



Article

# Privilege, place, and patronage: 'Giving something back' to Wales

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## Abstract

This article explores the complex relationship between civil society, social inequality, and nationhood through examining the motivations of elite members of Welsh civil society as they volunteer to serve on the boards of a wide range of Welsh charities. We interviewed nearly 60 trustees and patrons, all of whom enjoyed successful and influential careers in business, politics, or public service. Their narratives reveal diverse vocabularies of motive, but prominent within these is the desire to 'give something back', and not just to society in general but to Wales in particular. While their desire to 'give back' reflects an awareness of their own privileged position, their commitment to Wales can be seen as a response to the country's historic and current dominance by England, as well as a legacy of non-conformism and community. The article concludes by discussing the implications of these narratives for understanding the specificities of 'geographies of responsibility', civil society, and nationhood.

## Keywords

Civil society, geographies of responsibility, patronage, patrons, privilege, trustees, UK, Wales

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## Introduction

There is little doubt that social inequalities have increased in many societies in recent decades (e.g. Piketty, 2014; Stiglitz, 2015). This resurgence in inequalities has been particularly pronounced in the United Kingdom, which now has among the highest levels of income inequality in the European Union (Francis-Devine and Orme, 2023), levels that are not too far behind those of the United States. And while sociologists have traditionally focused their attention on the disadvantaged sections of society, the widening gulf between the ‘haves’ and the ‘have nots’ has led to increasing interest in the ‘advantaged’, in their allegiances and orientations. As Bottero (2020 [2019]) points out, ‘at a time of stark inequality, it is important to understand what shapes everyday “views” or framings of inequalities in terms of the practical and strategic significance’ (p. 1). Given the disproportionate influence on the lives of others exerted by members of elites, it is particularly important to look ‘upstream’ and explore how they understand their privileged status, and the implications of this for any sense of civic duty or national allegiance.

Various studies have pointed to the rise in recent decades of a transnational elite (e.g. Brown et al., 2011; Brown and Hesketh, 2004; Doyle and Nathan, 2001; Favell, 2008; Sassen, 2001). Of particular concern has been the extent to which their transnational orientations and allegiances have implications for civil society. Falk (1993), for instance, has argued that, unlike previous generations, there is ‘a denationalized global elite that is virtually without any sense of global civic responsibility’ (p. 44). Similarly, Robert Reich (1992) fears that the new elites ‘may never develop the habits and attitudes of social responsibility. They will be world citizens, but without accepting or even acknowledging any of the obligations that citizenship in a polity normally implies’ (p. 302). Freeland (2011) claims that the elite ‘are becoming a transglobal community of peers who have more in common with one another than with their countrymen back home’ (p. 2).

However, these rather sweeping claims are not underpinned by substantial empirical support. As Sassen (2005) argues, the ‘global’ may be embedded into nation-states in different ways, so it is important to look at the specificities of changing forms of citizenship. She contends that we need to trace ‘micro-transformations in the institution of citizenship on the inside of the national state (rather than the outside, as in post-national conceptions)’ (Sassen, 2005: 246). Comparative research has shown, for example, that emergent French elites have a very different sense of civic obligation to their nation than their British (generally English) counterparts (Power et al., 2013, 2016).

Moreover, as Wilkinson and Pickett (2009, 2018) have sought to demonstrate, there is evidence to suggest that high levels of social inequality are damaging not only for the ‘have nots’ but for the ‘haves’. Growing inequalities may heighten status anxieties and ‘fear of falling’ for those with much to lose (e.g. Paskov et al., 2013; Salverda and Grassiani, 2014). It may be, therefore, that increasing wealth disparities *strengthen* rather than weaken feelings of civic obligation within the elite. In Rachel Sherman’s (2019 [2017]) *Uneasy Street*, the ‘anxieties of affluence’ experienced by New York’s wealthiest appear to lead to a significant amount of philanthropy and volunteering, which suggests that ‘giving back’ might be seen as a means of dispelling unease over their own privileged position.

The nature and extent of this ‘giving back’ will be spatially framed as social elites forge affective relations with networks at local, national and transnational levels. These ‘place-frames’ (Guma et al., 2019) reflect what Massey (2004) refers to as ‘geographies of responsibility’. As Massey (2004) argues ‘issues of space, place and politics run deep’ (p. 1). She invites us to consider how our commitments are framed materially and discursively by our sense of place, and how these are (and should be) connected with the question of political responsibility. While Massey’s exposition of the importance of geographies of responsibility is based on the example of London and its claims to be a global city, the same principles apply to other places. As Massey argues, the local identities created through globalisation will vary substantially, and how places are made discursively and given coherence enable them to become a locus for civic action (Guma et al., 2019: 97).

In exploring how elite members of Welsh society seek to ‘give something back’ to Wales, we are drawing on, and hope to contribute to, a number of current theoretical debates. These include discussions about the enduring significance of nationhood in a global context, as well as conceptualisations of the nature and composition of contemporary elites. The issue of patronage, especially in the context of increasing social inequalities, raises questions about how we should interpret the vocabularies of motive surrounding elite philanthropy. We explore how Massey’s theorisation of ‘geographies of responsibility’ connects these different theoretical debates through providing a framework to understand how social obligations are constructed through spatial relations and social hierarchies.

## **Research methods**

The qualitative data presented in this article derive from interviews with 31 men and 27 women who serve in patronage roles, including trustees, ambassadors, and presidents, from a diverse cross-section of 15 Welsh civil society organisations. Some of these organisations can be characterised as educational charities (e.g. The Learned Society for Wales, National Library of Wales). Others focus on the arts (e.g. Welsh National Opera) and sport (e.g. Cricket Wales). Some of the charities are concerned to address particular social inequalities (e.g. Race Council Cymru, Women Empowerment Network) or social issues (e.g. Llamau, the Welsh homelessness charity). Others focus on the environment (e.g. Wildlife Trust of South and West Wales, Keep Wales Tidy) and rural interests (Royal Welsh Agricultural Society). In addition, there are umbrella organisations whose role is to support other civil society organisations (e.g. Wales Council for Voluntary Associations, Community Foundation Wales).

Although we began by sampling through the civil society organisations, it soon became clear that our respondents’ charitable engagements spread much wider than the 15 charities identified, as the overwhelming majority were involved with other charities. Between them, our interviewees held trustee roles for nearly 100 civil society organisations and can be said to constitute a ‘civil society elite’.

As Johansson and Uhlin (2020) point out, the phenomenon of civil society elites has been largely neglected in sociological research. In addition to there being very little research, the concept of ‘elite’ is itself contested and lacks any clear definition (Daloz,

2010). While some conceptualisations are very broad and can include any individual who is seen to hold status within a field, such as sports, music, or even crime (e.g. Schijf, 2003), we are following Scott's (2008) somewhat narrower definition, which proposes that elites are more usefully seen as those who hold or exercise power – those who have the authority to exert influence over others. While elite studies usually focus on those in powerful positions in finance and politics, those in powerful positions in civil society are also capable of exerting influence. As Johansson and Uhlin (2020) point out, those in key roles in civil society organisations 'hold status positions that allow them to control valuable resources, such as money, information, expertise and knowledge or ability to mobilise extensive numbers of people to push for policy change' (p. 82).

The extent to which civil society elites connect with other elites – or even a single 'power elite' (Mills, 1956) – is an empirical question which we cannot address in this article. There is virtually no research on elites in Wales, but our sense is that there is considerable overlap and relatively little fragmentation. It is difficult to identify, for example, a distinctive financial elite in Wales because there is relatively little concentration of financial wealth in the country – and certainly not to the extent that there is in Scotland, which is a similarly small country but where there is an identifiable financial elite (McCrone, 1992). Wales does have a strong cultural sector, but as Clayton's (2013) analysis of Wales' cultural elite shows, there are many interorganisational linkages and overlap between different sectors. She argues that 'having contacts and connections in different spheres facilitates movement between them, and actually serves to tighten the network further' (Clayton, 2013: 264). Morris (2000) claims that Wales is governed by a 'Taffia'<sup>1</sup> – 'the allegedly self-perpetuating oligarchy of South Wales, industrialists, officials, financials, broadcasters and academics'. The overwhelming majority of our respondents has held, or currently hold, prominent positions in industry (especially business and farming), academia, politics, and the public sector. Almost two-thirds were born in Wales. Half of these had left Wales to study elsewhere, and sometimes stayed on for work, before returning to Wales to take up key roles in employment and civil society. In short, our trustees comprise some of the key 'movers and shakers' not only in Welsh civil society but in Welsh society more generally.

Interviews with the trustees and other patrons were undertaken in the medium of English. While the respondents are located across Wales, the interviews were largely conducted online because of restrictions arising from the Covid-19 pandemic. The questions focused on the trustees' duties, motivations, and personal backgrounds, inclusive of family ties, education, and career trajectories. In analysing their narratives, which were transcribed and coded to identify dominant themes, we have tried to treat our trustees' expressed motivations as having validity rather than dismissing them as 'mere' justifications of their privilege. As Mills (1940: 909) argues, it is pointless to try to distinguish 'real motives' from 'mere rationalisation' or even 'unconscious motivation' as this implies there is some deeper reality *within* the person. However, it is also the case, as Mills (1940) reminds us that 'the differing reasons men give for their actions are not themselves without reason' (p. 904). These reasons are situated in time and place. We consider their vocabularies of motives to be reflective of their social standing (privileged) and spatial location (Wales) during a time of increasing inequality.

In presenting the data, we have been intentionally vague in our descriptions of their trusteeship and have only provided an indication of the nature of the association. Although we are able to identify the civil society organisations they represent, we do not wish to provide details which may lead individuals to be identifiable – a particular risk in a small country such as Wales. We have, though, labelled extracts with numbers to distinguish interviewees and provided data on gender.

The analysis begins by considering how patronage and trusteeship is seen as a means of discharging the ‘debt’ of privilege – and the extent to which vocabularies of motive revolve around the importance of ‘giving something back’. We then go on to examine the extent to which this ‘giving back’ is imbued with a sense of commitment to nationhood – and of giving back to Wales specifically. We explore how our trustees and other patrons express their allegiance to Wales on the grounds of its historic subjugation to England, its distinctive culture and the legacy of rural community and chapel. The article concludes by revisiting some of the theoretical issues identified earlier by discussing the implications of the strong national allegiance for our understanding of how geographies of responsibility (Massey, 2004) are framed by place and nationhood.

### Discharging the ‘debt’ of privilege through trusteeship

Sociologists have generally tended to stress the ‘self-interested nature’ of voluntary work, especially when undertaken by the privileged. For example, Warde and Bennett (2008), commenting on the extensive engagement of the UK managerial elite as trustees in a range of charitable organisations, especially cultural institutions, argue that ‘their behaviour would be hard to understand if they did not believe that there is some gain’ (p. 254) and point to the benefits of social connections and cultural capital. Other research has revealed the importance of these roles as a means of developing elite networks (e.g. Harvey and Maclean, 2008).

It is the case that many of the trustees and other patrons we spoke to acknowledge personal benefits they had gained from their trusteeship. Those who were still working (just under half of our interviewees) spoke of the usefulness of the new connections and skills that had been acquired through their voluntary work. However, their vocabularies of motive more commonly emphasised social responsibility.

Sherman (2019 [2017]) argues that expressions of social responsibility among her wealthy elite are exercises of self-justification used to legitimise privilege. Maybe because our interviewees’ elite status was more likely to be based on political and social grounds rather than wealth alone, they often attributed their privilege to luck, inheritance, and the support of others, rather than personal merit; for example,

It’s a bit of giving back . . . when you’ve had your entire career taking advantage of those people who given a good service. It comes a time when you think “Yeah, it’s my turn now”. [#24, male, education charity]

. . . because we are so lucky, and opportunities have come our way which we have taken advantage of. But there are others for whom opportunities may not be readily available. And it’s something that inspires me . . . to do for others, to give to others, a little bit of what you have been given. [#60, male, equalities charity]

We are not suggesting that the obligations that arise from their awareness of their privileges will entail any radical reworking of the social order. References to ‘good luck’ and ‘opportunity’ also serve to legitimate inequalities and downplay structural forces (Ye and Nylander, 2021). Nevertheless, our respondents’ avowal of social obligation does suggest a more complex motivation than the kind of rampant self-interest proposed by Warde and Bennett (2008). As Bottero (2020 [2019]) has argued, people are more aware of, and importantly, more concerned about, inequalities than is often assumed. Understanding our trustees’ voluntary work in transactional terms underplays the extent to which, as Sayer (2011) puts it, ‘people’s relation to the world is one of concern’ (p. 1).

Whatever the underlying ‘springs of action’, the expressed desire to ‘give something back’ runs through almost every trustee’s account. The following extracts are just a sample of many that we might have included:

I’ve had some challenges in my life, but I have had privileges as well. So I think for me, it’s an opportunity *to give back* to other people. [#70, female trustee, equalities charity]

I think because we’ve enjoyed those privileges, my brother and I have felt we wanted *to give something back*. [#39, male trustee, environmental charity]

I’m not a multimillionaire, but I’m, I’m, I’m more privileged than lots of people are. And so you know, it’s important *to give something back* isn’t it? [#57, male trustee, rural support charity]

... it was a way of making a difference, and contributing and *giving back* in the sense. [#21, female, education charity]

I think it’s important *to give back* to the community. [#22, female, education charity]

You know, it just felt right that I continue *to give back*. [#63, female, umbrella organisation]

Like Sherman’s (2019 [2017]: 123) wealthy New Yorkers, it would appear that ‘giving back’ is seen as an essential component of ‘worthy personhood’. However, unlike her New Yorkers, our trustees’ narratives are underpinned by a strong sense of national rather than just social obligation – a desire to ‘give something back’ to Wales. It is this which we explore next.

## Giving something back to Wales

Place attachment is very evident in our trustees’ vocabularies of motive. Places often form the focus of civic action, but more usually at local levels (e.g. Guma et al., 2019). Lewicka’s (2011: 212) review of the field finds that most research on what she calls ‘people-place’ bonds focuses on attachments to neighbourhood, followed by home, city, and less often, countries. For our respondents, the place attachment is very clear to the country.

Many respondents emphasised the importance of ‘giving back’ to Wales. Again, a selection of extracts indicates a strong sense of national commitment and obligation; for example,

So it’s a kind of combined sense that we’re all committed to Wales in some way or another. Yeah, we’re committed to the country. We’re committed to its development, to its future. And that gives a strong sense of community, identity and fellowship. [#23, *education charity*]

It’s where you’ve come from. It’s where you’ve hatched out from as well. So that is it. You like to give something back. [#35, *rural support charity*]

For many, giving back to Wales was closely associated with coming back to Wales. Almost two thirds of our respondents were born in Wales, but a significant proportion had left Wales either for study or work. Half of our Welsh-born graduates had studied outside Wales – in almost all cases at English universities, and many had stayed on working in England before returning to Wales, often on retirement:

I came back having worked away all my life, really all my working life . . . going over the bridge,<sup>2</sup> only strengthens it really . . . all that does is strengthen your identity and your desire to come to do something. So, I was always determined to come back, not to retire, but to come back to be able to make a contribution. [#05, *male, umbrella organisation*]

We’ve always been passionately Welsh as a family. I think it was because we were away from Wales. . . . there is a great passion for the place . . . it’s nice to be able to think that you’ve put something back in. [#13, *male, community charity*]

These sentiments of ‘return’ reflect what Piwoni (2019) refers to as a form of ‘rooted’ elite cosmopolitanism where the exile seeks to come back and make their country a better place. The exile’s allegiance to their home country is evident in the following extract:

I suppose I was involved in some sort of philanthropy or boards before that – as I just jocularly say to some of my English friends – on missionary duty in England for 25 years. [#35, *male, rural support charity*]

However, the commitment to Wales is evident not only in ‘returners’ but also ‘incomers’:

I do see myself as Welsh even though I’m not born Welsh or sound Welsh. Wales has stuck with me . . . my life is here. So I do feel a stronger affinity to Wales than I do to England, even though that’s my birth country. [#08, *male, umbrella organisation*]

The following trustee explained her place attachment to Wales in terms of her Cornish heritage, evoking some form of shared Celtic belonging:

I’ve lived in Wales since I was 21. I came here since so that’s a very long time. I’m 77 now and I think being a bit of a celt because my dad was Cornish. So coming from, you know, coming

from Devon and having those sorts of links. I think that the Cornishness, if you like helped me with some sort of understanding into the Welsh language. [#52, *female, rural support charity*]

In expressing their allegiance to Wales, our trustees are drawing on and reproducing an image of Wales as having a distinctive national identity. Bowie (1993) argues that the notion of a Welsh identity is seen as problematic: ‘fought for and over, talked about and defended, defined and rejected’ (p. 170). Nevertheless, within our trustees’ narratives, a number of key characteristics that define ‘Welshness’ recur.

One of these characteristics relates to Wales’ historic and continuing dominance by its much larger and more economically and politically powerful neighbour, England. Smith (1999), in his typology of ‘ethnic persistence’, argues that Welsh nationalism is constructed on the legacy of a community that ‘has been conquered and is struggling to preservice its former rights and way of life’ (p. 136). This sense of threat and vulnerability appears to contribute to a conviction that Wales *needs* their support:

We shouldn’t be as poor in Wales as what we are. We shouldn’t, you know. Our GDP, with all the Objective One funding coming in . . . And we’re, in fact, we are the third poorest country in Europe. [#58, *male, rural support charity*]

I really want to make sure that Wales is doing the best it can . . . being able to, you know, see what is happening that benefits my own community. . . Would I have chosen a UK organisation to be a trustee for? Probably not. [#07, *female, umbrella organisation*]

As Massey (2004) argues, place is always constructed relationally, and responsibility is ‘embodied in the way place is said to be embodied’ (p. 9). The importance of Wales’ historic and current relationship to England in forging national attachment and fostering civic duty is evident in the following trustee’s account:

I think there’s often a lot of fight, there’s often a lot of resistance to England, you know. They killed our last king in 1282. They brought in an Act in 1583 which meant that people who spoke Welsh got punished in schools. In the 1900s, they drowned villages within Wales to source water there . . . There’s a feeling that we don’t have the same opportunity. So it’s just the opportunities to live and be within the Welsh language really and fighting for that. [#73, *male, sports charity*]

The Welsh language is mentioned repeatedly in the trustees’ accounts. As Evans (2019) remarks, the Welsh language can be seen as ‘the ‘gold standard’ of national authenticity . . . a way of defining a distinctive Welshness against Englishness, of positioning the Welsh as “us”, a nation defined by a collective injustice’ (p. 180).

Several of the trustees justified their own involvement in terms of supporting the Welsh language; for example,

It’s bilingual. If there wasn’t a Welsh language aspect, I wouldn’t be as interested. [#26, *female, funding charity*]

I’m probably there as an individual who represents the Welsh dimension in terms of both Welsh speaking and the culture of Wales. [#17, *female, arts charity*]



When you when you face retirement, you should do something challenging. So, so there was the Welsh connection. There was the Welsh language thing. [#36, *male, education charity*]

One patron spoke of how he used his role to advance the Welsh language beyond the United Kingdom:

So, yes Wales PLC – my Welsh dragon flag is extremely important to me, hopefully my internationalism is as well. . . I was able to speak Welsh in Brussels, I fought for that. . . when I did it the first time, it was fantastic. . . one of my colleagues from the UK delegation. . . he said ‘I’m in tears, I’m so proud that the language I never heard in school is being spoken today’. . . You’d imagine how proud I was. [#25, *male, umbrella organisation*]

As another trustee recalled, some civil society organisations appear to take on the role of ‘a Sanhedrin Welsh, protectors of society’ [#35, *male, rural support charity*].

Indeed, Bowie (1993: 170) claims that the preservation and valorisation of the Welsh language should be seen as a form of defence for Wales as it struggles from a structurally weak position to protect itself from its more dominant neighbour.

In addition to the Welsh language, Welshness is seen to reside in a strong sense of community and inclusion. The following trustee, who was born overseas, speaks of Welsh culture being ‘more tolerant’:

I think there’s a lot of good value in Welsh culture, which has helped me to promote what I’m doing. Because there are a lot of things I can associate myself with the Welsh culture. And I think the Welsh culture, deep down those who have got good upbringing, good culture will be more tolerant to people who live around them. [#59, *male, equalities charity*]

Another ‘incomer’ is vague about the sense of Welshness, but claims it has elements that empower:

And the whole time that I lived in Cardiff, I really have a sense of the Welsh culture was very, very different. I’d come from England. So I was involved with the arts and involved with the arts nationally as well . . . But there was definitely a sense of Welshness. I think it is, it’s a really good, a good word, actually. And I think there are elements of that that empowers. [#63, *female, umbrella organisation*]

In drawing up images of inclusivity and community, our trustees often make reference to rurality and the closeness of ties they associate with country life; for example,

I was brought up in West Wales. I was brought up in Pembrokeshire, so, close, close communities, close knit families . . . so voluntary sector or volunteering or, you know, nobody would have applied any of those labels to it. But you know, but you grew up you grew up in a very connected community with a lot of relationships and a lot of support activities going on the people were engaged with. [#05, *male, umbrella organisation*]

I think you’re in the rural communities in Wales, I think everybody tries to pull their weight to help some sort of organisation out, even if it’s just the village show . . . that’s how I’ve been brought up then to, to help each other out. [#48, *male, rural support charity*]

Because when you're in a small community, and I still live in a small community, that's what everybody does. So I suppose yeah, I suppose there was that, that instinct that, you know, your priority is to see what you can do for other people. It's not just it's not about you. It's about what you can do for other people. [#74, *female, sports charity*]

Then they would be off to their various *pwyllogolau* [committee] meetings, which would always be something of a voluntary nature, you know, party political or something with the church or the chapel, or with some kind of community events, or the local Welsh language newsletter in the village, it would be something. [#42, *female, education charity*]

In addition to community, many of our respondents invoke religion as being a motivating factor in their charitable work. It is widely recognised that religious belonging contributes to a range of voluntary and philanthropic activity (e.g. Uslander, 2001). However, only a few of our trustees referred to their own faith or religious affiliation. Far more common were references to religious inheritance from their parents and grandparents. In particular, it is the legacy of the Welsh chapel that is writ large in the trustees' narratives.

Historically, religion was far more significant in Wales than in other parts of Britain. In the early years of the twentieth century, Wales experienced what is now referred to as the 'Welsh Revival' – a dramatic Nonconformist religious movement (see Williams, 1952). Although the revival was relatively short-lived, its influence on Welsh life was significant. In addition to keeping 'the churches of Wales filled for many years to come' (Orr 1973), it had strong implications for civil society (Williams, 1952: 258). Since then, levels of religious observance have fallen dramatically. Data from Understanding Society and Census 2021 suggest that Wales is now the least religious country in the United Kingdom. However, despite this increasing secularisation, the Welsh chapel, like the Welsh language, retains an important place in sustaining Welsh identity (Cohen, 2007).

For the following trustee, the legacy of the chapel lives on in physical form:

Just behind me you can see these pews. These are chapel pews that come from the chapel . . . which my great grandfather built. [#05, *male, umbrella organisation*]

But more often, trustees speak of the values they inherited and the extent to which these values have inculcated civic virtues; for example,

I was brought up Welsh Chapel. So you always do what's right. [#29, *female, education charity*]

They were always very caring, always wanting to help people . . . they both were members of a Chapel . . . actually sort of doing things for, beyond oneself . . . I think I was brought up to help other people. . . . I don't think anybody will take it away because it's in your DNA. [#37, *female, education charity*]

My grandmother was very strong Methodist, did a lot of stuff through the kind of, the Church and that kind of thing. [#44, *female, homelessness charity*]

My grandfather on my father's side was a minister . . . he had this inclusive, inclusive personality . . . He used to let tramps sleep in the crypt of the church, and he used to feed them all. So I

guess I've always had this charitable thing coming back, in the back of my mind, through what the legacy that he left and how good he was with looking after people and putting something back as best he could into the community. I think that does sit in my mind. [#38, *female, rural support charity*]

The following two trustees are explicit about their lack of faith, but nevertheless express a belief in the values of the chapel:

My father was a minister. And so he used to preach nonconformist religion . . . He would go up to the valleys on the weekend and preach in the morning, and then in the evening, and he would go to these tiny chapels where there will be very few there . . . I'm not religious, you know . . . But I think there's something about going to the place where you might least expect to make maybe or to have an impact . . . that sense of community. I think that's what I'm talking about its sense of community. [#17, *female, education charity*]

I'm not a Christian . . . but I probably have relatively strong Christian values, because that's the value set that I was brought up with. [#16, *female, arts charity*]

Chapel and community provide our trustees with the socially constructed motifs of group belonging which generate and reflect strong place attachment (Lewicka, 2011: 212). The power of these motifs is such that they retain their strength even when it is acknowledged that they may be more imagined than real:

I do have a sense of a very strong socially-minded Welsh community. Or like Welsh, Welsh values . . . a sense of community mindedness, social values of Wales, probably in the 1930s and 40s, a sort of societal inclusion model. And whether that's complete utter balderdash that never existed I don't know. But I do think I have a sense that there is that somewhere in Wales . . . It may be a chimera – it may not be true. But I think in my heart of hearts, I believe somehow that's there. [#22, *female, education charity*]

## Conclusion and discussion

In this discussion, we return to consider the implications of these narratives for a number of sociological debates about elites, globalisation, and philanthropy. We began by discussing concerns that globalisation has contributed to the emergence of elites who have little sense of social obligation or civic responsibility. The evidence from this research suggests that, while there may well be those for whom this is true, many of those who might be deemed part of a social elite are actively engaged in civil society in Wales. Indeed, our data suggest that it is possible to identify a distinctive civil society elite that is closely interconnected, at least within Wales, to other powerful groups in cultural, political, and business sectors. While this may suggest that there is a consolidation rather than a fragmentation of elites, this connectedness may simply reflect that fact that Wales is a small country where people 'at the top' tend to know each other.

The issue of patronage, especially in the context of increasing social inequalities, raises questions about how we should interpret the vocabularies of motive surrounding elite philanthropy. It is likely that there are many reasons why members of elites engage

in volunteering and philanthropy, and in our trustees' case, in the governance of charities. There is little doubt that trustees benefit from these voluntary activities – through developing influential networks and new skills. In addition, our research suggests that trusteeship is a means through which the burden of privilege may be eased. It is likely that this privilege feels more burdensome in contexts which are marked, as in the United Kingdom, by increasing inequalities. As we noted in the introduction, growing inequalities may heighten status anxieties and 'fear of falling' for those with much to lose (e.g. Paskov et al., 2013; Salverda and Grassiani, 2014). 'Giving back' can be viewed as a form of self-justification used to legitimise privilege (Kantola, 2020; Sherman, 2019 [2017]). However, it also indicates a recognition of that privilege (Breeze, 2023) – which is surely a necessary, if not a sufficient, condition for attempting to ameliorate social injustices.

The frequent reference to the need to give something back specifically to Wales reveals the enduring significance of nationhood in a global context and the importance of understanding how vocabularies of motive are situationally embedded. In particular, the narratives show how important place is in determining what counts as socially acceptable motives. While patriotic sentiments are seen as acceptable motives for our Welsh respondents, they would probably appear as less acceptable motives for English trustees because English nationalism is often associated with right-wing extremism (e.g. Winlow et al., 2017).

Moreover, understanding the acceptability of strongly expressed allegiance to Wales underscores the relational construction of Welshness, especially through Wales' relationship with England. The dominance of England can be seen to threaten Welsh culture and especially the survival of the Welsh language. According to Gibson-Graham (2002), endorsing local (in this case, national) identities becomes critical in places which have experienced power differentials in any of the social, cultural, and/ or political forms. The characteristics of Welshness, derived from romantic allusions to community and the legacy of the chapel, may be more chimerical than real. But these characteristics provide symbolic power from which to generate a sense of civic obligation.

It is important, though, not to overestimate the social justice implications of these forms of philanthropy. Taking on the role of trustee to discharge the debt of 'privilege' is, in itself, a reflection of the unequal social relationships on which elite membership is based. And the contribution made through the governance of civil society organisations is unlikely to entail any radical change in the distribution of opportunities available to the intended beneficiaries of the charities. Similarly, while allegiance to Wales may be driven by a sense of resistance to English dominance, prevailing discourses of Welshness are often exclusionary in terms of religion, race, and gender. Welsh nationalism, like other nationalist ideologies, is neither radical nor transformative. It is also the case that the forms of community celebrated here are underpinned by deferential models of rural power relations (see Heley, 2010; Heley et al., 2024).

Nevertheless, these forms of patronage do signify an attempt to avoid the negative consequences of social exclusion at the 'top'. As Giddens (1998) has argued, 'Exclusion at the top is not only just as threatening for public space, or common solidarity, as exclusion at the bottom end; it is causally linked to it' (p. 105). The strength of national attachment in our trustees' accounts also endorses the importance of affective ties in defining what Massey refers to as 'geographies of responsibility'.

### Data availability

Supporting data will be available to bona fide researchers, subject to registration, at the UK Data Archive (<https://www.data-archive.ac.uk/>) following the completion of the project.

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### Notes

1. A term based on the River Taff which flows through Cardiff, Wales' capital city.
2. The River Severn separates South Wales from England as is connected by two suspension bridges.

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## Résumé

Dans cet article, nous examinons la relation complexe entre la société civile, les inégalités sociales et le sentiment national à travers les motivations des membres de l'élite de la société civile galloise qui se portent volontaires pour siéger au conseil d'administration d'un large éventail d'organisations caritatives galloises. Nous avons interrogé près de 60 membres de conseils d'administration et mécènes, qui ont tous eu une carrière réussie et un rôle important dans le monde des affaires, de la politique ou de la fonction publique. Parmi leurs récits qui font apparaître des motivations diversement exprimées, le désir de « rendre quelque chose », non seulement à la société en général, mais aussi au pays de Galles en particulier, occupe une place prépondérante. Alors que leur désir de « rendre » traduit une conscience de leur propre position privilégiée, leur engagement en faveur du Pays de Galles peut être considéré comme une réponse à la domination passée et actuelle du pays par l'Angleterre, ainsi qu'un héritage de non-conformisme et un héritage communautaire. L'article conclut en examinant les implications de ces récits pour comprendre les spécificités des « géographies de la responsabilité », de la société civile et du sentiment national.

## Mots-clés

géographies de la responsabilité, mécénat, mécènes, membres de conseils d'administration, Pays de Galles, privilège, société civile

## Resumen

Este artículo explora la compleja relación entre sociedad civil, desigualdad social y sentimiento nacional a través del análisis de las motivaciones de los miembros de la élite de la sociedad civil galesa para ofrecerse como voluntarios para formar parte de las juntas directivas de una amplia gama de organizaciones benéficas galesas. Se ha entrevistado a casi 60 fideicomisarios y patronos, todos ellos con carreras exitosas e influyentes en los negocios, la política o la administración pública. Sus narrativas revelan diversos vocabularios de motivaciones, pero destaca especialmente el deseo de “dar algo a cambio”, y no sólo a la sociedad en general sino a Gales en particular. Si bien su deseo de “dar algo a cambio” refleja una conciencia de su propia posición privilegiada, su compromiso con Gales puede verse como una respuesta al dominio histórico y actual del país por parte de Inglaterra, así como un legado de inconformismo y comunidad. El artículo concluye discutiendo las implicaciones de estas narrativas para comprender las especificidades de las “geografías de la responsabilidad”, la sociedad civil y el sentimiento nacional.

## Palabras clave

fideicomisarios, Gales, geografías de la responsabilidad, patronos, patrocinio, privilegio, sociedad civil