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Raymond Williams and Marxism

John Brenkman

Reds

For twenty years Western Marxists looked back to two historic moments to guide our theoretical work on society and culture: 1917 and 1968. As symbols, as historic watersheds, as reminder and conscience of political struggle, the Russian Revolution and then the events in Prague, Paris, and Mexico City and in the United States at the Democratic convention in Chicago and at Columbia University stimulated important work in every field of social and cultural theory.

As each generation of Marxists has faced coming to terms with Stalin, "Soviet Marxism," or "actually existing socialism," it has developed various explanations for the fate of the Russian Revolution. And at each turn there have been attempts to consolidate—and withstand—the criticisms of the Soviet Union by renewing the notion that 1917 remained a starting point and a benchmark for socialism in the twentieth century.

The proximity of the uprisings in Paris and Prague in 1968 gave a new twist to these resurrections of the Russian Revolution, namely, the belief that the struggle against Western imperialism and capitalism and the struggle against state socialism and Soviet hegemony were two sides of the same coin. The challenge to Western capitalism, we believed, would turn out to belong to the same struggle as the challenge to Soviet totalitarianism. From this perspective, the Russian Revolution could once again become a revolutionary start-

ing point. From this conjuncture flowed Rudolph Bahro's critique of actually existing socialism.

The sentiment that the revolutionary legacy had a future pervades a good deal of writing throughout the 1970s and into the 1980s, but the future began to dim as the decade of Thatcher and Reagan took hold tooth and claw. The 1980s rapidly eroded the whole project in which Marxist theory attempted to preserve the expectations and transformations of the 1960s.

An emblem of Marxist theory in the Thatcher-Reagan decade is furnished in the film written by Hanif Kureishi, *My Beautiful Laundrette*. Omar's Papa is a Pakistani journalist and socialist. Ailing and alcoholic, he lies bedridden in London watching his son trim his toenails for him. He berates Omar for succumbing to his rich uncle's enticements and admonishes him, "You've got to study. We are under siege by the white man. For us education is power." The socialist's son, however, is smitten with Thatcherite ambition and wants only to make money managing his uncle's laundrette. When Papa stumbles into the laundrette's grand opening hours late and encounters Johnny, Omar's long-time friend, a former skinhead turned entrepreneur, he can only shake his head and sigh, "The working class is such a great disappointment to me."

When this decade of greed and social regression in the West then culminated, so unexpectedly, in the revolutions of 1989 in the East, critical Marxism found itself, I believe, at an ultimate impasse. There were of course last gasps: "Now that the Soviet perversion of socialism has collapsed the West can finally have a genuine debate on socialism!" "The events in Eastern Europe finally prove that even actually existing socialism contained an inner dynamic propelling it toward change!" Despite such absurd claims, the liberation of Eastern Europe *from* socialism has shattered the mythological value of the Russian Revolution. It is no longer a meaningful starting point for envisioning social and political change. When the Berlin Wall fell, Humpty-Dumpty could not be put back together again.

The very project of critical or Western Marxism has been thrown into question. I do not mean to suggest that it is implicated in the fallen regimes. The differences in political conviction between Western and Soviet Marxism, or between critical and scientific Marxism, ran deep. What counts, rather, is that Western Marxism could not provide the intellectual tools or the political vocabulary

that the peoples and movements of the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe—let alone China—needed to struggle for their freedoms and rights and for justice within their societies. Western Marxism proved irrelevant to the great revolutionary moment at the end of the twentieth century.

As a result, socialism has been left to appear antithetical to democracy. Conversely, the anachronistic notion that capitalism is the cradle of democracy has gained prestige worldwide. Thatcherism and Reaganism have scored an unanticipated ideological victory that will continue to influence the processes of social and political renewal going forward in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union.

What then does it mean today to take up the topic of Raymond Williams's contribution to Marxism? It cannot be a matter of looking to his works simply for paths out of the current impasse. As regards Marxism itself, I believe the impasse is permanent. The need is for a rearticulation of socialism and democracy. And Williams's contribution to that theoretical and political task, which requires a critique rather than a renewal of Marxism, was immense.

As a novelist, Williams found sources for this articulation of socialism and democracy in his own earliest experiences as the child of working-class parents. As a political thinker, he sought to link socialism and democracy by interrogating the meaning of revolution and the vocabularies of modern politics. As critic and teacher, he revitalized socialist thought through his commitments to the democratization of culture. Through this multiplicity of his writing—fiction, politics, criticism—there emerges, I hope to show, a profound working through of some of the most urgent political and cultural issues of our time.

In the Name of the Father

It is significant that Williams's own historical benchmarks were not 1917 and 1968. They were 1926 and 1966, the year of the General Strike in Great Britain and the year that the Labour Party's return to power revealed how intent it was to make its pact with capitalism, NATO, and American imperialism. In 1926 Williams's father joined the General Strike at great risk to his own well-being and his fam-

ily's. In 1966 Williams himself left the Labour Party, with a pained and ominous sense that the future of socialism had just become far more difficult and far riskier.

Williams's most important intellectual contributions to literary and cultural studies were, I will argue, efforts to keep faith with these two historic moments and with the choices he and his father made in their drastically different circumstances. I am not thereby restricting the relevance of his thought to its national context—as though to explain what makes his Marxism so *British*—nor am I suggesting that the biographical benchmarks limit the import of his work. On the contrary, these pressures coming from his own political experience animate his thought and are key to its broader validity. Historical thinking cannot test its validity except against history, a history that is concrete and pressing.

Williams was five years old, his father barely thirty, at the time of the General Strike. The nation's miners were locked out when they refused a contract calling for dramatic wage cuts; the owners also sought a longer working day and the power to replace nationwide contracts with local agreements. The government of Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin, whose Tories had been brought to power by a red scare in 1924, refused to sustain the miners' wages through subsidies to the coal industry. When talks between the government and the Trades Union Congress broke down, the TUC called for a national strike in support of the beleaguered miners. More than 3 million workers struck for nine days before retreating; the miners suffered utter defeat and were eventually forced to accept the coal industry's conditions.¹

Williams explored his own relation to these events, and to the continuing importance of the strike in his own life, in his 1962 novel, *Border Country*. He later told an interviewer, "The chapter which describes the Strike is very close to the facts."² The autobiographical novel weaves together two stories. Matthew Price, historian and academic, has returned to his family's village in Wales at the time of his father's stroke. In the other, flashed-back strand of the story, the life story of the father, Harry Price, is told in the context of family and community life.

In 1926 Harry Price is a signalman in Gynmawr along with two other men, Morgan Rosser and Jack Merideth. Instructions come from the union to begin a work stoppage on Tuesday morning. Mor-

gan is the local secretary of the railwaymen's union and a dedicated socialist who sees in a general strike a weapon against the capitalist order. "We're saying we're the country," he tells Harry. "We're the power, we the working class are defying the bosses' government, going to build our own social system."³

Harry not only resists this view but warns Morgan that it will only backfire in trying to enlist Merideth in the strike. And indeed Merideth does refuse to strike. His is the last shift before the stoppage, and he refuses to sign out until another man comes on. He refuses to shut down the signal box. All three signalmen and their stationmaster, Tom Rees, are in the box that Tuesday morning, stalemated so long as Merideth does not sign out. Finally, Rees tells Merideth he will take over himself. It seems to be the act of a company man taking over his striking subordinate's duties, but as soon as Merideth signs out, Rees himself initiates the strike by closing the box.

By dramatizing the divergent opinions and motives of the three signalmen, Williams attempts to ground his story in their specific experiences of community and work. The men never "represent" ideologies. Harry is not motivated by any of the larger aims, but by his sense of allegiance: "I'll stand by the miners, if it comes to it."

The anticipation of a long strike throws him headlong into efforts to provide for his family. He is desperate to avoid debt. He resolves to pay the rent with a pound from his strike pay and then replenish that with the advance he hopes to get on his monthly one-pound payment as groundskeeper of the village's bowling green. His other savings he had recently spent "on a new honey extractor and a season's supply of jars." How precarious the family's finances might become, how the strike threatens to strain the villagers' reliable relationships with one another, how sullen Harry becomes under all the stresses he bears but refuses to express—all this Williams portrays through a series of small events that occur during the nine days of the strike.

Complicating the texture of this essentially naturalistic narrative is the mixing in of the young son's perspective. His *knowledge* of the events is sharply limited because of his age, and he is shown pursuing his normal activities with friends, school, and church. His *moral experience*, on the other hand, is somehow caught up in the crisis of

the strike. Indeed, the specific actions Williams recounts involve guilty actions: a misdeed and a false accusation.

After receiving a book for his part in a church school program, Will (as Matthew was called in childhood) hurls the book into a stream in plain sight of the congregation. His father retrieves it, and the family pass by the gathering of churchgoers, including their landlady, and walk home. The father says not a word until they reach the cottage, and then tells his wife, referring apparently to the humiliations of the community's gaze, "He's got his punishment." What Will does not witness is his father's encounter the next day with the landlady, when Harry brings her the rent and apologizes for his son's behavior:

Mrs Hybart put down the iron, and went across to the fire, "Well, they always say, boy. Like father like son."

"I don't know what you mean."

"The father goes on strike, the boy throws the book away."

"That's altogether different. I'm not apologizing for the strike."

"Well you ought to. Such daftness."

Having registered her opinion on the strike, Mrs. Hybart then perplexes Harry by refusing to take the rent. "When it's all over, boy, you can pay me then." Her parting words—"Forget this old strike."—reiterate her disapproval. Harry, as though declaring his intention to keep up his commitment to her *and* to the strike, retorts, "I shan't forget anything!"

The pound Harry intended for the rent figures in Will's other episode as well, which happened the day before the book-hurling episode. Just after Harry had calculated how he would use his strike pay for the rent and replenish it with his earnings from mowing, he learns that Will has lost the one-pound note a neighbor had given him to buy her groceries. With, as always, determined silence, Harry looks for the money without success, and then takes the family's rent money down to the store, buys the groceries, and delivers them and the change to the neighbor. It turns out, however, that the neighbor had never in fact put the money in the pouch she gave Will. He had been falsely accused of losing it. The scene's denouement includes father, mother, and son:

"I'm sorry. Honestly, I'm sorry," Harry said, and bent forward so that his head touched the boy's shoulder.

"Not for you to be sorry, Dada," Will said but pushed the head away.

Ellen came in behind them, quietly.

"I got the pound, Harry. And the twopence she made me bring, for Will's sweets."

"I don't want her old twopence," Will shouted.

"Leave it all," Harry said, sharply, and got up. "I'll hear no more about it. Now get the lamp lit, and we'll have some food."

Ellen, suddenly quiet, obeyed.

What began with the accusing father's regret ends with the husband's irritated commands. Harry's money worries toss him from paternal remorse to male authoritarianism. He is caught in the panic of his fear of debt in the midst of the community's ethic of mutual obligation. At the same time, he makes displays of authority to salve his wounded sense of his ability to provide.

While these typical pathologies of working-class men in crisis are rendered crisply as well as sympathetically, Williams's portrayal of Will's moral experience is more complex. What connects the false accusation and the misdeed, the missing money and the damaged book? I think the key lies in how much happens out of Will's earshot. He does not hear Mrs. Hybart compare him to his father. Yet it is by means of this identification of the son with the father on the basis of their misdeeds that the narrative creates a moral reverberation between the childhood memory and the historical record. The child's experience becomes implicated in historical events. In the other episode, the moral resonance lies in the fact that the son is accused of losing money just at the time of the family's greatest need. His negligence not only adds to the father's worries but also intensifies his sense of failure. By the same token, the son's guiltiness is itself very like the father's fear of failing in his responsibilities, and the falseness of the accusations ends up resembling the unjustified scorn the striking father has encountered from the schoolteacher and the landlady. Once again father and son are reflected in one another. Yet all these implications, too, lie just beyond Will's consciousness, since he is not privy to the difficult calculations his father was making at the very moment he himself supposedly lost the money.

The complex tie between the son's experience and the father's resides, therefore, in the connections the *writer* makes, not in those Will could have directly felt. The moral tropes that decisively con-

nect the son's experience to the father's have been constructed in the process of writing. They have been, to use a phrase from Williams's own critical lexicon, actively composed. If the novel is read naturalistically, such constructions are a kind of allegorical overlay. If it is read autobiographically, however, these fabricated parallels between father and son create, retrospectively, the son's *moral* tie to the father's *political* decision.⁴

The trope that makes the son mirror the father also fashions Williams's own relation to 1926. It links the writer and the story, and in turn links past and present in the shape of a moral commitment to the politics of the General Strike. Williams takes on a responsibility to keep faith with the strikers in his own political-intellectual activities, just as he continually pays homage to family and village. When he delivers a commemorative lecture on the fiftieth anniversary of the strike, he barely even alludes to the strike's causes and outcomes. Looking past the strike's failure, he instead stresses the political learning processes it unleashed in the consciousness of ordinary workers. From this perspective, what happened in the Welsh village where his father was a railway signalman becomes a crucially typical rather than peripheral event, the key to a continuing heritage rather than an isolated moment lost in the past.

Heritage of Revolt/Mythology of Revolution

Williams knew in his bones how important it is to keep faith with actual moments of rebellion, with histories of resistance and revolt. Such historical moments are filled with meanings without which our own search for social justice would be lost. The messages they send forth, however, are seldom obvious. Forty or fifty years later, what should be the political form of fidelity to the General Strike? Williams felt that question to be so urgent and so difficult that he had to write a novel to begin working it through. And he continued to work it through in each new political context he faced. Keeping faith requires a recurrent struggle with the meaning of the past as well as the present.

An ambivalence runs through Williams's responses to the resonance between 1926 and contemporary situations and problems. On the one hand, he draws from the General Strike the insight that peo-

ple's politicization and their readiness to govern themselves follow the arc of their everyday relationships and understandings. He carries this insight into his criticism and teaching. It informs his whole commitment to the democratization of culture. On the other hand, Williams also falls back on a mythology of revolution to interpret the General Strike, casting its brief flowering of direct popular power as a prefiguration of socialism. This interpretation, I will argue, distorts his political reflections on democratic and revolutionary traditions.

Paradoxical as it sounds, his fidelity to the General Strike radicalizes his commitment to the democratization of culture even as it confuses his political understanding of democracy and revolution. First, the problem of Williams's political reflection on democracy and then, in the next section, his contribution to the democratization of culture.

Williams starts out with a cogent account of the impact of the General Strike on the railwaymen, whom he considers genuinely industrial workers even though they were scattered throughout the country and lived in villages and on farms. Their participation in the strike, he argues, led them to see themselves as a force within society as a whole:

The part of the history that most needs emphasis, and that was actually very evident in that country station and in thousands of other places up and down the country, was the growth of consciousness during that action itself. What began with relative formality, within a representative dimension, became, in its experience, the confidence, the vigour, the practical self-reliance, of which there is so much local evidence; and this was not just the spirit of a fight; it was the steady and remarkable self-realization of the capacity of a class, in its own sufficient social relations and in its potentially positive social and economic power.⁵

This legacy of class consciousness was still palpable to Williams in 1977. A few months after his lecture at the National Union of Mineworkers' anniversary conference at Pontypridd, he wistfully recalled how at that commemorative event "it seemed incredible that there had not been socialism in Britain for fifty years."⁶

In his writings between 1966 and 1977, Williams tends to mythify the leap in consciousness experienced by his father and the other striking workers of 1926. He wants the workers' intensified sense of

their power within society to translate, more or less directly, into a vision of a socialist future. Accordingly, the striking railwaymen's self-reliance is made to prefigure—and prepare—what Williams considered the key to socialism: “the direct exercise of popular power.”⁷⁷

So what is wrong with this resoundingly democratic slogan? Assuredly, a general strike is a challenge to capitalist enterprises *and* to the government that supports them. There is strong evidence that when British workers confronted the government as an antagonist in 1926, they saw themselves as a class and glimpsed how they might shape the nation. And indeed the concerted collective action that workers undertake in a general strike can prefigure radically widened and deepened participation in political institutions.

The direct exercise of popular power is short-lived, however, whether it succeeds in its immediate goals or not. Direct popular power cannot establish, let alone instantiate, the *forms* of democratic participation. It can create the space for new democratic institutions, and it can bring new participants into the political sphere. But “direct popular power” cannot itself be institutionalized. Increased popular participation requires increases in the mediations, the complexity, the diversity of various decision-making bodies composed of different constituencies, driven by different needs and interests, and probably guided by varying principles and values. Democracy has to guarantee, even foster, plurality.

Williams was too enamored of the moment of class unity briefly embodied in the General Strike. It became the benchmark for his understanding of socialist democracy, especially in *Politics and Letters* and *Keywords* and even in the political essays from the 1980s collected in *Resources of Hope*. He does not fully appreciate the countervailing need for democratic institutions to fracture and diversify power. The solidarity of embattled workers and the bonds of rural communities so dominate Williams's image of socialism that he one-sidedly privileges the goal of social unity. Neither individual rights nor the plurality of social life finds an adequate place in his conception of socialist democracy.

The undervaluation of plurality and right is compounded by Williams's antipathy to the electoral process in Western democracies. His attitude congealed in the aftermath of his break with the Labour Party in 1966. Labour had won a hundred-seat majority in Parliament but proceeded to chart a conservative course. Prime Minister Harold

Wilson set out to break a seamen's strike and shortly afterward responded to a currency crisis by devaluing the pound sterling and cutting social programs. These events finalized Williams's sense that "the Labour Party was no longer just an inadequate agency for socialism, it was now an active collaborator in the process of reproducing capitalist society."⁸

Williams joined with E. P. Thompson and Stuart Hall to write the *May-Day Manifesto* in 1967–68. Under its aegis they helped form a national commission of leftist groups. "There was real unity," Williams recalled in his 1976 interviews, "against the Labour government's trade union legislation, against the emergence of Powellism, against the Vietnamese war." But in 1970 the group split four ways and collapsed in response to upcoming national elections. Williams belonged to a group that wanted to run Left Alliance candidates, an alternative that Left Labourites, the Communist Party, and other groups participating in the commission found unacceptable.

The bitterness Williams still felt six years later over the commission's demise expressed itself in a vituperation against elections:

It never reassembled. A movement which had managed to sustain a significant amount of left unity disintegrated over the electoral process—over whether it was permissible to make electoral interventions to the left of the Labour Party. *A strategy of common activity could survive anything except an election.*⁹

The blame is misplaced, however much the scheduling of elections can be a tactic to blunt opposition. The more salient issue is that the *Manifesto* commission was not yet ready to act in concert in a crisis that tested the various groups' loyalty to the ideologies, programs, and allegiances they had brought with them in the first place. Time never stands still politically, and new political identities always have to ripen in unpredictable weather. There is nothing unique about the electoral process's ability to nip political plans in the bud. Fluctuations in the economy, public opinion, or war can just as unexpectedly deplete or fuel an incipient process of political organization.

Williams's response stems, I believe, from his anger at Labour's betrayal of the legacy of 1926 in 1966. The party of our fathers had sold out the past. It had broken faith with the political traditions that led back to the General Strike. What, then, did it now mean to keep faith

in a context where no organization could legitimately claim to be the instrument of workers or the site of their unity?

Deeply troubled by this question, Williams responded with his interpretation of the General Strike as a prefiguration of revolution and socialism. He also began to revise his important concept of the long revolution—by which he had meant that social transformation was never a punctual event but a protracted process of change through many-layered social relationships and feelings. He dissociated the long revolution from electoral politics altogether. And, finally, he moved considerably closer to a kind of rejectionist critique of liberal democratic values.

The new critique of liberal democracy offers itself as a correction to the assumptions behind *The Long Revolution*, published in 1961. “In *The Long Revolution*, I did start to develop a distinction between representative and what I called participatory democracy,” he says in reply to a fairly aggressive question from *New Left Review* about the difference between “bourgeois democracy” and “socialist democracy.” “However, I certainly had not at that time developed a full critique of the notion of representation, which it now seems to me in its common ideological form is fundamentally hostile to democracy. I think the distinction between representation and popular power has to be now put very sharply.”¹⁰

The opposition between mere representative democracy (equated with electoral politics) and genuine popular power (equated with the General Strike) thematizes, in theoretical terms, the rupture between 1966 and 1926. Williams’s important discussion of “democracy” in *Keywords* is flawed precisely to the extent that it employs this theoretical opposition. He construes a polarity in the modern meaning of democracy between socialist and liberal alternatives:

In the socialist tradition, **democracy** continued to mean *popular power*: a state in which the interests of the majority of the people were paramount and in which these interests were practically exercised and controlled by the majority. In the liberal tradition, **democracy** meant open election of representatives and certain conditions (**democratic rights**, such as free speech) which maintained the openness of election and political argument. These two conceptions, in their extremes, now meet each other as enemies.¹¹

This antagonism at the extremes of meaning seems to refer to the cold war confrontation between NATO and the Soviet bloc, at the level of their political systems and of their legitimating rhetorics:

If the predominant criterion is popular power in the popular interest, other criteria are often taken as secondary (as in the **People's Democracies**) and their emphasis is specialized to "capitalist democracy" or "bourgeois democracy." If the predominant criteria are elections and free speech, other criteria are seen as secondary or are rejected.

The sense of symmetry obfuscates an important difference. The Western democracies actually have elections and various guarantees of free speech, but the regimes of the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe (the "people's democracies") in the 1970s were in no way advancing or institutionalizing "popular power in the popular interest." By failing to account for the specific cynicism and emptiness of Soviet rhetoric or to distinguish its duplicities from those of Western cold war rhetoric, Williams created the impression that the tension between the liberal and socialist understandings of democracy was as stalemated as the cold war itself.

The semantics of extremes grossly oversimplifies the liberal tradition. Western denunciations of the Soviet system in the name of freedom, democracy, or rights have run a complex gamut from demonization to engaged critique. Hannah Arendt, Claude Lefort, and George Konrad cannot be thrown in with the Richard Nixon of the 1950s or the Ronald Reagan of the 1980s.

When Williams turns to spell out what criteria of democracy are subordinated or rejected in the liberal tradition (in symmetry with Soviet denunciations of "bourgeois democracy"), he skips the intricacies of anti-Soviet discourse altogether. Instead, he portrays the liberal tradition quite narrowly in its Tory guise as a repressive force against British labor:

If the predominant criteria are elections and free speech, other criteria are seen as secondary or are rejected; an attempt to exercise popular power in the general interest, for example by a General Strike, is described as **anti-democratic**, since **democracy** has already been assured by other means; to claim economic EQUALITY . . . as the essence of democracy is seen as leading to "chaos" or to **totalitarian democracy** or *government by trade unions*.

The polarization of Toryism and the working class within Great Britain is thus made parallel to the cold war polarization of West and East, and both are then said to embody the fate of the modern liberal and socialist meanings of “democracy.” What gets completely lost is the fact that the liberal and socialist traditions have themselves developed complex, ambiguous understandings of democracy.

The semantic promiscuity of “democracy” bothers Williams. Everybody uses it. “**Democracy** was,” he writes, “until the 19th century a strongly unfavourable term, and it is only since the late 19th and early 20th century that a majority of political parties have united in declaring their belief in it.”¹² Faced with the many hypocritical and propagandistic uses of the term, Williams concludes with a strange lament that harks back to a supposedly simpler time when “democracy” could have been appropriated with a cleaner, unambiguously oppositional meaning since it was mostly used negatively by ruling classes to express their contempt for the very idea that the multitude of poor might rule: “It would sometimes be easier to believe in democracy, or stand for it,” Williams writes, “if the 19th-century change had not happened and it were still an unfavourable or factional term. But that history has occurred, and the range of contemporary sense is its confused and still active record.”¹³

“Its confused and still active record”—Williams has painted himself into this corner. For the idea that socialism stands for an unequivocal sense of democracy is an illusory effect of his polarization of the liberal and socialist traditions. As he otherwise demonstrates so powerfully in *Keywords*, lexical problems *are* political problems. And the difficulties of meshing socialism and democracy are profound. They do not arise because liberals have misappropriated the term *democracy*. Socialism has tremendous antidemocratic potential that cannot be dispelled by appeals to egalitarianism. This antidemocratic potential is just as intrinsic to socialism as it is to capitalism, and just as dangerous and damaging.

I reread Williams's remarks on the Chinese Cultural Revolution with sorrow:

It is an indispensable condition of socialist democracy that the division of labour should be challenged by regular participation of everyone in ordinary labour. The fact that the Chinese did not fully put it into practice or that certain people were exempted from it doesn't change the fundamental principle at all. That principle has never been so

clearly and powerfully enunciated as in the Cultural Revolution. I do not think that anyone should manage or administer any form of labour without the knowledge that they themselves will perform it, as well as, preferably, having come from it. When I heard pathetic stories about professors being taken from their libraries and laboratories and sent to help bring in the harvest I felt totally on the side of the revolutionaries.¹⁴

These remarks are all the more striking because they come in a passage of the *New Left Review* interviews where Williams had just warned about the capacity of Western leftists to display more political passion about distant or long past struggles than about their own: "A particular kind of political alienation can occur when people opt for revolutionary processes which have happened elsewhere, coming alive more when they are relating to those than when they are engaging with the drabness of their own situation."¹⁵

In the next breath he glorifies the Chinese Cultural Revolution as though it was pointing the way through the thorny problem of squaring freedom and equality at the level of the division of labor. What reveals a more poignant "political alienation" than a Western intellectual dubbing the Cultural Revolution an exemplar of *socialist democracy*?

And yet Williams's attitude was widely shared in the mid-1970s. I made Mao's *Four Essays on Philosophy*, especially "On Contradiction," a central text in the first seminar I taught on theory in 1975, buoyed by the *Tel Quel* project and Althusser's *For Marx* and *Lenin and Philosophy*. In the immediate wake of the 1960s, "cultural revolution" seemed to name a generalized set of processes transforming societies worldwide. Our hopes for radical political transformation in the West had been dashed, and yet we had an ongoing experience of significant transformations in everyday life and in culture. Much of the impetus for the initiatives in cultural theory in the mid-1970s was a desire to consolidate the gains and redeem the losses of the 1960s through a concept and practice of cultural revolution.

Many of us too easily lost our moral-political bearings in this context regarding the People's Republic. Ignorance of what was really going on found a convenient alibi in the complexity of events and in the Western supposition of Chinese inscrutability. The romance of revolution effortlessly transformed the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution into a symbol of radical political renewal. The Red

Guards through whom the Chinese leadership wielded power became an icon of the European and American student movements as their own political potential was dissipating.

There is a haunting irony in the fact that a *student* movement in the West could symbolize its highest aspirations in the repression of intellectuals and the programming of young people's thought in China. As the *New Left Review* interviewer put it in a pointed rebuke of Williams's comment, "It is far more important in China today that everybody should have equal access to political information than that professors should bring in the harvest."

Against Distinction

I want to turn now to the alternative trend in Williams's fidelity to the General Strike of 1926. He saw that the whole process that altered the strikers' consciousness of themselves and their society was a development from, not a break with, their everyday experiences, relationships, and forms of communication. Culture was a resource for their critical awareness of society and their vision of a fuller participation in its institutions.

Williams kept faith with this insight in the whole project of his literary and cultural criticism, embodying it in a commitment to the democratization of culture quite unparalleled in the Marxist tradition or in contemporary theory more generally. In the topics and methods of his criticism he sought out paths to demonstrate how the production of culture is the result of the accumulated learning, coordinated efforts, and shared understandings of human beings in their social relationships.

He experimented with concepts like "structure of feeling" to explain how even the most innovative moments in literary history are evidence of some emergent set of social perceptions, dispositions, or attitudes shared by a group. He was seeking an alternative to the concept of ideology, which, since Marx, was laden with the assumption that culture is merely a distorted consciousness of real social practices. He increasingly distanced himself from Marxism. By the time he wrote *Marxism and Literature* he was systematically detaching his own cultural and literary criticism from the concept of ideology.

He had gravitated much closer to the sense of culture introduced by the early Marx and then abandoned, namely, the notion that culture is a set of material-social practices that are not categorically different from the material-social practices typically designated as “economy” or “material production.” This notion runs directly counter to the basic paradigm of Marxist cultural theory. Marxism categorically separates “society” and “culture,” whether the two terms are then conceptualized as base and superstructure or material reality and consciousness or social relations and representation or the economy and the symbolic. Williams shows how the key models of Marxist cultural and literary interpretation—reflection, mediation, typification, homology, correspondence—remained in thrall to the base-superstructure model at the heart of Marx’s own theory of ideology.¹⁶

Williams rejects the idea that social classes in capitalist society have radically distinct or separate cultures (bourgeois culture, proletarian culture). The developed forms of the modern public sphere, citizenship, and education leave no social group utterly insulated from the dominant culture. At the same time, Williams rejects the notion that the dominant culture itself is merely imposed on subordinate groups and classes. The dominant classes are not so singly the authors of the culture, and the subordinate classes are not so passive as the model suggests. The prospect or the possibility of a *common culture* has, in Williams’s view, been irreversibly planted in the development of modern Western societies.

The new forms of multiculturalism in contemporary society may well have sounded the death knell for the ideal of a common culture, and they are undoubtedly posing a new challenge to the relation between plurality and equality. But to understand Williams it is crucial to see how a common culture served as an ideal in his work. He did not presuppose that there already was a common culture, let alone that, as in F. R. Leavis, it could be comfortably located within the habits and prejudices of a particular stratum of society.

It was primarily in the domain of educational reform that Williams advanced the idea of a common culture as a goal. He advocated several measures together designed to radically reform education. The scope of the minimum education provided every child in elementary and secondary school should be expanded; tiered or tracked systems of schooling up to the age of sixteen should be bro-

ken down; students should be trained in democratic deliberation and decision through “their participation in the immediate government of the institution they attend”; instead of being pressured to quickly acquire specific credentials for an intended occupation or profession, young people age sixteen to twenty-five should be given a wide range of postsecondary education options and the freedom to revise or experiment with their choices; some form of continuing education should be guaranteed for all adults, and employers should be required to make provision for it. With his call for “a public education designed to express and create the values of an educated democracy and a common culture,” Williams turned the arrogant, traditionalist, class-bound idea of a common culture into a radical, open-ended vision of people’s widening participation in changing forms of literacy and learning.¹⁷

The same preoccupation informs the most basic premises of Williams’s literary criticism and theory. He approached literature as part and parcel of the history of literacy. Literature/literacy—there is no more basic ground, etymologically or empirically, on which to understand literary history or the relation between literature and society. Yet literacy long remained a marginal topic of literary studies. Williams not only makes it central but also construes “literature” more broadly than any modern critic. The phrase he chose to title his most important collection of essays—“writing in society”—might well serve as his definition of literature.

The connections between literature and literacy cut two ways. Since reading and writing have to be taught in an organized manner, “the introduction of writing and all its subsequent stages of development are intrinsically new forms of social relationship.” By the same token, the social relationships that shape literacy shape writing: “It was only at some point in the nineteenth century, very late in the record of English literature, that the majority of English people could read and write. It is impossible to imagine,” Williams dryly asserts, “that this had no effect on what was written and what was read.”¹⁸

The social unevenness of literacy and learning not only shapes what is written and read and how it is written, it also shapes how it is read. As Pierre Bourdieu has shown, social classes in capitalist society use their education and orchestrate the whole range of their cultural preferences, from eating to musical taste, to differentiate themselves from others, or to accept their differentiation from oth-

ers, on the basis of *distinction*.¹⁹ In the specific domain of literature, confirming one's social distinction is ingrained in the motives and rewards of reading. The "social conditions of the education of readers—and, more generally, of interpreters—affect the way they read the texts or the documents they use."²⁰

As a critic and teacher, Williams devised various strategies for cutting against the grain of distinction in the reading of texts. He sought to give the reinterpretation and appropriation of literary traditions a contrary value. Reading should be a learning process in which the potential leveling of social hierarchies becomes palpable; it should sharpen the perception of both the elements of commonality and the elements of domination—the civilization and the barbarism—in cultural creations.

Always alert to the institutional context in which he worked, Williams inflected his democratizing strategies with interestingly different emphases when it came to elite and nonelite education. Several of his early books—*Culture and Society, 1780-1950*, *Drama from Ibsen to Eliot*, *The English Novel from Dickens to Lawrence*—grew directly out of his years of teaching adult education. His aim was to enable adult working students to lay hold of the intellectual and literary traditions that, in the complex history of social exclusion and cultural distinction, had become the prevalent trends in cultural criticism, drama, and the novel. Students were not being invited to an exercise in abject appreciation. They were, rather, being provided with the competence and mastery needed to understand, on their own terms, just those texts that the culture of distinction continually tried to put beyond their grasp.

A red thread running through these early books is the modern debate over culture and society. His adult students were being invited to see themselves as participants in that debate. "In speaking of a common culture," Williams wrote, "one is asking, precisely for that free, contributive and common *process* of participation in the creation of meanings and values, as I have tried to define it."²¹

Williams demystifies without denigrating the complexity and learning accumulated in texts by Dickens or Ibsen or Eliot. His criticism tends to describe forms by breaking down the various means of expression or "composition" or construction the authors employ. He tends to show how dramas and novels get made, but he roman-

ticizes neither genius nor craft. Nor does he cast the reader's decipherments as heroic acts of unconcealing or demythologizing. Rather, he tends to put the writer's process of artistic construction and the reader's process of interpretive reconstruction more nearly on the same footing. Reading and writing become the two sides of a shared competence. Williams theorized this reciprocal relationship in *Marxism and Literature* in terms of the sociality of language: "It is a socially shared and reciprocal activity, already embedded in active relationships, within which every move is an activation of what is already shared and reciprocal or may become so."²²

Shared competence and reciprocal relationship do not imply unexamined consensus. By foregrounding the continuing modern debate over culture and society as well as the social relationships within which literature is produced, Williams linked culture to critical reflection. He was readying readers to participate in those debates and in the active making and remaking of culture.

An essay that reflects these pedagogic and critical values is the introduction Williams wrote in 1969 to a volume of the *Pelican Book of English Prose*. A sketch of the social origins and education of writers in English literary history alerts his readers to the role of the social divisions running through British culture:

It is still quite clear in Britain today that there is not only a marked inequality of representation in writers, as between different social groups, with the majority of writing still coming from a highly organized middle class; but also, in relation to this, a definition of interest which has to do with their quite common educational background, which only a few share with the majority of their potential readers.²³

The essay's accent falls on opening this majority's access to a literature not written for them. While society controls access to education and participation in the public sphere, the resulting literature also holds out the prospect of an experience that is not wholly bound by these contours of social exclusion and hierarchy. Writing and reading are a social transaction that can displace or realign the social relationships within which the writing was produced. While "society determines . . . the writing of literature," it is also the case that

the society is not complete, not fully and immediately present, until the literature has been written, and that this literature, in prose as often as any other form, can come through to stand as if on its own, with an in-

trinsic and permanent importance, so that we can see the rest of our living through it as well as it through the rest of our living.²⁴

What can sound to more jaded postmodern ears like a simple faith naively expressed is in fact Williams's significant and principled stand for the idea that every literate citizen is but a few semesters away from a capacity to engage literature amply and critically, and to do so by bringing his or her own experience to the act of reading.

Williams held to a humanism in his understanding of textuality and reading. It kept him at a distance from the antihumanism of theorists like Althusser, Foucault, and Derrida. Like the radical Puritans of the seventeenth century and today's liberation theologians, Williams believed the interpretation of even the most complex and sacred texts is within everyone's reach. To put it in their grasp is the responsibility of writers and teachers in struggles within all the institutions and discourses of culture.

A democratizing appropriation, making the culture one's own, is also necessarily fraught with ambivalence. It needs to be an articulate ambivalence. A model is Williams's own *The Country and the City*. His project is to connect English literature's complex history of nature poetry, pastorals, and country settings to the crushing history of feudal and capitalist exploitations of the land and the landless. Those exploitations of the past are still visible in the beautiful landscapes and architecture of the English countryside. Visible, but not immediately recognized. The history of social relationships is easily effaced from consciousness even as it fills the whole visual field of consciousness. Monuments of civilization are also monuments of barbarism. It is the task of criticism then to appropriate and protest at the same time.

Williams, the Welsh railway signman's son, analyzes country-house poems and the place of the country estate in British fiction through a fiercely personal assessment of English mansions:

Some of them had been there for centuries, visible triumphs over the ruin and labour of others. But the extraordinary phase of extension, rebuilding and enlarging, which occurred in the eighteenth century, represents a spectacular increase in the rate of exploitation: a good deal of it, of course, the profit of trade and of colonial exploitation; much of it, however, the higher surplus value of a new and more efficient mode of production. It is fashionable to admire these extraordi-

narily numerous houses: the extended manors, the neo-classical mansions, that lie so close to hand in rural Britain. People still pass from village to village, guidebook in hand, to see the next and yet the next example, to look at the stones and the furniture. But stand at any point and look at that land. Look at what those fields, those streams, those woods even today produce. Think it through as labour and see how long and systematic the exploitation and seizure must have been, to rear that many houses, on that scale. See by contrast what any ancient isolated farm, in uncounted generations of labour, has managed to become, by the efforts of any single real family, however prolonged. And then turn and look at what these other "families," these systematic owners, have accumulated and arrogantly declared. It isn't only that you know, looking at the land and then at the house, how much robbery and fraud there must have been, for so long to produce that degree of disparity, the barbarous disproportion of scale. The working farms and cottages are so small beside them: what men really raise, by their own efforts or by such portion as is left to them, in the ordinary scale of human achievement. What these "great" houses do is to break the scale, by an act of will corresponding to their real and systematic exploitation of others. For look at the sites, the facades, the defining avenues and walls, the great iron gates and the guardian lodges. These were chosen for more than the effect from the inside out; where so many admirers, too many of them writers, have stood and shared the view, finding its prospect delightful. They were chosen, also, you now see, for the other effect, from the outside looking in: a visible stamping of power, of displayed wealth and command: a social disproportion which was meant to impress and overawe.²⁵

The physicality of the class society persists down into the present not only in the presence of the country houses but also in the modern reclamation of them. For every house turned to "some general use, as a hospital or an agricultural college" others have become "the corporation country-house, the industrial seat, the ruling-class school."

The *New Left Review* editors would later scold Williams for "eclips[ing] history seen as a cumulative development of forces of production and division of labour, which in and through the very forms of social stratification and exploitation has been responsible for the growth of real human gains." Yes, yes, of course, he replied, the country house or the cathedral was built as part of an earlier period's perhaps inevitable form of creating wealth and developing society. Nevertheless, he added:

The nature of their power does not necessarily end, in the tidy way the simplest kind of Marxism suggests, with its epoch. The cathedrals are not just monuments to faith, the country houses are not just buildings of elegance. They are constantly presented as “our heritage,” inducing a particular way of seeing and relating to the world, which must be critically registered along with our acknowledgement of their value.²⁶

The struggle over what our heritage shall be, and how it will be used, is the critic and teacher’s daily battleground. The work that flowed most directly from the context of adult education stressed the mastery of forms and the learning of history. Williams’s emphasis changes with his appointment to Cambridge in the mid-1960s. New problematics arise, in particular, over how to apply the aesthetic and intellectual understanding of the past to the present. In short, what are the alternatives to “distinction” in the appropriation of culture within elite education?

Williams tells a marvelous, self-mocking anecdote about how he came to write *Modern Tragedy*, a book the editors of *New Left Review* among others consider his “most militant text.” His first lectures at Cambridge were to be a course on modern tragedy. To avoid having to prepare, he decided to rip off and recycle his 1952 book, *Drama from Ibsen to Eliot*:

But in the process of giving the lectures, with a particular awareness now of the more general debate over the nature of tragedy, they became transformed. It was as if I went into the lecture room with the text of a chapter from *Drama from Ibsen to Eliot* in front of me, and came out with the text of a chapter from *Modern Tragedy*. The same authors are discussed in the two books, the same themes developed, the same quotations used—which is the key point of continuity.

Faced with students for whom “the idea of revolution had—if not the impact of the late sixties—already a significant resonance,” Williams transformed a textbook on dialogue and staging into a treatise on tragedy and revolution! What had been practical criticism for workers and adult students became ideology critique for radicalized elite students. “It is a curious fact,” he muses, “that I was being a relatively sound academic before I was in academia. Once I was in it—. I think the connection isn’t accidental.”²⁷

The chapter entitled “Tragedy and Revolution,” written in 1965, is

one of Williams's most searching essays. He marshals a whole reading of tragic drama and of the relevant traditions of the idea of tragedy and then brings that cultural heritage to bear on the understanding of contemporary history. The use of heritage is for critical reflection on the present. In inaugurating his Cambridge teaching with this project, Williams challenged the culture of distinction and turned a kind of knowledge acquired by social privilege to a new task.

In substance the essay works out a tragic-revolutionary view of modern history. On the one hand, Williams insists on the tragic character of modern political and social transformation. On the other hand, he affirms his commitment to the transformation of capitalist society. He holds a decidedly humanistic and moral perspective on societies. A society is in need of revolution to the extent that "the incorporation of all its people, *as whole human beings*, is in practice impossible without a change in its fundamental form of relationships." The source of the society's disorder, the violence already wound into its institutions and structures, is the product of social division and exclusion. In such a society, the everyday acquiescence to disorder is called order:

We expect men brutally exploited and intolerably poor to rest and be patient in their misery, because if they act to end their condition it will involve the rest of us, and threaten our convenience or our lives. . . .

We have identified war and revolution as tragic dangers, when the real tragic danger, underlying war and revolution, is a disorder which we continually re-enact.

For Williams, the forms of tragic drama illuminate the nature of modern social transformation: "The tragic action, in its deepest sense, is not the confirmation of disorder, but its experience, its comprehension and its resolution."²⁸

In a strategy strikingly different from the building of cultural competence in adult education, Williams's Cambridge lectures on tragedy mobilize the intellectual and aesthetic resources of Western tragic drama for a pointedly oppositional interpretation of history and society. He sought to displace the culture of distinction with a tragic-revolutionary appropriation of the cultural heritage.

There are, then, perhaps three registers of Williams's criticism. In *Modern Tragedy*, the knowledge of a tradition is turned from a

badge of social distinction into an instrument of political reflection. *Culture and Society* or "Notes on English Prose," in contrast, reconstructs the intellectual and aesthetic skills of reading, imparting to new readers a capacity to experiment with active cultural-political interpretation, to join the debate on culture and society in the very act of appropriating traditions into their own life world. And, finally, in a third register, *The Country and the City* asks how a society's forms of wealth and power are embodied in its structures of feeling and its modes of expression; cultural forms, from poems to the cultivated landscape, are found to be ambiguous ciphers of human achievement and human violence.

These three registers of Williams's criticism are not united methodologically. Each took shape in the context of particular institutions and practices. Each proceeds from a distinct assessment of criticism's role in the public sphere. Moreover, as a critic, Williams continually plunged into new empirical complexities before completing his theoretical clarifications. Nevertheless, his diverse projects share a common intent: to challenge the culture of distinction by deepening and broadening the democratization of culture.

Heretical Empiricist

Williams was ultimately of two minds when it came to the meaning of revolution and social transformation. Debating revolutionary theory with *New Left Review*, he oscillates between a latter-day Leninist vision of revolutionaries capturing state power and the contrary vision in which layers of socialist transformations have to be accomplished *before* the state can be loosed from the imperatives of capital. First:

I have no doubt that the short revolution, to use that phrase, also has to occur. I wouldn't at all dissent from the traditional notions of the violent capture of state power.

And then:

So I am always uneasy about talk of short revolution when the problems of the run-up to it have not been fully appreciated. I have found that most of the images of the inherited tradition do not bear very much on this complicated process of preparation and learning.²⁹

The contradiction is glaring. The “images of the inherited tradition” and the “traditional notions of the violent capture of state power” are, after all, the exact same thing.

Despite the power and insight of the essay “Tragedy and Revolution,” it is haunted by an unsolved problem. Resonant with Hegel’s idea of the “causality of fate,” Williams postulates that the unjust society is a torn whole. And, like Marx, he seems to imply that those most oppressed or excluded by the disordered order of society are driven to overthrow it. But it is just that Marxian assumption that Williams in fact does not make. Nowhere in his work does he project the proletariat as the historically necessary agent of revolutionary change. The moral imperative to change society is not objectified in any group. His temptation to this view, or, at least, his failure to set it aside—“I see revolution as the *inevitable* working through of a deep and tragic disorder”³⁰—is what led him in the decade that followed this essay to idealize the General Strike of 1926 and mythologize the Chinese Cultural Revolution.

The insights and the difficulties in Williams’s idea of tragedy and of revolution stem from the difficulty he had in interpreting the direction of the workers movement in light of the Labour Party’s integration into capitalism. The crisis form of that question burst upon him in 1966. Social change revealed its tragic face. Henceforth the socialist movement would have to encounter the Labour Party itself as an antagonist. Long-standing solidarities would have to be broken in any process of radical social change. This sharpened Williams’s sense of the disorder in contemporary society and the suffering exacted by political struggle.

The revolutionary myth became tempting because it gave symbolic shape to the sense of potential upheaval. And it returned the events of 1926 into the present not only as a source of radical commitment but also as an emblem of revolutionary social transformation. Williams’s fidelity to the General Strike also, and at the same time, intensified his commitment to the democratization of culture and sharpened his sense that the resources of social transformation reside in people’s everyday practices, relationships, and obligations. The long rather than the short revolution, the deep transformations of the “run-up” rather than the violent seizure of power, pointed up a process at once socialist and democratic.

Williams never squared the two views. The ambivalences persisted. In my view, his most significant contributions are those that illuminated the democratization of culture. *The Long Revolution* (1961) is, finally, the starting point of his best insight into the links between socialism and democracy. The concept of long revolution itself was meant to address modern Western capitalist societies. The term signals that the transformation of capitalism into socialism would require a deep, pervasive change in institutions and in the very character of social relationships, from the impersonal relationships through which the society's wealth is created and distributed down to the personal relationships in which moral attitudes and mutual obligations are enacted. In this respect, there can be no socialism without revolution.

For the same reasons, however, it is a long revolution. The imperatives and values of capitalism organize layer upon layer of social life. As a process of democratization, the long revolution has to transform distributions of wealth, power, and decision through these many layers, extending participation and inventing new forms of participation. Williams believed, on the one hand, that this struggle has been going on for decades in capitalist society through various social reforms and in the structural changes in the public sphere and education. On the other hand, capitalism vigorously defends itself, and its antidemocratic tendencies are never merely dormant. Gains are not always permanent; reforms do not always combine to create enduring social changes; innovations that might anchor socialist institutions can be reabsorbed into capitalist ones.

Williams consistently refuses to denigrate such *incorporated* gains, reforms, or innovations. They have not merely been "co-opted." Incorporations cannot be judged wholesale, only in their particular contexts and effects. *Incorporation* is a descriptive rather than an evaluative term in Williams's vocabulary. Because capitalist society absorbs so many pressures for change, its institutions have to be continually reassessed and diagnosed anew. They at once embody instruments for the survival of capitalism and fragments of potential socialist institutions. Capitalist tool or revolutionary latency? The evaluation of particular reforms and institutions cannot be furnished through a theory; it always has to come from the open-ended process of social criticism and political decision taking.

Williams was, to borrow Pier Paolo Pasolini's phrase, a "heretical empiricist." Reform-or-revolution has to be decided in struggles over moral-political questions steeped in people's actual social relationships, not from within the matrix of revolutionary theory. So, too, cultural and literary interpretations belong to the moral and political domain.

Where a deconstructive critic might relish discovering in a text those nuances that seem to gather themselves into a dark yet playful aporia; where an Althusserian might home in on those structures of meaning that can at once be associated with a dominant ideology and yet seem to crack the more tightly they cohere; or where a critic inspired by Benjamin or Adorno might delight in the emergence of a text's inner form at just the point where the resulting sense of aesthetic inevitability suddenly acquires the meaning of social prophecy or negation—Williams's mind by contrast seems to have thrilled to those moments in reading where it flashes upon you that this text could only have been written, could only have come into being at all, because of the forms of learning that had consolidated at that point in history; because of some coordinated effort or shared purpose on the part of a class, a movement, a class fraction or a formation; because of perceptions, feelings, values that belong to the everyday life of some social group.

The capacity for such responses to literature was Williams's gift as a critic, and it is his intellectual legacy to us. It is worth imagining how to keep faith with it.

Yet like all paternal legacies, especially symbolic ones, the one Williams bequeathed is burdened. He often shortchanged the liberal traditions of individual right and failed to think through the importance of plurality in modern societies. His failure to grasp the relevance of feminism or to really examine how racism and imperialism have shaped British culture mars a project that was expressly designed to open culture to a "free, contributive and common *process* of participation."

The distorting contours of the public sphere are not carved out along merely class lines. The whole history of women's writing unfolds in the tortured development of the public sphere and education that excluded women, channeled their learning, devalued their forms of communication, and defined the very ideas and institu-

tions of “public” and “private” in gender terms. Colonialism is inscribed in our literature just as indelibly as feudal and capitalist exploitation is inscribed on the English landscape; moreover, Britain’s centuries of destroying and controlling the literacy and learning of Asians and Africans has unwittingly created the social conditions for writing that has completely altered the meaning of “English” literature.

That these other histories and struggles are so central to the project Williams defined and yet so absent from his work serves doubly to criticize him and reaffirm the project itself. In the decade or more of crisis that followed his break with the Labour Party in 1966, a time in which the women’s movement and immigration certainly brought home the changing face of political struggle, Williams was not ready to accept that the working class could no longer be the ground or reference point of socialist politics.

The working class, and not just the Labour Party, had become incorporated into the institutions of capitalism in unprecedented ways. Williams could never have bombastically announced, as André Gorz did, *Farewell to the Working Class!* But Gorz’s insights would have sharpened his sense that the task of the democratization of culture and the struggle for socialist institutions was proceeding through new social movements that certainly traversed but could never unite the working class.

So much in Williams’s work potentially speaks to just these new hopes and needs for social transformation. Unlike Kureishi’s disillusioned journalist, Williams never gave the working class a mission. He did not demand that they fulfill *his* dreams for society. He did not limit the agency of the working class to their supposed revolutionary agency. Indeed, it is not the unique fate of any social group to be the agent of revolution. The long revolution does not have a historically necessary subject. Unlike Lukács, Williams did not await this subject’s (inevitable) awakening. And unlike Adorno, he did not lament its (inevitable) passing. And unlike Althusser, he did not believe history is a process without a subject, the (inevitable) crisis of a system. It is a process with subjects, a process of uncertain outcome that will succeed in suffering the birth of a new society only if these empirical, complex, contradictory “subjects”—a.k.a. people—reinvent

our governing forms of wealth, power, and sociality. It is, Williams understood, a painfully (and inevitably) human task.

NOTES

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1. See Margaret Morris, *The General Strike* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976), and Patrick Renshaw, *The General Strike* (London: Eyre Methuen, 1975).

2. Raymond Williams, *Politics and Letters: Interviews with New Left Review* (London: New Left Books, 1979), p. 27.

3. Raymond Williams, *Border Country* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1962), p. 87. All the quotations from the novel come from chapter four, pp. 85-137.

4. Williams discouraged readers from equating Harry Price with his own father: "Many people have assumed that Harry Price, the signalman with his gardens, was a portrait of my father; but this is not really so. I found that to get the real movement I had to divide and contrast what I had seen in my father as conflicting impulses and modes. I had to imagine another character, Morgan Rosser, the politician and dealer, who in his relation to Harry Price could express and work through what I believed I had seen as an internal conflict" (*The Country and the City* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1973], p. 299). In reading the novel autobiographically, it is not really a question of assuming that Harry Price is an accurate "portrait" of Williams's father. What counts is Harry's relation to his son Matthew; the autobiographical tenor of the novel comes from the identification of Williams with Matthew. It is therefore the writer's relation to that father-son relation itself that needs to be illuminated. Terry Eagleton, in what is a generally injudicious commentary on Williams, raises a pertinent criticism of this splitting of the father figure on the grounds that it syphons off from Harry Price the troubling or ambivalent values of the rural community and thus idealizes that community by letting him stand as the "almost wholly admirable representative of [its] best values"; see *Criticism and Ideology: A Study in Marxist Literary Theory* (London: New Left Books, 1976), pp. 30-31.

5. Raymond Williams, "The Social Significance of 1926" (1977), in *Resources of Hope: Culture, Democracy, Socialism*, ed. Robin Gable (London: Verso, 1989), p. 108.

6. Raymond Williams, "The Importance of Community" (1977), *ibid.*, p. 119.

7. Williams, *Politics and Letters*, p. 426.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 373.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 375. Italics added.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 415.

11. Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, rev. ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), p. 96.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 94.

13. *Ibid.*, pp. 97-98.

14. Williams, *Politics and Letters*, p. 404.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 403.

16. Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), pp. 75-107. I have commented on the relevance of Williams's critique and related it to a submerged and abandoned tendency within Marx's thought in my *Culture and Domination* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1987), pp. 72-76.

17. Raymond Williams, *The Long Revolution* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1961), pp. 125-55.

18. Raymond Williams, "Writing," in *Writing in Society* (London: Verso, 1984), p. 3.
19. Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1984).
20. Pierre Bourdieu, "Reading, Readers, the Literate, Literature," in *In Other Words: Essays Towards a Reflexive Sociology*, trans. Matthew Adamson (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 1990), p. 95.
21. Raymond Williams, "The Idea of a Common Culture" (1968), in Gable, ed., *Resources of Hope*, p. 38.
22. Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, p. 167.
23. Raymond Williams, "Notes on English Prose: 1780-1950," in *Writing in Society*, p. 72.
24. *Ibid.*
25. Williams, *Country and the City*, pp. 105-6. On this passage, see also Jonathan Arac, *Critical Genealogies: Historical Situations for Postmodern Literary Studies* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), p. 278.
26. Williams, *Politics and Letters*, pp. 308-9.
27. *Ibid.*, pp. 211-12.
28. Raymond Williams, *Modern Tragedy* (1966; rev. ed., London: Verso, 1979), pp. 76, 80-81, 83.
29. Williams, *Politics and Letters*, pp. 420, 422.
30. Williams, *Modern Tragedy*, p. 75.