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Raymond Williams's "structure of feeling" and the problem of democratic values in Britain,
1938-1961

The idea of a "structure of feeling" was first used by Raymond Williams in 1954 in a little-read book entitled *Preface to Film*, the manifesto for a project upon which he was then collaborating with the screenwriter and producer Michael Orrom.¹ When Williams abandoned the project in early 1957 he retained this portion of its intellectual capital, and deployed it in the works that established his public reputation over the following four years: *Culture and Society* (1958), and its quasi-sequel *The Long Revolution* (1961).² During the subsequent five-and-a-half decades it has formed part of the analytical vocabulary of some of the most innovative work in the humanities, particularly in literary scholarship that has developed the cultural materialism that Williams helped to pioneer, and in works of history that seek to elucidate the experience of subjects marginalised or excluded from traditional forms of inquiry. Almost immediately after Williams's elaboration of the concept, it achieved the distinction of being disparaged and then adopted by E.P. Thompson in *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963), which helped to establish the practice of "history from below" in Britain.³ As historical inquiry in general has shifted away from causal explanation towards the reconstruction of experience and sentiment, the "structure of feeling" has frequently served to

¹ Raymond Williams, "Film and the Dramatic Tradition," in Williams and Michael Orrom, *Preface to Film* (London, 1954).

² Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society: 1780-1950* (London, 1958); id., *The Long Revolution* (London, 1961).

³ E.P. Thompson, "The Long Revolution," *New Left Review* 1/9 (May-Jun. 1961), 29, 32; id., "The Long Revolution—II", *New Left Review* 1/10 (Jul.-Aug. 1961), 37; id., *The Making of the English Working Class* (London, 1963), 116, 194.

connect subjectivity to broader social and material processes.⁴ It has also been adopted by scholars following the more recent “affective turn” in the humanities, either as an analytical tool in its own right or as a pioneering step towards the development of a now densely-constructed theoretical framework.⁵

Despite its widespread usage over nearly six decades of scholarly production, however, this “notoriously difficult” concept, as one study of Williams has described it, remains enigmatic.⁶ The secondary literature that has accumulated around Williams’s work since his death in 1988 has interpreted the “structure of feeling” in widely divergent ways. Williams’s first biographer alone offered three subtly different definitions of the term; and in one early critical survey of Williams’s work it was read, variously, as cognate with “ideology” and as an affective counterpart to Michel Foucault’s “*epistème*”.⁷ One recent attempt to elucidate it notes the confusion that the term occasions, yet shows greater certainty as to why its critics are

⁴ For a particularly notable example, see Carolyn Steedman, *Landscape for a Good Woman* (London, 1986); more recently, Mark Salber Phillips, “On the Advantages and Disadvantages of Sentimental History for Life,” *History Workshop Journal* 65 (2008).

⁵ See esp. Vanessa Agnew, “History’s Affective Turn: Historical reenactment and its work in the present,” *Rethinking History* 11 (2007); Gregory J. Seigworth and Melissa Gregg, “An Inventory of Shimmers,” in Gregg and Seigworth, eds., *The Affect Theory Reader* (Durham, N.C. and London, 2010); and Devika Sharma and Frederik Tygstrup, eds., *Structures of Feeling: Affectivity and the Study of Culture* (Berlin/ Boston, Mass., 2015), 1-8.

⁶ Paul Jones, *Raymond Williams’s Sociology of Culture: A Critical Reconstruction* (Basingstoke, 2004), 20.

⁷ David Simpson, “Raymond Williams: Feeling for Structures, Voicing ‘History’” in Christopher Prendergast, ed., *Cultural Materialism: On Raymond Williams* (London/ Minneapolis, 1995), 29-50 (quotation at 43); Morag Shiach, “A Gendered History of Cultural Categories”, *ibid.*, 51-70 (quotation at 58); Fred Inglis, *Raymond Williams* (London, 1995), 158, 229, 292.

mistaken than as to its positive content.⁸ Williams himself, under interrogation from the editors of *New Left Review* in 1977, could offer “no simple answer, but perhaps some clarification”, in the course of which he was forced back again to a defensive acknowledgement of “the need to define the limits of the term.”⁹ Part of the difficulty posed by the concept arises from its deployment in different senses in different parts of Williams’s own work: a difficulty which is often circumvented by the historically unsatisfactory procedure of reading the most accessible definitions given by Williams himself, in *The Long Revolution* and *Marxism and Literature* (1977), as exegeses of its meaning across his entire *oeuvre*.¹⁰ The effect of this ambiguity is that a concept which has formed a substantial underpinning of some of the most influential and tendentious developments in literary and historical scholarship since the 1950s carries no precise commitments: it functions rather to signify, and to command assent to, a broad set of intellectual and, perhaps, political principles without specifying the basis for their validity. In particular, the assumption—which is by no means integral to the concept itself—that it provides access to the experience of marginalised or subordinate historical actors has constituted a way of making “the subaltern speak” that evades the problems which scholars working within a different philosophical framework have recognised in this type of procedure.¹¹

If a history of the “structure of feeling” therefore illuminates some of the major developments in academic practice since the 1960s, it also casts new light upon mid-century

⁸ Paul Filmer, “Structures of feeling and socio-cultural formations: the significance of literature and experience to Raymond Williams’s sociology of culture,” *British Journal of Sociology* 54 (2003).

⁹ Raymond Williams, *Politics and Letters: Interviews with New Left Review* (London, 1979), 160; 164.

¹⁰ Williams, *Long Revolution*, 47-49, 293; id., *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford, 1977), 128-135.

¹¹ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” in Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, eds., *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (Urbana/ Chicago, Ill., 1988).

intellectual history. Williams's first major works were interventions in debates over the place of moral values in democratic politics that were a central feature of the "cultural Cold War", but which had been a point of contention in Britain and elsewhere since at least the 1930s. Williams himself is often identified as a champion of cultural democracy, in opposition or contradistinction to a dominant "paternalism" in mid-century Britain.¹² This reading of Williams's early work can appear plausible insofar as his avowed concern was indeed to challenge theories of minority culture through a transfer or redistribution of cultural authority, or of the means of cultural production. But although Williams himself frequently espoused democracy in something like this sense, and developed the "structure of feeling" as a means of realising it, the history of the latter concept demonstrates that this "democratic" impulse was constrained by Williams's concern to extend the tradition of moral criticism of industrialism that he himself traced from the early nineteenth century; and by the difficulty he encountered in conceiving of any change or renewal of the values underpinning that tradition other than through the agency of artists and critics, who thus retained a privileged role in cultural production.¹³ In this respect, the theory of culture of which the "structure of feeling" was the central component did not succeed in redistributing cultural authority quite so radically as Williams intended, and exemplified the problematic relationship between democracy and normative prescription in mid-century intellectual history.

This essay opens by examining a reconfiguration of public discussion of "culture" and its capacity to sustain democracy that began at the end of the 1930s and continued into the Second World War and the cultural Cold War, which constitutes the "context of refutation"

¹² See, notably, Francis Mulhern, *Culture/ Metaculture* (London/ New York, 2000), 73.

¹³ Similar observations have also been made in Simpson, "Raymond Williams" 38-40; and Jones, *Raymond Williams's Sociology of Culture*, 46.

within which the idea of the “structure of feeling” was developed.¹⁴ In the course of this historical reconstruction it becomes apparent that Williams’s work was shaped within a much more eclectic intellectual culture than conventional descriptions of him as a “left-Leavisite” tend to imply.¹⁵ In particular, I suggest that the heterogeneous intellectual formation of liberal anti-Communism, and the dissemination of certain forms of holism within the mid-century social sciences, helped to shape Williams’s signature concept and to limit the extent of the cultural “democratisation” that it could support. Whilst the diverse influences upon which Williams drew in his attempt to escape the polarities of the cultural Cold War underpinned a novel theory of universal cultural production, the difficulties to which they gave rise—particularly in relation to the possibility of change in artistic and moral values—ultimately left him reliant upon the authority of the artist or intellectual. As a result, his work not only bore a closer resemblance to a modified theory of “minority culture” than is generally supposed, but also registered a fundamental weakening of the moral critique of capitalism of which Williams himself was a leading exponent, long before that tradition is generally thought to have fallen into desuetude during the later 1960s.

I

As Williams travelled to Cambridge to study English literature in October 1939, public discussion of culture in Britain was at a point of transition in which the political-intellectual

¹⁴ The idea of a “context of refutation” is adopted from Stefan Collini, *Liberalism and Sociology: L.T. Hobhouse and Political Argument in England 1880-1914* (Cambridge, 1979), 9.

¹⁵ This term was coined, and applied to Williams, in Terry Eagleton, “Criticism and Politics: The Work of Raymond Williams,” *New Left Review* 1/95 (Jan.-Feb. 1976), 20-21; more recently, see Christopher Hilliard, *English as a Vocation: The Scrutiny Movement* (Oxford, 2012), ch.5.

moment of “the Thirties” was being simultaneously constructed and consigned to the past.¹⁶ The self-conscious concern of the politicised literary culture of the 1930s to articulate what one of its leading exponents called “a philosophy of life that would make them feel that they were participants in the social order, not fugitives or rebels” was publicly recanted during what has been called “the long 1939” after the Munich Conference, and literature in particular was withdrawn from its recent social and political entanglements.¹⁷ Auden himself personified this transition after his retreat to America at the beginning of 1939 itself, abandoning the boring meetings and complicity in murder that had been *de rigueur* during the Spanish Civil War to grapple with “Negation and despair” in a Fifty-Second Street dive.¹⁸ The day before war with Germany was declared in Britain, the writer and publisher John Lehmann observed that “[S]omewhere between the Munich sell-out of last September and the defeat of the Spanish Republicans early this year, a significant change began to develop in the attitude of the literary and artistic ‘Left.’ There are signs [...] of a revulsion from all political platforms.”¹⁹

That recent intellectual fashion was supplanted by a conception of artistic and quotidian culture as spheres in which supposedly non-political “democratic values” would be preserved from both the exigencies of wartime mobilisation, and the broader pathologies of modernity of which the war was commonly seen as a manifestation. This mode of cultural thought had been present in progressive circles throughout the 1930s, notably in the left-liberal *New Statesman*

¹⁶ The seminal account of this process is that given in Samuel Hynes, *The Auden Generation: Literature and Politics in England in the 1930s* (London, 1976), 382-94.

¹⁷ Michael Roberts, “First and Second Impressions,” *Poetry Review* 23 (Jan.-Feb. 1932), 66, quoted in Hynes, *Auden Generation*, 74; Steve Ellis, *British Writers and the Approach of World War II* (Cambridge, 2015), 6-7.

¹⁸ W.H. Auden, “Spain” (April 1937), in *Selected Poems*, ed. Edward Mendelson (London, 1979), 53-4; id., “September 1, 1939,” *New Republic* 100 (18 Oct. 1939), 297.

¹⁹ John Lehmann, “The Halt and the Blind,” *New Statesman* 2 Sep. 1939, 349-50.

whose socialist politics had existed in an uneasy tension with the “Bloomsbury” affiliations of its art and literary pages.²⁰ At the end of 1939 an important editorial in the magazine claimed that the greater facility with which “totalitarian” regimes managed “modern” economies would require democracies to adopt the same techniques during the war – but predicted that liberty could be sustained in quotidian culture.²¹ The same intellectual co-ordinates were followed in the famous celebrations of national culture that were penned amid the Battle of Britain and the Blitz during 1940-41. For example, George Orwell’s lyrical evocation of plebeian England in *The Lion and the Unicorn* (1941) presented quotidian culture as a kind of preservative of individual liberty, counterbalancing the economic collectivism that the successful prosecution of the war demanded.²² Orwell continued to weigh these conflicting priorities throughout the 1940s, but as he gradually came to view totalitarianism as a generalised pathology of modernity rather than as a particular state form, he became more doubtful of the capacity of national culture to withstand its corrupting influences.²³ As a result, the preservation of the democratic subject from totalitarianism was increasingly devolved upon the arts, which, with the values they ostensibly sustained, were consequently viewed in quasi-aestheticist terms as a sphere entirely apart from broader social processes.

This repudiation of the characteristic assumptions of “the Thirties” had been led by Cyril Connolly, who presented the declaration of war in 1939 as an opportunity for artists to withdraw to “The Ivory Shelter” and shortly afterwards launched the journal *Horizon* as a

²⁰ Edward Hyams, *The New Statesman: The history of the first fifty years, 1913-1963* (London, 1963), 164-167.

²¹ “Progress and Anarchy,” *New Statesman* 16 Dec. 1939, 884-885.

²² George Orwell, *The Lion and the Unicorn: Socialism and the English Genius* (1941) in Peter Davison (ed.), *The Complete Works of George Orwell* (20 vols.; London, 1997-1998), henceforth *CWGO*, XII, 394; 427.

²³ See for example George Orwell, “Looking Back on the Spanish War,” *CWGO* XIII, esp. 499, 504; id. [anon.], “Review of *The Pub and the People* by Mass-Observation,” *CWGO* XIV, 320-322.

haven for them.²⁴ Orwell was among its more notable early contributors, and shortly after *The Lion and the Unicorn* appeared he also gave a radio talk on “Literature and Totalitarianism” in which the writer was upheld as the paragon of individualism because his (*sic*) existence *qua* writer was dependent upon an ability to withstand the encroachments of “community”.²⁵ Likewise, in February 1942 *Horizon* warned that “a country that is socializing itself” was one of several factors making “the existence of the great artist, the free personality, of the solitary smouldering creative figure [...] more and more precarious”; and an oft-quoted editorial the following December complained of the baleful effects of state-led “culture-diffusion” upon the arts themselves.²⁶ Elsewhere, in 1943 the *Sunday Times*’s music critic Ernest Newman broke off from a celebration of Berlioz, “the most individual composer in the whole history of music”,²⁷ to launch an intemperate critique of the Workers’ Music Association and its president, the composer Alan Bush, for their socialised vision of the artist and support for state patronage of the arts.²⁸

Newman’s diatribe was directed against a quasi-Communist artistic and critical *milieu* that had survived “the long 1939”, and which over the course of the war established itself as the principal antagonist to the aesthetic politics diversely articulated by Orwell, *Horizon* and Newman. During the 1930s the philo-Communist journal *Left Review* had fostered a programme of writing, criticism and theoretical work in which the vogue for politically- and

²⁴ Cyril Connolly, “The Ivory Shelter,” *New Statesman* 7 Oct. 1939, 482-3; “Comment,” *Horizon* I:1 (Jan. 1940), 5-6.

²⁵ George Orwell, “Literary Criticism IV: Literature and Totalitarianism,” *CWGO* XII, 501-506.

²⁶ “Comment,” *Horizon* V:26 (Feb. 1942), 74; ‘Comment’, *Horizon* VI:36 (Dec. 1942), 370-371.

²⁷ Ernest Newman, “The Case of Berlioz,” *Sunday Times* 28 Feb. 1943, 2.

²⁸ Id., “Music and Ideology,” *Sunday Times* 28 Mar. 1943, 2; “England, Our England!” *Sunday Times* 18 Apr. 1943, 2.

socially-engaged art was assimilated to the democratic verities of the Popular Front. The journal had closed abruptly in 1938 but was succeeded first by the mimeographed journal *Poetry and the People* and, from 1941, by the slightly more lavishly-produced *Our Time*. The launch of Operation Barbarossa in June that year enabled the British Communist Party (C.P.G.B.) to lend its support to Britain's war effort, and *Our Time* attempted to situate itself at the head of a "democratic" or "people's culture" that it claimed was being revived through popularising initiatives such as the Council for the Encouragement of Music and the Arts and the London Philharmonic Orchestra, recently re-formed along co-operative lines under the auspices of its Communist former violist Thomas Russell.²⁹ In this "people's culture" the artist was held to exemplify not the autonomous individual celebrated by Orwell *et al.*, but the socialised individuality that would underpin both the war effort itself and the subsequent work of reconstruction;³⁰ and the state was conceived as the highest manifestation of "the whole people", the role of which in the planning of culture was indispensably beneficent.³¹

As this suggests, the Communism espoused by writers in *Our Time* was highly unorthodox and in certain respects closer to an idealist form of modern liberalism than to any identifiable Marxist canons. It greeted the end of the war with an editorial under the Arnoldian headline "culture and anarchy", and its accounts of a democratic "people's culture" continued

²⁹ See, for example, F.J. Brown, "Let the People Sing", *Our Time* 1:10 (Jan. 1942), 27-29; "The People's Orchestra is Building a People's Theatre", *Our Time* 2:5 (Aug. 1942), 18-19; "The Future of Our Time", *Our Time* 2:6 (Oct. 1942), 1-3; "Notes and Comments", *Our Time* 2:13 (Jul. 1943), 1-2; F.D. Klingender, "The Massacre of the Innocents", *Our Time* 3:9 (Apr. 1944), 18-19.

³⁰ "The Future of *Our Time*," *Our Time* 2:6 (Oct. 1942), 1; 2.

³¹ "The Price of Culture," *Our Time* 3:1 (Aug. 1943), 2-3; Walter Hudd, "New Audiences for Old..." *Our Time* 3:2 (Sep. 1943), 15-18, here 16; "Editorial: 1944," *Our Time* 3:6 (Jan. 1944), 1; "Editorial: Education," *Our Time* 3:7 (Feb. 1944), 1; Fernau Hall, "One Man's Meat," *ibid.*, 16; "Notes and Comments: The Arts in Wartime," *Our Time* 4:1 (Aug. 1944), 3.

to rely heavily on intellectual and artistic arbiters: an editorial manifesto in July 1943, for example, declared that “a people’s culture” could only emerge “from below, by the people, through *the re-educated desires of the people*.”³² Nonetheless, *Our Time*’s cultural politics transgressed the opposition that had been set up elsewhere between collectivism and culture, in various forms; and the journal’s promotion of Communism and of popular Russophilia helped to reinforce the equation that Orwell had drawn between collectivism and totalitarianism. The same was true of attempts by philo-Communist intellectuals to apply to wartime discussions of national culture the “purposive” social science for which John Dewey had called during the 1930s, among the most prominent of whom was the biologist C.H. Waddington. In 1941 he published a Pelican Special arguing that democracies suffered from a cultural conservatism incompatible with “modern methods of production” – which he unpejoratively called “totalitarian”.³³ Britain therefore required a new set of generally-agreed “standards” according to which radical social reforms could be enacted; and Waddington identified the processes of biological and social evolution as the bases of a “criterion by which we can decide between advance and retreat” which, being factually-grounded, should command universal assent.³⁴ This vulgar-pragmatist argument, which initiated a celebrated debate on “science and ethics” in *Nature*, aligned Waddington with other advocates of the extension of “planning” into the field of culture.³⁵ The sociologist Karl Mannheim, for example, had called for democratic planning of both the economy and social values, so that the “consistent way of life [...] without which modern society cannot survive” might be established

³² ‘Notes and Comments’, *Our Time* 2:13 (Jul. 1943), 2 (emphasis added).

³³ C.H. Waddington, *The Scientific Attitude* (Harmondsworth, 1941), 18.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 87.

³⁵ C.H. Waddington, “The Relations between Science and Ethics,” *Nature* 148 (6 Sep. 1941), 270-274.

without the straightforward imposition of uniformity.³⁶ But as Mannheim found in his exchanges with T.S. Eliot and the British-Hungarian scientist Michael Polanyi in “the Moot”, an ecumenical Christian discussion group convened to discuss the application of religious values to issues of social reform, the question of how a purposive reconstruction of morality could be undertaken by democratic means was not easily resolvable in the mid-1940s.³⁷ as Tim Rogan has recently described, when Mannheim’s proposals for state-directed moral reform were adopted by the sub-committee on educational reconstruction set up by R.A. Butler in 1941-2, they appeared to some contemporary critics as “stark totalitarianism”.³⁸

II

Historians of the “cultural Cold War” have long drawn attention to the way in which its antagonists laid claim to the virtues evoked by “culture”, and extolled the artist as an exemplar of the subjective attributes required to withstand the corrupting influence of the other side.³⁹ In Britain this mode of cultural politics was already established during the preceding conflict, and its structuring division was between opposing conceptions of the ideal political subject and their relationship to the state. The sensitivities that were therefore raised by public discussion

³⁶ Karl Mannheim, *Diagnosis of Our Time: Wartime Essays of a Sociologist* (London, 1943), ch.VII, here 111.

³⁷ See Roger Kojecky, *T.S. Eliot’s Social Criticism* (London, 1971), ch.IX; also Stefan Collini, *Absent Minds: Intellectuals in Britain* (Oxford, 2006), 316-322.

³⁸ Tim Rogan, *The Moral Economists: R.H. Tawney, Karl Polanyi, E.P. Thompson, and the Critique of Capitalism* (Princeton & Oxford, 2017), 123-127 (quotation at 125).

³⁹ David Caute, *The Dancer Defects: The Struggle for Cultural Supremacy During the Cold War* (Oxford, 2003), Introduction, esp. 3-5; Jamie Cohen-Cole, “The Creative American: Cold War Salons, Social Science, and the Cure for Modern Society,” *Isis* 100 (2009), 222, 242; Greg Barnhisel, *Cold War Modernists: Art, Literature and American Cultural Diplomacy* (New York, NY, 2015).

of the arts were signalled in J.M. Keynes' announcement of the Arts Council's foundation in July 1945, in which his teasing declaration that "State patronage of the arts has crept in" was immediately qualified by an emphasis that the new body did "not intend to socialise this side of social endeavour" and that the "individual and free, undisciplined, unregimented, uncontrolled" character of the artist would remain intact.⁴⁰ The months immediately following victory in Europe also saw a resurgence of the anti-Communist cultural politics wherein any form of collective normative legislation was regarded as a precursor to totalitarianism. In the new journal *Polemic* (1945-47), to which Orwell was a leading contributor, this was reinforced with a vulgarised form of logical positivism, whose conception of value statements as fundamentally meaningless upheld a rigid fact/ value distinction and thus undermined the capacity of culture to sustain moral values.⁴¹ The philosopher A.J. Ayer, who had helped to disseminate logical positivism in Britain during the 1930s and who had also begun to popularise the existentialism of Sartre and Camus, conjoined the two anti-foundationalist philosophies in a celebrated essay for *Polemic* entitled "The Claims of Philosophy", which concluded: "The question how men ought to live is one to which there is no authoritative answer. It has to be decided by each man for himself."⁴²

This secular antinomianism, which permitted no qualification of the individual's moral autonomy, was antipathetic to thinkers who sought to situate moral values in culture and thus to submit them to purposive reform, or "planning". Waddington's earlier argument for factually-grounded reform of moral standards had been immediately recognised as a rebuttal

⁴⁰ J.M. Keynes, "The Arts Council: its Policy and Hopes," *The Listener* 12 Jul. 1945, 31.

⁴¹ "Editorial," *Polemic* 1 (n.d., but 1945), 4. Karl Popper had also invoked a distinction between "natural" and "normative" law in his anti-Communist tract *The Open Society and its Enemies, Volume I: The Spell of Plato* (London, 1945), ch.5.

⁴² A.J. Ayer, "The Claims of Philosophy," *Polemic* 7 (Mar. 1947), 33.

of logical positivism, and when the C.P.G.B. re-launched its quasi-academic journal *The Modern Quarterly* at the end of 1945 it identified the “fact/ value” distinction among its principal intellectual antipathies.⁴³ In the same issue, the scientist J.D. Bernal reiterated Waddington’s call for a purposive reform of morality in an essay which attracted a good deal of opprobrium, particularly for its declaration that moral values “based on excessive concern with individual rectitude need reorienting in the direction of social responsibility.”⁴⁴ As the ensuing debates intensified, news emerged of an “ideological hardening” in the U.S.S.R. that had begun with the suppression of two literary journals and the official disgrace of the writers Anna Akhmatova and Mikhail Zoshchenko.⁴⁵ The “Soviet Literary Controversy”, as it rapidly became known, gained attention in Britain in September 1946 while the exchanges between *Polemic* and *The Modern Quarterly* were at their most intense, and in which *Our Time*’s tortuous apologies for the Soviet regime failed to convince more moderate cultural commentators who identified themselves with the “Left”.⁴⁶ J.B. Priestley, formerly a sympathiser with Communist cultural projects, now affirmed that the artist “must of necessity [...] be something of an individualist and an anarchist”; and the former Communist fellow-traveller Stephen Spender complained in the *New Statesman* that “the poet, driven out of his

⁴³ “Science and Ethics: A Symposium,” *Times Literary Supplement* 2137 (16 Jan. 1943), 34; “Editorial,” *Modern Quarterly* (N.S.) 1:1 (Dec. 1945), 2.

⁴⁴ J.D. Bernal, “Belief and Action,” *Modern Quarterly* 1:1 (Dec. 1945), 53-54.

⁴⁵ The term “ideological hardening” was used in the first *New Statesman* report of a change in domestic policy within the Soviet Union: “Russia Hardens,” *New Statesman* 21 Sep. 1946, 202.

⁴⁶ “Editorial,” *Modern Quarterly* 2:1 (Winter 1946-47); “Comment,” *Horizon* XIV:82 (Oct. 1946); “Notes and Comments,” *Our Time* 6:4 (Nov. 1946), 75.

bourgeois ivory tower, is being chased through communal corridors and offices into a new kind of isolation amidst the machinery and slogans of the collective international world.”⁴⁷

In mid-1947 this formed the point of departure for a new journal launched by three recent Cambridge graduates with the title *Politics and Letters*, which urged that a resolution of the recent debate over the source and status of moral values be accomplished in “experience of literature and the arts. For in these the values which we must be concerned to preserve find their most actual and complete expression.”⁴⁸ In other words, what it called the “dichotomy” between its titular categories could be bridged by a conception of art as a realm governed by standards with universal validity, but which were enkindled and sustained in individual experience.⁴⁹ This was an overtly Arnoldian vision of culture’s universal moral remit: the “values” extolled by the editorial resided in “the best that has been thought and known in the world” and their application to debates over economic and social planning, it was claimed, would resolve the opposition between the individual and objective social forms.⁵⁰ In offering this resolution of the *impasse* in the debate over “values”, the three aspiring public moralists were mobilising onto the intellectual battlefield of the Cold War an account of the efficacy of literature derived from the Cambridge English teacher F.R. Leavis, under whom two of them—Wolf Mankowitz and Clifford Collins—had studied. However, his categories and assumptions created a fundamental intellectual tension in the journal that was unresolved when it closed

⁴⁷ J.B. Priestley, *The Arts Under Socialism: Being a lecture given to the Fabian Society with a postscript on What the Government Should do for the Arts Here and Now* (London, 1947), 13; 8; Stephen Spender, “Horatio Hits Back,” *New Statesman* 12 Apr. 1947, 258.

⁴⁸ “For Continuity in Change,” *Politics and Letters* 1:1 (Summer 1947), 3.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 4. The phrase “The best that has been thought and known in the world” was derived from Matthew Arnold’s “Culture and Anarchy” (1869), where it was synonymous with “culture”: see *Culture and Anarchy and other writings*, ed. Stefan Collini (Cambridge, 1993), 79.

after only three issues. The values denoted by an Arnoldian concept of “culture” could not, by definition, reside in the experience of more than a minority of individuals; for the rest, they would appear as external moral and intellectual standards scarcely less alien and dominative than those for which Bernal had seemingly called in *The Modern Quarterly*. This tension was laid bare in T.S. Eliot’s *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture* (1948), which attempted to dispel visions of culture as an agent of democratic reconstruction by austere stating its incompatibility with either democracy or equality.⁵¹ Eliot famously identified “culture” with “the *whole way of life* of a people” – but a whole comprising a rigid hierarchy in which the arts were reserved to the highest social group.⁵² Accordingly, he declared in a much-quoted passage, “culture” was inherently inegalitarian: the reader who wished to pursue equality as an overriding objective was enjoined to “stop paying lip-service to culture.”⁵³

III

Eliot thus re-drew the connection between artistic and quotidian culture that liberal anti-Communism had sought to disallow, but he also tacitly confounded the attempt that *Politics and Letters* had made to situate universal values in art by pronouncing that “the best that has been thought and known in the world” could only be present in the experience of a minority. This was the difficulty to which the third member of the journal’s editorial triumvirate, Raymond Williams, addressed his first full-length works, in which he responded to the formative debates of the cultural Cold War by envisaging artistic and moral values arising in universal experience – but without thereby being corrupted as proponents of minority culture

⁵¹ T.S. Eliot, *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture* (London, 1948).

⁵² *Ibid.*, 28 (emphasis in original).

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 16.

feared they would be. In his first book he accordingly located standards of critical judgement in what he called “the structure of personal feelings of [...] writers and readers.”⁵⁴ Whilst acknowledging that at present this might merely reveal the “poverty and dissociation of feeling” among both groups, Williams nevertheless maintained that “Adequate standards will not be created or sustained unless they arise from groups to which all contribute and all accept.”⁵⁵ His next work of socio-literary criticism pursued this concern through the critique of naturalism that would become a characteristic theme of his work over the following years, in which Williams presented art as a manifestation of the fundamental cohesion of “experience” within and between subjects – what he called “the pattern or structure of experience”.⁵⁶ At this stage, however, Williams was unable to reconcile this function with the normative content that he still wished “culture” to carry: in the “community of sensibility” that he envisaged between artist and audience, a special role was reserved for the artist, and even the audience comprised only a “minority” because “The pressure of a mechanical environment [...] which artists, and a few of like temper, reject only by conscious resistance and great labour” had resulted in a “lack of certain qualities of living, certain capacities for experience” among the population at large.⁵⁷

These distinctive locutions point to the problems Williams encountered in attempting to escape a Leavisian theory of minority culture while working within its categories and assumptions. In an unpublished paper of the early 1950s Williams identified Marxism as “The principal and most challenging alternative to the various theories of minority culture”, but in print he was more disparaging, and in any case that tradition of cultural theory had fallen into

⁵⁴ Raymond Williams, *Reading and Criticism* (London, 1950), 19.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 29.

⁵⁶ Raymond Williams, *Drama from Ibsen to Eliot* (London, 1952), 21.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 27; 28.

abeyance by the early 1950s, after the closure of *Our Time* in 1949 and the tightening of C.P.G.B. control over its successors.⁵⁸ Instead Williams's development of a non-minoritarian theory of culture depended upon two very different aspects of mid-century intellectual culture. The first of these was what he called, in an unpublished report of 1954, "developments within Literary Criticism and Philosophy which have produced a greater emphasis on Language".⁵⁹ The "extension" of these developments to adult education had included "The analysis of certain key words and concepts in relation to particular periods, and the development of society" – which he himself had designed and delivered under the rubric of "Culture and Society" since the late 1940s.⁶⁰ In July 1953 he published an extended study of "The Idea of Culture" itself, in which that term's ambiguity in contemporary usage was explained in terms of its codification of three entwined strands of response to "the industrial revolution".⁶¹ The effect of this analysis was to demonstrate that the antinomies of his own earlier attempts to develop a non-elitist theory of culture resulted from the historical development of the master-category itself: culture was *by definition* reserved to a minority, and antithetical to the working class.⁶² (At this stage Williams's re-definition of culture did not register other antitheses which would later be identified in his own work: like many of the thinkers with and against whom he argued, he conceived the nation as the fundamental cultural unit, imposing a system of exclusions and

⁵⁸ National Library of Wales, Papers of Raymond Williams, 1. Culture and Society 1780-1950 (1958) Early working papers, "Marxism and Culture" (typescript [unpaginated], 1); Raymond Williams, "Saints, Revolutionaries, Carpetbaggers, Etc.," *The Critic* 1:1 (1947), 52.

⁵⁹ University of Swansea, Papers of Raymond Williams, WWE/2/1/14/1/1, "The Teaching of Public Expression", 1 (emphasis in original).

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 1; 2.

⁶¹ Raymond Williams, "The Idea of Culture," *Essays in Criticism* III:3 (Jul. 1953), 239-242, 244-255.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 264-266.

differences that were tacitly concealed by an espousal of universalism.)⁶³ Williams's essay therefore supplied the "*Definition of Culture*" that Eliot's recent analysis had magisterially presupposed, by demonstrating that it was "the response of certain men, attached to certain values, in the face of change and the consequences of change."⁶⁴ In other words, values were indeed contingent but the manner in which "culture" came to be understood as the "ground for *ultimate* valuation" during the nineteenth century demonstrated that their force was not thus diminished.⁶⁵ Indeed, the potency of the values inscribed in "culture" was derived precisely from their being not merely the formulation of "a series of isolated men or groups"—individuals, as Ayer had imagined them, articulating evaluative principles that applied only to themselves—but being grounded in social life, arising from the "pressure of active or general life [...] the total environment to which ["culture"] is one kind of response."⁶⁶

In accounting for that process of response to a "total environment"—in other words, for the process whereby art could be conceived as the forum for collective normative legislation—Williams appears to have assimilated the holistic emphases of cultural sociology and anthropology that had attained wide currency in Britain by the mid-1940s. Looking back during the 1970s upon his post-war return to Cambridge, Williams recalled noticing the

⁶³ See, most notably, Paul Gilroy's critique of Williams's later work in *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack: The Cultural Politics of Race and Nation* (London, 1987, repr. 2002), 50-3. Williams's tacit cultural nationalism stood in the lineages of the "nationalisation of knowledge" during the First World War, and more broadly of what Stefan Collini has called "the Whig interpretation of English literature" – Stefan Collini, *Public Moralists: Political Thought and Intellectual Life in Britain, 1850-1930* (Oxford, 1991), ch.9, esp. 370-1. The limitations of universalism by the nation during the post-war decades have been influentially examined in Samuel Moyn, *The Last Utopia: Human Rights in History* (Cambridge, MA, 2010).

⁶⁴ Williams, "Idea of Culture", 244.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 245 (emphasis added).

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 245.

prevalence of “an anthropological sense” of culture “which now, with increased American influence and with the parallel influence of such thinkers as Mannheim, was becoming naturalized.”⁶⁷ The American influence was almost certainly the “Culture and Personality” school of anthropology that was popularised in Britain during the 1940s by Margaret Mead and Ruth Benedict.⁶⁸ (In a course syllabus of 1950 Williams described Benedict’s *Patterns of Culture* as “so distinguished that it cannot wisely be omitted from an essential reading list” for literature students.)⁶⁹ The most obvious respect in which Benedict and Mead’s “influence” could be conceived as “parallel” to that of Mannheim is in its assimilation of the holism that was prevalent in discussions of “culture” in the mid-century social sciences.⁷⁰ Mannheim, whose work continued to be published and prominently discussed in his adoptive country after his early death in 1947, was best-known for his “sociology of knowledge” wherein intellectual and cultural artefacts were conceived as products of the entire social order within which they emerged – an approach explained by E.H. Carr in an extended survey of his work in the *Times Literary Supplement* in 1953.⁷¹ In particular, Mannheim held that a sociological analysis of the political ideologies that claimed to make good the absence of coherent values in contemporary

⁶⁷ Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (London, 1976), 10.

⁶⁸ Peter Mandler, *Return from the Natives: How Margaret Mead Won the Second World War and Lost the Cold War* (New Haven/ London, 2013), ch.3 and 203-4.

⁶⁹ Raymond Williams, “Stocktaking: I – Books for Teaching ‘Culture and Environment’,” *The Use of English I* (1950), 139.

⁷⁰ This prevalence was demonstrated and remarked upon in A.L. Kroeber & Clyde Kluckhohn, *Culture: A Critical Review of Concepts and Definitions* (Cambridge MA, 1952), 43-46 (esp. 44-5). I am grateful to MIH’s anonymous reviewer for this citation.

⁷¹ [E.H. Carr,] “Thinking Things Out,” *Times Literary Supplement* 2658 (9 Jan. 1953), 17-18. Mannheim’s early work is surveyed in David Kettler, Volker Meja and Nico Stehr, *Karl Mannheim* (London/ Chichester, 1984), chs.1-2, to which I am indebted here.

societies would enable them to be understood as “structures” or “styles of thought”, among which a latent cohesion could be perceived by the sociologist of knowledge.⁷² In his most influential work, *Ideology and Utopia* (1929, trans. 1936) Mannheim had termed this method “relationism” and presented it as a sociological application of Gestalt psychology derived from the work of Alfred Weber, with whom he had studied at Heidelberg.⁷³ During the mid-1940s Mannheim’s work was prominently criticised by both Friedrich von Hayek and Karl Popper – in the latter case, expressly on the grounds of what Popper took to be its mis-application of Gestalt-ist holism (with its then-famous understanding of perceptual “wholes” that were distinct both from their component parts and from the aggregate of the parts – yet were emphatically non-idealist).⁷⁴ Williams’s attention may also have been drawn to Mannheim by his wife (who was a student at the London School of Economics during 1937-40, while Mannheim was lecturing there); a syllabus he prepared for a W.E.A. course on “Culture and Society” in 1950-51 included Mannheim’s *Man and Society in an Age of Reconstruction* (1940) among the assigned reading.⁷⁵

⁷² Carr succinctly summarised this central theme of Mannheim’s work in “Thinking Things Out,” 18.

⁷³ Karl Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia: An Introduction to the Sociology of Knowledge*, trans. Louis Wirth and Edward Shils (London, 1936), 188n, 227.

⁷⁴ Karl Popper, ‘The Poverty of Historicism II’, *Economica* N.S. XI:43 (1944), 126-129; also F.A. Hayek, *The Road to Serfdom* (London, 1944), 15-16, 50-51, 54, 117-18; K.R. Popper, *The Open Society and its Enemies, Volume II: The High Tide of Prophecy: Hegel, Marx, and the Aftermath* (London, 1945), ch.23 & 319 n.15. Gestalt psychology was also identified by Benedict among the intellectual currents that formed the “Culture and Personality” approach: Ruth Benedict, *Patterns of Culture: A study of the civilizations of the Zuñi Indians, the natives of Dobu, and the Kwakiutl Indians* (Boston/ New York, 1934), 50-52 (here 50). See also Robert A. LeVine, “Culture and Personality Studies, 1918-1960: Myth and History”, *Journal of Personality* 69 (2001), 811.

⁷⁵ University of Swansea, Papers of Raymond Williams, WWE/2/1/14/1/1, “W.E.A. Courses”.

Williams's formal elaboration of the process whereby values arose as a response to a "total environment" appears to have responded to the distinctive mode of analysis that Mannheim had dubbed "relationism". As we have seen, in 1954 he co-authored the manifesto for a film project to which he contributed a prefatory essay on "Film and the Dramatic Tradition", in which film was presented as *par excellence* the medium in which the deficiencies of naturalist drama could be overcome. Here Williams presented the dual meaning of "convention" as evidence of the inherently social and consensual nature of "*accepted standards*".⁷⁶ The success of dramatic performance, Williams claimed, depended upon its accordance with artistic "convention", which meant "the terms upon which author, performers and audience agree to meet".⁷⁷ The artist was always constrained by this need for the audience's prior consent to his methods and technique: Williams emphasised that "we shall not be able, merely by taking thought, to create an alternative convention" because "Dramatist, actors and audience must be able to agree that the particular method to be employed is acceptable".⁷⁸ In other words, the operation of artistic "conventions" demonstrated that meaningful standards or values could never be determined by individual artists, but were the outcome of an interaction between the arts and "the life of the time in which they flourished" – which Williams here named "the structure of feeling".⁷⁹

The invention of this category as the primary field of artistic creation enabled Williams to interpose a theory of socially-generated value between the overt antinomianism of liberal anti-Communism, and the equally overt elitism of Eliot's recent attempt to conjoin social and artistic values. The Mannheimian "structure" or "style of thought" was here transposed into the

⁷⁶ Williams, "Film and the Dramatic Tradition," 15 (emphasis in original).

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 16.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 24.

realm of “feeling” to denote a latent cohesion that was always, already present beneath the apparent fragmentation of contemporary values. “All the products of a community in a given period are, we now commonly believe, essentially related”, Williams explained, “although in practice, and in detail, this is not always easy to see.”⁸⁰ This “essentially related” quality, and the fundamental cultural cohesion it supposedly underwrote, was obscured by criticism that focused upon determinate aspects of social life, as naturalist drama focused upon character and personality instead of the whole:

We examine each element as a precipitate, but in the living experience of the time every element was in solution, an inseparable part of a complex whole [...] when one has measured the work against the separable parts, there yet remains some element for which there is no external counterpart. This element, I believe, is what I have named the *structure of feeling* of a period, and it is only realizable through experience of the work of art itself, as a whole.⁸¹

The “structure of feeling” was therefore the distinctive quality of a “complex whole” that was not present in its individual parts, or in their aggregate: it was homologous with the principle of cohesion in cultural formations that Mannheim, in particular, had elaborated. The relationship that Williams thus established between artistic and anthropological culture differed from that envisaged by Eliot insofar as it precluded, by definition as it were, the reservation of the arts to any particular social group: Williams identified them with the whole because they embodied standards subsisting in a “structure of feeling” that was itself composed of the relations between all “the separable parts” of a universal culture. The elucidation of those

⁸⁰ Ibid., 21.

⁸¹ Ibid., 21 (emphasis in original).

relations—of the “structure of feeling”—remained the task of the artist, but it was now ostensibly a secondary activity, the articulation of principles which all members of society were always engaged upon creating. In the arts, “A new convention [...] will become established because there are changes in the structure of feeling which demand expression”.⁸² Whereas *Politics and Letters* had envisaged Arnoldian “culture” as instilling values into experience in order to reconcile the individual with objective social processes, Williams understood art as an expression of values that already pervaded individual and social experience. “The structure of feeling”, he emphasised in conclusion, “lies deeply embedded in our lives; it cannot be merely extracted and summarized; it is perhaps only in art—and this is the importance of art—that it can be realized, and communicated, as a whole experience.”⁸³ Although comparatively little-noticed in 1954, Williams thus elaborated a theoretical framework within which culture as an ordered body of work and judgements could be restored to what he thought of as a universal social constituency, and in so doing established the means by which he would attempt to resolve the dilemmas that had animated debates over democracy and “values” since the early 1940s.

IV

The theory of culture that Williams outlined in these early works was a product both of the “cultural Cold War”, and of the moment in twentieth-century Britain that Harold Perkin famously characterised as “the plateau of professional society”, during which competing claims to public authority were made by various forms of expertise, on the grounds of distinctive or

⁸² Ibid., 23.

⁸³ Ibid., 54.

unique disciplinary competence.⁸⁴ Literary intellectuals were vigorous participants in this contestation of public authority during the 1950s and 1960s.⁸⁵ As we have seen, *Politics and Letters* had already claimed a unique public authority for literature amid the scientific debate over “values” during the mid-1940s; and Williams presented *Reading and Criticism* as an extension of the Leavisian tradition of “culture and environment” studies that explicitly emphasised the efficacy of literature in the formation and maintenance of liberal subjectivity.⁸⁶ In this Williams was one of a group of young writers influenced by Leavis in the mid-1950s who upheld the capacity of literature to disclose ameliorative knowledge of the social, particularly in contradistinction to what were taken to be quasi-positivistic modes of sociological or philosophical knowledge. E.P. Thompson’s biography of William Morris (1955) projected anti-Communist deployments of logical-positivism back onto early Victorian industrialism, demonstrating how the Gradgrindian mantra of “‘Fact, fact, fact [...] fact, fact, fact’”, which nullified all “values” besides those of the existing economic and social order, was made to yield to the articulated moral principle of Morris’s aesthetic politics.⁸⁷ The opening of Richard Hoggart’s famous study of working-class and mass culture *The Uses of Literacy* (1957) dismissed “the detailed studies of working-class life which sociologists have made over the last twenty years”, and underlined the special ability of literary analysis to decode cultures – “to see beyond the habits to what the habits stand for, to see through the statements to what the

⁸⁴ Harold Perkin, *The Rise of Professional Society: England since 1880* (London, 1989), 405. See also, for example, Chris Waters, “‘Dark Strangers’ in Our Midst: Discourses of Race and Nation in Britain, 1947-1963”, *Journal of British Studies* 36 (1997); Mike Savage, *Identities and Social Change in Britain since 1940: The Politics of Method* (Oxford, 2010).

⁸⁵ Guy Ortolano, *The Two Cultures Controversy: Science, Literature and Cultural Politics in Postwar Britain* (Cambridge, 2009), 16-22; also Savage, *Identities and Social Change*, 90-1.

⁸⁶ Williams, *Reading and Criticism*, 8.

⁸⁷ E.P. Thompson, *William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary* (London, 1955) 21 (& 21-3 *passim*), 22; 828.

statements really mean [...] to detect the differing pressures of emotion behind idiomatic phrases and ritualistic observances.”⁸⁸

Williams likewise claimed a special role for the writer and critic as legislators of social values in his emphatic statement that “it is perhaps only in art” that the structure of feeling “can be realized, and communicated, as a whole experience”. This emphasis became more pronounced as Williams attempted to demonstrate how change in the “structure of feeling” could take place: the extent to which his new category had diminished the role of the artist in cultural production seemingly foreclosed the possibility of any deliberate innovation in artistic and moral standards, and Williams attempted to rectify this by suggesting that changes in conventions originated in the structure of feeling, but were initially perceptible to “a few minds only” who would “promote and affect them.”⁸⁹ In other words it continued to be necessary to assign some measure of authority to a minority, which thus remained a spectral presence in his theory of universal cultural production. But Williams’s overriding concern to dispel this presence subsequently led him to dispense altogether with any mediation between “experience” and “culture” so that, as he explained in an oft-cited essay of 1958, “Culture is Ordinary” – it was composed of the “shape”, the “purposes” and “meanings” of an entire society, which were “also made and remade in every individual mind.”⁹⁰ In the same year, in his celebrated book *Culture and Society* Williams unified the two strands of criticism that he had adumbrated in

⁸⁸ Richard Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy: Aspects of Working-Class Life, with Special Reference to Publications and Entertainments* (London, 1957), 6-7.

⁸⁹ Williams, “Film and the Dramatic Tradition”, 23; 23, 24.

⁹⁰ Raymond Williams, “Culture is Ordinary” in Norman MacKenzie, ed., *Conviction* (London, 1958), 75. Williams’s conflation of “experience” and “culture” in his work of this period is remarked upon in Martin Jay, *Songs of Experience: Modern American and European Variations on a Universal Theme* (Berkeley/ Los Angeles, 2005), 195 (and, with a different emphasis, in Stuart Middleton, “The concept of ‘experience’ and the making of the English working class, 1924-1963”, *Modern Intellectual History* 13 (2016), 179-208 (at 194-5)).

the essays of 1953-54: the “tradition” of thought about culture that he had identified in 1953 was presented here as the articulation of a “structure of feeling” which culminated in the contemporary figure of Orwell, whose work demonstrated the breakdown of the traditional concept of “culture” in the intellectual and social conjuncture of the early 1950s.⁹¹

Williams claimed that there was now a dislocation between “immediate experience” and the “meanings” conveyed by the tradition, which it was his aim to overcome – but not, it appeared, through any conscious action.⁹² In comparison with thinkers working within the ambit of the Communist Party, Williams was little-concerned with the possibility of purposive historical change: he appears closer to what has been characterised as a liberal-communitarian response to modernity, wherein an instinctive valuation of “a densely structured traditional existence” leaves “no point of leverage for criticism.”⁹³ The conclusion to *Culture and Society* stated that any attempt at deliberate alteration of the structure of feeling was a manifestation of “the dominative attitude” or “mode”,⁹⁴ in contrast to which Williams demanded a “democratic practice” centring upon the recognition that “Nobody can raise anybody else’s cultural standard. The most that can be done is to transmit the skills, which are not personal but general human property, and at the same time to give open access to all that has been made and done.”⁹⁵ The Arnoldian treasury of “the best that has been thought and known” was here recast in more inclusive terms as “all that has been made and done”, and Williams attempted to demonstrate

⁹¹ Williams, *Culture and Society*, 291.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 297.

⁹³ Bernard Williams, “Pluralism, Community and Left Wittgensteinianism,” in Williams, ed. Geoffrey Hawthorn, *In The Beginning Was the Deed: Realism and Moralism in Political Argument* (Princeton, N.J./ Oxford, 2005), 33.

⁹⁴ [Raymond] Williams, *Culture and Society*, 315, 317, 336-337.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 315; 318-19.

how working-class institutions could supply a new “structure of feeling” that would supplant the tradition of “culture” that had exhausted itself in the 1950s. “[T]he basic collective idea” embodied in working-class institutions was accordingly set in a quasi-dialectical relationship with “the basic individualist idea” of “bourgeois culture”, and Williams claimed that “In our culture as a whole, there is both a constant interaction between these ways of life and an area which can properly be described as common to or underlying both.”⁹⁶ This did not overcome the fundamental problem posed by his theory of universal cultural and ethical legislation, however: the retained concept of the “culture *as a whole*” within which working-class and bourgeois cultures supposedly commingled suggested that the former had *already* been synthesised into the extant “structure of feeling” and its articulated “meanings”, rather than forming the basis of a new, future synthesis in the way that Williams’s application of his historical analysis to contemporary debates about “culture” seemed to require.

Culture and Society became one of the seminal texts of the “New Left” that began to emerge in Britain in the late 1950s, seemingly in response to de-Stalinisation in the U.S.S.R., Soviet repression of the Hungarian revolt in October that year, and the almost-contemporaneous Suez affair; and as a forum for attempts by young intellectuals to reformulate socialist theory in response to the altered structures of post-war capitalism.⁹⁷ In fact most of the New Left’s distinctive concerns—with “commitment” in the arts, with the relationship between socialism and “humanism”, with the politics of logical positivism and Oxford ordinary language philosophy, and with the constraints of Popperian and structural-functionalist social science—were continuations of debates that had been underway for most of the post-war period, and in which competing disciplinary claims to public authority were clearly registered. It is

⁹⁶ Williams, *Culture and Society*, 327.

⁹⁷ The importance of *Culture and Society* to this *milieu* is emphasised in Michael Kenny, *The First New Left: British Intellectuals After Stalin* (London, 1995), 59, 60, 88-9.

therefore unsurprising that Williams's book, the culmination of his attempt to escape the intellectual deadlock that he perceived in the debates of the mid-1940s, should have gained so much attention in this milieu, which also shared his positive valuation of "democracy". The inaugural editorial of *Universities and Left Review*, one of the constitutive journals of the new intellectual caucus, declared that its principal difficulty was to renew what the journal called "socialist values" in such a way as to "change contemporary society so as to make it more democratic and more egalitarian, and yet [...] prevent it degenerating into totalitarianism" – an extraordinary qualification which is suggestive of how far schemes of moral and cultural reform such as those advocated by the incipient "New Left" had been placed in tension with democracy during the debates of the 1940s.⁹⁸ The historian E.P. Thompson joined Williams as one of the dominating figures of the New Left through his editorship of the *New Reasoner*, and by supplying a distinctive theoretical framework for its pursuit of democracy in his vision of "socialist humanism", a kind of corporate self-government that he counterposed to the bureaucratism of Soviet Communism and to the weaknesses and evasions of social-democratic politics.⁹⁹

In practice, however, the "agency" that stood at the centre of this renewal of democracy was a corporate faculty wherein working-class experience would be harnessed to the theoretical productions of socialist intellectuals.¹⁰⁰ This emphasis on intellectual leadership was retained in Williams's own work for the New Left, despite his attempts to dispense with it in *Culture and Society*. In an essay for *Universities and Left Review* in 1958, Williams presented the realist

⁹⁸ "Editorial", *Universities and Left Review* 1 (Spring 1957), 2.

⁹⁹ E.P. Thompson, "Socialist Humanism: An Epistle to the Philistines", *New Reasoner* 1 (Summer 1957). See also id., "Revolution", *New Left Review* I/3 (May-Jun. 1960), 7.

¹⁰⁰ On this see Stuart Middleton, "E.P. Thompson and the Cultural Politics of Literary Modernism", *Contemporary British History* 28 (2014).

novel as the sole remedy for the conflict between “meanings” and “experience” that he had diagnosed in that book, *contra* the claims of “sociology on the one hand or psychology on the other”: in fact his hopes were vested in a particular kind of realist novel, closely resembling the one he himself was engaged upon writing.¹⁰¹ Williams’s parallel attempts during the late 1950s to develop the formal theory of culture foreshadowed in *Culture and Society* seem to have encountered their greatest difficulty in establishing how the “structure of feeling” could mediate between culture and society without any delegation of cultural production or authority to intellectuals. His notebooks from mid-1957 contain outlines for “a general theory” of culture in which the different senses of that term and their relationship to “society” are painstakingly elaborated, with the “structure of feeling” interposed as a “middle term” which bound individuals to culture by demonstrating that they were always tacitly engaged upon its construction.¹⁰² This redefinition of the concept as a mediation of *individual* creativity appears as an attempt to resolve the problem of universalised cultural production that had arisen in *Culture and Society*, by understanding it not as a properly collective process but as one engaged upon simultaneously and autonomously by (all) individuals. He still appears to have been uncertain whether the “structure of feeling” was the object of expression, or its medium; in a sequence of notes on “Art and Mind” it is presented as both:

Expresses what? : The structure of feeling.

Because expresses : communicates.

¹⁰¹ Raymond Williams, “Realism and the Contemporary Novel”, *Universities and Left Review* 4 (Summer 1958), 25; id., *Border Country* (London, 1960).

¹⁰² University of Swansea, Papers of Raymond Williams, WWE/2/1/12/2, “B” notebook, not fully paginated but pages numbered by Williams 122, 126; 130.

This is why the structure is necessary, [formulas?] and forms for communication: partic. channels into which personal energies & conflicts can be diverted, & through exercise, partially controlled.¹⁰³

In 1961 the “general theory” of culture for which these notes were a preparation appeared as *The Long Revolution*, in which the diagnosis advanced in *Culture and Society* was elaborated in greater detail. At the turn of the 1960s, Williams claimed, Britain had seen the ascendancy of the liberal-empiricist ideology of which he had formerly identified Orwell as the representative, wherein the reality of social ties outside the immediate circle of “family and friends” was denied.¹⁰⁴ It was thus a “mass” society, in the sense that the corollary of this mode of individualism was an “image of society” wherein other people were viewed as “the mass” – and, implicitly, “governed, organized, instructed and entertained by an élite or élites.”¹⁰⁵ (Williams also described this “image of society” in quasi-Mannheimian terms as a “structure of thinking”.)¹⁰⁶ This mode of individualism was self-contradictory, however, since on its own terms it must either recognise the validity of other individuals, and thus concede some measure of social reciprocity; or culminate in the individual’s own subsumption by the mass.¹⁰⁷ It was also confounded by the very nature of experience, which the “structure of feeling” was intended to render inherently social: as we saw, Williams’s notes for the book indicate how he wished to use this “central concept” to bind individuals to “culture” by demonstrating that they were always tacitly engaged upon its construction. *The Long Revolution* opened with a

¹⁰³ University of Swansea, Papers of Raymond Williams, WWE/2/1/12/1, “B” notebook, 9.

¹⁰⁴ Raymond Williams, *The Long Revolution* (London, 1961), 111.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 110.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 111; cf. also 151 (“patterns of thinking”).

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 93-96.

reinforcement of that argument using the neuroscientist J.Z. Young's recent Reith lectures, which Williams cited as definitive validation of his belief that creativity was a universal faculty exercised at all times, by the mere fact of consciousness.¹⁰⁸ He now inverted the claim he had made in 1958, that "Culture is Ordinary": Young's lectures, he claimed, demonstrated that "there are, essentially, no 'ordinary' activities, if by 'ordinary' we mean the absence of creative interpretation and effort. Art is ratified, in the end, by the ratification of creativity in all our living."¹⁰⁹

The dominant "image of society" in Britain was therefore, by definition, at odds with "experience" because the latter category did not admit of any distinction between elites and masses. In this sense Williams attempted to demonstrate how the three components of his "long revolution"—democratic, industrial, and cultural—were intertwined, and mutually inextricable: in effect, how processes of economic, social and cultural development were evincing and promoting a universal impulse towards self-government.¹¹⁰ He also redefined the "structure of feeling" in accordance with his modified theoretical framework, placing more emphasis upon the intangible qualities that resided in "a way of thinking and living" of which there was no formal record or artefact: it was "a particular sense of life, a particular community of experience hardly needing expression, through which the characteristics of our way of life that an external analyst could describe are in some way passed, giving them a particular and characteristic colour."¹¹¹ In this sense the structure of feeling was actually inscrutable even to the individuals who were present within it; but it could be approached through "the body of intellectual or imaginative work, in which, in a detailed way, human thought and experience are variously

¹⁰⁸ J.Z. Young, *Doubt and Certainty in Science: A Biologist's Reflections on the Brain* (Oxford, 1951).

¹⁰⁹ Williams, *Long Revolution*, 37.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, x-xii.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 47; 48.

recorded”.¹¹² Williams claimed, in accordance with his quasi-democratic theory of universal creativity, that this encompassed *all* the artefacts of a culture, “from poems to buildings and dress-fashions”,¹¹³ and proceeded to apply the reformed concept to an analysis of English culture during the 1840s in which he claimed that even novelists who opposed the dominant “social character” remained inescapably “bound by the structure of feeling.”¹¹⁴

There was, however, an exception. In *Wuthering Heights*, “The creative elements in the other fiction are raised to a wholeness which takes the work right outside the ordinary structure of feeling, and teaches a new feeling.”¹¹⁵ The problem that Williams had always recognised in his “central concept”, of how it could allow for innovation and change, was ultimately irresolvable without recourse to the tutelary role of the artist (in this case Emily Brontë). He was therefore constrained to assign a special status to “art” that set it apart from the more quotidian forms of creativity with which he had attempted to equate it: “Art reflects its society and works a social character through to its reality in experience. But also, art creates, by new perceptions and responses, elements which the society, as such, is not able to realize.”¹¹⁶ Although he insisted on the “deep and central connections” between art and “the rest of the general life”, the possibility of artistic and ethical change ultimately required that those connections should not be reciprocal but run from one to the other, and the artist was again accorded the authority as cultural producer and legislator that it had been Williams’s foremost purpose to disperse.¹¹⁷ Accordingly at the close of the second section of the book, Williams

¹¹² Ibid., 41.

¹¹³ Ibid., 49.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 54-71, here 67.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 69.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 69.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 69.

tacitly modified the theory of universal creativity that he had outlined at its opening: “Reality is continually established, by common effort, *and art is one of the highest forms of this process.*”¹¹⁸ In calling for “a new realism” in the novel that would transcend the contemporary “structure of feeling”, Williams was therefore arguing for the special role of the artist as the legislator of a new way of life.¹¹⁹ If Britain in 1961 was indeed in the midst of a “long revolution” of the kind that he had claimed, the constraint of his own theoretical work within the assumptions of “minority culture” was itself a sign of what he acknowledged to be the revolution’s incompleteness.

V

The ambivalences and ambiguities that were therefore evident in *The Long Revolution* were also registered in wider attempts to reassert the role of moral values in political and economic debate in Britain during the early 1960s. In disputes within the Labour Party from the late 1950s, the new concept of “affluence”—partially derived from J.K. Galbraith’s *The Affluent Society* (1958)—was harnessed to a moral critique of the impoverishment of the public sphere that resulted from treating economic growth and consumption as ends in themselves.¹²⁰ Around the same time there was a minor revival of interest in R.H. Tawney, whose works of the 1920s and 1930s inspired some of those moralistic usages of “affluence”.¹²¹ On Tawney’s death in

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 288 (emphasis added).

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 289.

¹²⁰ Stuart Middleton, “‘Affluence’ and the Left in Britain, c.1958-1974”, *English Historical Review* CXXIX (2014), 107-138.

¹²¹ Asa Briggs, “Tawney and the Values of Society”, *New Statesman* 30 Apr. 1960, 634-6; R.H.S. Crossman, “An Anthology of Tawney”, *New Statesman* 26 Nov. 1960, 817-18.

January 1962, a *New Statesman* editorial explicitly situated contemporary critiques of capitalism in the lineages of Tawney's ethical socialism: "He had never claimed that capitalism was unworkable [...] He believed, quite simply, that it was wrong", the paper explained:

Long before J.K. Galbraith reminded us of the contrast between private affluence and public squalor, Tawney had attacked the double standard of private and public morality. Both *The Acquisitive Society* and *Equality* are passionate assertions that man cannot be whole or dignified until he lives in a community where his private motives lead him to seek the public good.¹²²

Yet although this moralistic rhetoric was integrated into Labour Party policy statements during the early 1960s and into the "public doctrine" that Harold Wilson elaborated as Labour leader during 1963-4, it did not shift the fundamental priorities of Labour policy. Shortly after Labour's return to office in the 1964 election Williams himself acknowledged that, within the party itself, the tradition of "moral critique" that subsisted in working-class culture and in the literary tradition he had analysed in *Culture and Society* had long been subordinate to the utilitarian and paternalist ideology of Fabianism, and would likely remain so under Wilson.¹²³

It has recently been argued that a version of this tradition of anti-utilitarian moral criticism, stemming from Tawney, was invalidated amid the anti-humanist shift in Western intellectual life from the late 1960s because it had depended upon a notion of the human "personality" as an absolute end in itself.¹²⁴ While that development was undoubtedly influential, we have seen here that the place of moral values in political debate had already

¹²² "A Man for all Seasons", *New Statesman* 19 Jan. 1962, 73.

¹²³ Raymond Williams, "The British Left", *New Left Review* I/30 (Mar.-Apr. 1965), 18-26.

¹²⁴ Rogan, *The Moral Economists*.

become deeply problematic by the 1940s, when the compatibility of any form of normative legislation with democracy and liberty was called into question in fundamental terms. The complexities and contradictions of Williams's concept of the "structure of feeling" arose from his attempts to circumvent those difficulties. Exponents of this kind of moral criticism were therefore already in a defensive position by the early 1950s, as a consequence not of challenges to the normative validity of the human "personality" but of a dominant intellectual liberalism that sought a safeguard against totalitarianism in a tendentious equation of individual liberty with value pluralism.¹²⁵ The philosopher Richard Wollheim directly applied this criticism to Williams's theory of culture shortly after *The Long Revolution* appeared, counterposing his own conception of Socialism as "a culturally plural society" to Williams's idea of a "common culture" which, in its apparent requirement for "widespread acceptance of [...] substantive values", risked allowing "the modest ideal of a society in which people speak the same language" to be supplanted by "the more comprehensive ideal of a society in which people say roughly the same things" – a criticism which evinces the same pattern of response that was apparent in *ULR*'s recognition that its espousal of democracy should not be permitted to slide into "totalitarianism".¹²⁶

The alarming implications that this criticism raised demonstrate the sensitivities that had formed around holistic or unitary schemes of moral reform by the early 1960s, as a result of the debates over the relationship between democracy and values that have been examined in this essay. Williams elaborated the concept of the "structure of feeling" in an attempt to develop a theory of culture that would licence a democratisation of cultural production, while continuing to support the progressive historical developments that he referred to as "the Long

¹²⁵ Most influentially in Isaiah Berlin, *Two Concepts of Liberty: An inaugural lecture delivered before the University of Oxford on 31 October 1958* (Oxford, 1958).

¹²⁶ Richard Wollheim, *Socialism and Culture*, Fabian tract 331 (London, 1961), 44, 45.

Revolution”. Yet the difficulty of sustaining a thoroughgoing cultural democracy had already been recognised by Karl Mannheim in his essay “The Democratization of Culture” (1933), which appeared in English in 1956 in a collection that Williams listed in the bibliography to *The Long Revolution*.¹²⁷ Mannheim viewed cultural democratisation as the normative path of development in modern societies, but also acknowledged “an inner contradiction inherent in the democratic organization of society” – namely, its irreconcilability with the objective of order.¹²⁸ “Hence, all democratic societies need certain neutralizing devices involving undemocratic or anti-democratic potentialities”, he explained: “These devices, however, are not imposed upon democratic society from without; they consist essentially in a *voluntary* renunciation by the mass of the full use of its energies.”¹²⁹ As we have seen, Mannheim was strongly criticised for his abrogation of democracy, and even after his death T.S. Eliot wondered at what he called Mannheim’s “dual personality”, in a letter to the theologian Reinhold Niebuhr of 1953: “I mean, that he always seemed to me to have the heart of a humane and highly civilised liberal and the head of a totalitarian planner”.¹³⁰ Williams, of course, sought to avoid any voluntary renunciation of cultural self-government and attempted instead to construct a theoretical framework within which what Mannheim called “the mass” *could* make full use of its creative faculties – but in which order, or the operation of cultural standards, could only be secured by the regulatory and innovative function of artists and intellectuals. His work, too, could thus appear to contemporaries to embody a dualism. “There are really two

¹²⁷ Karl Mannheim, “The Democratization of Culture” in Mannheim, *Essays on the Sociology of Culture* (London, 1956); Williams, *Long Revolution*, 357.

¹²⁸ Mannheim, “The Democratization of Culture”, 178.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 178-9 (emphasis in original).

¹³⁰ Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C., Papers of Reinhold Niebuhr, box 5, letter to Niebuhr from T.S. Eliot dated 19th August 1953.

Raymond Williamses”, a reviewer in the *New Statesman* observed in 1962: “The first is a democrat”, while the second “half-subscribes to the romantic myth that the modern world has seen some kind of absolute deterioration in the quality of life [...] this is the Raymond Williams who has been attracted by Coleridge’s dream of a clerisy.”¹³¹

The perception that Williams risked being absorbed into the tradition he himself had traced in *Culture and Society* was also, half-jokingly, raised by E.P. Thompson amid their uneasy collaboration within the first New Left.¹³² However, Williams himself had presented that book as part of the *completion* of “a body of work which I set myself to do ten years ago”,¹³³ and his growing engagement with what would later be called western Marxism was already evident in his article on Wilson for *New Left Review*: the contrast here between a potentially transformative moral critique and the corporatism of Fabian socialism, and the emphasis upon the political agency of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament and the New Left, demonstrated affinities with the work of Antonio Gramsci, which had long been known among British socialists before being adopted as an explicit theoretical reference point by Perry Anderson and Tom Nairn.¹³⁴ With the fuller development of Williams’s cultural materialism during the 1970s, he attempted to reformulate the “structure of feeling” in quasi-Marxian terms:

The idea of a structure of feeling can be specifically related to the evidence of forms and conventions—semantic figures—which, in art and literature, are often among the very first indications that such a new structure is forming [...] as a matter of cultural

¹³¹ John Gross, “All That Nonsense”, *New Statesman* 4 May 1962, 654.

¹³² University of Swansea, Papers of Raymond Williams, WWE/2/1/16/356, letter to Williams from E.P. Thompson dated 12 December (n.y, but probably 1960).

¹³³ Williams, *The Long Revolution*, xiv.

¹³⁴ Notably in Perry Anderson, “Origins of the Present Crisis”, *New Left Review* I/23 (Jan.-Feb. 1964), 26-53.

theory this is a way of defining forms and conventions in art and literature as inalienable elements of a social material process[.]¹³⁵

The voluntarism that Williams had attempted to incorporate in his earliest elaborations of the concept receded in this re-definition, with neither artist nor audience credited with any special agency in the face of “a social material process” that appears more nearly determinative than Williams allowed in his work of the 1950s. This shift may reflect his recognition of the problems that the concept continued to raise, which he explicitly acknowledged in his interviews with *New Left Review* shortly afterwards; but it also demonstrates how strongly Williams’s earlier work had been formed by the acute intellectual pressures of the 1940s and 1950s, a context by which it was less strongly bound by the mid-1970s.

Nonetheless, insofar as that passage in mid-century intellectual history saw purposive attempts to invalidate moral argument in political and economic discourse, and the valorisation of an ostensible ethical neutrality characteristic of early or “first-phase” neoliberalism, its influence continues to be felt in the present day.¹³⁶ Calls for the restoration of moral critique to contemporary debates about capitalism will therefore have not only to circumvent the problems posed by the concept of the human “personality”, but also address the difficulties of reconciling moral prescription with democracy that this essay has suggested was a major issue in mid-century intellectual history, and the fundamental concern of Williams’s early work. The history traced here suggests that those difficulties are not insuperable: as has been pointed out elsewhere, “views cast in a negative form” such as the disallowance of moral prescription, “may not be, in any given situation, any less prescriptive than views cast in a positive form”;

¹³⁵ Ibid., 133.

¹³⁶ On this aspect of “first-phase” neoliberalism see Daniel Stedman Jones, *Masters of the Universe: Hayek, Friedman, and the Birth of Neoliberal Politics* (Princeton & Oxford, 2012), 8-15.

and democracy is not necessarily or obviously incompatible with all forms of intellectual and cultural hierarchy.¹³⁷ It was made so, however, in Williams's rejection of any form of normative legislation as a manifestation of "the dominative mode", which also anticipated the radically anti-hierarchical impulses that were unleashed among the European and American left from the late 1960s. These, too, foundered upon their aversion to political leadership, while arguably lending themselves to new and more insidious forms of domination.¹³⁸ Some of the most influential recent work in modern intellectual history has been concerned with delineating a contemporary account of "the origins of the present crisis", in the celebrated phrase associated with Williams's interlocutors on the second New Left, by pointing to the unintended consequences of intellectual transformations that were accomplished in the global conjuncture of the late 1960s and early 1970s.¹³⁹ If the effects of those transformations are to be undone or overcome, their lineages within a more extended intellectual history of the kind that this article has attempted to outline will need to be more fully understood; and Williams's attempts to diagnose and respond to the intellectual convulsions of the mid-twentieth century may therefore retain some significance beyond the academy in the early twenty-first.

¹³⁷ Collini, *Absent Minds*, 398, discussing Ayer's essay "The Claims of Philosophy" (see above at n.42).

¹³⁸ Alexandre Campsie, "Populism and grassroots politics: 'New Left' critiques of social democracy, 1968-1994", *Renewal: A Journal of Social Democracy* 25 (2017); Luc Boltanski & Ève Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Gregory Elliott (London, 2005; revised ed., 2018).

¹³⁹ In addition to Campsie and Boltanski-Chiapello, see Mark Greif, *The Age of the Crisis of Man: Thought and Fiction in America, 1933-1973* (Princeton & Oxford, 2015); Rogan, *The Moral Economists*; Samuel Moyn, *Not Enough: Human Rights in an Unequal World* (Cambridge, MA & London, 2018).