

Film Review

A Fitting Farewell: Ken Loach's *The Old Oak*, and his Magnificent Legacy of Social Critique

★★★★☆

Review by James Fleming¹

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Ken Loach, the veteran champion of social realism in British cinema, offers a poignant and insightful final chapter to his extraordinary career with *The Old Oak* (2023). The film not only delves unflinchingly into the political zeitgeist of xenophobia and the politics of division, but feels like the culmination of many thematic threads Loach has woven through decades of filmmaking. From the groundbreaking *Cathy Come Home* (1966) and its shattering portrayal of homelessness, to the poignant class commentary of *Kes* (1969), and his piercing critique of the modern welfare state in *I, Daniel Blake* (2016), Loach has consistently sought to highlight the plight of the oppressed and to illuminate the human cost of social and economic policy. His films have much to say about the politics of work and class and challenge audiences to confront the harsh realities of inequality. Yet there is an optimistic humanism in his films that highlights the human yearning for connection and potential for solidarity even in the bleakest corners of experience.

¹ James Fleming is a member of the Editorial Committee of the Journal of Work and Ideas and the Executive Director of the AIER, Inc.

Recall Loach's portrait of Rickey (Kris Hitchen), a package-delivery driver who has to pee into a bottle in his van to meet his unreasonable work deadlines in *Sorry We Missed You* (2019). If *Sorry We Missed You* was Loach's sharp critique of the gig economy, then *The Old Oak* is Loach's pointed examination of working class xenophobia in post-industrial, post-Brexit Britain. Like many of his previous films, *The Old Oak* brings forward the experiences of otherwise invisible workers. This final film shifts from Loach's typical sympathy for the working class to a probative examination of racism and xenophobia among them, presenting new challenges for community and democracy, but not ones the film seems to cautiously suggest cannot be overcome.

In a decaying village in post-industrial Britain that has never recovered from the mine closures of the Thatcher years, a beleaguered pub owner TJ (Dave Turner) is torn between helping the Syrian refugees who have sought shelter in the town and appeasing the loyal pub patrons who keep his business from finally failing but want the refugees out of the pub. TJ's pub becomes a metaphor for society and their shared community and the battle over access to the pub becomes an exploration of something larger.

From the opening scene, we are on notice this is not going to be an overly-romantic portrayal of working class Britain, and it is certainly less sympathetic than his prior films. The film opens with Yara photographing through the bus window the angry, yelling mob of locals, that confront her and the other Syrian refugees as they enter town. Her photos flash onscreen, a frightening catalogue of spiteful, angry faces, and an unflattering portrait perhaps of the xenophobic, and even violent impulses that are such a significant force in politics today. The film then proceeds to artfully unpack the locals' stories and the perspectives behind these impulses, with cool objectivity. We are not invited to sympathise with the antagonists who bully and oppose the Syrian arrivals and add to their mounting difficulties, but we are forced to humanise the antagonists and to understand their perspective.

We learn the local community is also struggling. The good local jobs are long gone, the houses that they have never quite paid off are worthless as people flee to the city. The locals struggle to make ends meet

themselves. Shrinking social services are diverting away from them and their few privileges – like the sacred space of The Old Oak pub – seem to be now claimed by others.

Yara tries to dissolve this 'us-them' mentality at the root of the issue by showing the town the power of community and collective action and what the new residents can offer a town lacking in energy and gripped by decades of economic depression. She has the idea to organise a free open dinner for all that will unite the two communities, but for this she needs TJ's help as the pub he owns is the closest thing to communal space left in the town. This puts TJ in a difficult position. TJ seems to see the larger forces of austerity, and the economic and political neglect of The City as the cause of an oppression they all share rather than one caused by the refugees but he is initially reluctant to get his loyal customers offside who want the pub preserved for them and on whom his business depends. However, inspired by the photos on the wall of unity amongst the local striking mine workers of the 1980s that fought for their jobs against forces bigger than them, he decides to risk it all, and thus is forced to confront the forces of xenophobia in the community head on.

Despite the heavy themes, the film never devolves into a moralising essay. Loach's masterful dramaturgical artistry and moral distance elevates the character's challenges and moral quandaries into a highly engaging film with all the dramatic elements of a Greek tragedy. TJ is put into an impossible position between his conscience and his livelihood, between his desire to help those in need and his existing community allegiances. In trying to unite the communities, he and Yara are propelled into a struggle against powerful economic and political forces bigger than themselves and over which they have little control and which speak to the challenges of our times. It plays out with some unexpected results.

Loach's strategy of including non-professional cast members has opened the film's performances to criticism, but despite some minor fumbles, the fourth wall is never broken and instead we witness an

almost documentary-like realism that makes the characters' plights all the more moving and the films political relevancy all the more convincing.

In the end, *The Old Oak* forces us to witness the bleakness born of the economic inequality ushered in by the neoliberal turn in the 1980s and invites us to reflect on its connection to the present waves of xenophobia and the challenges in overcoming them. Rather ambitiously, Loach moves beyond merely raising the problem as Voltaire would have us do, but thankfully at this point in time, seriously and thoughtfully, explores its solution. The film remains cautiously hopeful that solidarity will prevail over political divisions without minimising the formidable task of repairing the social and economic divisions of which xenophobia is portrayed as a symptom. The film is a must-see on many levels. It is a fitting end to a magnificent cinematic career, one that explored many of the most pertinent social issues of the modern era, and whose legacy will no doubt endure.

Ken Loach (dir), *The Old Oak* (2023)

The Old Oak was released in cinemas late 2023/early 2024 and is currently available on various streaming platforms.

Declaration of interests

Nil.

James Fleming

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