



# Reading *Culture and Society* against the Cultural Cold War and the Culture Wars

MANUEL YANG

Japan Women's University

---

## Introduction

I first encountered Raymond Williams' work as an undergraduate at the University of Texas at Austin in the mid-1990s. At the time George W. Bush, then-occupant of the Texas governor's mansion in the same city, was effectively making use of his "born-again Christian" identity to appeal to his evangelical Christian constituency. Bush embodied a distinctly cultural type of "conservatism" that became the norm since the Reaganite neoconservative dominance of the Republican Party through the 1980s, opposing abortion and gun control and supporting prayer in school. This was also when Bill Clinton, the first post-Cold-War Democratic president, was redefining "liberalism" on cultural terms as he made a failing attempt to institute an official open-door policy for gays in the military and supported women's reproductive rights on the carefully calibrated phrase that abortion should be "safe, legal, and rare". Being a "conservative" or a "liberal" in this peculiarly cultural sense had little to do with classical forms of conservatism or liberalism (whose nineteenth-century genealogy Williams partly traces, via Edmund Burke and John Stuart Mill among others, in *Culture and Society* as containing crucial elements of opposition to industrial capitalism). In fact, their respective contemporary meanings had transformed radically even from the post-World-War-II bipartisan New Deal consensus, in support of social welfare and recognition of labor unions as an essential part of economic growth, into a reactionary statist rollback of welfare and weakening of unions, encouraging market deregulation, capital flight, and historically unprecedented financialization. As the latter neoliberal socioeconomic policies of the two major parties increasingly mirrored each other, prioritizing the interests of the corporate elites at the expense of the general population, such categories as "conservative" and "liberal", as well as "left", "right", "secular humanist", "evangelical/fundamental Christian", "Muslim", "gay", "feminist", etc., became ever more politicized, treated as emotionally charged antagonistic or partisan labels, which expressed radically irreconcilable difference against the opposition. As the homogenized neoliberal substance of ruling institutions and policies worsened class disparities and created greater misery among the poor, this warring micro-politics of



cultural identity grew even more cacophonous and diverted people's attention from the source of power by politicizing such issues as abortion, gender preference, and sex/science education in strictly religious or cultural terms, which divorced them from their defining social-economic class reality and presented them as a matter of individual, moral choice grounded in an irrevocable identity that trumped all else and fomented intense, sometimes violent responses.

Sociologist James Davison Hunter called this new politics of radical irreconcilable identity "culture wars" in his famous, same-titled book in 1991. Hunter cautioned against a political understanding of the phenomenon, noting that the political labels "trace back to prior moral commitments and more basic moral visions" and that "[o]n political matters one can compromise; on matters of ultimate moral truth, one cannot" (1991: 46). His approach was admittedly phenomenological: he took the participants' description of how they felt about the conflict on its own terms. And he generally viewed "culture wars" as a positive contestation of fundamental moral values in American society, deeming them "a struggle over national identity – *over the meaning of America*, who we have been in the past, who we are now, and perhaps most important, who we, as a nation, will aspire to become in the new Millennium" (1991: 50). We know retrospectively that the judgment of the "new Millennium" on the "culture wars" hardly fulfilled Hunter's idealized expectation of it as a dialectical entryway towards a more holistic and humanistic new American national identity. The discord in the "culture wars" has only worsened, with virtually no common culture emerging to prevent the radicalization of the Republican Party towards rightwing authoritarianism during the Donald Trump presidency and reverse the continuing ossification of the Democratic Party under Joe Biden's neoliberal military dispensation.

The signs of this coming conflict were already visible in 1992, a year after Hunter coined the term, at the Republican National Convention, where Patrick Buchanan made an infamous speech on behalf of the presidential nominee George Bush, declaring the "culture war" as a successor to the Cold War: "There is a religious war going on in this country. It is a cultural war, as critical to the kind of nation we shall be as was the Cold War itself, for this war is for the soul of America. And in that struggle for the soul of America, Clinton & Clinton are on the other side, and George Bush is on our side" (Buchanan 1992). While Hunter disapproved of Buchanan's aggressively partisan usage, his view that the "culture wars" harkened as far back as the intellectual origins of modernity, in which conservative religious values came into conflict with progressive secular values, reified "culture" into an idealist, ahistorical category over which people fought across centuries and ignored the actually existing material conditions of power and ideology out of which it emerged. Moreover, to posit the "culture wars" in such a *longue durée* view was to mystify it as a perennially irresolvable conflict and thereby unintentionally justify the existing state of the affairs.



The 2020 presidential election that pitted Trump and Biden against each other occluded the historical fact that these two figures were both complicit in the formation of the neoliberal framework of governance they take for granted, despite their contrasting rhetorical and cultural gestures. In the early 1990s the gilded sheen of Trump's image as a real estate mogul was starting to crack as his Taj Mahal casino and Trump Plaza Hotel in Atlantic City filed Chapter 11 bankruptcy, mirroring him in 3.4 billion dollars of debt that consisted mostly of junk bonds, those very same high-yield corporate bonds that became associated with the 1980s saving and loan crisis, bursting of the dot-com bubble at the turn of the millennium, and the subprime mortgage crisis of the 2007-2009 Great Recession. As the Bill Clinton presidency was generalizing the conditions of the possibility of this unstable neoliberal casino economy and developing a complementary use of state violence which Noam Chomsky dubbed "new military humanism", the younger Biden, as a Delaware senator, facilitated them by supporting the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), rooting for the NATO bombing of Serbia and Montenegro, and drafting the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act that helped militarize the police and incarcerate mass numbers of young poor people of color.

It was at such a juncture that I was introduced to Raymond Williams' writings in two distinct disciplinary contexts at the university. The first context was Williams as a foundational source of British Cultural Studies, as the author of *Marxism and Literature* (1977), whose theoretical vocabularies were applied to a critical study of contemporary popular music and culture. And the second context was Williams as a radical scholar of rural and urban capitalist culture, as richly elaborated in *The Country and the City* (1973). The first read Williams in the light of English language and literature, while the second read him in terms of capitalist political economy and its radical critique. Oddly, neither engaged directly with the then unfolding issue of the "culture wars" and its political significance for the emergent juncture of neoliberal capitalism. This was especially odd because, as Stuart Hall repeatedly reminded us, one major objective of Cultural Studies was to understand the current capitalist juncture, its changing structural conditions and immanent forces of antagonism. In fact, *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State, and Law and Order* (1978), a major collective text of the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies in its halcyon years, and Hall's own collection *The Hard Road to Renewal: Thatcherism and the Crisis of the Left* (1988) aimed to do precisely that, providing a crucial outline of the ongoing and coming class warfare from above in the form of racial capitalist assault on minority, particularly black youths in the city, and neoconservative consolidation of electoral, ideological hegemony. However, by the 1990s, the drift of Cultural Studies was less in the direction of conjunctural analysis seeking to facilitate critical grassroots political engagement than towards academic institutionalization and its corresponding specialized permutations into a depoliticized, fragmented tool of interdisciplinary research, which did not further develop and update



its earlier conjunctural analysis. Williams, in this academic context, was often treated as a mere addendum in tracing the prehistory of Cultural Studies or, at best, as a prominent literary scholar whose work was less read than referenced in the study of English literature, removed far from the madding conjuncture.<sup>1</sup>

But when we survey the complex contours of Williams' life and work, from his brief phase as a Cambridge Communist student activist in the late 1930s through the relative isolation of the 1950s as a tutor for the extra-mural adult education in Essex to his mentoring, fellow-traveling role in the British New Left in the 1960s to the subsequent pioneering mark he left as an independent Marxist theorist of literature, novelist of Welsh border country, and ecological socialist admonishing the labor movement to shift its focus from "production" to "livelihood", it is clear that he offers us a model of a radical intellectual who connects and negotiates among various forms of life and expression. No less importantly, Williams' critical insights are directly relevant to our own times, in which the "cultural" has assumed an ideologically overdetermined, if not outright overwhelming, weight. For example, Joshua Rothman's 2014 *New Yorker* article musing on the popular confusion over the changing meaning of "culture" in a "darker, sharper, more skeptical" direction (as in "rape culture", "celebrity culture", "culture of transparency/accountability", etc.), extensively cites the definition of the word in Williams' *Keywords* to explain its semantic complexity (Rothman 2014). But we need to go further than simply using Williams' work as, in Rothman's arch description, a "souped-up dictionary" to explicate the subtle nuances of the term "culture". We need to grasp it as a radical political intervention in the "culture wars" before the "culture wars", forged against the grain of the Cold War, which Buchanan had named as the defining predecessor to what we are living through today. Williams' *Culture and Society* is as good an entry point as any to understand the nature of this intervention.

### ***Culture and Society* against the Cultural Cold War**

*Culture and Society* was published in 1958 at the height of the Cold War, as its conflictual nodes were shifting to an explicitly scientific-technological arena. In response to the Soviet launch of Sputnik 1 rocket, which orbited the Earth for three months from October 1957 to January 1958, elite panic spread quickly in the United States, as

---

<sup>1</sup> Williams' receding status is partly due to Cultural Studies' "broader shift away from Williams, a shift that would culminate in the early 1980s, when Hall would repeatedly cast Williams' work as simultaneously inspirational and deeply outmoded form of cultural studies that must be superseded", stripping from him "both his structuralist connections and his Marxist credentials" – consequently, "[o]ver the following decade, a range of scholars would downplay Williams' contributions to forms of analysis that dovetail with Marxist aesthetics and he was progressively reconstructed as either a post-Leavis scholar of 'experience' or the purveyor of a 'mechanically and reductionist' model of 'cultural materialism'" (Holm and Duncan 2018: 749).



national security advisers and sensationalized mass media coverage exaggerated it as symptomatic of Soviet military and scientific advances that posed serious threat to U.S. national security; consequently, the Eisenhower administration was pressured into authorizing the development of military technology within the Department of Defense and establish the National Aeronautic and Space Act (NASA), inaugurating the so-called “Space Race” with the Soviet Union. Two major nuclear tests – Operation Argus conducted by the U.S. and Novaya Zemlya by the Soviets – in the same year also indicate the intensification of the Cold War in its military-technological infrastructural aspects.

E.P. Thompson, Williams’ compatriot in the British New Left, captured the catastrophic mood of global militarism in an urgent prophetic register when he declared in “Socialist Humanism: An Epistle to the Philistines” (1957):

For two hundred years the pace of technological and social change has accelerated to an unprecedented degree, and nuclear fission and automation promise an even more rapid acceleration. In the past few years several continents which – fifty years ago – were on the periphery of civilisation, have entered the arena of international politics. In the past fifty years more human beings have been killed in war than in any comparable period. The fact that, in the past ten, these wars have abated in extent, although not in intensity (Korea, Indo-China, Kenya, Algeria), indicates less any change of heart than mutual fear of the overwhelming killing power of atomic weapons. The only reasonable deduction from all these facts is that mankind is caught up in the throes of a revolutionary transition to an entirely new form of society – a transition which must certainly reach its climax during this century. (Thompson 1957: 105)

Thompson presented the Cold War as a technological and colonial intensification of the imminent nuclear war, anticipating his anti-nuclear activist commitment and polemic more than twenty years later when the Second Cold War would heat up under the bellicose neoconservative Thatcher-Reagan regimes. Its prophetic tone of urgency and understanding of the Cold War as a catastrophic acceleration of total war was echoed by American radical sociologist C. Wright Mills’ influential speech “A Pagan Sermon to a Christian Clergy” addressing the annual meeting of the Board of Evangelical and Social Service at the United Church of Canada in Toronto on February 27, 1958. Mills denounced the “crackpot metaphysics of militarism” pursued by the United States, which has made the prospect of “sudden hell” through total war more likely than ever, accusing any Christian who does not pose “an effective opposition” to this “obvious condition of biological survival” to be guilty of “moral insensibility” (Summers 2008: 170). The speech became the center piece of his incendiary anti-Cold-War pamphlet *The Causes of World War Three* (1960), which along with *Listen, Yankee: The Revolution in Cuba* (1960), made Mills an instant anathema in the U.S. sociological profession that denigrated these publications as politically partisan pronouncements lacking in social



scientific “objectivity” and, conversely, transformed Mills’ voice into that of a radical public intellectual signaling the Anglo-British formation of the New Left.

Alongside the Cold War’s accelerating material conflicts over military technology, which made a global nuclear war likely, were state-endorsed interventions in the cultural “superstructure”, so to speak, which rationalized this irrational antagonism and competed for ideological dominance in the sphere of art, literature, cinema, music, and science. The so-called “Lacy-Zarubin agreement”, signed on January 27, 1958, which ostensibly promoted “cultural, technical, and educational exchanges” between the U.S. and U.S.S.R. is an obvious case in point. The agreement was a significant diplomatic component of Khrushchev’s de-Stalinization reform, which commenced with his secret speech denouncing Stalin’s “cult of personality” two years earlier in the 20<sup>th</sup> Party Congress and was assuming the form of “peaceful coexistence” with the Western liberal capitalist camp. The Khrushchev Thaw, a period of erratic cultural liberalization named after Ilya Ehrenburg’s 1954 novel that presciently allegorized de-Stalinization in the figure of a wife leaving a dictatorial factory boss of a husband, emerged in response to the Hungarian and Polish October Revolutions of 1956, which also prompted Edward Thompson and thousands of others to resign from the Communist Party.

On the U.S. side, the Lacy-Zarubian agreement furnished the public façade to their Cold War propaganda war to publicize the virtues of Western liberal “cultural freedom”, in contrast to the repressive Soviet culture dictated by the totalitarian state. Such a campaign had been ongoing covertly at least as early as 1950, when the Congress of Cultural Freedom (CCF) was founded to endorse liberal democratic values that defined “culture” as above the fray of politics, in possession of presumably autonomous, transcendental value. But such a depoliticized, ennobling concept of culture was undermined by the fact that the CCF was a CIA front, whose primary “handler” Michael Josselson, an Estonia-born agent whose anti-Bolshevik Jewish merchant family fled to Germany in the wake of the Russian Revolution, sought to organize “non-Communist left” intellectuals to publicly oppose the Communist “God That Failed” (to borrow a phrase from a well-known 1949 publication anthologizing the writings of disillusioned ex-Communist writers, edited by British Labour Party politician Richard Crossman and financed by the secret Information Research Department of the UK Foreign Office as part of its anticommunist propaganda campaign) and defend “cultural freedom” associated with Western liberal society. After the Nazis took over Germany, Josselson, who had made a successful career as a multilingual representative of the U.S. department store Gimbel’s, moved to the U.S. and joined the intelligence service during World War II. The “cultural Cold War” that Josselson inconspicuously engineered was thus inseparable, even in his personal trajectory, from the ideology of anticommunism and development of capitalist consumerism. Frances Stonor Saunders, in her thorough exposé of the “cultural Cold War” described it as “a secret programme of cultural propaganda in



western Europe [...] managed, in great secrecy, by America's espionage arm, the Central Intelligence Agency" that drew "on an extensive, highly influential network of intelligent personnel, political strategists, the corporate establishment, and the old school ties of the Ivy League universities" to "promote an idea: that the world needed a *pax Americana*, a new age of enlightenment, and it would be called The American Century" (Saunders 1999: 1, 2).

Although *Culture and Society* did not explicitly deal with such ideologically loaded use of "culture" as a soft-power weapon of the Cold War, Williams was very much aware of the implications that his work had in relation to them, as he told the *New Left Review* interviewers "my primary motivation in writing the book [...] was oppositional – to counter the appropriation of a long line of thinking about culture to what were by now decisively reactionary positions" (2015b: 97-98). The conceptual polarization over the definition of culture at the time pitted a depoliticized modernist model touted by the "democratic" Western capitalist power against the Zhadnovite political model endorsed by the "Communist" East. Thus, on one hand was the definition of culture as a necessarily political act, in the service of the proletariat, socialism, anticolonial nationalism, or some other progressive cause, while, on the other was the notion of culture as autonomously valuable, a secular equivalent of religion, and beyond political partisanship. The U.S. policy, as pursued by CCF and its closely associated *Encounter* magazine, favored the latter definition, as long as it did not come into conflict with its geo-strategic objectives of defending Western liberal values and cultural freedom. It is this ideologically dominant definition that *Culture and Society* critiqued immanently through the very literary tradition out of which it emerged and in terms of which it was justified, aiming, in Williams' words, "to try to recover the true complexity of the tradition it had confiscated – so that the appropriation could be seen for what it was", "the increasing contemporary use of the concept of culture against democracy, socialism, the working class or popular education" (2015b: 97-98).

The general thesis in *Culture and Society* – namely that these two key concepts are inextricably bound up with each other, documented from major figures in British literary history from the late eighteenth to the mid-twentieth centuries – is hardly controversial today, in fact may seem so self-evident that the author's avowed independent socialist politics rooted in his Welsh "borderland" working-class community are easily overlooked. The book's method of analysis was quite traditional, staying securely within the framework of literary criticism that surveyed the opinions of great men of English letters. Its theoretical idiom, if it can be called as such, did not go beyond plain conceptual reference to "democracy", "industry", "class", "art", and "culture". Indeed, the publisher could hardly predict the book's commercial and critical success, putting it on the same unpromising par with another book released under its imprint, Richard Hoggart's *The Uses of Literacy* (1957), which also turned out to be an



unexpected bestseller with far-reaching intellectual consequence, including both books' formative role in the making of Cultural Studies. Before *Culture and Society*, Williams could not get his writings readily published, despite the fact that he had already written three books – *Reading and Criticism* (1950), *Drama from Ibsen to Eliot* (1952), and *Preface to Film*, co-authored with Michael Orrom (1954) – and was facing serious financial strains as a primary breadwinner of a household with a wife and three children; after *Culture and Society*, he immediately became a well-known author with more publishing demands than he knew what to do with and an offer for the position of a lecturer at his alma mater, Cambridge University.

What was then so unique about *Culture and Society* and explains its public success? In the mainstream Anglophone intellectual and academic discourse of the period, culture or literature or arts was treated in isolation from its social, to say nothing of its political and economic, context. The dominant presence of F.R. Leavis' view of literature as a virtually sacred realm of moral experience, passed onto one generation to the next as part of a "Great Tradition", impervious to rational or social analysis, in British literary criticism had its approximate analogue in the dominance of New Criticism, whose sole focus was the aesthetic work at the exclusion of analyzing its contextual history and social relations, in the U.S. To be sure, Leavisism, with its distinctive, even eccentrically British style of its irascible progenitor, moral conception of the novel and irrational poetics, was not the equivalent of a rationally oriented, theoretically structured New Criticism, with a readiness to incorporate various theoretical models and an access to a wider range of applicable methods which did not carry a particularly descensible mark of national culture. But their wholesale rejection of social context and historical reality reflected the ideological constraints of the times, which can also be seen in other disciplines of humanities and social sciences, from the "consensus school" of U.S. historiography to the status-driven framework of social equilibrium posited in Talcott Parson's sociology. Marxism was rejected *tout court* as an extrinsic ideology of totalitarian state and its cruder forms existing at the margin of the domestic Communist Parties and sectarian left groupuscules did nothing to dissuade this jaundiced view.

It was against this general atmosphere of Cold War conformism that valorized the venerated definition of culture as a refined tradition for the chosen few, as articulated by Matthew Arnold's "Culture and Anarchy", T.S. Eliot's "Notes on Culture", and Leavisism, that *Culture and Society* dissented sharply. The book's radicalism appeared as an immanent critique of the British cultural and literary tradition, carefully parsing the words of its own authority against itself. A striking feature of Williams' analysis is that it treated figures associated with the conservative, reactionary political tradition, such as Edmund Burke and Thomas Carlyle, as resources of critical analysis. Hence Burke whom Williams emphasized is not the traditional royalist denouncing the French revolutionary crowd as a "swinish multitude" and the proto-capitalist author of *Thoughts and Details*





on *Scarcity* (1795), a memorandum to Prime Minister William Pitts recommending against welfare for the poor and equating the law of the market with the law of nature and God; it is Burke the critic of “aggressive individualism” who “should have recognized most clearly the common ownership, through custom and prescription, of these four million acres that Parliament diverted into private hands” (Williams 1960: 13). Similarly, Carlyle’s racist, imperialist opinions, such as found in “Occasional Discourse on the Negro Question” (1849), took a backseat to his stature as potentially “the most important thinker of his century” who made “a direct response to the England of his times: to Industrialism, which he was the first to name: to the feel, the quality, of men’s general reactions – that structure of contemporary feeling which is only ever apprehended directly; as well as to the character and conflict of formal systems and points of view” (Williams 1960: 78).

In contrast, Williams dealt with English Marxist criticism and “Marxist cultural interpretation” more generally in a rather perfunctory, negative manner, as he saw the latter’s “procedure [...] to involve both forcing and superficiality” on the procrustean bed of economic determinism: “even if the economic element is determining, it determines a whole way of life, and it is to this, rather than to the economic system alone, that the literature has to be related” (1960: 300). According to Stuart Hall, Williams’ failure to engage Marxism beyond the provincial confines of 1930s English experience in the book was due to the conservative, anticommunist isolationism of the British academia at the time.<sup>2</sup> But Williams’ evasion derived as much from his self-critical awareness that the Marxism he had espoused naively as a Cambridge Communist undergraduate could not apprehend literature properly on its own terms, could not effectively argue with the positions of his tutor E.M.W. Tillyard who had far more extensive knowledge about literature and easily countered his socialist generalizations.<sup>3</sup> The “immanence” of *Culture and Society*’s form of argument was thus necessitated by Williams’ commitment to take on the insularity of British cultural tradition at its strongest point, through the peculiarities of its contemporaneous, empirical responses to industrial capitalism and the bourgeois democratic form in which it was defended. As he himself admitted, the book’s shortcomings stem from the fact that there was no critical tradition of “culture and society” analysis to which he could refer and build on; the work of going through

---

<sup>2</sup> “In the 1950s, talking about Marxist theory or Marxist criticism, even of the thirties, is not only not the thing to do, it is really a rather dangerous thing for intellectuals to be doing. Hence, if you find sections of Williams’ early books – *Culture and Society* (1958) and *The Long Revolution* (1961) – somewhat obscure, that is partly the result of his having to find alternative terms for the Marxist terms, with which to talk about Marxist concepts” (Hall 1983: 21).

<sup>3</sup> “I was engaged in having to satisfy somebody who was professionally teaching a subject that my ideas were tenable and reasonable, and I could not. I was continually found out in ignorance, found out in confusion”; “People often ask me now why I didn’t carry on then from the Marxist arguments of the thirties. The reason is that I felt they had led me into an impasse. I had become convinced that their answers did not meet the questions, and that I had got to be prepared to meet the professional objections. I was damned well going to do it properly this time” (Williams 2015: 51, 52).



literary primary documents across 150 years to piece together a genealogy of coherent opinions and perspectives fell solely on his own shoulders.

Like E.P. Thompson's *Making of the English Working Class* (1963), a book Williams said would have greatly benefited his own thinking and helped him overcome the limitations in *Culture and Society* and *The Long Revolution* (1961), had he read it during their composition, *Culture and Society* was a product of his teaching as an extra-mural tutor for the Workers' Educational Association (WEA). Williams tested many of the materials and ideas he used in *Culture and Society* with his working-class students in East Sussex, for whom the arguments had to be made relevant and meaningful. The significance of this educational context of active exchange between intellectual and worker in Williams' effort to decipher the social meaning of culture cannot be overstated; it marks the book as a work of a committed WEA educator seeking to teach as much as learn from his students. As Fred Inglis noted, "The book had its roots in Williams' extra-mural classes" and "spoke for them ["gloved, overcoated students looking for the 'non-specialist, concrete and human treatment' of literature"], but beyond them also" (Inglis 1995: 150).

*Culture and Society's* conclusion, with its autobiographically inspired, moving commentary on "community", without explicit reference to Williams' specific Welsh working-class background, is a salient notation of this extra-mural educational experience. There he made a spirited defense of the "swinish multitude" against Burke's fear that they will degrade knowledge and education (although Williams did not elaborate the concrete source of his conviction, he was speaking from experience, as, for example, he found genuine positive support from his working-class community for his scholarship study at Cambridge):

I would only point out that while it may have seemed reasonable to Burke to anticipate the trampling down of learning by the irruption of the 'swinish multitude', this has not in fact happened, and the swinish multitude itself has done much to prevent it happening. The record of the working-class movement in its attitudes to education, to learning and to art is on the whole a good record. It has sometimes wrongly interpreted, often neglected where it did not know. But it has never sought to destroy the institutions of this kind of culture; it has, on the contrary, pressed for their extension, for their wider social recognition, and, in our own time, for the application of a larger part of our material resources to their maintenance and development. Such a record will do more than stand comparison with that of the class by which the working class has been most actively and explicitly opposed. This, indeed, is the curious incident of the swine in the night. As the light came, and we could look around, it appeared that the trampling, which we had all heard, did not after all come from them. (Williams 1960: 347)

The implicit object of Williams' criticism is clearly the Leavisite heirs of this priggish Burkean attitude of class superiority, which was famously expressed in Leavis' *Mass*



*Civilisation and Minority Culture* (1930): “In any period it is often a very small minority that the discerning appreciation of art and literature depends: it is (apart from cases of the simple and familiar) only a few who are capable of unprompted, first-handed judgment”; “When we consider, for instance, the processes of mass production and standardisation [...] it becomes obviously of sinister significance that they should be accompanied by a process of levelling-down” (Leavis 2006: 12, 14). This “levelling-down” has been reread from a left-Leavisite position in *The Uses of Literacy* when Hoggart saw the passing of traditional working-class culture as the lamentable effect of Americanized “mass production and standardisation”. But Williams’ criticism of the hierarchically conceived notions of the educational “ladder” and “service”, as opposed to working-class values of solidarity and community, in the conclusion does not freeze the latter in Hoggart’s mode of egalitarian nostalgia:

The working class does not become bourgeois by owning the new products, any more than the bourgeois ceases to be bourgeois as the objects he owns change in kind [...] The great majority of English working people want only the middle-class material standard and for the rest want to go on being themselves. One should not be too quick to call this vulgar materialism. It is wholly reasonable to want the means of life in such abundance as is possible. This is the materialism of material provision, to which we are all, quite rightly, attentive. The working people, who have felt themselves long deprived of such means in any adequacy, intend to get them and to keep them if they can. (Williams 1960: 343-44)

The Arnoldian term of abuse for this anti-intellectual “vulgar materialism” is “philistinism”, whose tone Williams disapproved in the earlier chapter on Newman and Arnold for having “brought on it the continuing charges of priggishness and spiritual pride”, and it is this keyword that links *Culture and Society* to E.P. Thompson’s contemporaneous political statement of anti-Stalinist communist revisionism, “Socialist Humanism: An Epistle to the Philistines” (1957), which cleared the ideologically stultifying bipolar air of the Cold War for the emergence of the British New Left.

### ***Culture and Society* and the Intellectual Origins of the New Left**

Edward Thompson, who was three years behind Williams at Cambridge and was a committed WEA tutor as well, albeit 250 miles north in Yorkshire from where Williams lived in South England, set the political terms of the Cold War facing principled British socialists in “Socialist Humanism: An Epistle to the Philistines” for the dissident Communist journal *New Reasoner* he was editing. Unlike Williams, Thompson stayed in the CPGB throughout and after World War II; in contrast to the former’s political and intellectual isolation throughout the 1950s, Thompson’s activism in the Yorkshire local CPGB committee and various political writings – *The Fascist Threat to Britain* (1947),



*The Railway: An Adventure in Construction* (1948), *The Struggle for a Free Press* (1952) – kept his “politics and letters” closely tied to each other. Thompson’s 1955 biography of Morris and 1959 lecture on “The Communism of Williams Morris” to the William Morris Society, the former mottled with “Stalinist pieties” as he called them two decades later when he self-critically expunged and revised them, are signal examples of how he closely fused scholarship and political commitments, already showing his preoccupation with resuscitating a distinctly English tradition of radicalism. After Thompson resigned from the Communist Party, when attempts to democratize it from within had failed and indeed brought down the ire of King Street (location of CPGB Central Committee in London) on his and other like-minded Communist revisionists’ heads, he amplified his revisionist expressions even more openly in 1956, now freed entirely from the institutional straitjacket of Stalinism, which he dissected in “Socialist Humanism”. *The Reasoner*, an internal dissident CPGB journal that he and John Saville co-founded, now became *The New Reasoner*, which published this essay that became as close to a programmatic statement, a declaration of political independence, as he would ever articulate as a “dissident Communist”.

Thompson’s subtitle “Epistle to the Philistines” in “Socialist Humanism” evoked the apostolic epistles in the New Testament and focuses primarily on critiquing Stalinism as “an ideology; that is, a form of false consciousness, deriving from a partial partisan, view of reality; and, at a certain stage, establishing a *system* of false or partially false concepts with a mode of thought – which in the Marxist sense – is idealist”, “which reduces the moral consciousness to class relativism, or to Pavlovian behaviourism, forgets the creative sparks without which man cannot be man” (Thompson 1957: 107). It is this Stalinist reduction of creative human agency and moral consciousness to an inert thing to be molded and disciplined by the vanguard party which Thompson called “warped and militant philistinism”, careful to add that this “militant philistinism of Stalinism is matched by our own muted and sterile philistinism” of exclusively pursuing “a bit more middle-class life round” *pace* Anthony Crosland’s *The Future of Socialism* (1956), a crucial text that expressed the British Labour Party’s postwar reconceptualization of social democracy in terms of economic redistribution, social welfare, and mass consumption. Quoting *The Uses of Literacy* to point the source of this consumerist philistinism as “cultural and human pollution of the mass media of commercialism”, Thompson posited “socialist humanism” as the collective aspirations of human beings to go beyond “the list of things which Mr. Crosland offers”, “to stop killing one another [...] to stop this pollution of their spiritual life which runs through society as the rivers carried their sewage and refuse through our nineteenth-century industrial towns: side by the side with their direct economic interests, they would like to ‘do benefits’ to each other” (Thompson 1957: 141, 142).



In Thompson's hands, "philistinism" as a denunciatory cry of cultural elites against the bourgeois moneychangers and unlearned multitude transformed into a sharp rhetoric of radical democratic opposition of communist revisionism, recalibrated to fit the specific conditions of Cold War apathy and conformity. "Philistines" became equated with ideologues or intellectuals defending "vulgar materialism" in the broad political sense, advancing economic development, mass consumption, and institutional conformity at the expense of creative human agency. In this sense, "philistine" assumed a decidedly elitist sense. "Philistine" is not just someone who puts wealth above culture but anybody who puts anything, be it wealth or ideas or things, above people, whose labor is the source of wealth, ideas, and things after all. Thus, Matthew Arnold and its twentieth-century epigones, such as Eliot and Leavis, too, would qualify as "philistine" in this peculiarly Thompsonian sense, for they treated "culture" or "tradition" in the same way that the vulgar bourgeois materialist treats money or commodity, as an autonomous, virtual transcendental entity.

In his long two-part review of *The Long Revolution* for the *New Left Review*, it is this very issue of a seemingly disembodied cultural tradition, as presented in *Culture and Society*, to which Thompson objected:

[...] I have a real difficulty with Raymond Williams' *tone*. At times, in *Culture and Society*, I felt that I was being offered a procession of disembodied voices – Burke, Carlyle, Mill, Arnold – their meanings wrested out of their whole social context (that French Revolution – is its full shock and recoil really *felt* behind Mr. Williams' treatment of the late romantic tradition?), the whole transmitted through a disinterested spiritual medium. (Thompson 1961: 24-25)

Williams' "tone" grated on Thompson so much because he sensed in its "necessary openness and honesty of a man listening to another, in good faith, and then replying" (a phrase Thompson lifted from Williams' article in *The Guardian*) an academic attitude of polite civility that has alienated the voices of working-class figures such as Jude Fawley and Sue Bridehead in Thomas Hardy's *Jude the Obscure*, opting for "the sunlit quadrangle, the clinking of glasses of port, the quiet converse of enlightened men" instead of "indignation" (Thompson 1961: 25, 26). That this question of "tone" involved a matter of principle for Thompson is understandable in those passages where Williams' style, saddled with qualifications in the passive voice, obscured, if not erased, the agency of historical actors and the conflicts they waged. After all, this was the substance of his attack on Stalinist and social democratic "philistines", namely that they reified the political party or economic structure and denied the agency of the multitude to contest and change it from below; it is the central conviction he would carry to its empirically logical conclusion in the historical epic of *The Making of the English Working Class* two years later in 1963. Thompson's criticism of Williams' "determination to de-personalise social forces and at the same to avoid certain terms and formulations which might



associate him with a simplified version of the class struggle which he rightly believes to be discredited” was valid up to a point, insofar as Williams’ aim in *Culture and Society* was to deconstruct the tradition of “Cambridge English” in its own terms and could not overcome the methodological limitation inherent in such an approach that evaded the problem of class struggle (Thompson 1961: 26).

Williams assented to Thompson on the key points of his criticism but commented on the difficulty he had with some of its “asides and tones”, which he interpreted as “an inability on the left to sustain theoretical differences and yet present a common front”: “It was a period in which the left in general had difficulty in restraining itself from frustrated point-scoring, as distinct from the expression of theoretical differences which have the object of mutual clarification so that one can move on” (Williams 2015b: 134-35). Here, too, the question is one of “tones”, not in the sense of whether they embody the aloof distance of an elite academic as opposed to that of a direct, active voice of proletarian indignation but whether they could express differences as fraternal comrades in the movement and did not indulge in an excessively combative, even sectarian attack. On this latter point, it is Williams, not Thompson, who turned out to be the better communicator and interlocutor in the subsequent two decades. Thompson’s arguments with Perry Anderson and Tom Nairn, Leszek Kolakowski, and Louis Althusser all showcased his brilliance as an inveterate polemicist, full of satirical rhetorical pyrotechnics and autobiographical reflections, but yielded very little in the way of actual political, intellectual dialogue. Williams, on the other hand, patiently kept the channels of communication open with his colleagues and comrades, as his cordial relationship with the younger generation of New Left activists, engagement with Western Marxism, conversation with Jacques Derrida, and steadfast support for the labor movement demonstrate.

Perhaps because C. Wright Mills’ no-nonsense, confrontational style of an intellectual craftsman was closer in spirit to his and because Mills had died a year earlier, Thompson’s 1963 “Remembering C. Wright Mills” (revised later in 1979 for *Radical America*) carried a distinctively different, altogether more fraternal tone than his dissection of Williams. Thompson thought neither Williams nor Mills ever managed to develop a satisfactory theory, a theory of culture in Williams’ case and, in Mills’, a comprehensive social theory, a “common theoretical nexus” that unites “the psychological and historical dimensions of social analysis, and in developing those ‘theories of society, history, human nature’” (Thompson 1985: 263). But he considered them both invaluable confrères in the New Left, appreciating Williams’ “greatest service” in articulating “the potential of the common good, as a general aspiration and in particular constructive ways” and declaring that “this, in a sense, is what makes all of us, from different traditions, distinctively New Left” (Thompson 1961: 39). Thompson saluted Mills in an expansive, almost ethereal tone that located his political significance



as an exponent of a humanism that transcended the ideological limits of the Cold War: “We had come to assume his presence – definitions, provocations, exhortations – as a fixed point in the intellectual night-sky. His star stood above the ideological no-man’s land between the orthodox emplacements of West and East, flashing urgent humanist messages” (Thompson 1985: 261). Notwithstanding their respective differences in emphasis and degree of polemical temperature, these comments indicate how Williams’ work, no less than Thompson’s or Mills’, belonged to a political moment of common radical dissent against the existing global structure of power and its repressive ideologies of conformity.

There were, to be sure, real differences that should not be glossed over. For example, unlike Thompson, who dug the roots of English working-class formation to unearth a fountain of complex active agency that melded various popular cultural and religious traditions with their grievances against the industrial work-discipline of the “dark Satanic mills”, Mills had all but abandoned the ship of working-class agency, on the basis of his sociological study of labor union leaders, *New Men of Power: America’s Labor Leaders* (1948), which presciently saw the incorporation of labor unions into an apparatus of postwar U.S. economic development. Indeed, when Mills spoke of “cultural apparatus”, as he started to do frequently in his writings of the following decade, it was closer to Frankfurt School’s notion of “culture industry”, with mass education, media, and consumerism hijacking popular working-class consciousness into the conformist logic of Cold War power elites. This was not culture as a “whole way of life” that Williams underscored as he sought to recover the genuine democratic aspirations, values of solidarity, and practices of common good found in the popular “structure of feeling”. Mills dismissed Marxist commitment to the working class’ revolutionary agency as “labor metaphysics”. But, unlike the Frankfurt School’s defeatist pessimism, he never gave up on his search for a radical social agency that could potentially dismantle the system of socioeconomic, ideological repression and he found its budding pulsation in the young, middle-class revolutionary leaders of the Cuban Revolution and the young student militants of the New Left, as he declared in his rousing 1960 “Letter to the New Left”. He urged skeptics to “study new generations of intellectuals around the world as real live agencies of historic change”, “learn from their practice and work out with them new forms of action”, and “*help* them to focus their moral upsurge in less ambiguous political ways; work out with them the ideologies, the strategies, the theories that will help them consolidate their efforts: new theories of structural change of and by human societies in our epoch” (Summers 2008: 265).

In *Culture and Society* Williams, too, evinced a critical suspicion of “mass-communication” as “less a product of democracy than its denial” while criticizing the very notion of “masses” as an ideological invention, as it had become “a new word for mob, and the traditional characteristics of the mob were retained in its significance:



gullibility, fickleness, herd-prejudice, lowness of taste and habit [...] the perpetual threat to culture” and asserting that “[t]here are in fact no masses; there are only ways of seeing people as masses” (1960: 319). More importantly, Williams maintained his commitment to a working-class conception of society – “an ideal which, whether it is called communism, socialism or cooperation, regards society neither as neutral nor as protective, but as the positive means for all kinds of development, including individual development”, in contrast to the “bourgeois” individualist “idea of society as a neutral area within which each individual is free to pursue his own development and his own advantage as a natural right”. As he explained to the *New Left Review* interviewers, this commitment was grounded in his experience of working-class community in South Wales.

At this time my distance from Wales was at its most complete. However, unconsciously my Welsh experience was nevertheless operating on the strategy of the book. For when I concluded it with a discussion of cooperative community and solidarity, what I was really writing about – as if they were more widely available – was Welsh social relations. I was drawing very heavily on my experience of Wales, and in one way correctly locating it as a certain characteristic of working-class institutions, but with not nearly enough regional shading and sense of historical distinctions and complications. (Williams 2015b: 113)

This proximity to lived working-class experience or class struggle was a crucial determinant in how Williams conceived agency. For Mills, who grew up in Texas as a son of an insurance salesman and, in John H. Summers’ words, “discovered society” at Texas A&M University in the mid-1930s as a freshman cadet when he was bullied over an accidental injury during a wrestling match – a traumatic incident that likely led to his transfer to the University of Texas at Austin – his conception of social power was formed in the vise of petty-bourgeois white-collar milieu and authoritarian military culture, not the CIO labor agitation and Communist-led Unemployed Councils of the same period. His self-designation of a “Texan Wobbly” was then a code of independent political radicalism as much as of nostalgic affinity for the militant working-class movement of a bygone era. Mills could not conceive of an existing working-class “whole way of life” in the same way Williams did and consequently rejected the “labor metaphysics” of Marxism.

However, even as a creatively radical, practicing Weberian, Mills did not fall into the Cold War default of anti-Marxism. His posthumous book *Marxists* accurately described Marx’ ideas as rooted in rationalism, secular morality, consistent humanism, and abiding belief in human freedom. He called “plain marxists” those who “work in Marx’s own tradition” as “a part of the classic tradition of sociological thinking” and, while “generally agree[ing] that Marx’s work bears the trademarks of the nineteenth-century society [...] his general model and his ways of thinking are central to their own intellectual history





and remain relevant to their attempts to grasp present-day social worlds” (Mills 1962: 98). Among the “plain Marxists” he listed Isaac Deutscher, William Morris, Rosa Luxemburg, Antonio Gramsci, György Lukács, Jean-Paul Sartre, Erich Fromm, and Edward Thompson, noting that “plain marxists have stressed the humanism of marxism, especially of the younger Marx, and the role of the superstructure in history”, “confront[ing] the unresolved tension in Marx’s work – and in history itself: the tension of humanism and determinism, of human freedom and historical necessity” (Mills 1962: 99). In stressing the significance of the early Marx’ humanism, Mills had in mind the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, a key document in Marx’ oeuvre. The *1844 Manuscripts* defined communism as “humanism”, “the true *appropriation* of the *human* essence through and for man [...] the complete restoration of man to himself as a *social*, i.e., human, being, a restoration which has become conscious and which takes place within the entire wealth of previous periods of development [...] the *genuine* resolution of the conflict between man and nature, and between man and man, the true resolution of the conflict between existence and being, between objectification and self-affirmation, between freedom and necessity, between individual and species” (Marx 1992: 348). This was also the text to which Thompson alluded when he took Williams to task for not sufficiently engaging Marxism in his attempt to build a comprehensive theory of culture: “His conclusion (if it is a conclusion) – ‘people change and are change’ – is of course the beginning of the problem: and it is exactly here, in 1844, that Marx began [...] we need a book as good as *Culture and Society* discussing the Marxist and *marxian* tradition in the same definitive way” (Thompson 1961: 31).

The *1844 Manuscripts* was published in 1932 in Moscow, where it was edited by David Ryazanov who was working under György Lukács, whose conception of Marxism was radically changed by it. But it did not become available in English until the 1950s when Raya Dunayevskaya translated an excerpt from the Russian translation and included it in an appendix of her *Marxism and Freedom: From 1776 Until Today* (1958). Fromm approached Dunayevskaya to translate the *1844 Manuscripts* for a collection, but she begged off on account of her insufficient understanding of the German language. The book that Fromm eventually published, *Marx’s Concept of Man*, with the British Marxist sociologist Tom Bottomore’s lengthier translation, popularized the *1844 Manuscripts* for a wider Anglophone readership. In chapter three of *Marxism and Freedom*, “A New Humanism: Marx’s Early Economic-Philosophic Writings”, Dunayevskaya elaborated at length on how “these early essays” expressed “in no uncertain terms, that only the revolutionary activity of the masses will do away with the alienation of labor, *the* contradiction of capitalist society” and that “for Marx, as for us today, nothing short of a philosophy, a total outlook – which Marx called, *not* ‘Communism’ but ‘Humanism,’ can answer the manifold needs of the proletariat” (Dunayevskaya 1958: 58-59).



*Marxism and Freedom*, published in the same year as *Culture and Society*, was a pathbreaking philosophical reassertion of Marxism as a dialectical theory of proletarian revolution from a Marxist-humanist perspective. Its chronological span generally corresponded to the period covered in *Culture and Society*, but its analysis took on the wider European political conflicts, including contemporary workers' uprisings in 1953 East Germany and 1956 Hungary. Dunayevskaya's Marxist-humanism, like Thompson's socialist humanism, was defined by revolutionary politics grounded in working-class experience; her activist life among the Detroit industrial workers, mediated through her political engagements in small radical left collectives which broke away from Trotskyism, informed her distinctively Hegelian rereading of Marx, in which each singular moment of class struggle was seen as a historical expression of the revolutionary dialectic in motion. Herbert Marcuse, with whose critical support and input *Marxism and Freedom* was published, did not see eye to eye with her on the nature of "agency and choice" about which Thompson was polemicizing. Marcuse viewed Dunayevskaya's criticism of "intellectuals, bureaucrats, etc." as dangerously close to reactionary anti-intellectualism prevalent in the 1950s U.S., while Dunayevskaya felt Marcuse was too pessimistic about the potentiality of working-class agency and disagreed with his overestimation of the power of advanced capitalist technology.

Marcuse and Dunayevskaya's differences can be observed partly in their contributions to the anthology *Socialist Humanism: An International Symposium*, edited by Erich Fromm. Dunayevskaya made a spirited argument for the maturation of early Marx' humanist insights in *Capital* and emphasized the impact of class struggle on its composition, noting how "The Working Day" reflected "the impact of the mass movement for the shortening of the working day following the conclusion of the Civil War in the United States" and the revision of "The Fetishism of the Commodities" was due to the experience of the Paris Commune (Fromm 1965: 63). Marcuse's "Socialist Humanism?", on the other hand, considered the proletariat as no longer a viable agent of historical change with the development of industrial society and accordingly posited "socialist theory" as only capable of indicating the "specter" of the "future agents of a historical transformation" as "the image of a vital need" and "develop[ing] and protect[ing] the consciousness of this need" to "lay the groundwork for the dissolution of the false unity in defense of the status quo" (Fromm 1965: 105). In other words, Dunayevskaya saw Marxist-humanism as a theoretical articulation of the actually existing working-class movement while Marcuse saw socialist theory as a necessarily "abstract idea" to oppose the actually existing systems of advanced industrial domination.

This latter issue was a bone of contention between the two when Marcuse had published *Soviet Marxism: A Critical Analysis* earlier in 1958. For Marcuse, the contradictions of Soviet Marxism were rooted in the same alienating, dehumanizing



structure of power that was found in “Western industrial society”, namely “the technical-economic basis common in both systems, i.e., mechanized (and increasingly mechanized) industry as the mainspring of societal organization in all spheres of life” but at the same time made an ambivalent assessment on the prospect of whether “Soviet nationalization, under the historical condition of its progress, does not possess an inner dynamic which may counteract the repressive tendencies and transform the structure of Soviet society – regardless of the real or alleged policies and objectives of the leadership” (Marcuse 1958: 5-6, 94). Dunayevskaya, in her review of the paperback edition of the book, polemically skewered the book every which way, attacking Marcuse’s self-avowed “immanent critique” with the charge of “endowing the rational with irrational features” and “becom[ing] party to the Stalinist sleight of hand substitution of their monolithic monstrosity for ‘the self-organization of the proletariat’” by “blaming everybody – Marx, Lenin, the proletariat, above all, the proletariat – in order to facing the reality of the new stage of capitalism – state-capitalism – which manifested itself first on the historical stage in the Stalinist counter-revolution in Russia” (Anderson and Rockwell 2012: 225). Dunayevskaya’s political experience, from Trotskyism to its American dissident faction Johnson-Forest Tendency to her Marxist-Humanist organization *News & Letters*, was distinguished by her empirically underwritten analysis of the U.S.S.R. as a state-capitalist system wherein working-class self-activity against alienated labor was as actively present as in Western liberal capitalism. In contrast, Marcuse maintained a deep pessimism about proletarian agency under advanced industrial conditions, an analytical trait he shared with the Frankfurt School with which he was associated, while entertaining the possibility of the liberalizing effect of the Khrushchevite Thaw for Soviet society and softening of hardline Cold War climate in the corollary moment of peaceful coexistence — a possibility he would write off by the time he published “Socialist Humanism?” seven years later.

Despite such differences, which involved a measure of misunderstanding over the theoretical terms of the debate as well as genuine disagreements in analytical presuppositions, it is arguable that, as Robert Spencer pointed out, “(i)t was humanism that unites the leading lights of the British New Left such as Raymond Williams and E.P. Thompson, the Frankfurt School and the dissidents in the Soviet bloc whose voices began to be heard after the partial thaw that followed Stalin’s death and Khrushchev’s speech to the twentieth party congress” (Spencer 2017: 130). Although Williams apparently never elaborated his views of socialist humanism, it is clear from his comments on humanism in the entry on “Humanity” in *Keywords* that its meaning was inextricably linked with his concern with culture:

What was picked out from a complex argument [from the German etymology of “humanism”], which belongs, essentially, with the contemporary development of CULTURE and CIVILIZATION (qq.v.), was the attitude to religion, and humanism in



this sense (as a positive word preferred to the negative atheism) has become common. But a broader sense of humanism, related to post-Enlightenment ideas of HISTORY (q.v.) as human self-development and self-perfection, also became established in C19, and this overlapped with a new use of humanism to represent the developed sense of humanist and the humanities: a particular kind of learning associated with particular attitudes to CULTURE (q.v.) and human development or perfection (Williams 2015a: 104-105).

In light of this definition, *Culture and Society* can be seen as an attempt to restore genuine humanism in defining culture, whose dominant discourse had become so narrowly and undemocratically conceived in interests of the educated elites at the exclusion of the majority of humanity and in denial of the social reality of capitalist exploitation under which they toiled.

In 1969, when Williams reviewed Marcuse's *Negations: Essays in Critical Theory* (1968), he noted a curious convergence of intellectual interest and critical stance about this conflicting notion of culture between them. While judging Marcuse "more wrong than right, in most of his general analysis" because "any instinct-theory, of a Freudian kind, is incompatible with the historical emphasis which is the most critical element in Marx, and with the emphasis on social learning which can also be taken from Marx and others", he found an essential affinity between *Culture and Society* and Marcuse's earlier writing from the 1930s, "The Affirmative Character of Culture". Just as "The Affirmative Character of Culture" sought to extract the liberating potentiality of "human self-development and self-perfection" for the proletarian multitude in culture as adumbrated by the Western philosophical tradition, from Aristotle and Plato to German idealism, and delineated the ideological limits that it posed, in both its original form and bourgeois rearticulation, *Culture and Society* was attempting a similar rescue operation for culture in the annals of modern English literature:

The particular interest of the essay, for me, is that its analysis corresponded so closely with a central theme *Culture and Society*, and that both were historical treatments, of very much the same problem, which were yet continents of countries apart in method and in language. It was a marvellous moment of intellectual liberation to read across that gap into a mind which in all but its central area of concern and value was so wholly other and strange,

Affirmative culture was the historical form in which were preserved those human wants which surpassed the material reproduction of existence.

This is exactly my own conclusion, of the essential origin and operation of the idea of culture, as it developed in England after the Industrial Revolution, at a time when we were very close, especially through Coleridge and Carlyle, to the German thought to which Marcuse's arguments relate. It is a sense of meeting, after a long separation [...] Reading this German essay from 1937, I felt Marcuse must have been here, especially during these last ten years. That is no particular reason for



recommending the essay, but at least it indicates the possibility of reaching across what had seemed, in abstraction, quite separate intellectual traditions: in the fundamental experience of a certain kind of society, and of the function, in it, of certain kinds of institutions and ideas (Williams 1970: 164-66).

We see in Williams' "reaching across what had seemed, in abstraction, quite separate intellectual traditions" towards Marcuse precisely the sympathetic attitude of seeking common critical grounds and perspectives delineated in *Culture and Society*, if with occasional misjudgments and unfair emphasis, and practiced in real life towards fellow sectaries of the New Left. No doubt, an element of radical political camaraderie he had keenly felt in relation to Marcuse and other intellectuals accompanying the New Left outside England was at work as well: "we see the world quite differently, at a level of primary experience quite as much as in developed intellectual work, yet the crises of imperialism and of late capitalism force us into necessary common (often defensive) positions" (Williams 1970: 164). He would soon reach further across the channel to enter into productive discussion with Lucien Goldmann and other figures of Western Marxist tradition, seeking to rethink his views on Marxism and literature in his teaching at Cambridge and in his writing in the 1970s. It is above all this fraternal tone and attitude to learn from fellow travelers belonging to different political traditions and from younger generation of radicals which distinguished the older intellectual "craftsmen", to use Mills' consciously chosen self-designation, such as Williams, Mills, Thompson, Marcuse, and Dunayevskaya in making them especially capable figures in succoring the formation of the New Left. Some of them may have disagreed with each other or with certain aspects of the new movement and expressed them openly, at times with surprisingly fierce, even uncharitable, intensity, but they did so without condescension. Williams was especially noteworthy for avoiding unnecessary polemics and taking the dialogical path as far as it would go.

*Culture and Society* demonstrated how such a productively dialogical approach was possible within the confines of English literary studies. While the book's content is limited to the scope of English national literature and its methodology is theoretically, perhaps necessarily, conservative, its historically specific radical stance should be placed within the broader global constellation of contemporary works of radical intellectual dissent, including Dunayevskaya's *Marxism and Freedom*, Marcuse's *Soviet Marxism*, Mills' "A Pagan Sermon to a Christian Clergy", and Thompson's "Socialist Humanism". Even if these texts descended from a different set of traditions and experiences and were responding to different currents of debates and discourses, they nonetheless shared an independently radical way of rejecting the "cultural Cold War". This should not be surprising, for the political pressures bearing on the authors were mediated through the same globalized power structure, shaped by the post-World-War-II formation of U.S. hegemonic "imperialism without colonies"; what *is* surprising is their extraordinary convergence, in their seeking, with all their theoretical, intellectual, and



stylistic variations, to affirm the power or potentiality of human agency, the realm of cultural, philosophical discourse, against the repressive ideological structure of Stalinism, economic determinism, and historical necessity. By each creating in his or her own way a discursive space and an intellectual style of radical opposition, they broke out of the Cold War ideological straitjacket that imposed a false choice between liberal capitalist West and state Communist East. Even if their individual efforts may appear modest in influence at the time, they would become seminal reference points in the making of the global New Left that developed some of their radically dissenting gestures and expressions into a movement against the totality of the Cold War structure.

### **Coda: Radical Opposition to the “Culture Wars”**

There is an obvious problem of anachronistically disfigured analogy, in the service of inflaming reactionary political passions of hateful partisanship, in Patrick Buchanan’s designation of “culture wars” as a successor to the Cold War. The Cold War, as a whole and in its specifically cultural dimension, was purposefully, often clandestinely, organized by each technologically militarized superpower against its ostensible enemy state and its allies over the span of over forty years; its major antagonisms took the form of brutal state repressions, from Soviet crackdown of East German workers revolt, Hungarian Revolution, and Prague Spring, to the U.S.-supported violent overthrows of democratically elected governments of Mossadegh in Iraq, Jacob Arbenz in Guatemala, Salvador Allende in Chile, Maurice Bishop in Grenada to the U.S. imperialist wars in Korea and Southeast Asia. By contrast, “culture wars” are an entirely domestic affair, involving not so much the actual violence of bombs, torture, tanks, and chemical weapons but, for the most part, the metaphorical violence of language, manners, and values; in short, “culture wars” hardly qualifies as a “war” in any meaningful sense of the word.

What then is the point of examining the “cultural Cold War” and its New Left intellectual antagonists in relation to the “culture wars”, if the analogy is so obviously flawed, analytically and historically? For one, some of the leading “conservative” pundits in the “culture wars”, such as Allan Bloom, Harold Bloom, and David Horowitz, have targeted the New Left specifically and the 1960s-70s social movements more generally as the serpent of social disobedience responsible for wrecking “traditional” moral values and intellectual inquiry and for presumably expelling us from the Edenic garden of Western civilization. At least in this aspect of grossly caricaturing the 1960s-70s movements and the New Left, they are cut from the same cloth as participants in the Congress of Cultural Freedom, which had flattened all communist, anti-capitalist traditions into a caricatured totalitarian nemesis and defined the world in Manichean dualism pitting Western democratic order against Communist disorder and unfreedom.



This demonization of enemy state power was mobilized primarily to suppress domestic dissent and restrict freedom of speech, with the House of Un-American Activities Committee, the loyalty oath, McCarthyism, and *Encounter* all playing their own part in the anticommunist crusade.

The “culture wars” are then a symptom of the post-Cold-War crisis of governing ideology in several ways. In the most crucial sense, the end of state socialist or state capitalist regimes of the Soviet Union and its East European satellites evacuated the rationale for preserving a U.S. empire of global military bases and weapons of mass destruction, whose destructive scale and astronomical cost have only increased in the past thirty years, regardless of the presidency in power. Such widely publicized books as Samuel P. Huntington’s *Clash of Civilizations* (1996) and Thomas L. Friedman’s *The Lexus and the Olive Tree* (1999) attempted to dissimulate the post-Cold-War nature of unipolar world capitalist system centered in the recalcitrantly aggressive U.S. military empire by defining contemporary world conflicts in terms of religious, cultural identities of Western and non-Western civilizations or in idealizing capitalist globalization as a universal solution to these conflicting cultural identities and traditions. Perry Anderson, in his editorial essay on the occasion of the *New Left Review*’s millenarian relaunch, wryly commented that “[i]t is scarcely an accident that the most ambitious and intransigent theorization of ultra-capitalism as a global order, Thomas Friedman’s *The Lexus and the Olive-Tree*, should at the same time be a brazen paean to US world hegemony, and an unconditional advocacy of Clintonism, under the slogan ‘one dare not be a globalizer today without being a social-democrat’” and lamented that the “confident genre of writing” on the Right by “Fukuyama, Brzezinski, Huntington, Yergin, Luttwak, Friedman”, which “unite[s] a single powerful thesis with a fluent popular style, designed not for an academic readership but a broad international public [...] finds no equivalent on the Left” (Anderson 2000: 7-8, 15).

We continue to live in the long shadow of ideological confusion cast by such reactionary culturalist arguments of “respectable” intellectual cant, as well as by the evangelical and fundamentalist Christian appeal to irrational patriotism and by QAnon, climate denialist, COVID-19 conspiracy theories; the multiculturalist liberal identity politics, which also conceals or marginalizes the reality of neoliberal imperialism, as we have witnessed under the Clinton, Obama, and now Biden regimes, has been equally guilty in promoting the divisive politics of the “culture wars” by deploying issues of racial and gender identities, abortion, and multiculturalism as the velvet glove to cover the mailed fist of corporate, financial power, which they have unwaveringly strengthened no less than their Republican counterparts. The brunt of this division has functioned to divide the general population, to prevent the formation of radical popular movements and working-class solidarity that could challenge both “conservatives” and “liberals” in their mutually reinforcing politics of cultural opposition.



Ironically, the voice of democratic capitalist reason fashioned in the New Deal economic policy of the early Cold War years (that is, prior to the post-1979 New or Second Cold War) has entered the political stage in the last two U.S. presidential elections through the Bernie Sanders campaign in the name of socialism. This is doubly ironic in the sense that Sanders' policy platform, from free public college tuition to expansion of the social security to Medicare for All to the Green New Deal, is essentially an extension of what used to be both the Democrats' and the Republicans' economic consensus and that this "old wine in a new bottle" bears the label of socialism. The distinctive definitional component of "socialism", according to Williams, lay in viewing "a competitive, *individualist* form of society – specifically, industrial capitalism and the system of wage-labour" as "the enemy of truly *social* forms, which depended on practical cooperation and mutuality, which in turn could not be achieved while there was still *private (individual)* ownership of the means of production" (2015a: 224). This is not to diminish the political significance of the Sanders campaign or the revived interest in "socialism" even as a nominally hopeful slogan in a zealously anticommunist society but to suggest the urgent need for radical interventions, critiques, and dialogues that can transcend the ideologically debilitating horizon of the culture wars, which have enabled the rightward shift of the Democratic Party and the authoritarian radicalization of the Republican Party, to say nothing of debasing the semantic substance of our political vocabulary.

In forging a radical opposition to the culture wars, we can do worse than to sift through *Culture and Society* and its coeval constellation of works of radical dissent to see if there is not something worth inheriting from their varied fund of critical intellectual and political efforts, forged out of Williams and others' particular experiences and commitments, to shoulder against the seemingly overwhelming weight of Cold War ideology. What we find useful we may refashion to break out of our own impasse, to search for and help come into being a radical social agency that will finally dispel the cultural illusions conjured by the political unconscious of neoliberal capitalism of the past forty years and uproot its structure entirely. That may seem a daunting task, but we should recall the social and political pressures impinging on Williams and his fellow New Left dissenters were far more intense and pervasive than what we are experiencing today. They had faced a virtually monolithic cultural status quo, organized systematically by an economically stable welfare capitalist state that extracted conformity from the general population in exchange for providing a social wage and a blue-collar union job or a white-collar salaried job, at least for the majority of the white male workers. In other words, their works of the late 1950s, taken as a whole, helped break an ideological encirclement structurally more embedded and widely supported than any of our existing status quo, whose lack of consensus and continuing uncivil division are precisely a measure of the impact that the movements associated with the New Left had exerted culturally.





We should recall that the signs of the neoliberal *longue durée*, which has fetishized culture into this divisive logic, were all too visible by the time Raymond Williams died in 1988, when Margaret Thatcher made the Bruges speech against European Commission president Jacques Delors' proposal to federalize the European Economic Community and Ronald Reagan signed the Canada-United States Free Trade Agreement (CUSFTA). Bruges speech presaged the Eurosceptic passage to Brexit while CUSFTA paved the way for NAFTA, each defining the hegemonic or, at least, dominant terms on which Britain and the U.S., respectively, would engage in the global neoliberal economy. Stuart Hall's 1988 *The Hard Road to Renewal*, which collected a series of conjunctural analyses over the preceding decade, located the crisis of the left and decline of the British Labour Party in the face of unremitting Thatcherite assault – which came to a head three years earlier when her administration smashed the nation-wide miners' strike against massive job cuts and legislative attack on trade unions and notoriously designated the militant workers as “the enemy within” – in their inability to express “the widest range of popular aspirations”, “actively shaping the culture and educating desire” in effectively renewed moral terms, which could rival Thatcherism's “perfectly focused conception of who its ideal subjects are, those who best personify its sacred values” (Hall 1988: 282). In other words, the battle was ceded and lost on the ideological terrain, in the Gramscian “war of positions”.

Hall's point is well taken and, with some modifications, can be applied to the U.S. case as well, insofar as the Democratic Party and the mainstream labor unions are concerned. In retaliation against Reaganite political hegemony, the fiscally conservative, centrist New Democrats, with Bill Clinton, Al Gore, and Joe Biden as their leading figures, shredded the New Deal social contract and, in socioeconomic policies, shamelessly mirrored their successful opponents. In Britain, a similar bargain with the neoliberal devil was struck as Tony Blair's New Labour raised the banner of “Third Way”, striking out Labour's commitment to nationalized public ownership in Clause IV of the party constitution and unequivocally affirming the virtues of market economy. An important predecessor of the “Third Way” was Labour politician Anthony Crosland, whom Edward Thompson had excoriated in “Socialist Humanism: Epistle to the Philistines” thirty years earlier. Thus, history came full circle, except now the aggressively rightward political landscape necessarily displaced Thompson's militantly romantic optimism with Hall's Gramscian “revolutionary pessimism” and turned Thompson's unambiguous, plain-spoken socialist humanist tocsin against Stalinism and for communist revisionism into, in Hall's well-argued polemics, a theoretically circumspect, even at times opaque, call for “socialism without guarantee”. Thompson was writing as an uprooted dissident Marxist who had shook the dust off the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) and embarking on the making of the New Left; while Hall was penning his critiques in the CPGB's theoretical house journal *Marxism Today*, as a leading voice of the multicultural Eurocommunist revisionism, whose conflict with the traditional industrial labor current,



along with the intractably bureaucratic nature of the party and collapse of the Soviet Union, finally resulted in the party's dissolution.

The ironic component in this historical reversal of fortunes for the left was that, culturally and academically speaking, the "war of positions" had, in fact, advanced in many discernible ways. *Culture and Society* and *The Making of the English Working Class* had become canonical texts in English literary studies and social history, respectively; Cultural Studies well established through the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at the University of Birmingham (until the Centre's closure in 2002) with various institutions, periodicals, and a plethora of publications across the world; Marxism, to say nothing of ethnic, gender, indigenous, and disability studies, also found their way into the curriculum, with many programs and degree certifications built around them; and no doubt, from media representation to public discourse, racial/ethnic minorities, women, and LGBTQ found a far more favorable, equitable climate than they did in the segregated, homophobic, and patriarchal high noon of Cold War New Deal and Labour regimes. This, of course, is not to say that structural violence against socially vulnerable populations has ceased; on the contrary, its reality can be easily verified by consulting the latest statistics of domestic violence, gender/racial income gap, rate of unemployment, police brutality, incarceration, and morbidity. What is deeply problematic, indeed cognitively dissonant to a vertiginous degree, is the gulf between the discernibly improved representation and this ignoble material reality.

Culture and ideology functioned as a stopgap to make this cognitive dissonance more bearable or at least explicable by reinterpreting the reality as a gateway to an indecipherably radical future or a deeply layered conspiratorial power structure. The avant-garde, accelerationist collective Cybernetic Culture Research Unit (CCRU), founded in 1995 by the University of Warwick faculties Sadie Plant and Nick Land, are an exemplar of the former; and the white nationalist radical right, most spectacularly manifest in the 1995 bombing of Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City, which Timothy McVeigh and Terry Nichols set off, emblemizes the latter. To be sure, CCRU did not commit any terrorist act, as much as its members may have styled themselves as intellectual terrorists mixing post-structuralism, technophilia, Dadaesque performance art, and anti-humanist futurology with an unhealthy dose of amphetamine and rave music. But their apocalyptic affirmation of uber-capitalism without restraint, rejection of rational discourse, and self-designation as a gnostic vanguard that did not require and, in some sense, was even contemptuous of the multitude, echoed coevally the apocalyptic anti-statist politics of the white nationalist militia, even if the latter's reference points – fetishistic idealization of the U.S. Constitution, evangelical Christianity, rightwing conspiratorial theories, and white supremacy – would have struck the CCRU crew as crude, reactionary, and intellectually vacuous. The ideological correspondence would deepen further after Plant's departure from CCRU, as it traversed



through an even more insularly cultish phase under Land's singular influence with its flirtation with numerology and the occult and, later, his own literal devolution into a "neo-reactionary" exponent of anti-democratic, hyper-capitalist, eugenicist, and racialist "Dark Enlightenment", which has formed into an important theoretical strain of the neo-fascist alt-right.

In 2012 Mark Fisher, CCRU's founding member who was also Plant's Ph.D. student at Warwick, paid tribute to Land's "withering assaults on the academic left" as a practice of "Spinozist-Nietzschean-Marxist injunction that a theory should not be taken seriously if it remains at the level of representation" and praised his "cybergothic remix of Deleuze and Guattari" as "superior to the original" (Fisher 2014: 342, 344). At the same time Fisher took exception to Land's "fatal" "deviation from their [Deleuze-Guattari's] understanding of capitalism" as "simultaneous processes of deterritorialization and compensatory reterritorialization" *à la* the creative-destructive vision of the revolutionary bourgeoisie in *The Communist Manifesto*. He advocated accelerationism as "an anti-capitalist strategy – not the only anti-capitalist strategy, but a strategy that must be part of any political program that calls itself Marxist" and reproved in advance "a kneejerk socialist humanism" "that might imagine" "the kind of intensification of exploitation when the spectre of accelerationism is invoked" (Fisher 2014: 345).

There is no doubt that Plant, who taught Cultural Studies at the University of Birmingham from 1990-1995, and Fisher, whose blog under the nom de plume *k-punk* commented incisively on everything from Christopher Nolan's Batman and credit card advertisement to goth and Spinoza which earned him a cult following, are, in one way or another, treading a path that Williams, Hall, and others have paved in theorizing culture as a conduit for understanding and transcending capitalist socioeconomic structure. This is especially true in Fisher's case, whose *Capitalist Realism, Ghosts of My Life* (which my friend Goi Kentaro has translated into Japanese, along with Nick Land's *Dark Enlightenment*), and posthumous *Postcapitalist Desire* demonstrate the kind of intellectually eclectic, radical cultural criticism we would have associated with Walter Benjamin in an earlier era, transposed to an anonymously fragmented, exhausted period of long neoliberal malaise. His critical notion of "capitalist realism", defined as "the widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but also that it is now impossible even to *imagine* a coherent alternative to it" (Fisher 2009: 2), directly opposes Thatcher's notorious statement at the 1980 Conservative Women's Conference ("There is no real alternative"), which widely circulated into a pervading ideology of TINA (there is no alternative). Fisher tethers the conceptual lineage of "capitalist realism" to Fredric Jameson's elaboration of postmodernism as the "cultural logic of late capitalism" and again invokes *The Communist Manifesto* and *Anti-Oedipus* as its theoretical antecedents. He cites the dystopian film *Children of Men* and Kurt Cobain's suicide as cultural events that indicate



how capitalism has thoroughly colonized our unconscious to the point of erasing even the last vestiges of modernism and any oppositional force or alternative outside capitalism.

In Fisher's protean (I am almost tempted to say "post-Fordist" in its immaterial linkages, disappearance of social subject, theoretical bricolage fusing ideas and insights unconstrained by their historical or philosophical contexts, ontological grounding in the sphere of consumption rather than production, rejection of moral, humanist principles) chain of cultural observations, a collective sense of radical political tradition or movement is conspicuously absent. Despite his working-class roots in the East Midlands, their afterimage does not haunt his prose in the way the experience of Welsh borderland working-class community does Williams' work; in contrast to Williams' combat experience in the Normandy invasion, which seared the inhumanity of war into his consciousness as part of an actively collective opposition to fascism, Fisher's formative experience of violence was directly witnessing the 1989 Hillsborough disaster at a football match in Sheffield, the most fatal sporting event in British history in which 97 died and 766 were injured due to the head crush caused by police negligence – a tragic event in which working-class agency was all but lost in a chaotic welter of overcrowding without any apparent political significance (apart from the police's self-exculpation of its erroneous crowd management by misdirecting the blame on "hooligans").

A similar, almost epistemological break can be drawn between Williams' student activist days as a Cambridge Communist in the era of Popular Front, before the onset of the Cold War, and Fisher's post-Cold-War immersion in CCRU's drug-fueled collaborative work of producing "theory fiction" in the interstices of Warwick campus and the city's subcultural encampments. Even if both evinced a characteristically youthful naivety and arrogance, the former in Stalinist dogma and socialist realism and the latter in accelerationist theorizing, the politics of the mass revolutionary party and labor movement that Williams and his generation presupposed is not even registered as historical memory for Fisher and his collaborators, let alone conceivable in real life. Even if CCRU's activities constituted an effective antidote to academic convention and careerism, they did not rise to the political level of Marx' injunction in the Fourteenth Thesis on Feuerbach to change the world; whatever degree of creative, free intellectual expression Fisher may have found in Land's Nietzschean theatrics, his laudatory designation of it as practice of "theory" beyond "the level of representation" shows an amnesiac alienation from the movement as thorough as Timothy MacVeigh and Terry Nichols' disillusionment with the Gulf War, as veterans in the U.S. Army, which led them not to the antiwar activism of Veterans for Peace but to the bombing of a federal building.



Noting these differences is intended not so much as a criticism but a recognition of a clear declension in our political culture and historical consciousness. After all, Fisher is six years my senior and committed suicide in 2017 at approximately my current age and I notice throughout his published oeuvre our common generational markers: popular culture and music as our existential root experience; suspicion of academic left/Marxism, with a visceral antipathy toward political correctness (Fisher was a pioneering critic of “cancel culture”); a search for anti-capitalist revolutionary political forms that reject the exhausted obsolescence of Bolshevik state socialism and social democracy and find genuine congruence with our current stage of capitalism; and a deracinated, to a virtually vanishing point, consciousness of our own class.

The last is particularly important because capitalism is, in fact, already always immanent with class struggle, even if its tensions and conflicts do not erupt into direct action, riot, and insurrection, remaining indecipherably cryptic under the breath or assuming distorted, self-destructive forms; indeed, as the late David Graeber, Fisher’s erstwhile colleague at Goldsmiths, made it his lifework to anthropologically prove in multitudinous ways, much of what we call capitalism cannot exist without everyday communist gestures and activities of mutual aid, which we call by other names.<sup>4</sup> This is why I value the “kneejerk socialist humanism”, which Fisher is so quick to dismiss, as relevant and necessary in our long, blighted neoliberal conjuncture; I also consider it one of the central inheritances of our Marxist tradition. Hence, when he says after Jean-François Lyotard that “the left subsiding into a moral critique of capitalism is a hopeless betrayal of the anti-identitarian futurism that Marxism must stand for if it is to mean anything at all” (Fisher 2014: 345), I find myself reflexively countering it with a quote from Edward Thompson in *The Poverty of Theory*: “Marx does not only lay bare the economic processes of exploitation, but also expresses (or presents his material so as to evoke) indignation at suffering, poverty, child labour, waste of human potentialities, and contempt for intellectual mystifications and apologetics” (Thompson 1995: 78). Without such moral indignation, premised on some universal biological conception of human nature, no matter how necessarily indefinable it may be, we would have no rationale to oppose capitalism, slavery, or any other form of oppression, finding ourselves seduced into the merciless, delirious nihilism of the free market precisely where we must unmask and burn its illusion.

Fisher’s invocation of the late, postmodern Lyotard is telling, as is Sadie Plant’s contextualization of the Situationist International as the presciently critical diagnostician of the postmodern condition in her *The Most Radical Gesture: The*

---

<sup>4</sup> There is a strong indication that, by the end of Fisher’s life, he was rethinking his earlier totalizing formulation of “capitalist realism”, as he incorporated autonomist Marxist ideas of working-class agency and Graeber’s arguments about “bullshit jobs”, as an extension of Marx’ notion of “general intellect”, and “standpoint epistemology”, in terms of practically constructed class consciousness. See, for example, his last lectures and discussion at Goldsmith in Fisher 2020.



*Situationist International in a Post-Modern Age*. Plant acknowledges the significance of Lyotard and Guy Debord's early days as members of the council communist *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, which refused the false alternatives of Western liberal capitalism and Eastern bureaucratic state socialism and sought to elaborate the revolutionary potential of proletarian self-activity, as did their Detroit-based American counterparts Johnson-Forest Tendency and Facing Reality (Dunayevskaya, C.L.R. James, Grace Lee Boggs, James Boggs, Martin Glaberman). But she does not follow them into the actually existing class struggles that inspired their ideas in the first place, be they the 1953 East German uprising, 1956 Hungarian Revolution that also initiated Thompson's self-admitted commencement of socialist humanist reason, and the Belgian "Strike of the Century" of 1960-61; instead she wanders, as did her CCRU cohorts, into the divarications of celebrated French theorists, from Lyotard and Foucault to Deleuze-Guattari and Baudrillard.

Just as Fisher himself was forged from a particular moment of class composition and the choices he had made under the duress of his passage through the historical strait gait of neoliberal class warfare from above, so were Williams, Thompson, Mills, Marcuse, and Dunayevskaya formed in their historically and geographically specific moments of class composition; so are we all. As an undergraduate in 1990s Austin, when I was reading Williams, alongside of these figures, including Plant's *The Most Radical Gesture*, Harry Cleaver, the autonomist Marxist economist who introduced me to Williams' *Country and the City*, taught me that *The Communist Manifesto's* ecstatic paean to the revolutionary bourgeoisie stemmed from Marx' empirically unfounded youthful enthusiasm on the eve of the 1848 continent-wide European revolution against absolutism; he also bade us to follow Marx into his late period, when he corresponded with Vera Zasulich and other Russian comrades to not idealize the analysis of *Das Kapital* as a blueprint of their country's economic development but rather find the possibility of "social regeneration" in the *obshchina*, the traditional Russian rural commons. Thompson, in his late years, made the major object of his historical study the English plebeian equivalent of *obshchina* in *Customs in Common*, which was published in 1991 just as the Soviet Union was collapsing. These radical historical investigations showed me that there were indeed alternatives to capitalism in the past and the Zapatista movement, which emerged from Chiapas, the southernmost state of Mexico, in 1994 to directly challenge NAFTA and its neoliberal world capitalist realism, an alternative future in the present.

Angela Nagle, who has painstakingly chronicled the current state of "culture wars", from online forums to college campuses where the alt-right has produced a groundswell of popular support for Trumpism, comments on an influential feminist Twitter user's tastelessly jocose mockery of Fisher's suicide. She cites it as symptomatic of the "anti-free speech, anti-free thought, anti-intellectual online" "cultural left" "identitarians who



undoubtedly drove so many young people to the right during these vicious culture wars” (Nagle 2017: 117-18). What Harry Cleaver in 1995 observed as a popularly effective, radicalizing “electronic fabric of struggle” that the Zapatistas used to disseminate their communiques and interweave a global network of solidarity has become, more than twenty years later, a divisively Hobbesian cesspool swarming with “embarrassing and toxic online politics” of “Tumblr-liberalism and a purely identitarian self-oriented progressivism” and “festering undergrowth of dehumanizing reactionary online politics” of alt-right’s untrammelled masculinist racism, Jewish conspiracies, and white supremacy (Nagle: 117, 120). The declension of political culture thus sinks even deeper into a nadir of absurdist miscommunication and defamation, replacing Williams’ invocation of a tightly knit, democratic working-class community of his upbringing with a virtual “community” of anonymously democratic exchange of character assassination and unrelenting bullying against anybody with the slightest dissenting view – the very embodiment of the unregulated amoral free market wherein hysterical desires and irrational prejudices run amuck to smash any competing ideas like the deluge of bad money driving out good money in Gersham’s law. By comparison, the rhetorical slings and arrows of Thompson’s argument with *The Long Revolution* or book-length screed against Althusserian structural Marxism seem like ingenuously fraternal, sustained literary expressions from a different bucolic epoch, down to its language and sensibility.

The problem of dysfunctional “culture and society” Nagle poses is a serious one, which cannot be resolved with a simple call to return to the “heroic” moment of the Anglophone New Left which produced *Culture and Society*, *Soviet Marxism*, *Marxism and Freedom*, *The Causes of World War III*, and *The Making of the English Working Class*. But we can look back at it and learn from it, just as Williams, Dunayevskaya, and Thompson reached back to the previous centuries to resuscitate arguments and struggles that could help them rupture the ideological default and apathy of the Cold War. The Black Lives Matter and Me Too movements, despite some of their participants’ identitarian impulses, have captured the arc of dissident popular consciousness in recent years and whether or not they will help recompose the working class against racial/patriarchal capitalism depends partly on what we ourselves do. Rereading Williams or any of these figures should be, among other things, an exercise in recovering the historical sense of our radical past, which neoliberalism has done so much to damage through the “culture wars”, and accompanying these actually existing movements towards precisely such revolutionary class recomposition.



## Works Cited

- Anderson, Kevin B., and Russell Rockwell (eds.) (2012). *The Dunayevskaya-Marcuse-Fromm Correspondence, 1954-1978: Dialogues on Hegel, Marx, and Critical Theory*. Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books.
- Anderson, Perry (2000). "Renewals." *New Left Review* II/1 (January-February 2000): 1-20.
- Buchanan, Patrick Joseph (1992). "Culture War Speech: Address to the Republican National Convention." 17 Aug. *Voices of America: U.S. Oratory Project*. <<https://voicesofdemocracy.umd.edu/buchanan-culture-war-speech-speech-text/>>. [accessed 15 Nov. 2021]
- Dunayevskaya, Raya (1958). *Marxism and Freedom*. Beacon Press.
- Fisher, Mark (2009). *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* Winchester: Zero Books.
- (2014). "Terminator vs Avatar." *#Accelerate: The Accelerationist Reader*. Ed. Robin Mackay and Armen Avanessian. Falmouth: Urbanomic.
- (2020). *Postcapitalist Desire: The Final Lectures*. Ed. Matt Colquhoun. London: Repeater Books.
- Fromm, Erich (ed.) (1965). *Socialist Humanism: An International Symposium*. Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Company.
- Hall, Stuart (1988). *The Hard Road to Renewal: Thatcherism and the Crisis of the Left*. London: Verso.
- (2016). *Cultural Studies 1983: A Theoretical History*. Durham, NC and London: Duke UP.
- Holm, Nicholas, and Pansy Duncan (2018). "Introduction: Cultural Studies, Marxism, and the Exile of Aesthetics." *Open Cultural Studies* 2: 746-57.
- Hunter, James Davison (1991). *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America*. New York: Basic Books.
- Inglis, Fred (1995). *Raymond Williams*. London: Routledge.
- Leavis, F.R. (2006). "Mass Civilisation and Minority Culture." *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: A Reader*. Ed. John Storey. Third Edition. Harlow: Pearson, 12-20.
- Marcuse, Herbert (1958). *Soviet Marxism: A Critical Analysis*. New York: Columbia UP.
- Marx, Karl (1992). *Early Writings*. Trans. Rodney Livingstone and Gregor Benton. London: Penguin Books.
- Mills, C. Wright (1962). *The Marxists*. New York: Dell Publishing.
- Nagle, Angela (2017). *Kill All Normies: Online Culture Wars From 4Chan and Tumblr to Trump and the Alt-Right*. Winchester: Zero Books.





- Rothman, Joshua (2014). "The Meaning of 'Culture'." *The New Yorker* 26 Dec. <<https://www.newyorker.com/books/joshua-rothman/meaning-culture>>. [accessed 15 Nov. 2021]
- Saunders, Francis Stonor (1999). *Who Paid the Piper: CIA and the Cultural Cold War*. London: Granta Books.
- Spencer, Robert (2017). "Postcolonialism Is a Humanism." *For Humanism: Explorations in Theory and Politics*. Ed. David Alderson and Robert Spencer. London: Pluto, 120-62.
- Summers, John H. (ed.) (2008). *The Politics of Truth: Selected Writings of C. Wright Mills*. Oxford: Oxford UP.
- Thompson, E.P. (1957). "Socialist Humanism: An Epistle to the Philistines." *The New Reasoner* 1: 105-43.
- (1961). "The Long Revolution." *New Left Review* 9: 24-33.
- (1985). *The Heavy Dancers*. London: Merlin.
- (1995). *The Poverty of Theory: or an Orrery of Errors*. London: Merlin
- Williams, Raymond (1960). *Culture and Society, 1780-1950*. Garden City, NY: Anchor Books.
- (1970). "On Marcuse". *The Cambridge Mind: Ninety Years of the Cambridge Review, 1879-1969*. Ed. Eric Homberger, William Janeway, and Simon Schama. Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 162-66.
- (2015a). *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*. Oxford: Oxford UP.
- (2015b). *Politics and Letters: Interviews with New Left Review*. London: Verso.