waddell, 2003, p.58) but still enjoyed aspects of the show. The first episode attracted 10 million viewers, with this figure dropping in the second week, settling at around 9.5 million in the early weeks but then rising to over 11 million by the second half of its run in January 1984 and achieving 13 million viewers for the series finale (Roddam and Waddell, 2003, pp.59-62). Reviews of the finale were particularly positive: Anthea Hall in the *Sunday Telegraph* referred to 'this exceptional series, in the very best traditions of British comedy' (Roddam and Waddell, 2003, p.62), and, like other TV critics, expressed hopes for a second series. When series two aired in the spring of 1986, it was able to capitalise on this success, with between 13 and 16 million viewers during the run (Roddam and Waddell, 2003, pp. 95-105). Its commercial prospects for renewal would have been extremely good, but for the sudden death of Gary Holton towards the end of filming for series two, which proved devastating in permanently ending the possibility of the seven established protagonists appearing together again. It is indicative of the viewing public's enduring affection for the show and of its capacity for popular success that, over fifteen years later, the BBC picked up the show to develop its second life in the form of series three and four plus Christmas specials. Those series attained success of their own, but are part of a different era, and given the remit of this collection to focus on 1980s television, will not be discussed here.

The original show's appeal is further illuminated through contemporary academic studies of television audiences. David Morley's 1986 book *Family Television: cultural power and domestic leisure* was based on research with families on their viewing habits, conducted in spring 1985, and it is notable that *Auf Wiedersehen, Pet* is mentioned a number of times, with series one having concluded its run a year earlier in 1984. The 18 families interviewed by Morley all came from one area of South London, demonstrating that while the Geordie accents may have given unfamiliar viewers trouble, there was no north-south divide in terms of southern viewers relating to the show, its humour and its characters. They also all owned video recorders, which, coupled with the

significant presence of unemployed men in Morley's research participants as heavy television viewers, indicates that the series may have had a reach greater even than that shown by official viewing figures in being watched as time-shifted viewing by these audiences. One such viewer, an unemployed avid TV viewer and film fan, names *Auf Wiedersehen, Pet* as a favourite series –“That's a terrific programme” (Morley, 1986, p.61) Another man interviewed says of the show, “It was really terrific. After a while the characters were fantastic. That's something that I wouldn't miss.” (Morley, 1986, p.121). A third man expands on this with:

“Auf Wiedersehen Pet—it's fantastic. I work in the building industry and it's typical of what goes on on a building site. I'd really like to see another series. It's a terrific bunch of characters.” (Morley, 1986, p.136)

This interviewee's praise for the show as 'true to life' echoes the feelings other male viewers stated. Even if not matching their personal experience in all ways, they clearly identified with the representations of contemporary masculine experience on offer. Morley himself comments that shows like *Auf Wiedersehen, Pet*, *Boys From The Blackstuff* and other named favourites such as *Hill Street Blues* as 'providing precisely that sense of a connection between personal experience and the broader societal dynamics which construct that experience' (Morley, 1986, p.82). Even given regional differences, the sense of a shared form of experience was clear from these male viewers' responses.

Interestingly, the potential regional divide, and a different view, arises in another Morley interview with one woman discussing her husband's preferences:

He likes to watch Auf Wiedersehen Pet—I fall asleep in that. I can't even understand what they're talking about. I can't understand it. He's laughing and I couldn't honestly tell you about what. I find it such a strain I just fall asleep. They may as well be talking Dutch—because I don't understand it.” (Morley, 1986, pp.86-87)

This seems to be at least in part an issue with understanding accents as well as one of gendered viewing preferences. However, other female interviewees depart from this view, on the grounds of 'masculine' taste and also of age. One Morley interviewee 'has a preference for “realistic” drama of a kind which is displayed by the men in the other families interviewed. I like regional things [...] Auf Wiedersehen Pet, and the Likely Lads, those sort of things...and the Boys from the Blackstuff' (Morley, 1986, p.93). In another empirically-based study, Ann Gray's *Video Replay* which interviewed women viewers (based on a thesis submitted in 1989 so with interviews being conducted in the several years before) notes that Sandra, who at 21 is the youngest woman in the study, says 'I like to watch *Auf Wiedersehen, Pet* and *The Young Ones*. My mum and dad can't stand them, they don't see how it can be funny' (Gray, 1992, p.123). Gray and other feminist television scholars have noted the gendered differences in viewing preferences and also the extent to which, in the 1980s, men still held considerable sway in determining the family's real-time viewing. However, we can see from this that *Auf Wiedersehen, Pet* was able to appeal beyond its assumed core audience of male viewers on the basis of its regional representation, and also to younger viewers on the basis of its comedy status. Consequently, the characteristics that made it less explicitly political than shows like *Boys From The Blackstuff* were also those that allowed to attract a significant, mainstream audience, and in this capacity represent 'the context' of its protagonists' struggles, through a comedy frame to those who may well have never switched on something they saw as 'political'.

### **Men out of place: masculinity in changing times**

The enthusiastic responses of the men interviewed in David Morley's research show that *Auf Wiedersehen, Pet* was felt to excel in representing current masculine experience as well as the challenges of working-class life in 1980s Britain. It is significant that this originates from the 'fish-out-of-water' scenario of having to leave their home country and become Brits abroad, examining and comparing their own country, its industry and the resulting sets of values held with those they encounter in Germany. However, across series one and two, the protagonists continue to experience the feeling of being not at home, either abroad or even, later, in their own country. This is represented as a common, unifying masculine experience, which crosses regional divides, rivalries and other differences, but which reinforces the underlying class identity they share. Being away from home prompts this awareness of themselves as 'strangers in a strange land', and the inherent nostalgia and sense of dislocation that persists in Germany and after their return. This happens in spite of the protagonists being more widely travelled than ever given their class position; despite them roaming the globe in search of work (and play) they remain essentially provincial in outlook. Consequently they aim to recreate this sense of their own locality, often in the form of a comfortable drinking location, their literal 'local' – and lost sense of Britishness wherever they go. This engenders, for instance, Oz's hopes for and then disillusionment with the Falkland Islands as a defiantly British territory and scene of military victory, but still lacking in the social amenities he craves after a day of manual labour, prompting his return to the mode of continual complaining about all things German he deployed in Dusseldorf.

The seven protagonists are not outliers in deciding to join the black economy in Europe in response to a lack of work locally. In 'Who Won The War Anyway' Dennis says 'there's 30,000 of us over here'. Moreover, it is not just British workers who are seeking a better situation. When items start going missing in the hut, and the seven look for the culprit, Oz's suspicions fall on 'the Abduls', as he refers to the Turkish workers on site who live in separate huts. On voicing his, Neville asks 'What's wrong with the Abduls?' (it is notable that the derogatory terms used by Oz are also used by more wholesome members of the group). Oz isn't short of a reply:

'They account for half the crime in German cities. The dirty parts are where they live.'

Dennis, however, is able to contextualise these points, responding with:

'They're over here as sweated labour. They get the worst housing and the lowest wages'.

This seems to be tacitly accepted by the others, who are far less hostile to other nationalities than Oz, though they – even Neville – still seem to regard them as an alien group, one they are somehow different from as Englishmen, although they would prefer to live peaceably but at a slight distance from them. The view seems to be that the Turks do indeed suffer from racism, but that there is nothing the English workers can, or should, do about that. The resigned acceptance of inequality can be traced back to the disadvantages they themselves have experienced; life is simply not fair to the ordinary working man, who may rail against this – as Oz certainly does – but is powerless to change it.

Any attempts to challenge workplace unfairness in the first series of *Auf Wiedersehen, Pet* are made on an individual, case by case basis. Dennis thus tries his best to get Neville, as a young and naïve man, restored to his job after the deception where they initially pretend that he is a carpenter, to get him the only other available vacancy on the Dusseldorf site. When Oz is sacked for causing trouble, though, Dennis declines to get involved, and the general feeling in the hut is that Oz deserves it for his constant boundary-pushing with their German bosses. This can all be viewed in opposition to one of Thatcher's most infamous assertions, that there is 'no such thing as society'. In

contrast, in series two, the seven are seen, during a period when trade unions were under specific attack from the government, to take collective action and to succeed in doing so. They act in unity to help Barry renovate his house to make it a marital home; to take revenge on Wayne's behalf for their treatment at the hands of the local landlord, the snobbish Arthur Pringle, while working on the nearby Thornley Manor; and, most significantly, refuse to work until Ally Fraser, the underworld Newcastle businessman to whom Dennis is in debt, agrees to cancel the punitive level of Dennis's debt from then on. The informal nature of this arrangement – agreed on out of personal loyalty to Dennis – does not undermine the fact that when working men assume a united front, they prevail against the rich businessman, managerial classes and bitter pub landlords that aim to exploit them.

Series 2 was broadcast during 1986, with the ignominious end to the miners' strike in March 1985 still very much a fresh memory. This may well have seemed like unrealistic nostalgia for a time when such collective action had a far greater chance of success. However, *Auf Wiedersehen, Pet* had been from the start a series which foregrounded the plight of working-class men like the protagonists, in a society which seemed intent on modernising in a way which displaced and devalued them. Having already lost so much, it is perhaps not surprising that the protagonists are allowed their own small victory. As seen on many other occasions in the series, the struggles of working-class men can be ameliorated by the friendship and support they can provide for each other, from a perspective of knowing and understanding the struggles faced by other members of the group. While *Pet* frequently draws on the noted reluctance of men like this to open up and disclose their feelings, using this for comic purposes, it also includes a number of scenes where they divulge their fears, hurt and insecurity.

The seven's work skills are, above all, portable. That is what enables them to work informally in Germany in the first place, what allows them to move freely through the UK and Europe when work is available, and ultimately what they see as their recourse in the final episode of the second series, where they seem to be headed for Morocco on Ally Fraser's boat as it flees the pursuing Spanish authorities. Powerless to influence their course of travel, they continue to drink, and Bomber says, 'Well, there must be some work in North Africa', to which Moxey replies 'There's bound to be. I mean, they built the pyramids, didn't they?' The series ends on a note that affirms the paradoxical constants in the Seven's lives: they are on the move again, to a destination dictated by someone else, again, but with the expectation that they will pick up their trowels and get working on arrival, as what else is there to do?

### **Gender and social change**

Left behind by the social changes affecting traditional masculine roles, the *Auf Wiedersehen, Pet* protagonists find that working unofficially in Germany is their only option because there is 'nae graft up our way' as Oz puts it. As this shows, in one sense Thatcher's impact was felt and resisted on a regional and class-driven basis, particularly so in the north and midlands where the decline of traditional heavy industry and high unemployment, particularly for manual workers, were creating a significant economic downturn with a major effect on local communities. Jackson and Saunders note that this was treated as a necessary by-product of Thatcher's vision for the UK:

[Thatcher] was adamant that there was no alternative to the pain of economic restructuring, despite the social pain it caused [...] the collapse of the old industries was inevitable, heralding a new prosperous beginning. (Jackson and Saunders, 2012, p.172)

The bitterness felt by unemployed north-east brickies like Dennis, Oz and Neville was familiar then to many other working-class men from a similar regional background, where a dislike of the Thatcher

government deepened and for many has endured to the present day. Again, Jackson and Saunders indicate that this exacerbated an existing sense of north-south and other regional divisions between parts of the UK, fuelling in turn 'the growing perception of a distinctive 'territorial' dimension in British politics. The 'national' dimension was part of the mix of British regional anti-Conservatism, but the prime driver was socio-economic' (Jackson and Saunders, 2012, p.174) As such, *Auf Wiedersehen, Pet*'s cast of protagonists from across England demonstrated the dire straits in which many working-class men found themselves – even Wayne, the Londoner, has had to go to Dusseldorf to find work as a carpenter. Early worries about the show being 'too' regional faded with its ratings success, but arguably at least part of the affection felt by viewers was tied to its representation of different regional identities (English ones, at least) something those regional audiences could all appreciate.

While in series one more attention is paid to German-British differences, the English-set episodes of series two feature more references to the class divisions within British society itself, in a way which dovetails with regional divisions when the protagonists are based in a rural Derbyshire village to work on the conversion of Thornley Manor for Dennis's criminal boss, Ally Fraser. As they arrive at the manor, Moxey states, 'I lived in a place like this once... a borstal near Prestatyn'. Oz is, unsurprisingly, the character who voices the most pointed comments, as when he adopts a faux-upper-class voice to appear at the door of the manor and say, 'There's a notice there what clearly states that members of the working class will be exterminated', or when he remarks when an Alsatian barks at them on their walk through the village: 'That's an attack dog, that is, it's trained to go for the working class'. Even Neville becomes uncharacteristically sharp when responding to the well-spoken local campaigner who urges him to keep 'the glorious heritage of England intact with:

I was brought up on a council estate in the north east of England, pet, I mean Mrs Bellamy. I've seen precious little of the glorious heritage of England.

On returning from that conversation, Neville adds that he feels 'more a foreigner here than I did in Germany'. This stark difference between regions of England is underlined by the exchange between the two police officers pursuing Ally Fraser travel to Newcastle, with one asking the other if he considers himself working class, and on being told that he does 'Wait till you spend the night in Newcastle. You'll realise you're middle class.' Phil Wickham notes in his book on *The Likely Lads* that in spite of its characters' universalism for many, the north east was seen as 'different' (Wickham, 2008, p.23) and this returns as a distinct presence in both series one and two of *Auf Wiedersehen, Pet*, where the Newcastle location of Dennis, Oz and Neville becomes dominant in establishing the detail of 'left behind' communities under Thatcherism, while remaining relatable as one location in a web of many similarly affected others.

Barry is the keenest member of the seven to be seen as socially aspirant. Early in series two he outlines his progress:

I'm a very different person from the one you knew in Dusseldorf. Saved me money, bought this place, started me own business, learnt elementary Spanish and joined the SDP. And I've travelled, and I don't just mean the Falklands. Last year Hazel and I took a villa in Gozo.

Moxey obliging notes 'You're obviously very upwardly mobile these days, Barry' in response, but this list brings together Barry's intellectual aspirations, which were evident in series one, with markers of not only personal success such as buying property and owning a business – key aspects of aspiration which the Thatcher government strongly encouraged - but also mid-1980s modernity and progressive thinking, such as Barry's membership of the SDP. While Thatcherism and its cultural



framework had permeated day-to-day life, this co-existed with at best a deep ambivalence and at worst a passionate hatred of its ideology from many ordinary people. Barry may be the protagonist of whose achievements Thatcher would be most proud, but he made his position clear in series one in his comment lack of work available in the north-east, saying 'I blame Thatcherism. It's a misguided policy, misguided and misconstrued'. Aspiration may be desirable but the policy context that has made it so central is still a troubled subject.

Nevertheless, Barry is the most forward-looking of the group and the one most keen to speak the language of the future, though this, like Oz's regressive comments, is mocked (more gently) by the others. When he says, 'I'll give my business a couple of months, and if it still don't take off, I'll try one of those sunrise industries', Bomber replies 'Can't see you as a milkman, Barry'. It is no surprise that Barry is able to say to the young women he and Wayne are attempting to charm at the start of series two, 'I should think Prince is more your mark, eh?' whereas Oz resolutely sticks to his more traditional preference for country music, and indeed its more old-school masculinity. Oz is predictably dismayed when he discovers his son Rod's preference for American football, which Channel 4 had started showing soon after their launch in 1982, over Newcastle United, as another marker of cultural change which is leaving him behind. However, neither Oz nor Barry is represented as being suited to the combination of ruthless self-centredness and ambitious self-starter energy that truly Thatcherite success required. The protagonists are able to adjust, with some reluctance, to cultural change but are trailing forlornly in its wake, weighted down by their regional and class-based roots.

Most importantly, the new insecurity of previously secure jobs in traditional industries was above all a problem for men. This was the central aspect of the 'crisis in masculinity' being experienced by men in the early 1980s, as was already being documented by Ian Miles in 1989:

Fewer jobs involve heavy manual labour, more jobs involve working with keyboards and dealing with other people, for example. The everyday equation between types of work and gender, then, is harder to sustain than heretofore [...]. Mass unemployment has also weakened the correlation between masculinity-femininity and breadwinner-dependent, even if this ideology still maintains considerable force (and is able to inflict untold psychological stress on unemployed men and their families). (Miles, 1989, p.51)

Series one shows this primarily from the men's perspective, as their undocumented work in Germany allows them to regain their breadwinner roles in their families by sending money home (though not in Oz's case) or to accumulate money that will give them access either to their own family life, as with Barry's saving for a mortgage and wedding to Hazel. There are also occasional moments where we see the protagonists as able to adapt their skills to circumstances: where Bomber is sewing Wayne's jacket to repair it, and when asked by Wayne where he learned this replies that he has picked up all sorts of things in his time. However, for the most part they live resolutely undomestic lives in Dusseldorf, and even with the exception of Barry's plan to paint the hut to brighten it up, Bomber undermines his egalitarian demonstration of domestic skills by objecting to first pink, then yellow, as 'not a man's colour'. The protagonists' lives are stripped down to working and socialising, which means the family lives they have left behind are glimpsed rarely from occasional scenes back home and Neville's phone calls to Brenda: even this, though, conveys clearly the 'psychological stress on unemployed men and their families' that Miles refers to.

Series two, partly set back in England, gives a fuller view of how marital and gender roles are shifting, with Brenda the breadwinner in her job as a nurse, and Neville, unemployed once more, grappling with housework, childcare and cooking. Brenda, shown as clingy and dependent in series one, is now taking this in her stride, saying 'Things are changing for women, you know, Neville. Even on Tyneside', whereas Neville is adjusting to his wife's earning status more easily than to her socialising with her male doctor colleagues at suspiciously upwardly mobile activities like badminton club. Series two also represents a broader shift of the gender dynamics for the protagonists and their relationships, in that rather than being in the background, back at home while the lads in Germany are able to seek out other female company if they wish, now the women are in the position of picking and choosing. Having been able to choose between his new relationship with Dagmar or returning to his wife Vera at the end of series one, in series two Dennis's marriage has again collapsed and he is the rejected party, living with his sister. Marjorie finally breaks ties with Oz and is planning to move to Italy with her new partner, creating a storyline where Oz moves from being an absent and neglectful father to his son, Rod (whose age he can't remember in series one and is castigated by the others as a result), to one who experiences belated remorse and realisation that his son is effectively lost to him, largely through his own actions. Wayne's marriage to Christa, the German girl he has successfully wooed at the end of series one, has also broken down; Hazel, Barry's fiancée, is shown early in series two having cold feet about marriage while Barry ploughs on, unaware, with renovating their future marital home. The overall picture shows considerable ambivalence on the wives' part about whether marriage and the traditional nuclear family set up continues to offer them much, and either withdrawing from it altogether or remaking their role in it as Brenda has done. Even when Barry and Hazel eventually marry in the final episode of series two, this happens because Barry is finally able to offer the socially ambitious Hazel a wedding she deems more glamorous and enviable, on the exiled criminal Kenny Ames's ill-gotten yacht. The dynamics now show the lads at a relative disadvantage in their relationships.

Alongside this runs the storyline of Vicki, the gangster Ally Fraser's girlfriend, who at the start of series two is introduced as a stereotypical airheaded trophy partner whose role is to look decorative and go shopping. As the series progresses, though, even Vicki becomes dissatisfied with her lot, complaining that there is nothing for her to do in the Spanish villa and worrying about Ally's long-term plan to stay in Spain: 'I'd die if I thought I was never going to see Newcastle again'. Ally is also portrayed as an increasingly dark character as the series progresses, culminating in his violence against Vicki when she dares to challenge him: this proves to be the seal on his progression from local hard man made good to out and out villain. In comparison, the brief concern for the Turkish brothel owner's partner as a victim of male violence in series one fades away as seemingly something that is out of the lads' ability to influence, long term. Vicki's position is seen as more akin to Dennis's indebtedness to Ally: in both situations, the lads feel the need to step in and make a moral and practical stand in their respective defences. While Dennis's role as the 'gaffer' has consistently earned the lads' loyalty, their support for Vicki – led by Oz, who is written towards the end of the series as a more suitable partner for her – shows that even the lads are now acknowledging in a broader sense that 'things are changing for women...even on Tyneside' and regarding them as people with real aspirations, needs and desires of their own.

Though this 'provider and family man' role is the norm, it is not homogenous. Wayne is earning money for a single man's life of socialising and enjoyment, saying in series two: 'Give me any income you like and I'll live beyond it', though admitting that his constant pursuit of women and accessories like his sports car do not help. Working away from home does not particularly hamper this lifestyle, only the imposition of having to share a hut, and then his uncharacteristic feelings for Christa, interrupt it, but Wayne then continues through series two as an unreformed rake who thus escapes

the patriarchal responsibilities of family life. The popular theme song for the show, 'That's Livin' Alright' sums up Wayne's experiences most closely, even though he is something of an outlier.

In contrast, Moxey seems to be there because he is bereft not only of employment opportunities, but also of any relationships where he has to care for anyone else, or to be cared for himself. While Moxey is a marginal figure in the group – in ways that contrast with Wayne's more hedonistic outlier status - his criminal past is the basis for exploring the consequences of the rootless man's life at different points in the show. In series one, he comes under suspicion as a known criminal when money and valuables go missing in the hut; in series two, he is forced to seek out and live under a new identity, having absconded from his open prison, and eventually ends up travelling to Spain on his new false passport. Noticeably, Moxey does not share the wistfulness of Neville for his home country, having no-one and nothing to return to: he announces, as part of a discussion of future plans: 'England's finished. Someone should stick a bloody great notice on it - 'out of order'. I've got no desire to go back and watch it going through its death throes'.

While Bomber observes that this seems connected to the fact that 'if you go back, they'll stick you in clink', there is an undeniable aspect of truth to Moxey's statement, which connects with Dennis retort to Oz in series one that blokes like him spend a week away from the UK and 'become ridiculously nationalistic for the country that can't even bloody employ them in the first place!' It is Moxey who points out the illogicality of Neville's wish to be in 'some manky pub in Gateshead' instead of the sunny coast of Spain, and notes that 'wherever you are, you've always wanted to be somewhere else... if he [Neville] was there, he'd wish he was here'. Moxey exemplifies the extreme version of masculine rootlessness as represented in the show, but as such is also able to comment on the irony of other protagonists' attachment to a country that has arguably given them little to be attached to. Neville is the character who voices fully the nostalgia that permeates the show, and its dual meanings. Nostalgia was originally coined as a term denoting homesickness, but has mutated into indicating a longing for another *time* instead of, or as well as, another *place* (Stern, 1992; Tolley, 2020). Both apply to the nostalgia experienced by Neville and others, which they experience as a longing for both a time when their expected social roles were more readily achievable, and for a place that felt familiar, secure and like home.

However, one different sense in which the lads are 'out of place' is one in which there is also some small gain for them, alongside the alienation felt by being away from their homes and home country. Bomber, another of the 'family men' among the group, gives voice to a different form of disquiet about what they have missed out on in the expected process of settling down to family life:

I don't know, you goes to work every week, hands it over to the wife, pays for the house, new clothes for the kids. It don't leave much for yourself, like.

None of the group are newlyweds: even Neville as the youngest and most uxorious has been married for some years before they depart for Dusseldorf. All the others have been seen in previous episodes to be at least tempted to be unfaithful, usually having gone out drinking, seeming at times less than fully committed to their families back home. Bomber's wistful speech here is a reminder that these men married young and have been husbands, fathers and providers since then, but without having first had the space to act out, sow wild oats and indulge themselves in self-centred pursuits. Their time working away, while in many respects a hardship to be endured, also offers them a kind of delayed adolescence where day to day, they are responsible only for themselves, and once money has been sent home, family obligations have been met, leaving them free to drink, relax and socialise as they please. The series' creator, Franc Roddam, recounts this:

For those not inclined to be homesick, the life was a good one; sitting around drinking beer with your mates, watching the girls go by. Many of the men had married painfully young, often to the first girl they slept with. Suddenly, barely in their twenties, they had wives and kids and adult responsibilities. Then these same men found themselves in Germany ten years later with a wage packet and few responsibilities other than sending a few quid home. Having fun became an integral part of the experience; it was a chance to act like single men with no ties. (Roddam and Waddell, 2003, p.13)

The various dislocations the protagonists endure foster a kind of restrained hedonism, or perhaps a passively acquired version of the time-limited relief often found in comedy narratives where characters let go and break out of the expected social order, as theorised by Bakhtin in his work on carnival (1941). Nancy Glazener says of Bakhtin's conception of carnival laughter: 'It is ambivalent in that it affirms and denies at once, diminishing the individual but ennobling him or her through the medium of the collectivity' (Glazener, 1989, p.113). I noted earlier that the protagonists' victories come from uniting in collective action as a group; they also find more low-level, day-to-day satisfaction in uniting to enjoy their leisure time as men who have done their required work and are off the clock until the next day. Having been squeezed by social and political circumstances into a position where they are displaced from their expected roles and responsibilities, and resigned themselves to a lack of meaningful control in the long term, short-term moderately carnivalesque enjoyment is what's left to embrace, given that, as the lyrics of 'That's Livin' Alright' say 'Tomorrow you'll be back on the site'.

The popular success of *Auf Wiedersehen, Pet*'s blend of comedy and drama elements can be seen as marking the advent of various developments in television. One was the introduction of overtly 'hybrid' genres and labels like comedy-drama or dramedy, both of which gained in currency in the later 1980s'. Another was increasing recognition of the ability of regional identities to be present on TV in roles that extended beyond the confines of stereotypes, comic relief or sentimental tales of unalleviated class-based suffering. Finally, something which struck a chord with many viewers was the show's highly relatable depiction of working-class men struggling to deal with changes in their domestic and working lives. It continues to be the object of enduring fandom forty years on from its first broadcast, with active fan forums still discussing the show, and a sell-out 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary live event in Newcastle featuring members of the original cast. Baker and Hoey argue that *Minder*, another ITV comedy drama of the period that offers a London-based epitome of Thatcher-era contradictions, does not endorse British pretensions to greatness, but instead, 'its depiction of likeable low-life characters, trapped in an ossified class structure safeguarded for the ossification of the self-regarding rich, is more an indictment of the seemingly perpetual hankering after past glories that continues to skew public and political life in the UK' (Baker and Hoey, 2018, p.529). Much of this is present in *Auf Wiedersehen, Pet*, yet it offers different satisfactions comprised of a nostalgic yearning for a more secure past version of masculinity, alongside the temporary but finally available pleasures of collective social action and leisure. Importantly, it uses its comedy framing to set up what we can see as a condition-of-England comedy, enabling the examination of contemporary social life and politics but also fulfilling the requirements of a mainstream show and entertaining large and varied audiences.

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