

Raymond Williams and the Possibilities of ‘Committed’ Late Marxism

After the end of the Cold War Marxist thought entered into a long crisis from which it is only just beginning to emerge. After 1989 it was no longer clear, apart from a few revolutionary outposts, what a commitment to Marxism meant. Not surprisingly a generation of intellectuals who had previously called themselves Marxists either abandoned a relationship to revolutionary ideals or very quickly affixed a prefix to make Post-Marxism. Marxism was charged with being intrinsically authoritarian, statist and hierarchical in the way it sought to manage the economy and wider society. These features remain a powerful strain within Marxism: many groups on the revolutionary Left survive as hierarchical organisations wedded to ideas from a more insurrectionary political period. Yet there remain alternative configurations of Marxism capable of reinventing themselves in the context of the present. A widely read collection of essays, quickly issued by Verso after the fall of the Berlin Wall, featured Jurgen Habermas.¹ One of the European Left’s leading intellectuals, Habermas argued that socialists need to give up ideas of overthrowing the system and focus instead upon moral and cultural concerns. Socialism became less about questions of ownership and control and more concerned with the redistribution of power through democratic means, as Left debate sought to reinvent social democracy for the emergent global age. The old model of socialism stood accused of seeking to capture state power, leading to the eventual subordination of civil society. However Raymond Williams, and the New Left more generally, had long been critical of the kinds of Leninist transformation that Habermas depicted. Williams had his own ambivalences around the term Marxist, but generally seemed to feel that it articulated a complex tradition of thought that had been significant in the formation of the New Left.² However, unlike many others who remained connected to Marxism, Williams was engaged in a careful exercise in re-thinking what this legacy might come to mean in the future.

According to Williams there were broadly two main traditions of socialism addressed by the New Left: Stalinism and Fabianism. If the failures of Stalinism were

evident to many on the New Left then Fabianism had failed due to its inability to identify capitalism as 'an enemy.'³ For Williams this 'enemy' was 'not just an electoral enemy, but a hostile and organized social formation which is actively trying to defeat and destroy you'.⁴ The language of friends and enemies however had no place in the post-Marxist future and implied a previous generation's lack of complexity or perhaps hidden authoritarian intentions. Chantal Mouffe argued that we need to replace the language of enemies (and associated languages of victories and defeats) with a struggle between adversaries.⁵ Indeed she was to insist that democratic citizenship depended upon such a process. While Mouffe undoubtedly has a point, the adoption of a more neutral language masks the loss of something valuable. If Williams maintains a complex connection to Marxism as a tradition rather than as a doctrine it was because he perceived that any humane and genuinely democratic future was not really possible within a society whose priorities were shaped by the needs and interests of capital. Williams retained a connection to Marxism as he recognised that a more democratic society could only emerge after a long process of cultural and material struggle on the part of the organised working-class. The idea of society being constituted by a central fault line like that between capital and labour was, after the collapse of 'actually existed' socialism, dismissed as both outdated and essentialist. Again Chantal Mouffe, despite recognising key weaknesses in third way 1990s socialism, fails to appreciate that her desired programme of reform would be fiercely resisted by the capitalist ruling class in both material and cultural terms.⁶ As Williams well understood, part of the project of the New Right in the 1980s involved the 'actual defeat of major sectors of the working class, in prolonged mass unemployment and in the restoration of the absolute prerogatives of capital'.⁷ Despite the adoption of progressive social democracy by much of the Left after 1989, much contemporary analysis lacks a more critical understanding of capitalism as a system. This has been a significant loss to our collective thinking and one of the reasons why Williams's writing has taken on a renewed importance after the banking crash of 2008.

If Williams was sometimes ambivalent about the term 'Marxist' this was because, despite his admiration of Marx, he was unsure about being so closely identified with one thinker, and he hoped to escape the Cold War disdain for the idea of Communism.⁸ For Williams, commitment was poorly captured by words such as 'choice' as this failed to recognise the ways in which we had been 'made' by specific

historical and cultural experiences.⁹ Williams's sense of being 'significantly aligned' with Marxism had a number of sources including his own early experiences of class politics, Communism in the 1930s and involvement with the New Left in the 1960s.¹⁰ E.P. Thompson, who shared a similar commitment to the Marxist tradition, was especially interested in a living tradition that had become defined more through a popular struggle for democracy than abstract theoretical debates.¹¹ If Williams had been the subject of Thompson's rebuke for neglecting to connect the idea of culture to the struggle for a different society we need not overstate their differences.¹² Both Williams and Thompson had a shared connection to a form of Marxism that grew out of different historical circumstances and would need to be re-thought, depending upon historical time and geographical location. For Thompson this meant a popular tradition that included the Diggers, Levellers and on through the Chartists, resisting the rule of private property, landlords and governments.¹³ Similarly what I shall call Williams's 'late Marxism' became more explicitly connected to more specific histories and identities rather than seeking to defend more universal doctrines. If this was a 'commitment' of Williams's it was only partially chosen, given his need to explore his own historical formation as an intellectual and to make sense of his location within working-class history and political struggle.¹⁴

What became significant here was not whether Marxism, but more crucially which kind of Marxism? As Terry Eagleton has argued, the centrality of the class struggle remains determined by the need to gain democratic control over economic surplus or profit.¹⁵ More recent debates about the so-called 'decline of class' remain wide of the mark. Indeed, since Williams's time what has happened is that the priorities of capital have been increasingly extended through society under the guise of 'austerity' and the dominance of neoliberal ideas. Similarly David Harvey has argued that the democratisation of society depends upon control over the economic surplus.¹⁶ In this respect, neoliberalism remains hostile to social and cultural priorities, instead promoting control by private corporations and elites. Having said this, Williams would have been quick to remind us of contestations that go on within Marxism and would have refused any dogmatic position that could not recognise some of the gains of the social democratic period.¹⁷ Here I think we continue to need Williams's subtle thinking, should the debate over the future of the Left and Marxism more generally simply fall into the identification of opposed camps. Williams's writing on Marxism and democracy remains valuable for the way he carefully sought

to think through tough and often historically contingent problems. In reviewing the Marxist thought of the post-war period, Williams not only suggests that Marxism is necessarily always in the process of being re-thought but that it needs to be clearly understood in terms of the role it plays in specific contexts.¹⁸ Here Williams suggests that to polarise reformism and revolution is often deeply unhelpful; instead, we need more careful forms of dialogue between different traditions and forms of analysis.

Williams's 'commitment' to Marxism was a defining feature of his late work and should not be understood as an aberration or afterthought. Further, a stubborn commitment to Marxism is not only defensible, but increasingly important in the context of the early 21st century. This will mean refusing to allow those who oppose Marxism to consign it to the museum, but equally it will (following Williams) require a certain amount of careful and pragmatic re-imagining, not simply in terms of its often bloody history, but how it connects to ongoing features of the class struggle. Before thinking about how this might be done I want to look more closely at Williams's own late Marxism, and how it remains significant.

Late Marxism

Edward Said's study of the idea of late style is concerned not only with what might be called the late period of significant artists but also as an expression of intense difficulty.¹⁹ The late period, in Said's analysis, is a period of 'intransigence, difficulty, and unresolved contradiction.'²⁰ If one expects closure or maturity on a number of questions that the writer or artist has found troubling then sometimes we might discover 'a bristling, difficult, and unyielding – perhaps even inhuman – challenge.'²¹ There is in Said's analysis something stubborn about late style in its refusal to compromise with what is expected. In this respect, we might point to Williams's refusal to give up on Marxism and his exploration of ecological ideas. These concerns also need to be linked to Williams's preoccupation with his own Welshness and sense of belonging in relation to certain places that come to the fore. The theme of cultural nationalism and the need to explore local experiences is not of course new to Williams. His early chapter 'Images of Society' contains a detailed analysis of different ways of representing 'the British' as either subjects or citizens.²² These features are especially present within his final novels, but can of course be found elsewhere.²³ Much of the more sociological work on Williams either ignores this

strand within his thought or quickly dismisses it. This might in part be due to Paul Gilroy's well known critique of the position that Williams seemed to adopt in *Towards 2000*.²⁴ In the chapter 'The Culture of Nations' Williams, having recognised that nations often speak a language of belonging and connection that cannot be met by capitalism, goes on to argue that within the modern world many of these constructions are somewhat artificial.²⁵ For example 'the Yookay' is often addressed as if it were simply a means of enforcing transnational efficiency in the interests of international capital.²⁶ In addition 'frenetic nationalism' can be a means by which social divisions and conflicts of interest are maintained by the status quo.²⁷ The point being that the artificiality of these constructs are no substitute for what Williams terms more 'rooted settlements', whose complexity over the generations have helped sustain different forms of collective identity.²⁸ If in the European context the nation-state is at 'once too large and too small for the range of real social purposes' then we are compelled to address the complexity of more 'lived' and less 'alienated' constructions.²⁹ Yet as Gilroy rightly points out, ideas around a lack of rootedness can easily become mobilised by racists and ethnic nationalists.³⁰ This is an important criticism and yet Williams's point remains about how social and cultural identities are more about lived connections than legalistic criteria.

In a talk given to the socialist society in 1983, Williams contrasts the jingoistic nationalism evident within the Falklands war and the disconnected 'mobile privatism' of capitalism with the possibility of newly emerged nationalisms becoming the focus for an alternative socialist project.³¹ Submerged nationalisms and more local identities remain significant as a source of collective solidarity within either processes of deindustrialisation or new forms of control being exercised through the media and state. This is not to argue that Williams treated his own relationship with his Welsh identity as anything other than complex. As we saw earlier, Williams often seeks to distance himself from a detached Marxism that is unable to relate to the complexity of more place-specific identities. The refusal to engage in the complexity of our relationship with place was indicative of more 'scientific' or 'positivist' strands within Marxism that Williams found himself in sharp disagreement.³² David Harvey's view is that while Williams saw abstraction as necessary, we need to be careful should we overly disconnect people from their attachment to place and more specific loyalties.³³ This was mainly because the capitalistic mode of thinking and feeling that dominates our society depends upon

viewing people as moveable economic units. Williams's Marxism did not fail to recognise the power of class relationships and capital in determining society, but in certain versions it had remained connected to the dominant logic of capitalism. If these themes are often overlooked (or at least underplayed) by some of the scholarship on Williams we might consider whether they could be said to have a broader relevance? Here I am thinking of the rise of English nationalism and the development of the alter-globalisation movement, both of which mostly emerged after Williams's death in 1988. Williams himself recognised that the images we often associate with Englishness are overtly class-based, obscuring more complex accounts, and that a decline in British (or indeed English) imperial power had partially paved the way for the emergence of Welsh identity.³⁴ The cultural question that emerges for Williams is how he might live his own connection to Welsh identity: there were obviously different ways of being Welsh and his own depended upon the construction of a Welsh identity that could work towards more communal and place-specific versions of socialism. Clearly Williams hoped that a submerged nationalism and other local identities might breathe new life into the relationship between socialism and ecology.

If the eco-socialism of the future were to operate in a more complex society than that of capitalism, this would be because of an urgent need to break with ideas related to economic growth and associated capitalistic ideas of progress.³⁵ What matters instead is not only how goods are distributed, but also 'other kinds of production, notably the renewed interest in agriculture and forestry, in new forms of energy production and of transport, and in various kinds of more locally based, non-exploitative and also renewable and non-obsolescent kinds of work.'³⁶ The radically localised and socialised economy necessarily involves a different relationship to place as a space of 'bonding', but also as a distinctive location whose cultural difference is more likely to become apparent after breaking with the homogeneity imposed by capitalism.³⁷ If socialism depends upon the decentralisation of control and the revival of ideas of self-management, this is best expressed through a diversity of traditions and more complex appreciation of local identities than the dominance of the British state allows. This would mean breaking with the priorities of capitalism and consumerism in order to build a democracy based upon more direct forms of control, the satisfaction of basic human needs and self-development. These priorities would require a cultural revolution that radically democratised society and re-thought

questions of production, work, care and other human relationships.³⁸ More recently Serge Latouche has sought to counter the productivist and consumerist society of capitalism based upon the idea of unlimited expansion with an ecological and democratised society that recognises the material limits of society.³⁹ This is an explicitly anti-capitalistic politics that both recognises the idea of localising the economy and rejects the false utopia of consumerism. A more emancipated society would be one where we learn to both consume and work less while building opportunities for expanded forms of human fulfilment. Here I want to argue that this set of ideas continues to have much to offer more contemporary debates on the potentially emancipated societies of the future.

A Sense of Citizenship

Radical politics is about human flourishing and self-realisation. Terry Eagleton comments that to 'live a really fulfilling life, we have to be allowed to do what we do just for the sake of it'.⁴⁰ In this context, socialism becomes a means of organising social life to make self-realisation a collective as well as reciprocal affair. But capitalism has a certain form of instrumentality that is intrinsic to how it operates, driving society for greater productivity, effort in the workplace or indeed profit. This means that radical politics is inevitably involved in a discussion of morality as well as particular social and historical contexts. Williams joins a number of other libertarian socialists - including Murray Bookchin, Cornelius Castoriadis, Andre Gorz, Ivan Illich, E.P.Thompson and others - who are explicitly involved in rethinking what socialism might come to mean in an age of ecological limits.⁴¹ In short, the outer limits of capitalism are not only a matter of the strain it places on the lives of the working-class, but equally radical politics needs to explore the hostility of capitalism to the sustainability of life. This means not only that capitalism is structured around inequality and exploitation, but also that it threatens the possibility of life (and inevitably fulfilment) on the planet. If the culture of capitalism insists upon consumerism and a disposition of 'more is never enough' then more radical forms of politics would be required to adopt a more (and not less) materialist approach.⁴² What becomes pressing in this situation is self-government, not being led by a hierarchy; and production for human needs, not the 'wants' of a consumer culture.⁴³ The new eco-socialist politics would require a revival of the self-management tradition

whereby workers can be directly involved in discussions about production that is necessarily geared around questions of need rather than the more environmentally destructive imperatives of capitalism.

Here I want to argue that many of Williams's more radical ecological arguments are being kept alive by the alter-globalisation movement which often imagines the global ecological commons under threat by a predatory capitalism utilising war, environmental destruction and exploitative social relations as a means of enclosing the commons. By taking direct action from below, the aim of those seeking to resist capitalist enclosure is to defend all that is free and then can be shared. Resistance against the enclosure of parks through property development, ecological landscapes through fracking, the surveillance of the net or the shutting of public libraries – the defence of common resources that can be enjoyed by citizens relatively free from hierarchical control. The commons is guarded as a space of freedom from control from above, and as spaces that can be transformed by bottom-up energies opening up co-operatives and new modes of organisation.⁴⁴ Giovanna Ricoveri argues that the commons is best imagined as a form of direct democracy where the local community seeks to gain control by establishing food banks, co-operatives, sustainable energy, public water supplies and access to common land for recreation and play.⁴⁵ The precise shape of the struggle for the commons will depend upon the character and shape of the locality. David Harvey refers to the assault upon the rights of the commons, downward pressure on labour and the repression of alternatives as neoliberalism imposes a logic of 'accumulation by dispossession'.⁴⁶ Since 1973 this has become the primary means of organising the capitalist economy as citizens become increasingly subject to the rule of capital and previously publicly or commonly owned assets are privatised. The dominance of neoliberal assumptions within mainstream policy debates has inevitably marginalised more radical ideas involved in the transformation of the economy and pushed much of the Left into a position of seeking to protect social democracy. Meanwhile the more radical leanings of the alter-globalisation movement have helped keep an alternative political imagination alive.

However if recent debate on the idea of the commons has breathed new life back into Marxist and anarchist debates this was not the direction taken by many discussions on the Left in the aftermath of the Cold War. Here there was a general sense that state-planned socialism had failed and there was a need to revive a

discussion based upon rights, obligations and a sense of belonging through national forms of citizenship. These debates dominated much of the political discussion of the 1990s and were central to the idea of the Third Way adopted by New Labour. The sociologist Anthony Giddens - who was a key architect of the 'third way' - argued that the state should be positive about globalisation and insisted there could be 'no rights without responsibilities'.⁴⁷ The problem being that social democracy had treated rights 'as unconditional claims'.⁴⁸ There were of course other Left-orientated thinkers like Chantal Mouffe who pointed out that the Third Way had entirely erased the languages of capitalism and class, thereby removing any sense of a democratic struggle.⁴⁹ Yet, as I suggested earlier, the absence of Marxism from the conversation and the dominance of the New Right meant that much of the Left conceived of problems of social justice and ecology as an exclusive matter for state policy. Further, ideas around ecological citizenship adopted an analytical language and spoke of the need to emphasise issues related to responsibility over those of rights.⁵⁰ While many of these debates were progressive in that they recognised questions related to virtues such as care and compassion, there was little mention of capitalism or of an ecological politics that recognised the bonds of place. Since the passing of Raymond Williams it is arguable that a more radical language is required in respect of the ecological commons that recognises the importance of social and cultural needs over that of global capitalism.

Many of the debates around citizenship have shifted their tone since the financial collapse of 2008, adopting a more critical frame of reference in relation to capitalism. Jonathan Rutherford (who briefly became associated with a group within the Labour Party called Blue Labour) suggested that social democracy is losing its way as it has lost its connection to the local.⁵¹ While Rutherford was exploring a specifically English identity his conclusions were meant to be generalisable across Europe. The Third Way had championed a top-down, technocratic politics which was disconnected from any language of place or belonging. Here there is an explicit need for the Left to address the terrain occupied by the Right wing populism of the English Defence League and UKIP. The loss of jobs for life and the fragmentation of communities has meant that many (especially men) have experienced a loss of identity. Neoliberalism has brutally undermined family life and the wider community, making access to well-paid employment difficult. This has helped support a wider sense of anger and resentment in the context of deindustrialisation. Not surprisingly in

the context of the war on terror, the search for identity has led many working-class men to feel that their identity is put under threat by Islam.

Ironically, if Raymond Williams had felt that submerged national and local identities could become a vehicle for the renewal of socialism then Scotland and England more recently have supplied different answers to this question. While the recent success of the Scottish National Party has been a result for more progressive forces, within England the populist Right have won the upper hand. For the Left to regain this terrain Rutherford suggests that the future for a social democratic project is conservative rather than radical as it seeks to connect itself to more place-based sensibilities. This is a brave essay dealing with a number of questions that make many on the Left of politics feel deeply uncomfortable. Many on the English Left dislike discussing nationhood, preferring to speak of cosmopolitanism or a broader engagement with more radical social movements. The problem with such a view is that it tends to see the politics of nationhood as intrinsically reactionary and racist. Indeed this is the view that many in cultural studies more generally are seemingly prepared to defend. Paul Gilroy argues that national politics and race are intrinsically connected and dominate citizenship through nationalist displays of flags, military hardware and 'fantasies of absolute cultural identity'.⁵² This means that alternative modernities can only be found within more cosmopolitan and border-crossing identities, less fixed to place and settlement.

With good reason a more emancipatory politics is cautious about entangling itself within nationalist or place-based politics. Yet as Terry Eagleton suggests, it is possible to recognise that if Williams often described himself as a 'Welsh European', he did so in recognition that more local and global affiliations are not necessarily at war with one another.⁵³ If Gilroy is right to point to the histories of war and ethnic nationalism and its problematic relationship to race there are other ways of imagining more local and national feelings of belonging. What mattered to Williams was the ability to conceive of radical versions of identity that connected to the local, national and more global sensibilities. This has been replicated in much of the literature produced by the alter-globalisation movement that has sought to describe resistance against capitalist enclosure undertaken by a range of different identity constructions. Naomi Klein describes how social movements from below need to find both local, global and national expression to refuse a model of economic growth that requires the continued extraction of new sources of carbon-based energy.⁵⁴ The version of the

commons claimed by these movements will require both the ability to resist the power of corporations while engaging in more long-term planning for a sustainable energy supply.⁵⁵ Inevitably this will include complex webs of citizenship-based identity including national formations. The climate justice movement are called on to defend our shared ecological commons by working through a number of levels at the same time. However we might be forgiven for thinking that within England the commons could only really be defended by more global and local forces, given the grip the Right currently exercise over national identity. However this is far from being the case.

Remaking English Marxism and the Commons

The idea of there being a radical Englishness is of course fraught with difficulty. However just as Williams's own 'late Marxism' engaged with national feelings and sentiments, so there is a need to explore these dimensions. A careful reading of his writing suggests there is little mileage in the Left seeking to ape the social conservatism of UKIP. There are of course - especially after the recent Brexit campaign - reasons to take UKIP seriously. Many commentators have pointed to how UKIP have successfully gained support amongst voters who live in areas of economic decline and who tend to blame immigration for their problems.⁵⁶ These arguments are used to support a more culturally conservative Left of family, faith and flag. These views perhaps echo those of Rutherford and Blue Labour, as discussed earlier.⁵⁷ Williams, however, would have quickly reminded us that more progressive ideas require a commitment to more emancipatory forms of politics while engaging with the historical and cultural complexity of English identities.

Williams recognised how the work of George Orwell was often presumed to evoke a radical Englishness.⁵⁸ This is precisely what Ben Clarke tries to do by explicitly rejecting some of Williams's more cautious remarks in this respect.⁵⁹ Indeed we might argue that Orwell remains a deeply ambivalent figure for more progressive forms of thinking, both defending liberty and freedom of thought while in the next breath ruthlessly silencing his critics.⁶⁰ Indeed it is notable how Christopher Hitchens, who has written so passionately on Orwell, used virtually the same tactics against Left critics of the war on terror.⁶¹ Scott Lucas demonstrates how the so-called 'tough liberalism' seemingly derived from Orwell was used to police dissent by critics

of the war on terror by either declaring them unpatriotic or as seeking to defend dictators from attack.⁶² For Williams Orwell's Englishness remains trapped within a class-bound logic that defends the right of the privileged to speak while maintaining a deep sense of ambivalence concerning the so called lower orders.⁶³ Indeed E.P. Thompson, Williams's New Left associate, argued that the historical legacy of Orwell in the post-war period (irrespective of what he may have intended) became a means of maintaining the polarities of Cold War thinking.⁶⁴ For Thompson this was significant for producing views that suggested that the Cold War world could be constructed through an opposition between totalitarianism and freedom. This logic, Thompson warned, was deeply hostile to the possibilities of more democratic alternatives emerging, and that when they did - as in Hungary in 1956 - they were soon sucked back into the system. Orwell became an intellectual battering ram used against those who struggled from below for more independent and progressive socialist alternatives.

This is not to argue that Orwell's liberalism does not connect to a suggestive strain of English thought that might be said to include Thomas Hobhouse, John Stuart Mill and Colin Ward, all of whom sought to defend the idea of liberty against more authoritarian currents. This is a conflict that cuts across ideas of liberalism, socialism and anarchism and that could be drawn upon to fashion a sense of belonging out of less conservative patterns of writing. The history of English libertarian thought could be said to offer a counterweight to some of the more prevalent conservative assumptions that are connected to more current debates on Englishness. In this respect, Thompson's work as a historian can be associated with the rebellious history of the English commoner.⁶⁵ The idea of the commons is of course not an exclusively English story, but could be said to have special relevance to a submerged radical national identity. This is worth investigating as it potentially ties together some of the concerns of the alter-globalisation movement while also articulating a more rebellious English identity. Indeed if Marxism is to be re-made within the English setting then these contours are likely to remain crucial.

The radical culture 'made' by the English working-class so famously restored by Thompson was partially a result of the 'class robbery' performed through the enclosure of common land.⁶⁶ However what mattered just as much in shaping the protests was the historical inheritance of the idea of the 'free born Englishman'. These

freedoms ('freedom from arbitrary arrest, trial by jury, equality before the law, the freedom of the home from arbitrary entrance and search' amongst others) helped form a libertarian consensus amongst the working class.⁶⁷ These liberties held by the community against the state can be traced back to the Magna Carta. Peter Linebaugh (originally a student of Thompson's) argues in an important book that Magna Carta remains significant in perhaps three senses.⁶⁸ Firstly that it was designed to 'curtail the powers of the sovereign', thereby suggesting that law is not simply an expression of ruling class power.⁶⁹ Secondly that what has been forgotten is that the Magna Carta contained two charters - one based upon what we might call civil rights, and another charter which sought to establish rights to the forest. This was significant as for commoners the forest was a source of identity, herbs for healing, festivals, play and of course food. Magna Carta establishes a different idea of freedom to the narrow definitions of neoliberalism, suggesting that civil and social rights are linked together. The commons needed to be enclosed to capitalise the land and to produce wage labourers, thereby separating people from a means of subsistence. Finally Magna Carta remains an important source not only of the idea of the 'free born' Englishman, but equally has the cause of freedom across the planet influencing the American constitution, the idea of human rights, the Zapatista rebellion and of course Chartism. E.P. Thompson drew on the diverse traditions of English radicalism when he sought to defeat the arguments of fellow Marxist historians or more right-wing critics who assumed that the English did not have their own rebellious and radical past. Part of the 'peculiarities of the English' was the use of law and its ability to utilise defensive means in order to protect historical gains like the welfare state.⁷⁰ If Thompson worried throughout the 1970s that the tradition of the 'free born Englishman' was becoming managed and controlled by the security state then it became reborn in the peace movement. This radical and dissenting culture Thompson recognised is not specifically Marxist, but nevertheless acted as a major restraint on ruling class power. Historically English commoners were seemingly at their most dangerous and radical when trying to protect what were seen as their customary rights to wood, fuel, land and bread.⁷¹ In other words, following Thompson and Williams, the relevance of a more place-specific and ecological Marxism of the future would depend upon its ability to exhibit an openness to these and other radical histories.

More recently David Horspool has sought to track the radicalness of the English by arguing that it should not be seen as an exclusive property of the Left.⁷²

However, perhaps agreeing with Thompson, we should remember that the ‘English have proved remarkably tenacious rebels, but rather less than effective revolutionaries’.⁷³ As Thompson recognises, it was during the Chartist period that the English came closest to a revolution. Dorothy Thompson (written with E.P. Thompson) outlines the revolutionary nature of the Halifax Chartists who, inspired by the French Revolution, galvanised themselves with the slogan ‘France has the Republic, England shall have the Charter.’⁷⁴ English radicalism in this respect historically worked through public meetings, the production of pamphlets and attempts to change the law rather than attempts to overthrow the system. This stops short of those calling for a short sharp revolution, but at the same time is not readily reconciled with more reactionary formations. The recent work of Michael Kenny is important here, pointing to the complexities of the historical debate in respect of Englishness and the cultural resources that are clearly available to re-make it in more civic terms.⁷⁵

The idea of a grass-roots English radicalness has recently been revived by Paul Kingsnorth as a reaction against the sterilised environments required by a consumer culture built on an explicitly manufactured, placeless culture.⁷⁶ Neoliberal corporate globalisation has produced the ‘citizens of nowhere’, seeking to flatten out local difference and diversity.⁷⁷ This has helped produce a sense of Englishness under threat by a culture of sameness. This is a world that has been made safe for corporations, specifically middle-class lifestyles and gentrification seeking to uproot people who do not fit into this project. Kingsnorth writes that across ‘England the bleaching out of character, community, place and meaning in the name of growth and investment and global competition is causing ripples, resentment and resistance’.⁷⁸ More explicitly what is emerging is the defence of the local and distinctive against a number of projects from airport expansion to motorway widening and supermarket growth to the construction of yuppie flats. Notably what is at stake in many of these cultural developments is a sense of belonging that is perceived to be under threat by the corporate and inauthentic. Similar to the radicalism of the commoners discovered by Thompson, what Kingsnorth articulates is what happens when a resurgent localism is pitted against capitalist modernisation projects. The attempt to preserve the customary can become articulated by a number of differing political agendas including the defence of the commons. Indeed this tradition may well have a considerable role to play in mobilising popular sentiment against top-down projects

such as HS2 rail that threaten rural communities or, just as significantly, the practice of fracking that is often contested by local people as well as green movements and organisations.

Kingsnorth's journalistic impressions end with a plea to imagine 'a future in which England is not a vain consumer monoculture, but a patchwork of living communities'.⁷⁹ Such views break with the denial that national cultures and landscapes don't matter and introduce the possibility of the flourishing of different cultures of the country and the city. This slightly nostalgic Englishness, just as Thompson suggested, could have radical implications. Kingsnorth here begins to locate a point at which issues related to Englishness and some of the sentiments of the alter-globalisation movement meet in defence of the local and the distinctive against the corporate homogeneity of global capitalism. These concerns come close to what Williams's place-based and ecological Marxism was trying to achieve in a different setting. Williams perceived that the merging of the 'Red and Green' was closely related to the idea of the long revolution, whereby the working-class movement sought to end capitalism and construct a liveable and democratic society for humanity beyond the structural necessity of fighting for better wages and conditions.⁸⁰ This would of course not be possible unless it re-made itself in terms of the histories of different struggles related to more specific localities. Williams then was perceptive enough to recognise that some of the older perceptions of England as the coloniser made less sense in a situation where much 'that happened, over centuries to the Welsh are now happening, in decades, to the English'.⁸¹ While the ruling class power and privilege of the English was formidable, the effects of deindustrialisation, poverty and marginalisation nonetheless cut across national borders.

A Politics of Hope

As we have seen, Williams's Marxism was inspired by the need to progressively democratise capitalism. Social democracy had been a considerable victory for the labour movement and yet was never likely to go far enough if it remained primarily defensive or conservative. However since Williams's death it has become much clearer that the working-class labour movement as a significant actor is in long-term decline. If Williams faced some of these questions he did not live long enough to see the erosion of the 'moment of socialism'.⁸² Williams's calls for a 'new and renewed

labour movement' in the context of post-industrial decline could still be met with new waves of militancy after the assaults on the working class that took place in the 1980s.⁸³ However the long-term global and historical trends which are sweeping across the Western world have generated a social order where the decline in the collective power of trade unions has been accompanied by a more individualised and less deferential society.⁸⁴ This means that despite the rise of the alter-globalisation movement the building of a radical working-class movement is as urgent now as ever. As Williams was well aware it was the organised working-class despite their decline who remained in the best structural position to communicate critical ideas about the capitalist system to large numbers of people. However despite many of the hopes that have been raised by the ascent of Jeremy Corbyn it is unlikely that the Labour Party are currently in a position to move beyond internal divisions.⁸⁵ Even if this feat were somehow achieved the long-term decline of socialist culture, alternative working-class institutions and the dominance of the capitalist media, makes the current prospect for a radical agenda emerging through state-driven elections bleak. Here those with a more radical eco-socialist agenda might look to the Green Party, but they are likely to remain marginal within a first past the post electoral system. With little prospect of a radical Left government and the dominance of Right-wing populism there are in fact good reasons for despair. While these features are all subject to change we also need to recognise along with Williams 'there is no real point in pretending that the capitalist social order has not done its main job of implanting a deep assent to capitalism even in a period of its most evident economic failures'.⁸⁶

Williams's dogged refusal to give up on radical forms of socialist critique demonstrates a clear and necessary refusal to abandon the need to transform society beyond capitalism. Marxism, despite its stained and bloody past, continues to have a number of intellectual and cultural resources to aid us in this quest. However for these possibilities to be fully realised and discussed we need 'a new kind of socialist movement' to emerge from below that is less concerned with capturing political power and more with a change in culture.⁸⁷

The first resource that Marxism gives us is the recognition that capitalism is central to the basic nature and character of our social order. Capitalism could not be said to represent the common interest and would always prefer the promotion of a society based upon the financial calculations of the ruling class.⁸⁸ As Terry Eagleton argues, the class struggle continues to act as the 'joker in the pack of civilisation'.⁸⁹

Secondly, historically more humanistic versions of Marxism have sought to recover and defend values other than those required to make profit. These values – such as co-operation, mutuality and democracy - find it difficult to find expression in a world dominated by corporations and neoliberal nation-states. Here we might think about what happens when literally everything becomes subordinate to the ‘cash nexus.’⁹⁰ Similarly Andy Merrifield argues that cultural Marxism has a long historical connection to a more poetic and literary sensibility that stands diametrically opposed to the ‘car boot sale of our culture’.⁹¹ Under the sign of an increasingly capitalist society there is an ongoing need to defend the study of art, literature, history and society in terms beyond dominant forms of instrumentality. These concerns are of course traceable back to the Romantic tradition whose cultural ambiguity Williams did so much to capture.⁹² Finally Marxism remains necessary for its ability to point to the limitations of capitalism (especially apparent in relation to ecological questions) and for its call to imagine a different society where, in Williams’s terms, we begin to honour our connection to place and locality. If the technological and hurried culture of capitalism is hostile to these terms then a more place-based sensibility could yet find its way into more critical forms of analysis. Here the argument is not to defend Marxism in its endless variety, but to defend Williams’s own ‘commitment’ as having something to offer our own times. This will mean Marxists joining a number of local struggles to save the commons from manoeuvres by capital to turn it into a form of private property. This could include attempts to save libraries from closure, defend the dignity of low paid workers (the living wage campaign) and the downgrading of contracts into precarious forms of labour, and crucially attempts to prevent the further erosion of the environment and spread of consumerism.

Raymond Williams stood for a non-dogmatic Marxism that could be remade in the context of social struggle. For a Marxist analysis to remain relevant it needs to connect itself to an anti-capitalist sensibility. Joel Kovel argues that if the first phase of socialism sought to overcome the exploitation of labour it mainly failed to question the need for economic growth that can be linked to the destruction of nature.⁹³ Instead our common interests are now threatened by an economic system that threatens the very survival of humanity. The struggle now is not only for the wellbeing of the working class who continue to suffer from exploitation and precarious forms of labour, but for the survival of humans as well as other planetary life forms. As Kovel suggests, such a struggle against the destructive power of capital

will inevitably involve the opening up of questions of value other than those that require the instrumental functioning of the economic system. The eco-socialist revolution is less concerned with the operation of political parties, and more with a non-violent cultural revolution. Such a dramatic change in society's values could within our current setting only emerge from below and by rejecting a productivist masculinity that finds expression within many forms of Marxism. This will mean directly challenging what we understand by 'development' for a different paradigm where social questions and the need to preserve life takes priority over capitalist forms of growth. Serge Latouche has usefully summed up the new more ecologically sensitive form of politics as radical strategies to question the centrality of work, revalue the natural world, redistributing wealth, localise economies, reduce over-consumption, recycling and alternative forms of transport amongst other strategies.⁹⁴ Such features are not only necessary for the long-term survival of humanity and the planet, but will of course be resisted by capitalism and most of the mass media. This then is nothing less than a new revolutionary paradigm that works less through the need to take state power or indeed violently overthrow capitalism, but through the recovery of an ethic of responsibility by citizens more generally. As Williams would have been quick to remind us, such a politics would not really be possible without a recovery of a sense of our connection to a locality and the radical revival of the self-management tradition.⁹⁵ This would include enhanced forms of participation within local decision-making processes as well as the development of more co-operative and ecologically sensitive economies.

There is still a great deal to salvage from the ruins of Marxism. The danger remains that a return to Marxism could equally lead to the celebration of new forms of productivism. The Marxist imaginary remains historically connected to the contradiction between the forces and relations of production. The more abundant society of the future becomes possible in the society of common ownership where technology is able to harness labour power producing goods for the community rather than private interest. Here science and technological mastery are used to further subordinate nature to the needs of the community rather than capital.

These arguments are potentially hostile to the wider sustainability of the commons.⁹⁶ After the crash of 2008 and the imposition of austerity there are indeed dangers that new forces will emerge, offering more consumerist forms of abundance for the future in ways that could well have a popular appeal. The path more in keeping

with the writing of Raymond Williams is perhaps more difficult but offers a better prospect of an emancipated future. For Williams a crucial part of any humanistic socialism was the recovery of ‘specifically alienated human capacities’ that were not allowed expression in a society built upon commercial values and class hierarchy.⁹⁷ These questions need to be asked again within a society that cannot produce meaningful employment for everyone and where many people struggle to find a balance between work, time for caring responsibilities and other more cultural pursuits.⁹⁸ There is still a need for a humanistic Marxism less focused upon increased economic production and more upon a life devoted to parenting, play, artistic activities and civic forms of engagement in ways that cannot be satisfied by neoliberal capitalism. The tragedy is that Marxism historically, in seeking to produce a more humane world to that of capitalism, ended by producing what Williams called ‘new kinds of alienation’.⁹⁹ The hope remains that a more democratic and ecological version of Marxism will pick up the task of transforming a social order adequate to meeting the needs for more democratic and sustainable ways of human flourishing. Despite appearances to the contrary we do not live in a post-revolutionary context but, largely due to the contradiction between capitalism and the planet, need to oppose attempts to decolonise the impact that capitalism and consumerism has upon our collective imaginations before it is too late.

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⁷ Raymond Williams, ‘Notes on Marxism in Britain Since 1945’, in *Culture and Materialism* (London: Verso, 2005), 233-251.

⁸ Williams, ‘You’re a Marxist, Aren’t You?’ 66.

⁹ Raymond Williams, ‘Commitment’, in *What I Came to Say* (London: Hutchinson Radius, 1989), 258.

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¹³ Thompson, ‘Recovering the Libertarian Tradition’, 21.

¹⁴ Raymond Williams, ‘The Writer: Commitment and Alignment’, in *Resources of Hope*, ed. Robin Gable (London, Verso, 1989), 77-87.

¹⁵ Terry Eagleton, *Why Marx Was Right*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2011).

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¹⁷ Williams, ‘Notes on Marxism in Britain Since 1945’, 250.

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- ²⁸ Williams, *Towards 2000*, 196.
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