Chapter Seventeen

**Culture and Revolution**¹

*A Review of Raymond Williams, Culture and Society, 1780–1950 and The Long Revolution*

Hegel said that the function of philosophy was to make man at home in the world.² The effect of a good deal of socialist theorising is almost the opposite. The categories of thought are often so alien to the detail of everyday experience that theory becomes not a kind of insight, but a kind of blindness, and a blindness almost deliberate and willed. On the one hand, there is the fabric of life at work and in the family, the worries about children and schooling, the pub and the trade-union branch, housing and money and holidays. On the other hand, there is some imposed abstract political scheme, a mechanical rendering of Marx’s view of history or, worse still, of Lenin

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² Hegel nowhere states this directly, but it is implied in several passages. See Hegel 1952, pp. 6, 7. ‘To recognise reason as the rose in the cross of the present and therefore to enjoy the present, this is the rational insight, which reconciles us to the actual, the reconciliation which philosophy affords to those in whom there has at once arisen an inner voice bidding them to comprehend, not only to dwell in what substantive while still retaining subjective freedom, but also to possess subjective freedom while standing not in anything particular and accidental but in what exists absolutely…. Just as reason is not content with an approximation which, as something “neither hot nor cold” it will “spew out of its mouth”, so it is just as little content with the cold despair which submits the view that in this earthly life things are truly bad or at best only tolerable, though here they cannot be improved and that this is the only reflection which can keep us at peace with the world. There is less chill in the peace with the world which knowledge supplies.’
or the Fabians. These, coexisting in a single mind, produce in turn theoretical sterility and frustration, a violent refusal to face the complexity of thought and temporary relief in the substitution of easy slogans and formulas for well-founded conclusions.

Raymond Williams has done more than any other writer to liberate us from this. His novel, *Border Country*, makes it plain why he was so well equipped for the task. For those who have traversed in their own lives the journey between working-class and university life, or between Wales and England, the felt experience is a movement towards and not away from theorising. To travel in class and in place is also to travel in time through the social strata laid down at different periods in the past hundred years. One can be forced to ask for a view of history because one discovers that one is oneself what the past has made one. All of Raymond Williams’s work is touched with an entirely admirable and unobtrusive self-consciousness of this kind.

This personal quality is linked to a method of approach which in one respect at least promises well. Williams approaches social change through thought about social change. In *Culture and Society* he discusses the variety of descriptions which people have offered in theories, in novels, in polemical tracts and literary criticism, of social changes since the industrial revolution. This, as *The Long Revolution* makes clear, is not a substitute for describing such change itself. But the changes did not happen, did not exist, except as an incarnation of human purposes and projects, and we do not know what men were doing who contrived these changes unless we know how they envisaged them. The cultural images which men throw up are a first attempt at a history of human action in their time; but even before that they themselves are also part, and the articulate, conscious part, of the change which such history aspires to describe. We cannot describe a period first in our terms and then ask how good contemporaries were at describing it; for we do not know what they were doing unless we know how they described it. It is in the incoherences of such descriptions that we discover the key to the difference between the true story and the story as told. So Marx began not by going straight to capitalism and measuring up his own description of capitalism against that of classical political economy. He began with the classical economists, whom he treated

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3 Williams 1960.