Key Words: A Journal of Cultural Materialism

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Key Words is a publication of The Raymond Williams Society (website: www.raymondwilliams.co.uk).

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Cover design by Andrew Dawson.

Printed by Russell Press, Nottingham.
Distributed by Central Books Ltd, London.

ISSN 1369-9725
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Introduction
Language and Socialism
Tony Crowley

Raymond Williams ends the introduction to *Culture and Society* with these words: ‘I am enquiring into our common language, on matters of common interest, and when we consider how matters now stand, our continuing interest and language could hardly be too lively.’¹ This engagement with language ran throughout Williams’s work, from *Culture and Society* to *Keywords* and through to what he considered ‘the most pivotal’ section of *Marxism and Literature.*² Given this, it is fitting that this issue of *Key Words* is mostly dedicated to research that follows Williams’s concern for language as a matter of political interest. Before introducing that work, however, it might be useful very briefly to sketch why language should be of interest to socialists.

I.A. Richards once asserted that ‘language… is the instrument of all our distinctively human development, of everything in which we go beyond the other animals’.³ In the light of research demonstrating the extent to which other forms of animal life are sign-making beings, a more appropriate (if apparently tautological) formulation might be: ‘human language is the instrument of our distinctively human development’. In other words, human language – arbitrary, creative and productive, and thus the facilitator of a specific type of critical, creative consciousness – is the medium that sets us apart in terms of our species being. For socialist thinkers, this is significant because it means that language is an essential part of our human sociality, an important component in the process by which we labour – as human beings – upon the natural world, and the already existing social conditions, to make history.

The central role of language in social life has been generally recognised. The English philosopher John Locke, for example, described language as ‘the great Instrument, and Common Tye of Society’ and devoted an important part of his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690) to words and their significance.⁴ In more specific terms, Angela Carter, writing three centuries later, gave a more nuanced and critical account: ‘language is power, life and the instrument of culture, the instrument of domination and liberation’.⁵ The different emphases are significant. For Locke, language is both the general and undifferentiated ‘instrument’ by which society works, and the bond that ties us together communally. Whereas for Carter, precisely because it is the ‘instrument’ (that word again) of culture, language therefore has a dual role. Given our history and the nature of our social life, language can allow

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¹ Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society* (1958), p. 3.
² Raymond Williams, *Keywords* (1976), p. 11.
us to dominate others and be dominated by them, and it can facilitate the achievement of liberation, of ourselves and others.

Carter’s comment points to the ways in which language is entwined with power relations. And given that the transformation of power relations is fundamental to the socialist project, it follows that language should be a concern for socialist thinkers. And yet, although there has been considerable work on language from a socialist perspective, there is no developed tradition of socialist thought on language, nor indeed any coherent methodological approach. The essays that appear in this issue of Key Words do not and cannot rectify that puzzling omission. But they can at least point to issues of concern, problems that need to be addressed, ways of thinking about such matters, methods that might be adopted in later work.

The essays fall into two distinct but related groups. The first – the essays by Lecercle, Crowley, Holborow and Ware – is concerned with ways of theorising language and the relations between language and ideology. Jean-Jacques Lecercle’s analysis sets out to delineate a socialist politics of language based on a critique of the dual function of language – domination and liberation – noted by Carter. Rejecting the dominant trends in the study of language in the twentieth century (from Saussure and Chomsky through Habermas and sociolinguistics), Lecercle follows Williams in focusing on language in practice – ‘in and of the world’. As he outlines, this is crucial given the role of language in the process of subject-formation; specifically, how we become ideological subjects in particular societies at a given moment in history. But what distinguishes Lecercle’s study, and again links back to the work of Williams, is his insistence that the open, unfinished, unfixable nature of language allows for the possibility of ideological interpellation and ‘counter-interpellation’ (otherwise known as resistance).

The possibility of domination of and by language is taken up in Tony Crowley’s study of the central role played by language in the work of George Orwell and Raymond Williams. Focusing on Orwell’s essay ‘Politics and the English Language’ and Nineteen Eighty-Four, Crowley notes the significance of Orwell’s critique of political discourse essay and its continuing relevance. But after tracing the version of linguistic determinism that apparently underpins Orwell’s work, Crowley explores the political ramifications of an account of language that sees it as potentially subject to absolute hegemonic rule. Taking this as a damaging and possibly defeatist stance, Crowley turns to Williams’s view of language as part of the social order by which individuals are shaped, but which they also actively create in an ongoing process. This leads again to a consideration of the role of language in both subject-formation and counter-resistance that ends with a call for a view of words as essential baggage on the journey of hope rather than as a burden on a voyage of pessimism.
Marnie Holborow’s examination of the effects of a set of powerful neoliberal keywords takes issue with Williams’s notion of ‘structures of feeling’ and his use of the concept of hegemony, and argues instead for a stronger understanding of the force of ideology and a renewed emphasis on the relations between the economic base, political economy and public discourse. In the context of the propagation and acceptance of neoliberalism as the common sense of global capitalism, Holborow considers the use and meanings of terms such as ‘market’, ‘customer’, ‘entrepreneur’, ‘brand’ and ‘human capital’ in policy documents published by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and national governments, and in the discourse of higher education. Focusing on Ireland, Holborow points to the way in which the linguistic ‘refraction’ of reality both demands critique and offers the potential for a socialist alternative.

The question of how to live under advanced capitalism – to lead a right life in a wrong world – is the topic of Ben Ware’s essay on Kant and Marx. Focusing on Kant’s ‘Formula of Humanity’ – that people are not means but ends in themselves, not things with a market price but beings with dignity – Ware demonstrates how Marx revealed the structural impossibility of realising this doctrine under the social order of capitalism and thus asserted the ‘categorical imperative’ of overthrowing it. As Ware shows, however, such a project demands practical critique – as a means to clear the ground intellectually, politically, practically – in order to facilitate a new social order. And part of that general critique, as Ware argues in a way that links his work back to the previous essays, must consist in a critique of language that does not simply debunk the nonsense in and through which we are interpellated, but again takes advantage of the possibilities of alternative formulations.

The second set of essays, by Cameron and Ives, focuses on the political functions of the English language today. Cameron’s piece, written before the vote to leave the European Union, concentrates on the role played by English in the contemporary discourse around British national identity and multiculturalism. Taking the newly created link between being British and speaking the English language, Cameron demonstrates how debates around this issue have been in effect arguments about immigration based on distortions of fact (the 2011 Census records a figure of 138,000 non-English-speakers from a total 62.3 million – less than 0.3 per cent). The real point is that Britain has been, is and will be a multilingual country for reasons related to both its history and its contemporary economic structure. Given that, the task for socialists, Cameron argues, is to challenge the false equation between language and a set of supposed values (‘Britishness’), and to demand language policies that will prevent discrimination and empower all British citizens on an equal basis.
Peter Ives’s essay addresses one of the most significant social developments in the last half-century: the appearance and diffusion of ‘global English’. As with Cameron’s critical demystification of the discourse around the English language in Britain, Ives considers the ways in which ‘global English’ has been figured as an inevitable, quasi-automatic process, engaged in by individuals making rational choices. Rejecting this explanation, Ives presents a new reading of Marx’s notion of the ‘general intellect’ (roughly speaking, technological expertise and accumulated social knowledge – including knowledge of language) as a force of production. From this viewpoint, the development of ‘global English’ can be compared to the way that states instituted and imposed standard national languages at the end of the nineteenth century. Which is to say, it is part of the restructuring demanded by global capitalism in its most recent neoliberal phase. And yet, as Ives argues, if an education in English is now part of the formation of the global worker in the twenty-first century, this very fact offers up new possibilities for the forging of counter-hegemony.

The Simon Dentith Memorial Prize for 2015 was won by Owen Holland’s essay, ‘From the Place Vendôme to Trafalgar Square: Imperialism and Counter-Hegemony in the 1880s Romance Revival’, and it is printed as the final long piece in this issue. An important re-reading of William Morris’s News from Nowhere that focuses on the imagined transformation of Trafalgar Square, Holland’s essay places Morris’s text firmly in its historical and literary context. The result is a fascinating, detailed reading which emphasises the full radical significance of Morris’s use of the late nineteenth-century romance revival to offer a utopian challenge to high British Imperialism.

There have been a number of changes at both Key Words and the Raymond Williams Society during the past year. Stan Smith, long-time member of the editorial board, Kristin Ewins, Secretary to the RWS and member of the board, and Jennifer Birkett, Treasurer of the RWS, have departed. All three have been mainstays and we would like to record our sincere thanks for their stellar contributions over a number of years; they have been central to shaping the journal and ensuring its long-term viability and we are grateful to them. We have been joined by John Connor, Assistant Professor in English at Colgate University, Phil O’Brien, who recently completed his doctorate at Manchester University, Liane Tanguay, Assistant Professor of English at the University of Houston – Victoria (also the new Reviews Editor), and Claire Warden, Senior Lecturer in Drama at De Montfort University. We welcome them all very warmly.

Finally, a brief note on past and future activities. The 2015 Annual Raymond Williams Society Lecture was given by Susan Watkins, editor of New Left Review, on ‘Social Perspectives in Bad Times: Re-Reading Williams’s Modern Tragedy’ (published in revised form as ‘Left Oppositions’ in NLR 98). This year’s
Tony Crowley

A lecture will be given in Oxford by Professor Deborah Cameron on the topic of ‘gender’; full details available on the RWS website (see below). *Key Words* 15 will be on the topic of ‘Williams and Performance’, edited by Claire Warden, and *KW 16*, edited by Ben Harker, will be dedicated to the theme of ‘commitment’. We continue to welcome unsolicited submissions from established and up-and-coming scholars, as well as suggestions for our ‘Recoveries’ section, which in this issue features a re-assessment of *Winter Sonata* (1928) by the Welsh writer Dorothy Edwards. A last reminder to RWS members: the *Key Words* Facebook page is at www.facebook.com/keywordsjournal, while the RWS website can be found at https://raymondwilliams.co.uk.

Notes

Language and Socialism
Jean-Jacques Lecercle

Politics and Language

The opening pages of Jacques Rancière’s book on politics and philosophy are devoted to a discussion of ‘the beginnings of politics’, a beginning he finds in the opening section of Aristotle’s *Politics*, which famously states that man is a political animal in so far as man is a speaking animal. Aristotle’s argument starts from the fact that human beings are the only animal endowed with speech (*logos*: not only vocal communication, but articulated speech, the basis and vector of thought and reasoning). Voice is common to all animals as a means of communication, but a communication that is limited to signals indicating pain or pleasure: the cry, the scream, the moan, the grunt are bodily reactions to bodily stimuli and their consequent affects. But speech is different. As Rancière comments, it does not merely ‘indicate’, it ‘makes manifest’ and what it makes manifest is the difference between the useful and the noxious, whence a development from mere affect to concepts of good and evil, justice and injustice. For Aristotle, then, speech allows the passage from affect to concept, specifically the concept of justice that is the foundation of politics and its objects, the family and the state (*polis*).

Language, therefore, is constitutive of politics: there is only politics where there is *logos* (both language and argument). The question is: does this relationship work both ways? Does the interpenetration of language and politics mean that language is not only constitutive of politics but pervaded by it? It seems reasonable to answer yes. If language is what makes manifest and thereby allows the construction of the hierarchies on which society (the family and the state) is based, hierarchies that Aristotle develops in the pages that follow (master and slave, husband and wife, parents and children – one who commands and one who obeys), one may expect that language will not only facilitate the construction of social relationships but express and bolster up the *rapports de force* (power relations) that structure them. And Rancière is quick to point out the contradiction that lies at the heart of *logos*: on the one hand, it expresses the hierarchies that, Aristotle claims, are the natural structure of society; on the other hand, as a vector of communication between a speaker and a hearer, and vice-versa, it postulates a fundamental equality between the agents engaged in linguistic exchange. In order to obey a command, I must be able to answer, that is to share the language of whoever commands, on a footing of equality (Rancière, 37).

*Key Words* 14 (2016), pp. 10–22
Jean-Jacques Lecercle

If language was given to humankind in order to enable human beings to perceive the difference between justice and injustice and on this basis construct a society, it is not only the means whereby politics is conducted, it is also one of the fields in which the political struggle takes place, as it is both the actual vector of domination and the potential vector of emancipation through equality. The object of a socialist politics then, will be a struggle against the domination that language expresses and to which it contributes, and a struggle for the equality and cooperation that it equally postulates. Given that politics is in language but that it is also about language, it follows therefore that there must be a socialist politics of language, both in its pars destructus (a critique of the relations of domination that, in our class society, language conveys and facilitates) and a pars construens (a politics of emancipation of and through language).

Contrasts

However, the contradiction within logos that is the object of a socialist intervention in the field of language is not at the centre of the conception of language developed by either scientific linguistics or the philosophy of language. They, of course, being science and philosophy, disclaim any direct concern with politics, and we understand the relief with which Western linguists acknowledged Stalin’s famous intervention in the field of language, in 1950, when the great leader decided, against the main trends of Soviet linguistics, that language was not part of the superstructure and belonged to the nation as a whole, a ruling that placed it above the politics of class.²

The philosophy of language, however, is the site of an ideological struggle between competing views of language, which may be of interest and use to the Socialist, even if they are not directly political, and with which she must come to terms if a socialist politics of language is to be elaborated. Let us therefore envisage, in Aristotelian fashion, the main theoretical approaches to language in terms of a dichotomy: what are the functions of language? And how does it work? In answer to these questions, two sharply contrasted positions may be described.

In the long history of the philosophy of language and of the science of linguistics, the function of language has been defined in two opposite ways. Language is either an instrument of communication and cooperation (position 1a), or it is a weapon in dialogic exchange (position 1b), the object of which is the establishment of rapports de forces rather than cooperation. Here one recognises a trace of the contradiction within logos: the formulation of commands which express the hierarchies that constitute society versus the equality that the linguistic exchange requires. Or, to put it in more modern
Language and Socialism

terms, the contrast holds between what Habermas calls communicative action (on the basis of which he sought to reconstruct historical materialism) and what he calls strategic action, with the proviso that language is constitutively concerned with the first type of action and only contingently, and it is hoped temporarily, with the second.\(^3\) Or again, one may construct a theory of conversation, that is a theory of language as pragmatic exchange (Habermas calls his theory of communicative action ‘generalised pragmatics’), on Grice’s ‘cooperative principle’, with its attendant maxims (‘say as much, but not more, as is needed for the purposes of the current exchange’ – this is the maxim of quantity), or one may invert this and formulate a principle of struggle, with its attendant maxims (‘say as much or as little as you wish, provided it comforts your position in the linguistic exchange and embarrasses your opponent’).\(^4\) In other words we may contrast the \textit{irene} of linguistic cooperation and exchange of information with the \textit{agon} of dialogic struggle, where language has become a battlefield – language as inherently peaceful or constitutively violent.

But the workings of language have also, in the history of the study of language, been captured in two opposite ways – as system or as practice. On the one hand (this is position 2a) language must be reduced, or abstracted, in order to become the object of a science, to a system of rules – Saussure’s \textit{langue} or Chomsky’s competence. Such abstraction is expressed in the principle of immanence, on which mainstream linguistics is based: language, or rather the system of \textit{langue}, must be studied on its own, independently of any consideration of its speakers (the speaker and hearer are angels: they have neither body nor history nor ideology) and of the world in which it is used (this is discarded under the names of \textit{parole} and performance, which are beyond the scientific pale). Such is the price to pay, as J.-C. Milner demonstrates, for linguistics to be a Galilean science.\(^5\) The only difference between \textit{langue} and competence (but it is an important one for the Socialist) is that the system of \textit{langue} is collective (the individual speaker must enter a system which is exterior to her and precedes her), whereas competence is individual, situated in the mind/brain of the individual speaker, which means that the passage from Saussure to Chomsky is a regression from the social and collective to a form of methodological individualism (in the field of liberal social theory, this means there is no such thing as society, only a collection of individuals and a composition of their individual strategies of action).

But, on the other hand, the remainder that the abstraction of the system excludes is still part of language, part of our daily practice of language. The opposite position, therefore (let us call it position 2b), by discarding the principle of immanence, will concentrate on language as practice, that is on language as \textit{in} and \textit{of} the world. This was the position of Raymond Williams, in the introduction to \textit{Keywords}, and in the chapter on language in \textit{Marxism}
Jean-Jacques Lecercle

and Literature. His opponent was linguistic structuralism, based on the principle of immanence, with its downgrading of history under the name of diachrony (where the only linguistic change admitted is the development of the system along its own internal constraints, which has nothing to do with the contingency of the actual history of communities of speakers). Williams’s study of language took the form of historical semantics, as developed in the Keywords ‘vocabulary of culture and society’: ‘The emphasis on history as a way of understanding contemporary problems of meaning and structures of meaning, is a basic choice from a position of historical materialism rather than from the now more powerful positions of objective idealism or non-historical (synchronic) structuralism’ (Williams, Keywords, 20–1). This emphasis on history, combined with an emphasis on language as activity, or practice, is what, according to Williams, should inform the Marxist position on language (Williams, Marxism, 21). Following this line of thought, I have attempted to give a Marxist account of language as a development of a number of theses:

Main thesis: language is a form of praxis.
First positive thesis: language is a historical phenomenon.
Second positive thesis: language is a social phenomenon.
Third positive thesis: language is a material phenomenon.
Fourth positive thesis: language is a political phenomenon.
Concluding thesis: language is the site of subjectivation through interpellation.

This position abandons any hope of linguistics as a Galilean science, with its principle of immanence and angels for speakers, but it compensates for this potential loss by taking into account not an abstraction but the totality of the phenomena that we encounter in our daily practice of language. Like Williams, and following him, I am interested in linguistic change as it is conditioned by the history of society and culture, in what structuralist linguistics banishes under the name of sociolinguistics (there is at least as much that is problematic about language in the work of Labov as in Chomsky), in the incarnation of language in the scream rather than in the wiring of the mind/brain, in the political question of national languages and the power of political slogans.

The four positions I have sketched above, taken in couples, are the basis of two opposite philosophies of language. Positions 1a and 2a define the mainstream philosophy of language, firmly based on linguistics as the science of language, a science that in the heyday of structuralism was the guiding light for all other social sciences. Positions 1b and 2b define the non-dominant but always resurgent philosophy of language, which seeks to account for the totality of the phenomena of language, at the cost of abandoning any claim.
to the scientific study of language (at least according to the positivist concept of what a ‘hard’ science ought to be). My question is: what position will the Socialist adopt in this matter, if we recognise the fact that language is too important a human practice to escape her notice?

Four Socialist Approaches to Language

At first sight, the question is easily answered. The Socialist, especially if, like this Socialist, he is of the Marxist persuasion, will enthusiastically adopt the second, non-dominant, philosophy of language, given that the linguistic agon is the image, as well as one of the vectors, of the social agon of the class struggle, whereas the cooperative and irenic view of language reflects the liberal view that contracts concluded on a footing of equality between individual agents are the basis of society. To this last point the classic Marxist rejoinder is that the contract concluded between the capitalist and the worker is what is known in French as a ‘leonine contract’ (contrat léonin), a contract between a lion and a mouse, where one of the parties is compelled, by the need to eat, to accept the contract, whereas the other, being the fortunate owner of capital, is not, and enters into the contract from a dominant position. An agonistic view of language takes into account the fact that society is pervaded by relations of power and that communicative action is always subservient to strategic action.

This answer, however, is predictable and therefore hasty. I would like to show that the Socialist has something to learn from each of the four positions I have described. We must explore to the full the contradiction of logos that Rancière has noted, a mixture of actual inequality and domination, with consequent agon, and of potential equality, with an opening towards emancipation. This topos, which is central to Rancière’s conception of politics, is that the exploited, les sans parts, must take seriously and return to the sender the proclamations of equality on which bourgeois politics is based.

Let us take, therefore, position 1a, language as an instrument of communication and cooperation. Language thus intended is the archetypal example of what the French call ‘common’ (le commun), the kind of resource, like air and water, which cannot be the object of private appropriation but must be held in common. Language is communism already enacted, in a state that was actualised at the very beginning of society (which Marxists call primitive communism), when it emerged (this is one of the many theories of the origin of language) in the cooperation of communal work. And that state will be realised again in fully developed communism, where the cooperative principle will no longer be an idea of Reason, a situation devoutly to be wished for but sadly lacking, but the description of the actual workings of linguistic exchanges.
This is where Habermas’s reconstruction of historical materialism along the lines of communicative action is politically useful, except that, contrary to Habermas’s claims, it does not concern the present conjuncture but is doubly mythical: it involves both a myth of origins and a utopian view of the future. Such a utopia, however, is part of socialist political programmes (there is always a pars construens after the pars destruens of the critique of capitalism). And it even has political use in the present conjuncture: the generic nature of language as a human faculty equally distributed among all human beings is the bearer of a universalism that is the best antidote to any form of racism, xenophobia and a reductive conception of identity. And nobody will deny that, in the present political conjuncture, such universalism is a central component of a socialist programme. So the linguistic irenism of position 1a is the expression of a communism sadly absent in the present conjuncture but worth fighting for.

Position 1b is implicit in the status granted to position 1a – a situation devoutly to be wished for but not yet with us. Language in its current function is the image of society as it currently stands. The agon of linguistic struggle is the image of the class struggle. The truth of dialogue is to be found not in the peaceful exchange of rational argument (of which our academic discussions ought to be, but usually are not, prime examples) but in the plays of Pinter, where the agonistic maxim of quantity that I mentioned earlier is spectacularly actualised: characters speak endlessly to reduce their opponents to speechless rage, or they remain silent, like psychoanalysts, to compel their opponents to keep talking in order to elicit an answer, a demand which, like all demands, is doomed not to be satisfied. We are back to Lenin’s awareness of the importance of the right slogan to bear on the political conjuncture, and to Deleuze and Guattari’s contention that the original form of the sentence is not the declarative sentence as bearer of information but what they call the ‘order-word’ (mot-d’ordre) as bearer of force. We might therefore be inclined to approach language not through the usual concepts (langue, synchrony, etc.), but through concepts created by analogy to the concepts of historical materialism, such as linguistic formation (rather than langue) or linguistic conjuncture (rather than either synchrony or diachrony). The main point of course is that both positions, 1a and 1b, must be taken together, even if they are contradictory. Their strict opposition conceals a form of complicity: dialogue is obviously both irenic (I am addressing my readers in at least an attempt at irene) and agonistic (witness your last department meeting) – it will be our task to think this opposition in the unity of a contradiction.

Is there anything in position 2a, language as system, that is of interest to the Socialist? There is, at least in Saussure’s version of the systematic nature of language. For Saussurean langue, as we saw, is a social entity: the system is exterior to the individual speaker and precedes her, so that she must learn it
and adapt herself to it in order to pass from the condition of an infant to the status of *sujet d’énonciation*, of speaking subject. This is coherent with the basic Marxist thesis of the ‘social ex-centration of human essence’. The subject of enunciation is always already outside herself, in that the expression of her innermost thoughts and feelings must accommodate the system of *langue* that she must accept as a constraint (but an ‘enabling’ constraint) in order to gain individual expression. The limits of my world are the limits of my language, as Wittgenstein famously stated. This may turn out to be crucially important to the Socialist: language as collective system, beyond the power of the individual speaker, is central to the process of subjectivation (the active construction of a subject) through interpellation and counter-interpellation. I am who I am because I am spoken by language, by the linguistic system of my mother tongue. And yet I speak the language that speaks me, I counter-interpellate the language that assigns a place to me. As you have realised, we are in the midst of the Marxist theory of ideology, at least in its Althusserian version. So that understanding position 2a turns out to be of crucial political importance to the Socialist: if the individual becomes a subject by being captured by the symbolic order, of which language as a system is the best incarnation (one can sense here the explicit proximity between the Marxism of Althusser and the version of psychoanalysis defended by Lacan), if therefore ideology is language in a non-trivial sense (language is the vector of the operation of ideology in the process of subjectivation through interpellation), understanding the workings of language is of crucial importance to the Socialist. It is the means of understanding the workings of hegemony, or how the dominant ideology dominates and how the ruling classes not only exploit and dominate the subaltern classes but guide them. I am now speaking the language of Gramsci, who influenced Althusser’s theory of ideology, even if it took the form, on the part of Althusser, of Freudian denial. Understanding the workings of language is of the essence in the ideological struggle, a struggle in which the class enemy is always already in a position of dominance, having at his disposal armies of specialists, in universities, in the media, and wherever the class struggle is conducted through language.

But the workings of language are not limited, as we saw, to the unfolding of the system. Language is not only system but practice, a practice that does not leave the system unaffected, or, to phrase this in Saussurean terms, ‘la parole subvertit constamment la langue’ [lange is constantly subverted by parole]. As a consequence, position 2b, language as practice, is of immediate and direct concern to the Socialist, for at least two reasons. The first is that, as we saw, language is directly political: not only the agonistic potential of *logos*, not only the slogans and *mots d’ordre* (Althusser once stated that Lenin’s contribution to the study of politics consisted of the development of two ‘sciences’, the
science of concrete analysis and the science of slogans), but the necessity imposed on any politics, be it bourgeois or socialist, to include a linguistic policy and a linguistic politics. A language, common wisdom has it, is a dialect with an army, and linguistic policy is necessary to the construction of a nation as an imagined community. But a linguistic politics goes far beyond the construction of nationhood or the relationship between the standard language and the various dialects—it involves all the fields in which language intervenes, a politics of the body and of gender, a politics of the environment (witness the appearance not only of a feminist linguistics but, more recently, of an ecolinguistics).

There is a second reason that position 2b is of direct concern to the Socialist: because language is directly historical (position 1a represses actual history beneath structural diachrony). This is where Raymond Williams’s research programme, as exemplified in Keywords, should be not only celebrated but developed. We need not only a semantic history of our key words, in which the persistence of linguistic struggles is still available to us through their sedimentation beneath current meanings, in the clash of past and present structures of feelings; we also need to take into account the synchronic consequence of this persistence, in the ideological ambivalence of the main words of our political life and the necessity to struggle, from a socialist point of view, to capture or regain words, such as freedom or agency, from the class enemy.

The Unity of a Contradiction

So the Socialist appears to be allowed to pick and choose between the four positions I have sketched, which smacks of eclecticism, an epistemological attitude firmly to be deplored. But this Socialist, being of the Marxist persuasion, is used to thinking apparently incompatible positions under the unity of a contradiction. In the case of the philosophy of language, the contradiction will attempt to think the unity of the two opposite poles of langue and parole. And we can in fact develop a conception of language from two opposite directions. If we start from langue, that is from the social and collective, or the universal (as in Chomsky’s universal grammar, which is only a generalisation of Saussurean langue), we shall have no difficulty in thinking the system as a set of rules and principles that capture the speaker in a network of enabling constraints. But we shall not find it easy to think historical change (other than the structural development of the system, which does not account for the run-of-the-mill linguistic change). And we shall not find it easy to think any form of variation, from the collective variation of dialects diverging
from the standard variety of the language, down to the variations of style and idiolect. If, on the other hand, we decide that the relevant pole is the pole of *parole*, as does the ecolinguist Salikoko Mufwene, for whom a language is not a grammatical system but a kind of species, that is a population of idiolects, subject to the laws of evolution (Lamarckian rather than Darwinian evolution, with hereditary transmission of acquired features), we shall find it easy to think variation, collective or individual, and change. Mufwene is a specialist of creoles: for him, the emergence of a creole is not due to the internal pressure of the system but to the socio-historical conjuncture in which the speakers, namely the slaves deported from Africa, found themselves. But if we adopt this model, we shall find it difficult to think regularity or rules: why are those idiolects so close to one another? Mufwene is compelled at this point to gesture towards Chomsky’s universal grammar.

This is where the Socialist, being a Marxist, introduces a concept of contradiction: the two positions form a contradiction, one aspect of which, the aspect of systematicity, is dominant, and the other is dominated but unavoidable and always resurgent. I propose to formulate this dialectic in two propositions, taking as my example of *langue* English, the world language, the language of globalisation:

(i) English does not exist, but it insists.
(ii) There is no interpellation without counter-interpellation.

This sibylline formulation demands explanation.

What do we mean by ‘English’? We usually mean Standard English, or even, if we remember that English is the language of globalisation, WSSE, World Spoken Standard English, an abstraction from actually spoken versions of English but one that is ‘grammatised’, in other words inscribed in grammars and textbooks, taught throughout the school apparatus and liberally spread by the media. This English, being an abstraction from a dialect (Southern British English) spoken by only 12 per cent of native speakers, does not exist. What exists is the infinite varieties of actual Englishes: national Englişhes (American or Australian versus British), new Englishes (in Commonwealth countries like Singapore, where English is a second language), creoles (for instance Trinidadian creole), regional dialects (for instance Wenglish), class dialects (the dialect of a Glaswegian working-class lad is hardly intelligible to the speaker of WSSE) and even generational dialects (such as the Estuary English that infected the speech of even Princess Diana). So English as a unitary system does not exist. But it insists: it is described in grammars, it is taught, because it is necessary for pedagogic purposes (you cannot teach infinite variation), and it is imposed as an instrument of what Phillipson calls
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‘linguistic imperialism’, the vector of ‘linguicism’, a word he coined in imitation of ‘racism’.¹⁹

There is no objection per se to abstraction. Science abstracts the relevant from the chaos of irrelevant phenomena in order to provide a systematic account of them: this is what the scientific linguist claims to do when he abstracts langue from the infinite variety of parole. But in the case of English, this abstraction operates on a specific dialect, thus contributing to its domination through the imposition of a ‘standard’. So English, which does not exist as a unitary entity, does insist in the process of linguistic domination, the imposition of rapports de force and the constitution of linguistic capital.²⁰

But the domination of the abstract system is bound to generate its own resistance. This is what my second proposition – there is no interpellation without counter-interpellation – seeks to capture. Interpellation, as we saw, is the central concept of Althusser’s theory of ideology.²¹ Ideology, which is produced in Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs: the Family, the School, the Church, the Media, etc.) and finds its incarnation in rituals, practices and discourses or speech-acts, interpellates individuals as, or rather into, subjects – this is what I meant by ‘the process of subjectivation’. Ideology interpellates all individuals, and it never falls. The theory takes every advantage of the ambiguity of the term ‘subject’ in English or French: the subject or sujet is subjected (assujetti) or, in apparent contradiction, it is a centre of consciousness, responsibility and agency. In other words, in order to be subject of (consciousness, agency) one must be subject to (ideology). The problem that immediately crops up is the problem of determinism: how can the subject be a free agent if she is subjected to ideology? Althusser’s response is that interpellation is never unique; it is multiple (the subject is interpellated, at different places, by different ISAs) and it is continuous (the subject is not interpellated once and for all – in a non-trivial sense the story of her life is the story of her interpellations).

Language is the prime vector (but not the only one; there is such a thing as visual interpellation) of the operation of interpellation. The individual is interpellated as speaker by her language: in order to emerge from infancy, she must accept the enabling constraints of the system. But the process of linguistic interpellation is contradictory rather than one-sided: the speaker is interpellated by more than one dialect, as she finds herself within the scope of different ISAs. Thus the ISA of the family will impose its ideology through its own dialect, which may not be the same as the dialect of the school or the media (i.e. the standard version of the language). My mother-in-law was born into a family of Welsh-speaking farmers and learnt English at school. Raymond Williams spoke English within the family, but a dialect of English marked by features of class and region (the contact with Welsh and Wenglish). The son
of a Cambridge don already speaks the standard language within the family, which gives him a considerable amount of cultural capital – even in this case there may be tiny linguistic nuances that will make up his idiolect. If the son of a Cambridge don, or the son of a Welsh railway worker, becomes a writer, this idiolect becomes a style, by being inscribed in a literary monument, aere perennius. Style is the inscription of the counter-interpellation that every speaker operates on the language that interpellates her, as the linguistic constraints, through her appropriation of the system, become enabling constraints.

Because all this is a little abstract, here is an example. Sam Selvon’s novel, The Lonely Londoners, published in 1956, describes the life of the first wave of West Indian immigrants in a not-so-welcoming London. Here is the portrait of Harris, who desperately wishes to integrate:

Harris is a fellar who likes to play ladeda, and he like English customs and things, he does be polite and say thank you and he does get up on the bus and the tube to let woman sit down, which is a thing even them Englishmen don’t do. And when he dress, you think is some Englishman going to work in the city, bowler and umbrella, and briefcase tuck under the arm, with The Times fold up in the pocket so the name would show, and he walking upright like if he is alone who alive in the world. Only thing, Harris face black.22

The question I would like to ask is, in which language is this text written? The immediate answer is that it is written in some form of English, as we have no trouble understanding the passage. But it is definitely not Standard English (one often comes across such sentences as ‘He had was to go to court’ which, in my thirty years as a teacher of English, I would have underlined in petulant red). Selvon himself states that he started writing his novel in Standard English, but that ‘it did not work’. Is the text, then, an example of Trinidadian creole (Selvon was born and bred in Trinidad)? Here is an example of such creole: ‘Im no ben kom’23 – a sentence in obvious need of translation: ‘he or she did not come’. It is not therefore, the dialect in which Selvon writes. So the only answer is that the text is written in a literary idiolect, the result of a fusion (or a clash) of dialects, the creation of a speaker interpellated by more than one language, who counter-interpellates them in turn by playing one against the other. And the literary achievement of such counter-interpellation, of Selvon’s style, is considerable. You have no doubt noted how Harris’s stance is deflated by the literary conceit of the last sentence, a rhetorical trick that is made possible by Selvon’s idiolect, in its distance from Standard English (compare the rather tame, or at least tamer, standard version ‘The only thing is that Harris’s face is black’).
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Conclusion

There is politics in language, in the play of interpellation and counter-interpellation by which speaking subjects are made: as Aristotle notes, human beings are political animals insofar as they are speaking animals. The lesson to be drawn from a Marxist framing of my contrasts in the form of a contradiction is that even if the dominant ideology dominates, resistance is always at least structurally possible as the currently dominated but potentially hegemonic aspect of the contradiction. The lesson to be drawn from the Marxist capture of my contrasts in the form of a contradiction is that even if the dominant ideology dominates, resistance is always possible – it is structurally possible as the currently dominated but potentially hegemonic aspect of the contradiction. Speakers of the world, unite in counter-interpellation.

Notes

12. On this concept, which is based on a reading of Marx’s sixth thesis on Feuerbach (‘human essence is the totality of social relationships’), see the work of Lucien Sève, Marxisme et théorie de la personnalité (Paris: Editions Sociales, 1969), his introduction to the work of L.S. Vygotsky, Histoire du développement des fonctions psychiques supérieures (Paris: La Dispute, 2014) and the second volume of ‘L’homme?’ (Paris: La Dispute, 2008).
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23 Quoted in Mufwene, *The Ecology of Language Evolution*, 70.
Orwell and Williams: Language and Socialism
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1. Introduction

George Orwell and Raymond Williams were central figures in the twentieth-century British Left and their careers overlapped slightly (Orwell’s ‘Writer and Leviathan’ was published in the journal *Politics and Letters*, of which Williams was a co-editor). Williams’s critical stance towards Orwell’s work is mapped out in a set of increasingly hostile engagements in *Culture and Society* (1958), *Orwell* (1971), and *Politics and Letters* (1979).¹ In this essay, however, I will not be concerned directly with the details of Williams’s critique of Orwell. I will aim rather to give an account of the ways in which both writers took language to be central to the understanding of social and political life and therefore important for socialists. Towards the end of the essay, I will present an evaluation of the ideological effects of Orwell’s representation of the relations between language and politics which will lead to a reflection on Williams’s ultimate rejection of his political predecessor.

2. Orwell’s Concern with Language

The influence of Orwell’s concern for language and its political effects is such that the term ‘Orwellian’ is often used to mean linguistic usage that is in some sense sinister or perilous. His interest in the issue was expressed directly in the essay ‘Politics and the English Language’ (1946), and indirectly in the much more widely-read *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and its appendix, ‘The Principles of Newspeak’ (1949).² Orwell’s core message is that language can be used to dangerous effect and therefore that communicative clarity is politically important. His worry about the deleterious use of language is hardly surprising given that he witnessed the early use of mass media for the purposes of propaganda (a term that only acquired its pejorative connotations from the 1920s) during the early 1930s, the Spanish Civil War, the Second World War, and the very start of the Cold War. As he famously noted:

In our time, political speech and writing are largely the defence of the indefensible. Things like the continuance of British rule in India, the Russian purges and deportations, the dropping of the atom bombs on Japan, can indeed be defended, but only by arguments which are too brutal
for most people to face, and which do not square with the professed aims of the political parties.

For this reason, political discourse consists,

largely of euphemism, question-begging and sheer cloudy vagueness. Defenceless villages are bombardied from the air, the inhabitants driven out into the countryside, the cattle machine-gunned, the huts set on fire with incendiary bullets: this is called pacification. Millions of peasants are robbed of their farms and sent trudging along the roads with no more than they can carry: this is called transfer of population or rectification of frontiers. People are imprisoned for years without trial, or shot in the back of the neck or sent to die of scurvy in Arctic lumber camps: this is called elimination of unreliable elements. (Orwell, ‘Politics’, 373–4)

It is worth remarking how Orwell’s analytical approach to language pre-empted what became, and remains, one of the central methods of media studies. His point was that the type of obfuscatory language that he identifies serves a very specific purpose: the elision of the use of violence to achieve political ends. There are two aspects to this process: the denial of violence itself and the eradication of political agency in the decision to use it. The result, as David Bromwich commented in an essay on the Iraq war, ‘Euphemism and American Violence’, is ‘a history falsified by language’. As Bromwich noted, this was not a new insight; in Tacitus’s Agricola, a Caledonian rebel observed of Roman imperialists: ‘to robbery, butchery, and rapine, they give the lying name of “government”; they create a desolation and call it peace’.

The point is surely well-made and significant: language in these examples is used to obscure and delude with regard to the use of violence by the State. But it is worth noting that Orwell’s account, like many that have followed his lead, is effectively one that concerns itself with style. This is undoubtedly an important method, although it ought to be noted that it fails to address those many examples of political discourse in which language is simply used to lie (there is after all a difference between a euphemistic half-truth and a factually incorrect statement). Nevertheless, Orwell’s attempt to articulate a link between clarity and political integrity is one that socialists would do well to bear in mind. This is not to say that arguments have to be made simplistically using Anglo-Saxon words of not more than one syllable (there will be more to say of Orwell’s stylistic strictures later). But it must be central to any radical political project to insist that however complicated the process, the world is knowable, facts can be established, persuasive arguments can be made clearly, and agreement can be reached in and through language. Complexity does not
necessarily entail unintelligibility, but unintelligibility is in and of itself a bad thing because it prevents understanding. In this sense, Orwell is right when he argues that language and thought are dialectically intertwined and that language ‘becomes ugly and inaccurate because our thoughts are foolish, but the slovenliness of our language makes it easier for us to have foolish thoughts’ (Orwell, ‘Politics’, 365). Indeed precisely because misleading uses of language (‘habits’ as Orwell calls them) cause problems, it follows that,

if one gets rid of these habits one can think more clearly, and to think clearly is a necessary first step toward political regeneration: so that the fight against bad English is not frivolous and is not the exclusive concern of professional writers. (365)

Such ‘habits’ take many forms. Euphemism, as Orwell indicates, or the familiar but always reductive tendency to make undue extrapolation from particular instances to general observations – a ‘habit’ that lies at the root of many, if not all, forms of social prejudice.

There is then much to attend to in Orwell’s strictures on language, although there are many ways in which Orwell’s account of ‘bad English’ in ‘Politics’ is also deeply flawed. At times it is simply uninformed, as in his attack on ‘bad writers’ who labour under ‘the notion that Latin or Greek words are grander than Saxon ones’, with the consequence that ‘unnecessary words like expedite, ameliorate, predict, extraneous, deracinated, clandestine, subaqueous, and hundreds of others constantly gain ground from their Anglo-Saxon opposite numbers’ (369). This linguistic Little Englanderism is based on an ignorant misunderstanding of the history of the English language and amounts to not much more than personal stylistic prejudice. As does the notion that ‘the defence of the English language’ necessarily implies ‘using the fewest and shortest words that will cover one’s meaning’ (366). At other points in the essay too Orwell’s word choice is poor, as when he claims that ‘the great enemy of clear language is insincerity’ (when it is clear from context that he means ‘dishonesty’) (374). Or when he asserts that ‘the present political chaos is connected with the decay of language’ – as though English had fallen from some previous superior state (377). There are also times when Orwell’s writing seems like a perfect example of the type of weak style against which he rails: ‘as soon as certain topics are raised, the concrete melts into the abstract and no one seems able to think of turns of speech that are not hackneyed’ (367). And his theory of knowledge is both naïve – ‘probably it is best to put off using words as long as possible and get one’s meaning as clear as one can through pictures or sensations’ (376) – and deceptive in its attack on abstract thinking (as though empiricism itself is not a profoundly abstract doctrine). And yet in spite of these problems, there
can be no doubt that Orwell’s emphasis on the significance of language is timely. For as he argues, consider what happens if you do not think critically and fail to think about the language you use, and indulge instead in ‘throwing your mind open and letting the ready-made phrases come crowding in’:

[Such phrases] will construct your sentences for you – even think your thoughts for you, to a certain extent – and at need they will perform the important service of partially concealing your meaning even from yourself. It is at this point that the special connection between politics and the debasement of language becomes clear. (372–3)

In its way, this is an intelligent if partial understanding of the role of language in the formation of ideology and subjectivity.

3. The Centrality of Language in Williams’s Work

The introduction to *Culture and Society* begins with these words:

In the last decades of the eighteenth century, and in the first half of the nineteenth century, a number of words, which are now of capital importance, came for the first time into common English use, or, where they had already been generally used in the language, acquired new and important meanings. There is in fact a general pattern of change in these words, and this can be used as a special kind of map by which it is possible to look again at those wider changes in life and thought to which the changes in language evidently refer. (Williams, *Culture*, xiii)

The introduction ends with this:

I am enquiring into our common language, on matters of common interest, and when we consider how matters now stand, our continuing interest and language could hardly be too lively. (xx)

Elsewhere in the introduction, Williams declares that he feels himself ‘committed to the study of actual language: that is to say, to the words and sequences of words which particular men and women have used in trying to give meaning to their experience’ as well as ‘the general developments of meaning in language’ (xiv). In considering words, he says, he takes their ‘original meanings’, their ‘development’, and ‘the relations between them’ as not ‘accidental, but general and deeply significant’. His ambitious ‘terms of
reference’, as he puts it, ‘are not only to distinguish the meanings, but to relate them to their sources and effects’ (xviii).

*Culture and Society* was to be at least in part an investigation of words from ‘actual language’, our ‘common language’, as a form of social and cultural mapping. The words themselves were ordinary, common words, but they carried historical significance nonetheless. These are the examples with which he started: ‘five words are the key points from which this map can be drawn. They are industry, democracy, class, art and culture. The importance of these words, in our modern structure of meanings, is obvious’ (xiii). But these were simply the starting points of the work and he continues to cite, a number of other words which are either new, or acquired new meanings, in this decisive period [1780–1850]. Among the new words, for example, there are ideology, intellectual, rationalism, scientist, humanitarian, utilitarian, romanticism, atomistic; bureaucracy, capitalism, collectivism, commercialism, communism, doctrinaire, equalitarian, liberalism, masses, mediaeval and mediaevalism, operative (noun), primitivism, proletariat (a new word for ‘mob’), socialism, unemployment; cranks, highbrow, isms and pretentious. Among words which then acquired their now normal modern meanings are business (= trade), common (= vulgar), earnest (derisive), Education and educational, getting-on, handmade, idealist (= visionary), Progress, rank-and-file (other than military), reformer and reformism, revolutionary and revolutionize, salary (as opposed to ‘wages’), Science (= natural and physical sciences), speculator (financial), solidarity, strike and suburban (as a description of attitudes). (xvii)

Given the explicit focus on language, specifically on the histories of words and the social significance of their changing meanings, readers might be forgiven for thinking that these quotations are taken from Williams’s seminal linguistic study *Keywords* (1976), rather than *Culture and Society* (1958), his earliest and perhaps most influential work. But in fact Williams tells us that a concern with language was the starting point for the entire *Culture and Society* project, since in discussions in his Workers’ Educational Association classes in the 1950s, one of the most important topics was precisely the meanings of words, not least the five ‘keywords’ – ‘culture’, ‘class’, ‘art’, ‘industry’ and ‘democracy’. Reflecting on that early phase of his work, Williams uses a phrase that indicates the genesis of his important theoretical concept, the ‘structure of feeling’: ‘I could feel these five words as a kind of structure’. 4 But they were more than that, as he discovered when he looked up the word ‘culture’, ‘almost casually’, in the *Oxford English Dictionary* in the public library at Seaford and saw ‘in the language, not only an intellectual but an historical shape’ (13). This was a
transformative moment (Williams describes it as ‘like a shock of recognition’) and one that points to the initiation of two of Williams’s lasting achievements. First, as noted above, it marks the turn to popular culture (here in the form of the everyday, common language) as an object of study. And second, it signifies the starting point of the field of historical semiotics (rather than the established historical semantics): the investigation of the historical and intellectual shape of words – the study of the ways they change in and through history, together with the ways in which they are held together at particular moments, including of course the present.

It is clear then that a concern for and with language, a specific understanding of language, underpins Williams’s work from the start and becomes increasingly important for him. It is there in the introduction to *Culture and Society*; it forms the basis of *Keywords*, which is an expanded version of an appendix that he could not put in to *Culture and Society* for reasons of length; and it lies at the heart of *Marxism and Literature* (1976), Williams’s most sustained theoretical work. Indeed, reflecting on *Marxism and Literature* in *Politics and Letters* (1979), Williams describes it as an important departure since he ‘hadn’t written anything theoretical, apart from two articles, since the first part of *The Long Revolution*’ (Williams, *Politics*, 324). The work started as a series of lectures in Cambridge in about 1970, but, he notes,

> It’s very significant that in those lectures there was nothing on the theory of language, whereas now it is the longest section of the book, and I would say the most pivotal. I don’t think any of the rest can be sustained unless that position is seen as its basis… I could have written a whole book on that subject alone. (324)

It is significant that Williams identifies the language chapter of *Marxism and Literature* as ‘the most pivotal’, for two reasons. First, it contains a theorisation of language which enables him to understand retrospectively the method that underpins not just *Culture and Society*, but cultural materialism in general. Second, it reveals the centrality of language to Williams’s entire oeuvre.

### 4. Orwell: Meaning and Political Control

Though ‘Politics and the English Language’ is Orwell’s most explicit treatment of the topic, it is clear that an account of language, and a specific theory of meaning, underpins his most influential work, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Set in Oceania, the totalitarian future state, a new language had been created – ‘Newspeak’ – with its own dictionary (in the tenth edition by 1984). It had
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been invented for explicit political purposes, as the appendix to *Nineteen Eighty-Four* – ‘The Principles of Newspeak’ – makes clear. Its function was,

not only to provide a medium of expression for the world-view and mental habits proper to the devotees of Ingsoc, but to make all other thoughts impossible...This was done partly by the invention of new words, but chiefly by eliminating undesirable words and by stripping such words as remained of unorthodox meanings, and so far as possible of all secondary meanings whatever. (Orwell, ‘Newspeak’, 343–4)

Based on a specific view of the relationship between language and mind, Orwell’s sense of the potential dangers of language enabled him to imagine a form of non-resistible power. Newspeak, ‘designed not to extend but to diminish the range of thought’ (344), had one ultimate aim:

Newspeak, indeed, differed from most all other languages in that its vocabulary grew smaller instead of larger every year. Each reduction was a gain, since the smaller the area of choice, the smaller the temptation to take thought. Ultimately it was hoped to make articulate speech issue from the larynx without involving the higher brain centres at all. (352)

Once this goal had been achieved, the inhabitants of Oceania would cease to be rational human beings and would instead be reduced to animalistic status. They would end up using ‘duckspeak’ (meaning nothing but quacking like a duck).

It is worth noting that the origins of the language-thought articulation that underpins Orwell’s text lie in the work of Wilhelm Von Humboldt, a scholar whose research underpins what later became known as linguistic relativism. Von Humboldt’s *On Language. The Diversity of Human Language-Structure and Its Influence on the Mental Development of Mankind* (1836), based in part on a study of the Javan language of Kawi, argued for the creative role of language in relation to the human mind: ‘language is the formative organ of thought’. It also asserted the inseparable connection between languages and ways of thinking: ‘the diversity of languages rests on their form, and the latter is most intimately connected with the mental aptitudes of nations... Thought and language are therefore one and inseparable from each other’ (54). The effect of this important new conception of the relation between language and thought was to pose a challenge to both universalism (the idea that whatever their differences, all languages embody the categories of Reason), and the traditional understanding of the function of language (simply to represent the world). It was also to have serious significance beyond philosophy in that it served

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as the basis of linguistic nationalism, the core doctrine that underpinned cultural nationalism, the belief-system used repeatedly by national liberation movements against imperial power in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

The emphasis on the formative role of language in relation to consciousness was taken up influentially in the early twentieth century in the work of two American anthropologists, Edward Sapir and Benjamin Lee Whorf. Just as von Humboldt’s research had focused on languages outside the European mainstream (Basque, Kavi), that of Sapir and Whorf involved the study of the rapidly disappearing Native American (‘Amerindian’) languages. Based on research into the lexis and grammar of languages such as Hopi, Whorf concluded that,

we dissect nature along lines laid down by our native languages. The categories and types that we isolate from the world of phenomena we do not find there because they stare every observer in the face; on the contrary, the world is presented in a kaleidoscopic flux of impressions which has to be organised by our minds – and this means largely by the linguistic systems in our minds.6

Like the earlier formulation of the link between language and mind, this hypothesis had a radical edge to it, and what became known as linguistic relativism (thought being relative to a specific language), served as a way of decentering European languages and Western Reason. For as Whorf put it, if accepted, the principle meant that:

we shall no longer be able to see a few recent dialects of the Indo-European family, and the rationalising techniques elaborated from their patterns, as the apex of the evolution of the human mind, nor their present wide spread as due to any survival from fitness or to anything but a few events of history, events that could be called fortunate only from the point of view of the favoured parties. (279)

Yet if this aspect of Whorf’s work was politically progressive, the move from linguistic relativism (language shapes thought) to linguistic determinism (language determines thought) was more problematic. For Whorf, linguistic determinism entailed that,

We cut nature up, organize it into concepts, and ascribe significances as we do, largely because we are parties to an agreement to organize it in this way – an agreement that holds throughout our speech community and is codified in the patterns of our language. The agreement is, of course, an
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implicit and unstated one, but its terms are absolutely obligatory; we cannot talk at all except by subscribing to the organization and classification of data which the agreement decrees. (213–4)

 Needless to say, the idea of ‘tacit consensus’ is always dubious, and the notion of the language of a speech community being subject to an unstated agreement whose terms are ‘absolutely obligatory’ is highly problematic. As will be argued, such an account of language can underpin a political outlook that socialists can ill afford to espouse.

The account of a fixed relationship between language, mind and meaning – in either its relativist or determinist modes – clearly formed part of a structure of feeling in an important area of early twentieth-century Anglo-American thought. Allied to a form of cultural conservatism that focused on the idea of linguistic decline as a cipher of more general cultural decay (a long-standing tradition in relation to the English language), it was articulated in the work of a number of American thinkers and cultural commentators such as Alfred Korzybski (Science and Sanity, 1933), Stuart Chase (The Tyranny of Words, 1938), S.L. Hayakawa (Language in Action, 1941), and the group around the journal ETC.: A Review of General Semantics. Orwell knew at least some of this work (he mentions ‘Stuart Chase and others’ at the end of ‘Politics and the English Language’), and he would have been familiar with one of its central tenets: the emphasis on the dangerous and corrupt ways in which language was deployed to deprave the thought of those who used it for nefarious political purposes.

If Nineteen Eighty-Four functioned as nothing more than an allegory of the undoubted dangers of language, then it would be possible both to read it against its historical intellectual context and to hail it as a salutary warning. But it will be argued here that in its concern for the political perils to which language can lead, Orwell’s text slips from a form of linguistic relativism into linguistic determinism. For rather than language shaping thought, Orwell’s satire shares the Whorfian premise that the relationship between the language which we inherit and the thoughts which that language permits can be subject to an ‘absolutely obligatory’ ‘agreement’ that is beyond challenge. For this reason then, rather than serving as a caution against the hazards of language, Nineteen Eighty-Four might perhaps be better understood as an exemplum of a misconceived notion of language and meaning whose consequences are highly problematic. For the perilous conception that dominates Nineteen Eighty-Four is that the Party’s command of language, through the imposition of Newspeak, can and will enable it to control the mental universe of the subjects of Oceania. The effect of which would be to create:
a nation of warriors and fanatics, marching forward in perfect unity, all thinking the same thoughts and shouting the same slogans, perpetually working, fighting, triumphing, persecuting – three hundred million people all with the same face. (Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, 85)

In other words, based on the belief that a hegemonic group can delimit words and their meanings, and thus thought, Orwell’s text embodies one of the twentieth century’s most enduring political fantasies: that the ordering of language will engender political supremacy by way of the control of people’s minds.

Understood historically, it is ironic that the prioritisation of language as a way of understanding consciousness, which began with the radically-inflected investigation of non-European languages and cultures, should inform a reactionary vision of political control. And as noted earlier, the shift from relativism to determinism is crucial in this regard. But it should be noted that linguistic determinism suffers from a simple logical flaw: if it were true, how could we know it was true? In other words, if we cannot think outside the static, fixed terms and meanings available to us, then how exactly do we come to know that we are in a prison house of language? To put the matter simply, how could Whorf know that the words of the Hopi language are ‘incommensurable’ with those of English? This is a problem that causes difficulties for any account (and there are a number of examples, ranging from science fiction to linguistic and political theory) that attempts to represent the supposedly determinate effects of language. In Orwell’s text, the difficulty is side-stepped by the textual trope of locating the story at a transitional point. This is necessary because if totalitarian linguistic control had already been realised in Oceania, then Winston’s resistance could not have been possible since he would have been captivated within the linguistic prison of Newspeak. In this sense the violence enacted upon Winston indicates that the Party’s control over language was relative rather than absolute. But this simply means that 1984 (the historical moment) was a point of transition and thus translation; ‘Newspeak’ had not yet been finalised – only the next (eleventh) edition of the dictionary would be the definitive version that would allow for complete hegemony (Orwell, ‘Newspeak’, 343).

Despite the laudable achievement of pointing to language as a political issue then, Orwell’s text is ultimately pessimistic and defeatist in its propagation of the possibility that language can be static and fixed, that meaning can be imposed absolutely, and that subjectivity is open to direct control. Indeed *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is based on the premise that when the Party’s slogans are repeated – ‘War is Peace, Freedom is Slavery, Ignorance is Strength’ – the human subjects who hear them will be duped in an uncritical and passive
manner. But who would say that about their own minds and the minds of others? Who would think of themselves or others as one amongst millions of automata ‘with the same face’ uttering nothing but ‘duckspeak’? This is not an account that makes historical or political sense for socialist thinkers. For if its central claim were true, it would herald nothing less than the end to any possibility of social struggle and change.

5. Williams: Towards a Socialist Account of Language

Williams’s comment that he could have written a whole book on language alone is tantalising in view of the fact that there is no fully developed socialist account of language. This curious omission within socialist thought is puzzling, given the centrality of language to social being, and problematic, since the lack of such an account causes difficulties in a number of different areas, not least in the understanding of ideology and hegemony. This is not to say that there isn’t a Marxist tradition of thinking about language, but it is evidently partial and undeveloped. There is, however, one exception to that statement, which is the work that came out of Vitebsk and Leningrad in the late 1920s and ’30s and which became available in the West in the 1970s and ’80s. Namely the texts of P.N. Medvedev, The Formal Method in Literary Scholarship (1928), V.N. Vološinov, Marxism and the Philosophy of Language (1929), Mikhail Bakhtin, Problems in Dostoyevsky’s Poetics (1929) and the essays collected in The Dialogic Imagination (1981), and L.S. Vygotsky, Thought and Language (1934). Of these thinkers, the most influential was Bakhtin, at least amongst Western cultural critics, but for a socialist account of language, the work that really matters is that of Vološinov, whose influence on Williams was profound.

Marx and Engels made only a few references to language per se, but there is one important passage in The German Ideology, as part of the refutation of philosophical idealism, in which they provide a sketch of a materialist conception of history. In it they reflect on the nature and function of language:

From the start the ‘spirit’ [consciousness] is afflicted with the curse of being ‘burdened’ with matter, which here makes its appearance in the form of agitated layers of air, sounds, in short, of language. Language is as old as consciousness, language is practical consciousness that exists also for other men, and for that reason alone it really exists for me personally as well; language, like consciousness, only arises from the need, the necessity, of intercourse with other men.
The stress on language as central to human activity indicates the important function that Marx and Engels gave it in their account of the distinctiveness of human species-being. For it is clear that they held that language plays an essential role in the evolving process by which human beings in social relationships create historical reality through the satisfaction of both material needs and the requirement for self-reproduction. But it is important to note that Marx and Engels did not see language as either a primary or derivative activity that could be abstracted from human life. In other words, language was not the faculty that enabled human beings to become social in the first place, nor was it the medium by which they could express themselves once they had been socialised. Instead, language was a crucial, active component of the social, material practice – labour in its general, technical sense – by which human beings were constituted as human beings, and by which they acted with and upon nature, and with and upon other human beings, in order to make history.

It is this emphasis on the creative, practical nature of language that forms the basis of Vološinov’s critique of two key tendencies that he identified in modern linguistic thought: ‘individualistic subjectivism’ and ‘abstract objectivism’ (Vološinov, 45–64). ‘Individualistic subjectivism’, traced by Vološinov to German Idealism, regards the individual human mind as the most important site of language and takes language itself to be a type of aesthetic creativity, with the corollary that all speech acts are individual, creative, and unreproducible. ‘Abstract objectivism’, on the other hand, is best typified by Saussure’s model of language and the classical structuralism that developed from it. In this approach, the static linguistic system is divorced from history, separated off from practical use, and composed of nothing other than normatively identical signs (realised in practice as fixed forms of lexis, grammar and phonetics). If the first tendency focuses on the unceasing process of individual linguistic creativity, then the second treats language as a finished product, open to the objective gaze of the science of linguistics.

For Vološinov both of these accounts are flawed. The focus on individual consciousness as the explanation of linguistic signification is mistaken because individual consciousness is itself in need of explication from a social point of view. This is because consciousness itself only ‘takes shape and being in the material of signs created by an organized group in the process of its social intercourse… nurtured on signs, it derives its growth from them; it reflects their logic and laws’ (13). In other words, the individual human mind is formed through an already social language; if there were no language, there would be no developed consciousness. To adapt Marx, it is linguistic (and therefore social) being that determines consciousness, and not the other way around.
But this does not mean that the individual consciousness is formed by and in the normatively identical signs of the abstract objectivist system. On the contrary, signs, as dynamic complexes of form and meaning, are not simply presented as given, fixed elements of a system, but are open products of the activity—the material practice—of language-making between socially organised individuals. Indeed it is precisely because language, like any other form of social life, is the site of all sorts of contestation between conflicting interests that signs change historically. As a corollary, it follows that the signs of any particular language will necessarily embody ‘the contradictory and conflict-ridden social history of the people who speak [it]’ (Williams, Politics, 176).

Vološinov’s attention to language as creative social activity, as practical consciousness, and his insistence on the openness of the sign, its ‘multiaccentuality’, was of dual importance to Williams. First, it allowed him to make theoretical sense of his perception, there from that early recognition of the complexity of the term ‘culture’, that signs are both shaped by past use but also deployed in the creative making of the present and the future. That in turn permitted him to reflect on the method that he had forged in the development of his work, and in that regard it is interesting to note his claim, in the reflective essay ‘Crisis in English Studies’ (1981), that ‘a fully historical semiotics would be very much the same thing as cultural materialism’. But the second reason why ‘multiaccentuality’ was significant for Williams, is that it afforded the possibility of thinking through the relations between language and ideology as social practice.

If it is a function of ideology to pass off what is social as natural and to present the historical as eternal, then it is clear that the doctrine of ‘multiaccentuality’, with its emphasis on the necessary historicity and openness of signs, allows us to debunk various ideological forms by revealing their social constructedness, their variability, the ways in which they play specific historical roles in formations of power. Indeed in this sense, the historical critique of political economy that Marx produced (for example, in the section of the Grundrisse in which he deconstructs how specific economists understand theories of surplus value), is a sort of precursor to the work of Williams in Culture and Society and Keywords. For what both Marx and Williams showed is how apparently ‘timeless’ notions were produced out of a very specific history, by particular interests, for particular ends.

For Williams, the key insight is that language is a socially creative practice. The sign is not a pre-existing unit that belongs to some abstract system of language but the product of speech activity between real individuals who are in some continuing social relationship. This means that ‘usable signs’ are ‘living evidence of a continuing social process, into which individuals are born and within which they are shaped, but to which they then also actively contribute, in a continuing process’
Orwell and Williams: Language and Socialism

(emphasis added) (Williams, *Marxism*, 37). The same important point is made when Williams refers to the historical character of language as ‘the result, the always changing result, of the activities of real people in social relationships, including individuals not simply as products of the society, but in a precise dialectical relation both producing and being produced by it’ (emphasis added) (Williams, *Politics*, 330).

For Williams, the social creativity of language is significant because it allows for both the force of ideological interpellation and the possibility of resisting it. And therein lies the crucial difference between Orwell and Williams. For although Williams would have joined Orwell in acknowledging the dangers of language (and Orwell surely deserves credit for drawing serious attention to the issue), Orwell’s postulation of the possibility of a totalitarian political order in which the hegemony of one group can be ensured by its ability to fix meaning is one with which Williams could not have agreed. Ultimately, Orwell’s representation of a form of linguistic determinism in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* embodies not so much a rebuke, as a mode of pessimistic defeatism that makes a journey of hope all the more difficult.

6. Conclusion: Williams’s Challenge

If Williams’s account of language is correct, then it poses a challenge: how to use the creative, open, multiaccentual nature of language, our practical consciousness, to counteract, at an everyday level, the mundane words, phrases, labels, designations, habits of speech and ways of talking that interpellate us ideologically in the interests of the dominant order. Evidently that is easier said than done, because as Orwell’s work properly showed, the forces ranged against resistance are enormous and the pressures are real. But for socialists it is nonetheless both possible and necessary to meet the challenge. Why? Well given that language is a creative material and political practice, it follows that our words matter because they are part of the dialectical process by which we shape the world and are shaped by it. And precisely because our words are significant it also follows that we need to pay attention to them, to use them in critical, reflective, positive and progressive ways, rather than ways which in effect make us talk and write against ourselves and our collective interests. There is no way out of this: we either resist the terms of our domination, or we accept them. Of course, those who have the institutional power to make meanings ‘stick’ at specific moments will attempt to make us think that those meanings are ‘real’, ‘natural’, ‘received’, ‘commonsense’, ‘eternal’, ‘just the case’ – ‘uniaccentual’. But they aren’t, and it is a serious mistake to act as though they are. The challenge then is to use the multiaccentuality of language as one of the means of resistance; it is a call to words.
Notes


Neoliberal Keywords, Political Economy and the Relevance of Ideology
Marnie Holborow

The overbearing presence of neoliberal ideology in public discourse demonstrates the degree to which a ruling ideology can become naturalised verbally as common sense. ‘Creeping linguistic neoliberalism’ is most evident in the repeated use of a cluster of neoliberal keywords, a notion which owes much to the work of Raymond Williams.

The capacity of Williams’s keywords to register the specific social tensions of post-war Britain was predicated on the view that language is continuous social production, which develops within a particular social order and which constitutes a lived system of meanings and values whose social significance appear reciprocally confirming. For Williams, keywords were the ‘socially prominent’ often explicitly political words which were ‘capable of bearing interlocking, yet commonly contested, contemporary meanings’. They could be described as tips of icebergs, ‘nodes around which ideological battles are fought’ thus capturing the unmistakable, if slippery, presence of ideology in language.

Neoliberal keywords are tips of icebergs in another sense: they reaffirm the social truth of the ‘free’ market and, figuring in fields well beyond the economy, represent pivotal semantic hubs in the articulation of the dominant ideology. Their neoliberal reference points are often unspoken rather than explicit and their ideological content and provenance often only traceable through a socio-political analysis of the contexts within which they occur. The neoliberal keyword cluster expands on Williams’s original keywords, whose random selection reflected broader aspects of contemporary social culture.

Williams expressed reservations about the use of the term ideology, preferring instead a more culturally-orientated understanding of hegemony. He argued that the related concepts of the base and superstructure were unhelpful in accounting for both dominant and oppositional cultures and ways of thinking. A focus on specifically neoliberal keywords and their hidden meanings, however, brings into sharp relief the ideological dimension of language and the class interests that their articulation represents, particularly in the aftermath of the 2008 economic crash. Indeed, it could be said that the neoliberal keyword cluster, as used in official texts in Ireland, where the fall-out from the crisis has been most severe, expresses indirectly the reciprocity between the infrastructural and the superstructural, in the Marxist sense. Their ideological expression of the interests of capital at this particular conjuncture explains the force and, potentially, the vulnerability of their neoliberal message.
Vincent Mosco, in his classic study of communication, has outlined the main characteristics of a political economy approach. Firstly, its cornerstone is that change and historical transformation lie at the heart of all societies. Following Marx, political economists examine the dynamic forces of capitalism which explain both its booms and its slumps, its growth and its crises. Secondly, political economy transcends specific academic disciplines and attempts to describe society in its totality. Political economy seeks to set the economy within its social and historical parameters. It takes from the classical political economy of Adam Smith that the state is a fundamental unit of socio-economic organisation but takes also from Marx that social relations are at the core of the workings of the economy. Political economy, as Mosco summarises, ‘is the study of social relations particularly the power relations that mutually constitute the production, distribution and consumption of resources’ (24). In other words, political economic analysis draws the connections between the economic foundations of society and other social phenomena.

In one sense, although not explicitly, Williams applied the principles of political economy to the terrain of culture and language. His discussion of keywords sought to move beyond static dictionary definitions to describing how words were socially charged, how their meaning pertained to changing social practices and to ‘wider areas of thought and experience’. His intention was to reach out beyond linguistic analysis to the ‘deliberately social and historical’, in order to identify the ‘actual relationships’ from which the meanings of his selected keywords emerged and also the ‘deep conflict of value and belief’ that they contained. Their ‘unspoken’ meanings and relationships carry the pressures and limits of a specific economic, political and cultural system but, as expressions that saturate daily language, they seem to express merely the pressures and limits of timeless common sense. Williams describes their ‘sense of edge’ as deriving from their social history and ongoing transformation in the real circumstances of the social order shaped by a dominant class. It was thus the task of the analyst to make at once conscious and critical the precise social and historical conditions of the language (Williams, *Keywords*, 22–4).

On the other hand, however, Williams also stressed how much culture was a core determinant in the shaping of meaning, perhaps because he wanted to break with a certain strand of what was then ‘official’ Marxism. Its mechanical interpretations, in which ideological and cultural phenomena were either superstructural ‘reflexes’ to the economic base or constituents of strictly demarcated superstructural apparatuses that faithfully transmitted capitalist values, Williams, with good reason, rejected as too binary and too static. In this connection, he noted that Althusserian claims for ideological
‘over-determination’ in the superstructure could too easily fossilise into an abstracted structure which ignored the reality of ‘practice and practical consciousness’ (Williams, *Marxism*, 88). However, Williams’s response to these theoretical rigidities was to redefine the relationship of language and culture to the social order and to reposition the notion of materiality, a move which allowed his interpretation to be taken up in ways that he may not have fully envisaged.

For Williams, it was the lived dimension of social change, experienced both socially and individually, which was crucial and why, perhaps, he preferred ‘structure of feeling’ over world-view or ideology. He was concerned with ‘meanings and values as they are actively lived and felt’, ‘over a range from formal assent with private dissent to the more nuanced interaction between selected and interpreted beliefs’ (132). Above all, he was interested in the meanings and interpretations that were consciously decided and those that just took shape or happened. For this reason, Williams was drawn to the Gramscian concept of hegemony because it treated domination and subordination dynamically, as reciprocally determined ongoing processes rather than settled states. However, Williams’s ‘structure of feeling’, standing for the historico-affective aspects of experience, falls well short of Gramsci’s understanding of consciousness, which arose very precisely from specific agents in the political and economic conjuncture. Gramsci’s explanation of social consciousness explicitly referred to the interplay of ‘the base and the superstructures’, a historical materialist premise that he had absorbed from Marx and Labriola.

Indeed, the tension between ‘common sense’ and ‘good sense’, so often repeated in Gramsci’s writings, derives from the dialectical relationship between domination and subordination, between a world created by the dominant class and the lived experience of the ‘subaltern classes’, between ideology and political economy. Gramsci’s social consciousness is not singular but fragmented, consisting of two theoretical consciousness existing side by side: one ‘superficially explicit or verbal’, which has been ‘inherited from the past and uncritically absorbed’ (common sense), and another, often less coherently articulated, that derives from social activity and unites a person with other ‘fellow-workers’ in ‘the practical transformation of the real world’ (good sense) (333). Perhaps Williams intended ‘structure of feeling’ to capture some of this vacillation, but William’s choice of terminology, inevitably prioritises the affective and cultural over the political and the ideological, a slant compounded by the absence of reference to actual class struggles in his writings. ‘Structure of feeling’ also skirts around the question of social agency. Whose social voice was it behind keywords? This silence meant that ‘structure of feeling’ could easily become, in later interpretations, stripped of any Marxist or marxisant themes of class and political economy.

Kate Crehan
Marnie Holborow argues that Williams’s hegemony as described in *Marxism* is based not on the socio-economic dimension of power but exclusively on beliefs and ideas, and therefore constitutes a kind of ‘hegemony lite’. Certainly, it is this weaker version that been resonant in subsequent writings about hegemony in relation to language.\(^{10}\)

Williams’s impulse to remove all traces of economic reductionism led him to invert historical materialism and propose an ‘extension of the base’ to include all things cultural. This leaves language uncomfortably alongside, rather than in relationship with, the material. Williams rejected the base/superstructure distinction because he saw the superstructural (such things as palaces, churches prisons and schools, weapons of war) as also having a strong material dimension (Williams, *Marxism*, 81, 93). His reasoning rested on the premise that Marx’s base/superstructure model represented a material/non-material dichotomy, which is far from the case. Marx saw the material and immaterial not as discrete categories but as a continuum. In the few direct references to base and superstructure in Marx’s writings, both the productive forces and social relations are to be found in the base, thereby including on the supposedly more ‘real’ side of the model, both material and less tangible elements. Equally, phenomena with material aspects – such as the state and the army – Marx saw no difficulty in including in the superstructure. Later interpretations of the base/superstructure model assumed it to mean simply the primacy of production over all other social phenomena, whereas Marx actually counted social relations as interlinked with the forces of production, an assessment which led him to count political class struggle as the driving force in history.\(^{12}\) For Marx, the base/superstructure distinction was based not on degrees of materiality but on the nature of the relationship between economic production and social relations. Williams, too, appears to share in some respects Marx’s dynamic view of base and superstructure, invoking at times a more subtle and dialectical interpretation than many of his contemporary ‘orthodox’ Marxists. But, overall, he rejects the metaphorical base/superstructure frame as being too restrictive, and proposes in its place a model of cultural materialism.\(^{13}\)

It is important to point out that while Williams invokes a Gramscian basis for this démarche, Gramsci’s writings in fact make constant reference to the base/superstructure frame of classical Marxism.\(^{14}\) Gramsci sees ideology and ‘superstructures’ not as mechanically deriving from the base, but as complex, changing social phenomena through which people come to recognise practically the determining conditions of their lives at any given time. Gramsci’s analysis of language and languages in general, and of the meanings of words in particular, proceeds through the historical materialist prism.\(^{15}\) For example, Gramsci’s discussion of the notions of ‘east’ and ‘west’ – in many ways a ‘keyword’ cultural analysis which prefigures Williams’s own – can only be understood
in terms of the development of productive forces. As he puts it, ‘these terms have crystallised not from the point of view of a hypothetical melancholic man in general but from the point of view of the European cultured classes, who as a result of their world-wide hegemony, have caused them to be accepted everywhere’. The concepts of East and Near East are Western constructions, Gramsci stresses, which underline ‘the importance of and significance of the doctrine of superstructures’ (Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*, 447).

Williams seems intent on stripping other Marxists’ work of the base/superstructure dimension. His approving references to the Marxist linguist, Vološinov, for example, make no mention of the fact that *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* contains an explanatory chapter entitled ‘Concerning the Relationship of the Basis and Superstructures’, which is foundational for Vološinov’s view of language and social consciousness. Such selective readings of both Gramsci and Vološinov would seem to confirm that Williams is intent on jettisoning the base/superstructure model because it was irrevocably tainted.

But simply renaming cultural phenomena as material does not erase overdetermination: it merely introduces different inflexibilities. Attributing a material status to everything not only drains the material of its specific force, but, paradoxically, also obscures the actual material situation and context of instances of language and cultural activity and how and to what extent this facilitates interpretation of reality. The quality of signs to ‘refract’ another reality points to the distinction between different layers of materiality from which meaning arises (the linguistic moment, in Vološinov’s words) where ‘the real conditions of life’ and ‘social evaluation’ come together. The core contribution of the Marxist differentiation between base and the superstructure, as Terry Eagleton notes in a shrewd discussion of this topic, is not that those determinations are symmetrical, even less than they are predictable or inevitable, but that ‘in the production of human society some activities are more fundamentally determining than others’ (Eagleton, 172).

Finally, collapsing the cultural into the material also risks going down the same cul-de-sac, ironically, as the over-determinist accounts that Williams so despised: blocking off a sustainable pathway to critique. If critique is to have any claim to objectivity it must surely accept that there is a distinction between how society presents itself in discourse and the social structures constituted by exploitation and class antagonism. This epistemological boundary provides a necessary vantage point from which to analyse critically discursive or cultural phenomena. My brief discussion here of the ‘double truths’ of neoliberal keywords shows how this boundary provides the analyst with a method with which to expose social mythologising (Mirowski, 117). Rather than flattening the cultural and material into one, recognising the connections
and misconnections between the two becomes the vital means of identifying the linguistic refractions of reality. Developments in the economic base and political economy affect public discourse in various ways and identifying these distinct threads, rather than merging them, furthers the distinctive socio-political critique which was Williams’s point of departure. It is now time to look at the ways in which an analysis of neoliberal keywords can contribute towards that aim.

Neoliberal Keywords – Making Ideology Stick?

The keywords criteria as presented by Williams can be summarised as: 1) their use in day-to-day discourse; 2) their belonging to a cluster of interrelated words which typically co-occur; 3) their multiple meanings often condensed into one currently dominant sense; 4) their status as ‘indicative words’ designating social concepts, practices and norms and orders; and finally 5) the contested nature of their meanings whose full content requires more than a purely linguistic analysis (Williams, *Keywords*, 15–22). The preceding section has highlighted the need to make reference to political economy, to social agency, and to ideology when seeking to set keywords in their full social context. Here I narrow down Williams’s understanding of keywords to the ideological field, to a cluster of keywords which articulate neoliberal ideology. Neoliberal keywords allow a specific pathway into the identification of ideology in public discourse, give indications as to their social authorship and provide insights into the workings of ideology itself.

It might be useful here to indicate how I am using the term ‘neoliberal’. I am focusing on neoliberal ideology, and not its other dimensions, which I have discussed elsewhere. I understand neoliberal ideology as a world view which rests on the belief that market exchange is the guide for all human action and that social organisation should be directed towards allowing the ‘free’ market to thrive. Neoliberalism, given its global reach and official status, has become a dominant ideology in every sense of the word, for it is in many respects the voice of global capitalism and ‘the common sense way many of us interpret, live in and understand the world’. The content and emphasis of neoliberal ideology varies according to events and social developments and, since the crash of 2008, I argue, it has come to be articulated in close conjunction with the notion of austerity, with the aim of legitimising sharp reductions in public social spending.

The keywords chosen by Williams were words which were the subject of public debate, partly because their meanings were undergoing change. His examples of culture and class, ideology and isms, standards and status, taste
Neoliberal Keywords

and tradition, racial and reactionary, wealth and welfare, were words which stirred controversy, and were often explicitly and recognisably political in content. Neoliberal keywords, despite their co-occurrence within the frame of neoliberal ideology, are, on the face of it, less politically explicit than Williams’s terms. They are words which present themselves as ‘vocabularies of the economy’ which have simply extended beyond their subject specialism of economics into other areas. They could be described as a collection of words which revolve around common assumptions about the free market. Market itself has spilled over into a vast array of unexpected fields and domains. For example, diabetes is described as being a fast growing market, with the insulin market described as rapidly expanding and the maker of insulin as having secured for itself the position of market leader. Customer, similarly, has become the generic term for our role in many and diverse social interactions. It has become the stand-in term for patients, passengers, tourists, students and, even, asylum seekers as one customer care document from the Irish Immigration Service makes clear. Correspondingly, customer service, customer care, customer satisfaction and even customer delight, have become what a wide range of people – nurses, ticket collectors, art gallery and park attendants, social welfare clerks, doctors and dentists, educationalists – claim to provide to us most of the time, for our custom, as we are unrelentingly told, is important to them. These new applications, which represent a considerable semantic stretching of what was conventionally thought of as market activities, amount to what Williams described as being the ‘conscious changes, or consciously different uses’ of language:

the innovation, obsolescence, specialisation, extension, overlap transfer; or changes which are marked by a nominal continuity so that words that seem to have been there for centuries, with continuous general meanings, have come in fact to express radically different or radically variable, yet sometimes hardly noticed, meanings and implication of meaning. (Williams, Keywords, 11–12)

The use of entrepreneur across various public and policy documents is particularly instructive for how meanings are stretched to encompass new usages. Entrepreneur did not figure in Williams’s original list (although ‘expert’ did, having possibly a comparable ideological significance at the time). Entrepreneur as a person who sets up a business or businesses, a financial risk-taker in search of profits, has expanded in meaning. These include, according to dictionary definitions, ‘wheeler-dealer’, ‘ideas person, ‘whiz-kid’, ‘mover and shaker’, ‘go-getter’, ‘high flyer’, even ‘hustler’. ‘Entrepreneurship’ not only accompanies a wide variety of human activities but has now become an official driver of
public policy, education, civic duty, personal behaviour and many other things besides. In an Irish Higher Education policy document of 2011, for example, ‘enterprise’ is used no less than 89 times in a 134-page text. Medical journals, disturbingly, now describe dentistry and surgery as ‘entrepreneurial in nature’ and ‘medical entrepreneurs’ are able to help patients, or at least those able to pay, towards recovery. Nursing now has ‘entrepreneurial potential’ and, as one nurse-entrepreneur website points out, nurses are ‘totally customer-service orientated’ and ‘naturally’ make great business people. Child care, providing personal coaching, giving fitness classes, looking after the elderly, planning family events and weddings, home clearing and help, all these activities present the opportunity to practice ‘entrepreneurship’. Stamped on this vast industry of what has been termed the ‘outsourcing of the self’, ‘entrepreneurship’ embraces everyone: those who are entrepreneurial enough to brand their services to sell and those who have the entrepreneurial spirit to take stock of their busy lives and recognise the services they need to buy in. These identifications, associations and connotations make entrepreneur, as I have argued elsewhere, a pivotal neoliberal keyword, one which, following Williams’s definition, contains a complex hub of sense and reference, and the reconstruction of a whole new social imaginary.

Another market-orientated word of the neoliberal keyword cluster, used in unexpected contexts, is ‘brand’, as in personal branding and brand me. Its meaning highlights some of the contradictory forces at play in the creation of a wholly market-defined world. ‘Branding yourself’ with a ‘personalised global personal brand toolbox’, together with brand me workbooks, websites, ‘personal brand agencies’, and ‘personal brand portals’ for graduating students, have become the necessary means to ‘fast track you on a very successful career’, as one ‘talent acquisition specialist’ (an employer) from the UK, advertising their ‘brand stand’ services puts it. Here, like customer and entrepreneur, the individual is being put at the centre of things but as an object equipped to compete on the market, and thus encouraged to translate herself voluntarily into a marketable commodity. The process unfolds through metaphorical mapping in which an lifeless thing – a brand – is being mapped on to the traits, qualities, acquired skills belonging to a person. In spite of the intense focus on the self, the process also involves, paradoxically, blocking out the human aspect through its re-invention as a marketable thing. Brand me defines the individual solely in terms of selling and buying, making money and consuming. And this effacement of the person runs through many commonly used expressions in public language: unemployed people and their families are described as benefit units, while others in work are termed human resources, human capital, or the stock of labour. Yet such dehumanising representations create limits, as we shall see, to these keywords being widely used or fully accepted.
The ‘Pushers’ of Neoliberal Keywords – Social Agency and Political Economy

The extension, variation and transfer of meanings of these market-related words point to what Williams noted as a natural tendency of language to stretch its rules of use ‘to social norms which both enable sense and reference to be generated and in some large degree to control them’ (Williams, *Keywords*, 17). What are the mechanisms, beyond the purely linguistic, which allow the generation of new senses and meanings of certain words to take root in society? Why have these neoliberal keywords come to the fore in public discourse just now and how has their use become hegemonic?

To answer these questions requires reference to the political economy and to the contexts within which the more extensive use of neoliberal keywords has occurred. The market master narrative is nothing new. For a generation now, the official policies of most states in the western world, and elsewhere, have come to accept without question the idea that human well-being is best advanced by unfettered markets and that governments should provide the institutional framework to achieve this. But the market crash of 2008 marked the beginning of a refashioning of the neoliberal trope in unexpected ways. In Ireland, the impact of the crash was dramatic, which is what makes it such an interesting example of the effects of neoliberalism on public language. Firstly the state – hitherto branded by neoliberalism as sclerotic and unentrepreneurial – stepped out of its usual ideological patch and assumed, as it injected huge sums of money into Irish banks, an openly hands-on role. This was a case of the neoliberal state brazenly not leaving the market to do its work but rather intervening very directly to shape it according to neoliberal dictates. Secondly, the ballooning public debt, which was a direct result of the huge bank bailouts, resulted in the government implementing a sharp reduction in public spending through a permanent austerity programme. This led to deeper recession and higher levels of unemployment. The crisis and the Irish government’s blanket guarantee for the banks resulted in one of the most serious economic contractions in modern history. The crash became the opportunity to implement what neoliberals had sought for a long time – a sharp shrinking of public expenditure on social provision. The bailout ushered in a period of extreme uncertainly and ‘uninterrupted disturbance’, which provided the psychological backdrop to sweep away customary ways of thinking.29

Public language was one way that this revamped neoliberalism made its mark. Before the crash, the interplay of the market and language had often been interpreted by discourse analysts as the unexplained ‘colonising’ of new fields by business, as forms of ‘discursive realignment’ or ‘re-contextualisation’.30
Post-crash, such discourse-centric explanations seemed narrowly introspective and inadequate. ‘Creeping linguistic neoliberalism’ was so widespread, within and across states, that it pointed to a common social cause and to a concerted initiative on the part of powerful social actors (Mirowski, 117). Just as Williams had noted that, at specific times, and particularly times of crisis, certain word meanings change and become dominant, in rapid and concentrated ways, likewise the hegemonic force of neoliberal keywords can be traced to influential chains of communication.

The words of public discourse today are infinitely more susceptible to being streamlined than they would have been in Williams’s day. The uniform adoption of such words as *entrepreneur* in higher education texts can be traced, in effect, to specific supra-national institutions which make use of highly centralised networks of communication to pass words down to local contexts. In a study of the Irish context, I have shown how a tight chain of transmission is provided by institutions such as the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and, increasingly since the crash, by one arm of the Troika, the European Commission. These unelected bodies spin out these keywords across numerous and internationally disseminated policy documents, and they are then recirculated in official government policy statements and finally reappear in on the websites and documents of individual universities (Holborow, *Language and Neoliberalism*, ch. 6). Universities have stepped forward as faithful reproducers and legitimisers of these neoliberal keywords and their role in a chain that reaches up to the EU institutions highlights how much ideological transmission and social reproduction takes place through our institutions of higher education. They, with other state agencies, have ensured a high degree of standardisation of the keywords of neoliberal thinking. These communication channels make ‘creeping linguistic neoliberalism’ a rather coordinated ideological affair, with defined goals traceable to specific social agents. What is striking in the insistent repetition of these keywords across documents and websites is that all these institutions speak, literally, in concert. Despite the popular claim that neoliberal hegemony derives from the neoliberal bit of ourselves, or from Foucauldian ‘regimes of the self’, the degree of neoliberal verbal synchronisation underscores that it is powerful, collective social agents who are able to bring their influence to bear and who have imposed standard neoliberal speech as the norm in official settings.

Political economist and social geographer Jamie Peck has noted that ‘austerity’ acts as a ‘strategy of displacement’ on behalf of neoliberal elites to deflect the social impact of the crisis. ‘Austerity’ itself places fault and blame for the situation in the moral arena, and by drawing implicit parallels with budgeting within an individual household, thereby justifies making ordinary citizens bear the cost of the speculative excesses of the wealthy few. The
assertion that ‘austerity is not a choice; austerity is learning to live within our means’, made by the Irish Labour Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform, neatly implies that everyone had shared in the excesses of the boom and everyone should now pay. But ‘pushers of austerity’, Peck notes, employ two distinct but mutually dependent tactics, one material and the other discursive and ideological. The costs of the banking crisis are materially transferred to branches of government and thereby also to society at large, thus effecting social redistribution against the working class in favour of the already wealthy; and, secondly, this move involves also an ideologically-motivated re-narration, whereby austerity is presented as the necessary antidote to state overspending (the causes of which are conveniently obscured). The ingenious and now generally accepted translation of bank debt into sovereign debt, as those of us who live in Ireland, or Spain or Greece, have come to know only too well, encapsulates the efficacy of re-narration as identified by Peck.

Neoliberal keywords, post-crash, also enact ideological re-narration to mask considerable real wealth redistribution. The presence in public discourse of enterprise or personal branding advocates that private institutions and individuals find their own ways of filling the vacuum left by reduced public funding. In higher education, the promotion of universities as ‘enterprises’ has coincided with the severest reductions of state funding. In the case of Ireland, the crash dramatically accelerated the trend away from state funding for higher education. The bank bailout, which increased government debt from 25 per cent to 118 per cent of its GDP, affected all public spending. The contribution of the state to universities through grants and student support has shrunk from 76 per cent of higher education income in 2007 to a projected 51 per cent in 2016. In Ireland prior to 2008, unlike the UK, the neoliberalisation of higher education was only in its early stages; the deep recession provided the social moment to implement it more cogently and thoroughly, a project in which neoliberal language played no small part. We can see how the systematic use of such neoliberal keywords – particularly the university as enterprise – expresses an accumulation of meaning and connotations which, in specific social conditions, following Vološinov’s formulation, contains a ‘refracting and distorting peculiarity’ and acts as a repository for ‘countless ideological threads’. The university as enterprise, in a context of shrinking public funds, shows succinctly how the material and the ideological are intricately interwoven.

Official government documents, economic reports, educational policy statements, and mission statements of institutions of higher education assert that human capital – another much-used neoliberal keyword – is an essential component of the economy. The metaphor of human capital shows graphically how the social is re-narrated as the individual. Human capital coalesces around the twin concepts of the skills that people bring to bear in the economy and
the need for capital investment in these. The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development defines human capital as ‘the knowledge, skills and competences and other attributes embodied in individuals that are relevant to economic activity’. The term now replaces terms such as ‘labour force’, ‘skilled personnel’, ‘skilled workers’, ‘highly educated workforce’ as well as, more broadly, ‘investment in education at all levels’. The Irish report on Higher Education, the Hunt Report, now sees a main function of universities to ‘enhance human capital’. Human capital is a metaphor in the sense that humans are likened to capital but it also comes to stand for two other terms – labour and investment in education. The process of metonymy within this keyword allows for the binding together of individual knowledge and expertise and human thought, to their function and value in the economy. In a process of re-semanticisation or semantic field stretching, human knowledge and skills are reclassified as an exclusively economic category and categorised as an investment for which the individual reaps the returns. Human capital condenses a person’s knowledge and skills into an economic asset with the power to produce wealth for the individual. thus becomes a pivotal neoliberal keyword for the reconfiguration of society as a market state of individual economic actors (Holborow, Language and Neoliberalism, 15–16).

The coining of human capital would seem to be a striking example of Williams’s view of language as continuous social production, but it can be traced to specific origins. When human capital was first used by the early neoliberal thinkers in the Chicago school of economics it was considered to be too crudely reductionist to be applied to education. Education was considered in the 1960s to have broader goals – for life itself – in Dewey’s phrase. Neoliberal ideology, by contrast, in its reshaping of the society around the workings of the market, brushes aside such concerns. Every aspect of human endeavour must be bent to the needs of capitalist accumulation, and education becomes exclusively the making of human capital. Such extreme functionalism may well turn out to be ideologically counterproductive. Who would actually describe themselves as human capital? This excess may make the term, in Williams’s phrase, somewhat ‘ideologically brittle’ and easily open to challenge.

Branding used for people, as in self-branding or personal branding, also neoliberal keywords with greater circulation post-crash, may engender a ‘brittleness’ of another sort. Students who concentrate on their personal branding aim to increase the range of marketable skills that they have to offer and to spend time packaging everything that they have learnt in terms of what they think employers need. Self-branding, like human capital, represents a re-narration of the crisis from the social to the individual. If a person has not made the choice to equip herself with a good brand, then, so the narrative goes, if she finds herself in a poorly paid job or out of work, she has only herself to blame.
The strategy of displacement is enacted through seeing the question of securing a job as solely a matter of individual initiative and creativity. The specific conjuncture explains the ideological force of the keyword, and in whose interests this re-narration lies. Of course, the brand me narrative is silent on the fact that the brand, however well devised, may still not sell, or only to unintended buyers. In Ireland, one effect of the recession has been record numbers of people emigrating, and almost half of those leaving (47 per cent) were graduates. The brand is selling far further afield than implied by the official narrative, with Toronto or Sydney readily making use of the pool of unemployed Irish graduates. Graduate unemployment increased by 5 per cent to almost 9 per cent, compared with an OECD average of 7 per cent, a figure which does not include those graduates who have emigrated. Overall in the EU, unemployment is running at 25 per cent amongst young people and a lot higher in some countries. These stark realities run counter to the official theme of the success of a strong personal brand. Branding may present itself as the necessary individual pathway to employment, but it is in reality a distorted expression of the ever greater competition amongst graduates for jobs.

Conclusion

The promotion of neoliberal keywords in public discourse through privileged channels represents, therefore, a conscious attempt by specific social actors to impose their preferred ideology. The process reveals how neoliberal keywords can acquire what Vološinov describes as ‘a uni-accentual, fixed eternal character which serves to naturalise what are specific class positions’. Neoliberal keywords can be understood as ‘the ideological sign[s]’ in an established, dominant ideology’ whose purpose is ‘to stabilise the flux of the social process and present its interpretation as the truth’ (Vološinov, 24). I have attempted to show that the specifically ideological dimension, resting on the social relations of capital and labour, comes to the fore in the analysis of specific neoliberal keywords. The social agents involved in the standardising of these keywords – EU institutions, states and universities – points to their upholding specific class interests within the broader neoliberal-austerity project.

This one-sidedness supplies both the force and the vulnerability of neoliberal keywords. Seen as the required phrases to pepper public speech, these words contribute to the establishment of neoliberal thinking as accepted common sense. Williams, in his essay ‘Culture is Ordinary’, describes ‘an English bourgeois culture with its powerful educational, literary and social institutions in close contact with the actual centres of power’. It presents itself as the automatically expected, and excludes most working-class people
In the neoliberal way of speech, constituted by its own set of keywords, we find the presence of a similar, if reconstituted, social voice with its own compact and rigidly conformist networks whose unerringly predictable invectives speak only to a tiny minority for whom they make sense. Although Williams was reluctant to use the notion of ideology, it is precisely through reference to the complex matrix of the infrastructure and superstructure of contemporary capitalism that the tensions behind the acceptability of these keywords become visible. Neoliberal keywords, as we have seen, recount a neoliberal vision that, as recession persists and austerity pertains, thinly cloaks the very different social realities and outcomes to the official narrative. Few could identify with being human capital. Not everyone, by definition, can be an entrepreneur, and even fewer, a successful entrepreneur. However well you brand yourself a job may not be forthcoming. The mismatch makes neoliberal keywords ideologically ‘brittle’ and open to challenge. From this point of view, a critique of neoliberal keywords is not just a question of language. In making explicit the social actors and historical conditions of this specific neoliberal language, we may, as Williams noted, see language ‘not as a consensus to be accepted’ but ‘a vocabulary to use’, ‘to change as we find it necessary to change it, as we go on making our own language and history’ (Williams, Keywords, 25).

Notes

5 Raymond Williams, Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society, revised ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 14.
6 These characteristics are discussed by Williams in relation to hegemony, see Marxism, 110.
8 Leonard Grossberg, in his discussion of Williams’s ‘structure of feeling’, argues that the term includes the Gramscian notion of conjuncture, but he passes over Gramsci’s historical materialism. Lawrence Grossberg, ‘Raymond Williams and the Absent Modernity’, in About Raymond Williams, ed. Monica Seidman, Roman Horak and Lawrence Grossberg (London: Routledge, 2010), 18–33.


17 Seidl, Horak and Grossberg discuss some of the issues surrounding William’s understanding of cultural materialism, pointing out Williams’s debt to structuralism and the distance he takes from Marxism. See *About Raymond Williams*, 11–15.


19 See also the University of Pittsburg and Jesus College Cambridge, *Keywords Project* at http://keywords.pitt.edu/whatis.html#lists (accessed 23 January 2015).


Marnie Holborow


Living Wrong Life Rightly: Kant *avec* Marx
Ben Ware

In section 18 of *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*, Theodor Adorno writes: ‘Es gibt kein richtiges Leben im falschen’ (‘Wrong life cannot be lived rightly’). Whilst this statement should certainly be read as a piece of exaggerated late-Adornian rhetoric, designed to provoke contemplation of reality in ‘its estranged form’ (15), it also leaves us with a pressing contemporary question: given that our own ethical and political life is clearly ‘damaged’, is it still possible, or even desirable, to speak of leading a ‘right life’ or a ‘good life’ in either an individual or a collective sense? Put another way: need we accept, sixty-five years after the publication of *Minima Moralia*, Adorno’s ‘melancholy’ conclusion that the notion of the good life has now passed over into the domain of ideology, concealing ‘the fact that there is life no longer’ (15)? When thinking about this issue, we run up against three immediate problems. First, ideas of the good life would now appear to have been reduced to a set of ‘banal catchphrases’ embodying the command to *enjoy*: ‘just do it’, ‘because you’re worth it’, ‘live better’ and so on. Whilst these slogans appear to promise a life of infinite enjoyment, their function, as Slavoj Žižek observes, is in fact to control and regulate *jouissance* through a kind of obligatory, consumerist hedonism. Second, the notion of the good life has, in recent decades, become increasingly bound up with the idea of ‘wellness’ – the ideology of cognitive and physical self-improvement. This new moral imperative to be happy and healthy is what Alenka Zupančič has termed ‘bio-morality’:

Negativity, lack, dissatisfaction, unhappiness, are perceived more and more as moral faults – worse, as a corruption at the level of our very being or bare life. There is a spectacular rise of what we might call bio-morality (as well as morality of feelings and emotions), which promotes the following fundamental axiom: a person who feels good (and is happy) is a good person; a person who feels bad is a bad person.

Third, while contemporary political discourse all but excludes talk of the collective good, certain critics of neoliberalism also attack what they perceive to be outmoded attachments to the good life. Lauren Berlant, for example, argues that in an era characterised by ‘precariousness’, all ‘ends-oriented’ political projects requiring ‘clarity and consensus’ are themselves mere ‘good-life fantasies’ which act as obstacles to one’s own ‘flourishing’. Do these recent linguistic and ideological shifts thus mean that we are no longer in a position to articulate any kind of canonical map of the good life? Is contemporary society
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so lacking in the right forms of institutions and social practices that we are now deprived of even the framework within which a fully coherent moral life might be imagined?

In this essay, I sketch one possible answer to the question of how one might lead a right life in a wrong world: an answer that begins with the injunction, Back to Kant. Such a move will require taking a new look at Kant’s notion of the good which, in the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, he says consists in the good will doing its duty for duty’s sake. Kant’s moral philosophy is often criticised for, amongst other things, being overly ‘abstract’ and for issuing ‘impossible’ ethical demands. Here, however, I argue that it is precisely these perceived weaknesses that constitute the subversive core of Kant’s work; indeed, it is the philosopher’s rigorism that brings us face to face (albeit indirectly) with the ethico-political limits of capitalism as such. My aim, though, will not be to provide a wholesale endorsement of Kant’s ethical position, and consequently the argument will move through a further stage. In the second part of the essay, I contend that any true realisation of the ethical point of Kant’s philosophy – which I take to be exemplified by the Formula of Humanity – will require a rediscovery of Kant via Marx, and more specifically a transformation of Kantian ‘pure morals’ into the practice of radical critique. The journey undertaken here will thus be one from (moral) law to (the politics of) language.

**Laying Down the Moral Law**

Kant is the first philosopher to invite us to think seriously about the concept of moral duty. In the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, he argues that the only thing that can be considered good without limitation is a ‘good will’.6 Whilst traditional moral qualities such as courage, resolution and perseverance, talents such as understanding, wit and judgement, and gifts of fortune such as health, power, and riches, are all undoubtedly good and desirable for many purposes, they can also be put to harmful use. A good will, by contrast, can be regarded as ‘absolutely good’: it ‘is not good because of what it effects or accomplishes, because of its fitness to attain some proposed end, but only because of its volition, that is, it is a good in itself’ (AK 4: 394). For Kant, good willing is equivalent to acting from *duty* – duty being the good will operating under ‘certain subjective limitations and hindrances, which… far from concealing it… bring it out… and make it shine forth all the more brightly’ (AK 4: 397). Whilst it is possible to act in *conformity with duty* rather than *from duty* (one might, for example, give money to charitable causes hoping that this will enhance one’s business reputation, or be inclined towards helping others because this
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is something one enjoys), it is only actions performed from duty that, on Kant’s view, have ‘genuine moral worth’ (AK 4: 398). What gives actions performed from duty their special moral character is that they are undertaken with ‘respect for law’: ‘[o]nly what is connected with my will merely as ground and never as effect, what does not serve my inclination but outweighs it or at least excludes it altogether from calculations in making a choice – hence the mere law for itself – can be an object of respect and so command’ (AK 4: 400). Going on to ask ‘what kind of law can [it] be, the representation of which must determine the will, even without regard for the effect expected from it, in order for the will to be called good absolutely and without limitation?’, Kant derives the following maxim (the so-called Formula of Universal Law): ‘I ought never to act except in such a way that I could also will that my maxim should become a universal law’ (AK 4: 402).

Here we arrive at the cornerstone of Kant’s practical philosophy: the formulation of the categorical imperative. In order to assess the potential political implications of this imperative, however, we need first to consider something paradoxical about Kant’s coupling of duty and the law. According to Kant, moral duty should ‘put aside entirely the influence of inclination and with it every object of the will; hence there is left for the will nothing that could determine it except objectively the law and subjectively pure respect for this practical law, and so the maxim of complying with such a law even if it infringes upon all my inclinations’ (AK 4: 400–1). Here Kant appears to lay the foundations for an ethics that is at once brutal and sublime: my moral actions should not be based on any feelings of compassion or sympathy for the other, nor should I be concerned with any satisfaction or rewards which my actions might bring; for this, as Kant says, represents a ‘pathology’ of reason. The moral imperative, Kant writes, ‘has to do not with the matter of the action and what is to result from it, but with the form and the principle from which the action itself follows’ – namely, ‘pure duty’ (emphasis added) (AK 4: 416/406). According to Freud, Kant’s moral law gives philosophical expression to the ‘harsh, cruel, and inexorable’ super-ego, and as such it is ‘a direct inheritance from the Oedipus-complex’. In his 1959–60 seminar on the Ethics of Psychoanalysis, and in his later essay ‘Kant avec Sade’, Lacan takes Freud’s argument to the next dialectical stage, claiming that one finds in the Marquis de Sade’s Philosophy in the Boudoir the unconscious ‘truth’ of Kant’s ethics – ‘the former’, Lacan writes, ‘completes the latter’. For Lacan, Sade does not figure as a corruption of Kant – he does not represent a regression of reason as he does for Adorno and Horkheimer. On the contrary, Sade shows ‘the secret unthought animating Kant’s entire system’, namely, that it is possible on the categorical imperative to will anything (including absolute cruelty) as a universal law. Thus, according to Lacan, one can consistently and
rationally ‘adopt the opposite of all the laws of the Decalogue’, leaving one with something like the following Sadean maxim: ‘“Let us take as the universal maxim of our conduct the right to enjoy any other person whatsoever as the instrument of our pleasure.”’\footnote{11}

Lacan’s coupling of Kant and Sade is suggestive on a number of fronts. First, it brings to the fore what Kant’s practical philosophy passes over in silence: the possibility of a fully ‘rational’ ethics which is entirely at odds with traditional morality. Second, it casts light on what we might call the ‘Sadistic’ element in Kant: the fact that the moral law demands that the subject act (on occasion) against her inclinations, thus producing in herself ‘a feeling that one could call pain [Schmerz]’ (Lacan, \textit{Ethics}, 98). Lacan’s aim is not, finally, to endorse Sade (psychoanalysis, he remarks, reveals that the ‘moral theory’ of perverse pleasure is always destined to fail) (4–5), but simply to demonstrate that ‘Sadism’ is one possibility in a world in which the guidance of moral sentiment has been eliminated and one lives solely according to strict duty: ‘it is enough for \textit{jouissance} to be a form of evil, for the whole thing to change character completely, and for the meaning of the moral law itself to be completely changed’ (233).

Despite its provocative insights, the fundamental weakness of Lacan’s thesis is clear: its rhetorical force depends upon a somewhat caricatured presentation of Kant. Lacan fails to register, for example, ‘that Kant’s examples of agents who act out of respect for duty without any sympathetic inclinations at all are \textit{thought-experiments} designed to help us correctly identify the fundamental principle of morality, and are not intended to offer a complete picture of human virtue’.\footnote{12} Moreover, we do indeed, according to Kant, ‘have a duty to cultivate love, sympathy, and other inclinations that make our duties easier to do’.\footnote{13} As Kant clearly puts it in the ‘Doctrine of Virtue’ of the \textit{Metaphysics of Morals}: ‘while it is not in itself a duty to share the sufferings (as well the joys) of others, it is a duty to sympathise actively in their fate; and to this end it is thereby an indirect duty to cultivate the compassionate natural (aesthetic) feelings in us, and to make use of them as so many means to sympathy based on moral principle and the feeling appropriate to them’ (AK 6: 457). In this respect, Žižek is correct when he argues that ‘Sade is not the truth of Kantian ethics, but a form of its perverted realization… Sade [is] what happens when the subject betrays the true stringency of… Kantian ethics… [A]t its most radical, Kantian ethics is not “sadist” but precisely what prohibits assuming the position of a Sadean executioner’.\footnote{14}
Kant and the Limits of Capitalism

Building upon Žižek’s point, we might say that what finally unuples Kant and Sade is politics. While Sade’s programme culminates in a libertine republicanism that remains stuck in the loop of trangression and law, Kant is able to offer an affirmative challenge to bourgeois ethico-political reason – a challenge that comes from the Formula of Humanity. In Section II of the Groundwork Kant articulates this formula as follows: ‘Act in such a way that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of another, always at the same time as an end and never simply as a means’ (AK 4: 429). What this statement conveys, according to Kant, is that a human being ‘is not a thing’ (429). Speaking on the same point later in the Groundwork, Kant remarks that a human being has ‘dignity’ and not a ‘market price’ (AK 4: 434). Commenting on the Formula of Humanity in 1945, Lucien Goldmann writes: ‘Kant succeeds in concentrating into a few words the most radical condemnation of bourgeois society and in formulating the foundations of any future humanity.’ And in Negative Dialectics, Adorno affirms Horkheimer’s judgement that the phrase ‘never simply’ [niemals bloss] in Kant’s formula ‘is one of those majestically sober turns of speech designed not to spoil utopia’s chance of realization’.16

In order to bring out the contemporary significance of Kant’s formula, we might examine it in relation to Fredric Jameson’s suggestion that there are certain ethico-political demands that are ‘unrealizable’ within the context of the existing system and that therefore ‘dramatize everything non-functional about [the system’s] structure’.17 In an essay entitled ‘The Politics of Utopia’, Jameson illustrates this point by turning specifically to the issue of full employment:

if I ask myself what would today be the most radical demand to make on our own system – that demand which could not be fulfilled or satisfied without transforming the system beyond recognition, and which would at once usher in a society structurally distinct from this one in every conceivable way, from the psychological to the sociological, from the cultural to the political – it would be the demand for full employment, universal full employment around the globe.18

Leaving aside the possible circularity of this demand (i.e. whether the system would already have to be transformed, in advance, in order for full employment to be implemented), we might see it as working in two ways. First, as a rhetorical gesture, revealing a gap between the empirical present and a possible future; and second, as a kind of diagnostic device which casts new
light upon the ‘dark spots and pathological dimensions’ of a society which is unable to accommodate the productiveness of all of its citizens (38).

Like Jameson’s call for ‘full employment around the globe’, Kant’s Formula of Humanity also demonstrates its unrealizability within the present (socio-economic) framework; and precisely on account of this fact, it brings our attention back to the nature of capitalism as such. What the impossibility of the Formula reveals is, I would argue, not a vague ‘immorality’ at the heart of the system, but something much more specific: no less than capitalism’s dirty little secret, which Marx explores in volume 1 of *Capital* when he asks us to leave ‘the sphere of circulation or commodity exchange, within whose boundaries the sale and purchase of labour-power goes on… a very Eden of the innate rights of man’, and to follow him into capitalism’s ‘hidden abode’:

If we, in company with the owner of money and the owner of labour-power, leave this noisy sphere, where everything takes place on the surface and in full view of everyone, and follow them into the hidden abode of production, on whose threshold there hangs the notice ‘No admittance except on business’. Here we shall see, not only how capital produces, but how capital is itself produced. The secret of profit-making must at last be laid bare.19

The secret of profit-making is simply **exploitation**: the profits of capital, as Marx goes on to detail, depend upon the extraction of surplus value from waged-workers. In this respect, exploitation is based on a relation between exploiter (wage-owner) and exploited (possessor of labour power). This relation is not an aberration within capitalism, but **structural** – part of the normal workings of a system of generalised commodity production. As Marx puts it: the worker brings ‘his own hide to market and… has nothing else to expect but – a tanning’.20 Given this, any possibility of Kant’s ‘never simply as a means’ is ruled out **a priori**: for the money-owner the possessor of labour-power can only ever be a means, even though this process of exploitation is hidden behind the façade of free and equal exchange.

**A Bearded Kant?**

It would thus seem that Kant’s Formula of Humanity brings us face to face with the limits of capitalism as such. It presents a demand – that one doesn’t instrumentalise the rational nature of others – that the system, organised by a set of relations in which others are **necessarily** treated as ‘tools’ for capital accumulation, cannot accommodate. For Kant, the issue of treating persons...
as ends in themselves is, importantly, metaphysical as well as moral: it is only through the adoption of the humanity principle that we come to know ourselves as free. ‘Freedom’, Kant writes, ‘is... that capacity which gives all other capacities infinite usefulness, it is the highest degree of life, it is that property which is a necessary condition that underlies all perfections’. Kant’s idea of an innate, internal freedom also underpins his idea of external freedom – what he calls a ‘right to freedom’ – within the political domain: ‘Freedom (independence from being constrained by another’s choice), insofar as it can co-exist with the freedom of every other in accordance with a universal law, is the only original right belonging to every man by virtue of his humanity’ (AK 6: 237).

It is possible to discern a family resemblance (to use Wittgenstein’s phrase) between Kant and Marx, one that is explored by Kojin Karatani in his study Transcritique. Picking up on the concept of freedom, Karatani argues that ethics is for Kant ‘less a question of good and evil than of being causa sui and hence free, and this compels us to treat other people as free agents’ and thus as ends in themselves. If Kantian ethics is underwritten by the imperative ‘be free!’ then what ‘pushes us into the dimension of freedom’ is, Karatani claims, the ‘necessity to respond to others’:

When one says the other, it does not have to mean existing others. The others – those who do not share a common set of rules – are not only those in outside communities, but also include those who do not exist in the here and now – future humans as well as the dead.... Generally speaking, ethics takes only living beings in consideration, while Kantian ethics, that sees the others as the thing-in-itself, takes hold of the others who have been and who will be. (125)

Karatani finds in Kant’s ethics not only a Benjaminian ‘secret agreement’ between past, present and future generations, but also the idea of communism itself, ‘the regulative idea of superseding capitalism’: ‘Communist society... must be a society where others are treated as an end at the same time as a means; and communism is possible only by reorganizing the social system where people are treated as a means... If we think about it, from the very beginning communism could not have been conceptualized without the moral moment inherent in Kant’s thinking’ (129, viii). Whilst Karatani is certainly correct to see a thread of Kant’s thinking ‘lurking behind’ Marx (specifically, as we shall see, in relation to the latter’s talk of ‘the categorical imperative to overthrow’ existing social and economic relations), he fails to grasp the relationship between the two thinkers in its full dialectical sense. That is, he fails to see that in order for Kant’s principle of humanity to become actual, what is required is a break with
Kantian (legalistic-humanist) ethics, more specifically a transformation of ‘pure morals’ into the practice of *critique*. In this respect, one can see Marx as taking up a position *beyond* the register of traditional ethics; but this, paradoxically, is the place where ethics – in the proper sense of the term – finally begins.

Beyond the Language of Morals

While Marx affirms Hegel’s judgement regarding the ‘abstract’ nature of Kantian morals (*Moralität*), he also criticises Hegel’s ‘illusory’ picture of the state, which presents it as subordinate to, rather than a determining influence upon, ethical life (*Sittlichkeit*). This critique of Hegel dovetails with Marx’s early criticisms of ‘rights’ (*Rechte*) in his 1843 essay against Bruno Bauer, ‘On the Jewish Question’:

None of the so-called human rights... goes beyond the egoistic man, beyond man as member of civil society, namely withdrawn into his private interests and his private will, separated from the community. Not only is man not considered in these human rights to be a species-being, but also species-life itself, society, appears to be a context external to the individuals, and a restriction of their original independence. The only tie that holds them together is natural necessity, need and private interest, the conservation of their property and their egoistic person.

It would, I believe, be incorrect to see Marx here as providing a *general* indictment of rights. Instead, his criticisms are directed towards a particular discourse of rights; namely, freedom-oriented, liberal rights as they are articulated within the context of a property-owning society (*‘the practical application of the human right of freedom is the right of private property’*) (45). The key point for Marx, then, is that ‘[r]ights can never be higher than the economic form of society and the cultural development which is conditioned by it’. Rights, we might say, are always *internally* related to specific modes of production. Precisely on account of this, however, Marx leaves open the possibility of transcending ‘the limited horizon’ of bourgeois rights and establishing a new form of *right-ing being* – *revolutionary equality* – within the sphere of communism: ‘from each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs!’ (Marx, *Critique*, 214–5).

Just as Marx’s view of rights is much more dialectical than it might at first appear, so is his general conception of ethics. In the *German Ideology*, Marx and Engels do indeed consign ‘morality’, along with religion and metaphysics, to the domain of ‘phantoms formed in the human brain’, that is, to ‘ideology’,
while in the *Communist Manifesto*, ‘[t]he law, morality [and] religion’ are described as ‘so many bourgeois prejudices behind which lurk in ambush so many bourgeois interests’ (Marx, *Later Political Writings*, 11). A number of exegetes have taken these remarks as evidence not only of Marx’s general hostility to ethics, but also of an ‘underlying inconsistency’ at the heart of his thinking. According to Eugene Kamenka, for example, while Marx bitterly opposes any attempt to base a socialist programme on abstract moral demands, he is, at the same time, committed to the ‘moral superiority’ of socialism over all other systems. One way of resolving this perceived conflict is suggested by Norman Geras, when he remarks that ‘Marx did think capitalism was unjust but he did not think he thought so’. A similar view is put forward by Terry Eagleton who contends: ‘Marx made the mistake of defining morality as moralism, and so quite understandably rejected it’. But while it is certainly correct to see Marx as a thinker who rejects moralism, it is less clear why one would have to take his general position on ethics as confused or lacking in self-awareness. Focusing attention, specifically, on the stylistic and methodological dimensions of Marx’s writings can, I would argue, yield a different perspective on this issue.

First, it is important to note that when Marx does engage in outright rejections of morality, it is often in polemical works (*German Ideology, Communist Manifesto*) aimed at bringing about a transformation in the outlook of the reader/recipient. There is thus a kind of avant-gardist brusqueness at work in the language of these texts that plays an integral part in the very struggle it announces. This is especially true of the *Manifesto*, which does not merely describe capitalist reality, but, through its own intervention, strives to create a new political subject liberated from the moral, metaphysical and religious ‘illusions’ of the ‘old society’. Second, despite his condemnations of morality, Marx’s works, both early and late, remain intrinsically ethical; what he rejects, however, is the language of morals – the language of moral predicates, maxims, imperatives and propositions. The reason for such a rejection is itself ethical: in a society in which the ‘accumulation of wealth [is]... at the same time the accumulation of misery... torment [and] brutalization’, conventional moral talk (about virtue, the good will and so on) becomes, quite simply, empty – ‘obsolete verbal rubbish’, in Marx’s phrase. In *Capital* we thus see the cultivation of a distinctively moral mode of expression, but one that sidesteps the register of traditional ethics:

Within the capitalist system all methods for raising the social productivity of labour are put into effect at the cost of the individual worker... they distort the worker into a fragment of a man, they degrade him to the level of an appendage of a machine, they destroy the actual content of his
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labour by turning it into a torment; they alienate [entfremden] from him the intellectual potentialities of the labour process in the same proportion as science is incorporated in it as an independent power; they deform the conditions under which he works, subject him during the labour process to a despotism the more hateful for its meanness; they transform his life-time into working-time, and drag his wife and child beneath the wheels of the juggernaut of capital. (799)

We might speak of this passage (and others like it in Capital) as performing a radical ethical gesture at the level of style. Not only does it immerse the reader in the ‘misery… of the active army of labour’, in the manner of Victorian literary realism, but its very urgency (embodied capital’s own drive) also indicates the need for a shift beyond the discourse of pure morals and a re-founding of ethics within the sphere of ‘practical-critical activity in which theory is already revolutionary praxis, and practice is loaded with theoretical significance’. As Marx himself puts it (prior to Capital): ‘the weapon of criticism certainly cannot replace the criticism of weapons; material force must be overthrown by material force; but theory, too, becomes a material force once it seizes the masses. Theory is capable of seizing the masses once it demonstrates ad hominem, and it demonstrates ad hominem once it becomes radical. To be radical is to grasp matters at the root’. It is here that we come to grasp the dialectical relation that holds between Marx and Kant. Whereas Kant’s Formula of Humanity aims to effect a revolutionary transformation within the realm of morals, Marx wants to show how the true realisation of this formula depends upon a double movement: first, a political rediscovery of the language of critique (a materialist reworking of Kant’s critical project of overturning all forms of ‘time-worn dogmatism’); second, the transition from bourgeois humanism to class humanism (the proletariat’s realisation that it is the ‘de facto dissolution of [the existing] world order’) (69). Contra the Marburg neo-Kantians of the early twentieth century, it is not that Kant might supply Marx(ism) with a moral justification; rather, Kant is already a silent partner in much of Marx’s work, providing a kind of invisible ethical backdrop for his theory of revolution. What Marx identifies, however, is a gap between Kantian philosophy and the actual world – what we might call a gap between the ‘ideal’ and the ‘real’. In order for this gap to be transcended, a new dialectical relation between philosophy and the proletariat needs to be established. As Marx writes: ‘philosophy finds its material weapons in the proletariat, so the proletariat finds its spiritual weapons in philosophy.… The head of [the emancipation [of man] is philosophy, its heart is the proletariat. Philosophy cannot be actualised without the abolition [Aufhebung] of the proletariat; the proletariat cannot be abolished without the actualisation of philosophy’ (69–70). For Marx, philosophical
and political emancipation are therefore one and the same: the realisation of (moral) philosophy requires the self-abolition of the proletariat; at the same time, the proletariat requires the tools of philosophy in order to become conscious of its universal role. Within this context, the categorical imperative is no longer merely moral; instead it becomes, in Marx’s words, ‘the categorical imperative to overthrow all conditions in which man is a debased, enslaved, neglected [and] contemptible being’ (64).

**On Critique: The Destructive Character and the Style of Negation**

Marx thus turns Kantian moral philosophy on its head. Where Kant’s moral formulas aim at providing an antagonistic society with a rational moral foundation, Marx believes that the material force of Kant’s practical philosophy can only be realised through a determinate negation of existing conditions. This process begins, crucially, with a return to the practice of critique – what Marx describes in a letter to Arnold Ruge as ‘ruthless criticism of all that exists, ruthless both in the sense of not being afraid of the results it arrives at and in the sense of being just as little afraid of the conflict with the powers that be’. As Marx continues in the same letter: ‘we do not attempt dogmatically to prefigure the future, but want to find the new world only through criticism of the old’.

By way of conclusion, then, I want to raise the question of how we should read Marx’s comments today. What role does critique have to play in the context of contemporary damaged life? And how might this relate back to our original concern with the possibility of living wrong life rightly?

First, after Marx and inverting Kant, we might say that critique should never be treated as an end in itself, but always simply as a means: its purpose is to assist intellectually in clearing the ground for new forms of collective political life. Here we can draw a connection with Walter Benjamin’s short 1931 essay on ‘Der destruktive Charakter’ (‘The Destructive Character’). According to Benjamin, ‘the destructive character knows only one watchword: make room. And only one activity: clearing away… Where others encounter walls or monuments, there, too, he sees a way. But because he sees a way everywhere, he has to clear things from it everywhere. Not always by brute force; sometimes by the most refined [means]… What exists he reduces to rubble – not for the sake of the rubble, but for that of the way leading through it’. Clearly, then, destruction here is not to be equated with unqualified destructiveness (‘abstract’ or ‘indeterminate’ negation, as Hegel would put it); rather, destruction is ‘invested with a positive force’. ‘Demolition sites’, as Benjamin notes in the *Passagen Werk*, are ‘sources for teaching the theory of construction’. How, precisely,
should this relation between destruction and construction/production be understood? Although Brecht is commonly taken to be Benjamin’s model for the destructive character, I would suggest that we can also see the destructive-productive dialectic at work in the figure of Karl Kraus, the Viennese satirist to whom Benjamin frequently returns in his writings. In his long essay on Kraus, Benjamin unearths the following political fragment from a ‘vanished edition’ (November 1920) of the former’s journal Die Fackel:

What I mean is – and now for once I shall speak plainly to this dehumanised brood of owners of property and blood, and to all their followers, because they do not understand German and from my ‘contradictions’ are incapable of deducing my true intention… – what I mean is, Communism as a reality is only the obverse of their own life-violating ideology, admittedly by the grace of a purer ideal origin, a deranged remedy with a purer ideal purpose: the devil take its practice, but God preserve it as a constant threat over the heads of those who have property and would like to compel all others to preserve it, driving them, with the consolation that worldly goods are not the highest, to the fronts of hunger and patriotic honor. God preserve it, so that this rabble who are beside themselves with brazenness do not grow more brazen still, and so that the society of those exclusively entitled to enjoyment, who believe they are loving subordinate humanity enough if they give it syphilis, may at least go to bed with a nightmare! So that at least they may lose their appetite for preaching morality to their victims, take less delight in ridiculing them! 

Kraus’s ‘noble work’ of destruction, as Benjamin terms it, goes beyond his all too simple declaration that communism as a lived reality stands for the negation of the ‘life-violating ideology’ of capitalism. Rather, it consists in the fact that his mode of immanent critique is itself unleashed like a destructive force upon the world of ‘property and blood’ at the same time as its expression hints at the possibility of an awakening from the ‘nightmare’ of domination. Benjamin thus speaks of Kraus’s ‘sober language which bases its dominance on permanence’; a language that intrudes destructively into the material reality of bourgeois life, laying bare its contradictions and clearing the ground for a future beyond the ‘dehumanised brood of owners’.

The second thing to say about critique – and here again Kraus provides the link – is that critique will need to be a critique of language; that is, in Jameson’s words, ‘an exploration of the ideological connotations of various formulations, the long shadow cast by certain words and terms, the questionable worldviews generated by the most impeccable definitions, the ideologies seeping out of the most airtight propositions, the moist footprints of error left by the most
Kraus’ critique of language, Benjamin writes, manifests itself in the struggle against the journalistic ‘empty phrase’: ‘journalism being clearly seen as the expression of the changed function of language in the world of high capitalism’ (Benjamin, ‘Kraus’, 435). ‘How was it possible’, Kraus asks, ‘that in days when clichés were already bleeding and surrendering their last life to death they were still able to serve as window decoration at a bawdyhouse of liberalism?’

Kraus goes further than any other modernist in exploring how the language of the press – propagating ‘free’ trade and ‘just’ war under the banner of ‘progress’ – plays a role in the production of new subjectivities: ‘[the reporter] has produced in mankind that degree of unimaginativeness that enables it to wage war against itself’ (78, 80). What Kraus is speaking of here is a process of subject-formation (Althusser’s interpellation) through language, a process in which the subject comes to be spoken by the language which he or she speaks. Kraus’s clearest example of this occurs in his play The Last Days of Mankind, in which the opinions of the character ‘Optimist’ reveal themselves to be nothing more than an elaborate recycling of newspaper war propaganda: ‘[War] strengthens those who are forced to face death; it lifts them to higher spiritual levels…. Good people become better, and bad ones good. War purifies’. Importantly, however, the linguistic universe which Kraus depicts in the play is far from closed. The verbal opponent of ‘Optimist’ is ‘Grumbler’ who calls into question the former’s pseudo-judgements through various acts of linguistic creativity. For example, at different points in the dialogue ‘Grumbler’ completes the sentences of ‘Optimist’ in such a way that their intended meaning is inverted:

OPTIMIST: … Man no longer lives only for material gain but also…
GRUMBLER: … for medals…
OPTIMIST: There will always be bread. But we also live by hope in the final victory, which is never in doubt, and for which we…
GRUMBLER: … will all starve to death…
OPTIMIST: The nations will learn from this war…
GRUMBLER: … how to wage more wars in the future. (168)

‘Grumbler’ thus undertakes a critique of language that adopts, in Guy Debord’s words, ‘the style of negation’, an ‘insurrectional style’ which extracts the subversive potential from political platitudes that have congealed into ‘respectable truths’. The point is not to attempt to take up a position outside, but rather to enter fully into the official language-game – the language of so-called ‘public opinion’ and ‘common-sense’ – in order to explode it from within. This strategy is already prefigured in Marx’s letter to Ruge when he writes of developing ‘new principles to the world out of its own principles’.
a transformation of ‘consciousness’ not through the formulation of dogmas, but through a critical and creative overturning of ‘the consciousness which is unclear to itself’. If the quest for right life essentially means the quest for the right form of politics, then we might say that the latter will always entail a linguistic dimension. Specifically, ‘real’ political struggles (as Marx refers to them) will be inseparable from various creative acts of negation, insurrection and demystification carried out at the level of language. Such linguistic interventions will need to begin by formulating new strategies of counter-identification, or counter-interpellation, aimed at refusing, or re-appropriating, certain forms of discourse. The ‘good’ subject – the one who consents to assume the socially preferred image of the self – will therefore need to become a ‘bad’ subject – one who identifies herself with her own active refusal to identity with forms of the dominant discourse; a refusal marked by various forms of grammatical and discursive virtuosity. We are reminded, once again, that ‘words are also weapons, explosives or tranquilizers and poisons’.42

Notes

6 Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, ed. Mary Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 7 (AK 4: 393). Hereafter all references to this text will appear in the body of the essay using the standard method of citing passages from Kant’s work (except for the *Critique of Pure Reason*). AK 4: 393 says that the passage quoted is on page 393 of Volume 4 of the Standard German Academy edition (AK) of Kant’s writings.
21 Cited in Gayer, *Kant's 'Groundwork*', 12.
32 Karl Marx, ‘A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right: Introduction’, in *Early Political Writings*, 64.
British socialists who came of age during the Thatcher era may remember the opening lines of a satirical number performed in the early 1980s by the ‘alternative’ comedian Alexei Sayle: ‘It’s not class or ideology / Culture, creed or roots / The only thing that unites us / Is Dr Marten’s boots.’ Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, the English language has become the Dr Marten’s boots of political discourse on British national identity, security and social integration. The political class, the media and the public at large have united around a narrative that fosters increasing intolerance of the use of other languages, and increasing support for policies whose effect is to stigmatise and punish those who cannot or (allegedly) will not speak English. Here I consider how socialists might reframe the narrative, and why it is important to do so.¹

The Story So Far

In 2013 the annual British Social Attitudes (BSA) survey found that speaking English was considered to be an important part of being British by 95 per cent of respondents (in a sample of 3,000).² This was a striking finding, not only because the percentage was so high, but also because it had risen sharply since the previous decade, suggesting a definite shift in attitudes. In fact, that shift might better be described as a hardening of attitudes towards people who do not speak English. The years between 2001 and 2013 were a period of escalating political and popular concern about the status of English in Britain, of a kind that in many respects fits the template for what the sociologist Stanley Cohen dubbed ‘moral panic’.³ A problem was discovered and a ‘folk devil’ identified; the problem was amplified by the rhetoric of politicians and the media; the predictable result was increasing public anxiety and resentment, which was then mobilised by the authorities to justify various punitive measures.

The initial discovery of the problem occurred in the wake of two events that took place in 2001. One was local: during the summer, several northern English towns experienced civil disturbances sparked by tensions between the white and Asian communities (whose members were in competition for scarce resources, notably housing and jobs, in the economically depressed former mill-towns where they lived). The other was global, and its effects transformed the geopolitical landscape: the al-Qaeda attacks launched against several US targets on 11 September 2001.

¹ Key Words 14 (2016), pp. 69–81
The Labour government of the time responded to the local problem by ordering a review of what it called ‘community cohesion’. The report produced by the review body suggested that while respect for cultural differences was important, more emphasis needed to be put on shared national values: among the specific values they identified was acceptance of the English language. That suggestion was positively received by the Home Secretary David Blunkett. In his response to the 2001 disturbances he suggested that British Asians could help their children integrate into British society by using English at home. This caused some controversy and, as Roxy Harris would later observe, it was an odd point for him to emphasise, given that broadcast interviews with some of the young Asian men involved in the fighting had left no doubt that English was their native tongue: indeed, they spoke it with accents very similar to David Blunkett’s.

Harris’s own work with young British Asians in west London (or as he calls them, in a term that draws attention to the hybridity of their identity and culture, ‘Brasians’) suggests that this is typical of the rising generation. Many of his subjects had acquired a South Asian language as their mother-tongue in early childhood, but few had maintained it into adolescence: English was the language of the peer group and the Brasians’ use of other community languages tended to be very limited, in part because they had never acquired full adult proficiency in them. Despite the evidence that intergenerational language shift is taking place, however, politicians have continued to argue that the use of community languages among British Asians constitutes a barrier to integration.

The issue of integration took on a new urgency as the government turned its attention to the threat of terrorism after 9/11. In July 2005 the threat ceased to be hypothetical: more than fifty people were killed in the ‘7/7’ attacks on underground trains and a bus in London, and it soon became clear that those attacks had been perpetrated by ‘home-grown terrorists’, most of them British-born Muslims of Pakistani ancestry. Efforts to foster cohesion through the promotion of British values and the English language acquired a new focus on preventing ‘radicalisation’, the process that turned disaffected young British Muslims into extremists and potential terrorists. Again, it was not entirely clear what language had to do with this problem. There was no indication that the 7/7 bombers had known any language except English: the martyrdom videos some of them produced were in English and reports suggested they had been influenced by the preaching of the Arab-American Anwar al-Awlaki, whose greatest value to al-Qaeda lay in his ability to reach a global audience by harnessing the combined power of English and the internet.

In 2006 a new government department for ‘communities and local government’ was set up, with cohesion and integration as part of its remit.
It soon became (and has remained) an important locus for the promotion of English. By this time, however, the main focus of public concern had begun to shift away from the issue of social cohesion as that had originally been defined (i.e. as a matter of community relations in places where there were established minority ethnic populations), and towards the problems associated with what some considered to be excessive numbers of new immigrants entering the UK, especially from the Eastern European countries that had recently joined the EU. Increasingly, political rhetoric about ‘social integration’ became a coded way of talking about immigration, and in this coded discourse willingness to learn and use English became the clearest symbolic marker of the difference between ‘good’ migrants, who were economically productive and socially well-integrated, and ‘bad’ migrants, who were freeloaders, abusing the hospitality and consuming the resources of a society to which they had contributed nothing and to which they had no real desire to belong. The figure of the migrant, or the member of a minority community, who did not speak English or make any effort to learn it became the ‘folk devil’ in the unfolding moral panic.

Since this particular folk devil came in several guises – the freeloading Eastern European, the bogus asylum seeker from the middle East or Africa, the British Asian who voluntarily confined him- or herself to an ethnic ghetto – it was easy to get the impression that he or she was everywhere, making British people who did speak English feel like foreigners in their own country. By the beginning of the present decade the problem or threat this presented had become a staple theme in speeches made by politicians of all parties. In 2012 the Labour leader Ed Miliband promised (in a speech widely interpreted as an admission that his predecessors had ‘got it wrong’ on immigration) that the next Labour government’s strategy for social integration would ‘start with language’. In 2013, the Conservative Communities Secretary Eric Pickles expressed outrage about the recent census finding that 5 per cent of UK households did not have English as their main language, describing their failure to adopt the majority language as ‘frankly incomprehensible’ and assuring readers of the *Sun* that it would not be allowed to continue. In 2014, the UK Independence Party (UKIP) leader Nigel Farage made a speech whose most frequently quoted sound bite described an ‘awkward’ train journey through London during which he claimed to have heard no English until the train reached the outer suburbs.

The alleged problem of migrants’ failure to integrate by learning and using English has been addressed not only in politicians’ rhetoric, but also by a steady stream of policy interventions. Language requirements that did not previously exist have been put in place for non-EU citizens seeking to enter the UK on work or family visas. Since 2005, applicants for citizenship
or permanent residence have been required to pass a test that had to be taken in ‘a recognised British language’ (in practice, almost invariably English). Since languages can be learned, states that have language requirements for immigration and citizenship can argue that they are treating everyone equally: it is not like discriminating on the basis of nationality, race or religion. In practice, however, the new requirements have favoured certain nationalities and also, indirectly, ethnic groups. They give an advantage to applicants who are native English speakers – the highest pass rates in the citizenship test are achieved by nationals of majority English-speaking countries like Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the USA (most of whom will also be white) – while conversely they are particularly disadvantageous to poorer and less educated migrants from non-Anglophone countries (most of whom will not be white).

Speakers of other languages already resident in the UK have been targeted by policies intended to decrease reliance on community languages and increase the use of English. There has been a sustained attack on the provision of information and services in translation, which is said to constitute not only a burden on the taxpayer but also an obstacle to integration, depriving people of incentives to become proficient in the majority language. Eric Pickles’s remarks on the census, mentioned above, prefaced an announcement that funding for translation was to be cut – the latest in a series of cuts that had begun under the Labour government a decade earlier. Both Labour and the Conservatives promised further reductions in funding after the 2015 general election. This was not the only language-related measure to feature in the campaign. In his 2012 speech on social integration Ed Miliband announced that a Labour government would introduce a test of English language proficiency for public sector workers whose jobs required them to interact with members of the public, and require parents whose home language was not English to accept shared responsibility for their children’s acquisition of the language. For the Conservatives, Home Secretary Theresa May pledged to crack down on benefit claimants who refused to learn English by cutting their benefits, and floated the suggestion that health professionals might be given a legal duty to refer patients with poor English to language classes.

These proposals were evidently meant to make the parties look tough on the integration issue, and one might suspect that some of them would prove to be unworkable in practice (for instance, health professionals have neither the time nor the expertise to assess patients’ language-learning needs). But there is a more general problem with the assumption they are based on, that intervention is needed because of the presence in the UK of large and growing numbers of people who are unable to speak the majority language. That belief is doubtless shared by a significant proportion of the British public (especially if they rely on the media for their information, as I discuss below), but it is not
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supported by the best evidence to which politicians have access, namely the figures compiled by the Office for National Statistics (ONS) using data from the 2011 national census. In 2011 the census form, which everyone resident in the UK on the census date is legally required to complete, contained a section on language in which respondents were first asked to name the main language spoken in their household and then, if the language they named was not English, to indicate the level of their proficiency in English (whether they spoke it ‘very well’, ‘well’, ‘not well’ or ‘not at all’). The data collected for England and Wales showed that 92 per cent of residents (about 50 million people) reported English (or in Wales, Welsh) as their main household language; among the 8 per cent who used some other language at home (the most frequently reported other languages were Polish, Punjabi and Urdu), the great majority (79 per cent or 3.3 million) reported speaking English well or very well. The number who reported not speaking English at all was 138,000, around 0.3 per cent of the population. For a country with relatively high levels of immigration this is a very low figure. The census data do not rule out the possibility that the 0.3 per cent includes some people who have chosen to remain obdurately monolingual in their mother-tongues because they are uninterested in integrating or too lazy to make the effort. But they do make clear that such people cannot exist in the worryingly large numbers implied by recent discourse about the problem. (The ONS analysis also makes clear that people who know no English are concentrated in particular localities, notably the poorest London boroughs, while in many parts of the country their numbers are negligible.)

If we ask why there is such a mismatch between the perceived number of non-English speakers in the UK and the actual number, there is a clue in the way the census findings were reported by the media. Though the most significant finding was the one noted above – that 99.7 per cent of residents of England and Wales in 2011 did speak English and 98.4 per cent reported speaking it well, very well or natively – almost none of the reports that appeared in the media made that the main story. Many chose to focus instead on the large increase in the number of Polish speakers since 2001, or to draw attention to the finding that over a fifth of households in London reported a main language other than English – a much higher figure than in any other part of the country. It cannot be said that these editorial choices directly misrepresented the census findings, though arguably they were indirectly misleading. But as Mark Sebba notes in a detailed analysis of the way the census was reported, there was one key point on which the media clearly and repeatedly misrepresented the findings, by interpreting ‘English is not the main language in X per cent of households’ to mean ‘no one speaks English in X per cent of households’. In fact, the statistics make clear (and the ONS presentation of them explicitly
points out) that around four out of five people living in households where English is not the main language are bilingual: the fact that they converse in (for instance) Polish with partners and family members at home does not mean they cannot use English in other contexts, such as work or socialising with friends. Nevertheless, journalists and commentators continued to assert that worryingly large numbers of UK households contained no one able to speak the UK’s majority language.

An example of this misrepresentation, used by Sebba to illustrate the wider problem, occurred in an article by the BBC’s political editor Nick Robinson, which appeared on the BBC news website under the title ‘How has Immigration Changed Britain?’ Drawing on the 2011 census findings, Robinson asserted that in Peterborough, a small city in East Anglia which has experienced significant in-migration since 2001, ‘10% of households have no one at home who speaks English’. If that were true, it would arguably give cause for concern; but in fact it is a serious misreading (one that has still not been corrected two years later). It is true that 10 per cent of households in Peterborough reported that English was not the main language used at home, but Sebba points out that if that figure is set alongside the data on English proficiency, it is evident that the percentage of households in which no one speaks English at all cannot be higher than 1.9 per cent. In fact, it would only be as high as 1.9 per cent in the unlikely event that every individual non-English speaker in the city constituted a separate single-person household. Individual residents who reported having no proficiency in the language made up only 0.8 per cent of the total population of Peterborough – slightly fewer than one in a hundred people rather than the one in ten implied by Robinson’s article.

The question about English proficiency was included in the census for the first time in 2011, and what motivated its inclusion was the concern that large numbers of people were unable to speak English. Yet although the census findings suggested that the scale of that problem had been exaggerated, the original concern was reinforced, in the event, by inaccurate and sensationalised media reporting. This gave a new impetus to the competition among politicians to propose ever more draconian measures, as can be seen from their 2015 general election pledges. It was/is a vicious circle, and no political party – even if one looks outside the electoral mainstream – has made any serious attempt to break out of it. For the mainstream parties the dominant narrative has the advantage of being popular: the BSA survey cited above suggests that on the language question public opinion is virtually unanimous. Even people who do not favour stricter controls on immigration itself appear to agree that it is both reasonable and desirable to make entry to the UK, continued residence in the UK and access to the UK’s public services conditional on speaking English. For many people, moreover (including politicians like Nigel Farage
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and Eric Pickles), ‘speaking English’ appears to mean speaking only English, and forswearing the use of other languages even in casual conversations on a train or in your own home.

If one compares the rhetoric of Conservative and Labour politicians, it is apparent that the Conservative version of the narrative puts more emphasis on learning English as a duty the immigrant owes to the host community, while the Labour version puts more emphasis on the benefits of speaking English for the immigrant. I say ‘emphasis’ because both themes appear in the rhetoric of both parties: the difference is a matter of balance, and sometimes tone. In his ‘social integration’ speech, Ed Miliband made the point that being unable to speak the majority language of the UK not only restricted economic opportunities for migrant workers, it also rendered them vulnerable to exploitation by unscrupulous employers and landlords. This is as close to a socialist argument as any recent speech on the subject by a senior UK politician has come. But Miliband’s good intentions are arguably undermined by the overall framing of the issue in terms of ‘integration’ and ‘Britishness’, terms which presuppose that the ideal British society would essentially be monolingual and (with a few key exceptions such as religious observance) monocultural.

The problem with this is not only that it effectively condones discrimination and the demonisation of migrants. It also suggests a failure to grasp the bigger picture. The Left is in need of a different and better narrative than the ‘social integration’ one: even if at present a counter-narrative would be unlikely to make a major impact on mainstream electoral politics, it might at least prompt parties like Labour, which make some claim to be influenced by socialist values, to rethink their approach to language policy.

A Different Story

Mark Sebba suggests that the persistent misrepresentations found in media coverage of the census reflect, first and foremost, a lack of understanding of multilingualism among the monolingual English-speaking majority (Sebba, 17). Eric Pickles can only find it ‘frankly incomprehensible’ that 5 per cent of households do not have English as their main language because he does not appreciate that bilingual speakers’ use of their linguistic repertoire is influenced by context (they may use one language at home and another in the workplace, for instance), and even in a single context it will reflect other factors such as topic and interlocutor (a bilingual will not choose to speak English to an elderly relative in the same household who does not understand it well, but may speak it to a child when the topic is English homework). On its own, the fact that someone reports a language other than English as their
main household language says nothing about their competence in English, and politicians whose responsibilities include language policy would do well to educate themselves on that point. For the purposes of this discussion, however, I am most interested in critically examining the larger narrative that frames the display of ignorance to which Sebba draws attention. This narrative depends on two implicit assumptions that need to be challenged: first, that societal multilingualism is the temporary and socially disruptive effect of conditions which national governments could and should seek to change through measures promoting ‘integration’; and second, that there is some necessary and essential connection between speaking a particular language and subscribing to a particular set of values.

The first assumption is discussed in a thought-provoking article by Mary Louise Pratt about the case of the US, where popular movements and state laws promoting the exclusive use of English have a longer history than they do in England. Pratt argues that the dogmatic insistence on English monolingualism as both the ideal state of the US and in some sense its ‘natural’ state (though currently disrupted by the uncooperative behaviour of some migrants) displays a kind of perpetual bad faith. The phrase often used about the US – ‘a nation of immigrants’ – describes a state formed through settler colonialism, in which the creation of wealth depended from the beginning on two processes: the seizure of the land from its indigenous inhabitants and the importation of labour power from other parts of the world. The second of these processes has never stopped. Imported labour means imported languages: though the usual pattern is for each wave of incomers to shift to using English as its main or only language within two or three generations, it is always and necessarily succeeded by a new wave, making societal multilingualism a permanent structural condition. The people and the languages change over time (the demonised position occupied today by bilingual Spanish speakers was once occupied by German speakers), but multilingualism itself will persist for as long as the US grows its capitalist economy by importing labour.

It follows that complaints about migrants not speaking English are in one sense a red herring. If multilingualism is a permanent structural condition, reproduced by a continuous flow of new immigrants, then its existence and overall prevalence will not be affected by efforts to speed up language shift in any particular migrant group. How quickly or completely today’s migrants assimilate is absolutely irrelevant to the bigger picture. However, the conviction that multilingualism is only a temporary disruption caused by the uncooperative attitudes of these particular migrants (the claim is commonly heard that in the past, other groups of migrants ‘made the effort’ to assimilate) serves ideological purposes. As Pratt says:
Monolingualism in English is coded ... as the essential outward sign of loyalty; bi- or multilingualism becomes the outward sign of divided loyalty... This monolingual loyalty is the precondition of the right to equality. In its absence, discrimination ceases to be an outrage. (15)

Britain’s development as an industrial capitalist (and imperialist) power took a somewhat different path from that of the US, but in the current era of globalisation and neoliberalism the UK has become more similar to the US in both the extent of its dependence on imported labour and in its ideological stance on the specific issue of language and ‘integration’. Pratt’s analysis of the US case is strikingly applicable to the UK situation as described in the previous section – though one difference is that Britain does not have a long tradition of representing itself as a ‘nation of immigrants’ (even though in fact it is – the Anglo-Saxons were settler colonists), and the view of multilingualism as temporary and disruptive is paralleled in some sections of the majority population by a similar view of immigration itself. Right-wing anti-immigration parties like UKIP pander to the idea that the UK’s economic position could be maintained with little or even no immigration, but mainstream politicians know that this is unrealistic. Instead they deal with popular agitation for drastic reductions in immigrant numbers by promising more integration of migrants and punitive sanctions against those who fail to become integrated. In that case, as Pratt says, ‘discrimination ceases to be an outrage’. Denying people access to information in a language they understand, or refusing them welfare benefits on the grounds that they do not speak English well enough, are seen as reasonable and proportionate rather than self-evidently unjust.

Although the Labour Party has tried to tell a more positive story than the parties to the right of it about the economic contribution made by migrants, it has not opposed discriminatory measures like the ones just mentioned. In government it pursued the same policies (it began the attack on translation, for instance), and in opposition it made every effort to appear as tough as, or even tougher than, the Conservative-led coalition government. Miliband’s 2012 social integration speech emphasised this toughness, while also presenting the policies he proposed to introduce as being in immigrants’ own best interests. This is a profoundly un-socialist argument. Socialists should not support unequal treatment on the basis of language proficiency. They should recognise that multilingualism is a structural condition, a consequence of adopting certain economic policies (albeit, for Labour, policies not made under conditions of their own choosing), and that it is unjust to stigmatise or penalise migrants for the position they occupy within an already unjust economic system.

That is not to dismiss Miliband’s argument that learning English benefits migrants. As the 2011 census showed, most of those who come to Britain have
learned it, and in many cases they will have known at least some English before they came. In all the political rhetoric about migrants’ proficiency in English, it is ironic that no one ever mentions the possibility that their pre-existing knowledge of the world’s most widely-taught second/foreign language is one of the ‘pull factors’ which make the UK an attractive destination – just like Miliband, they reason that they will be better equipped to work in a country where they have some proficiency in the language. For the smaller number whose English is limited or non-existent, however, it is of course important they should have the opportunity to learn. Socialists should support the principle of making language teaching available and accessible to all those who need and want it.

However, the socialist argument for this is not the one most often heard now: that instruction in English will both display and help to inculcate respect for British values. Mary Louise Pratt offers a more radical argument for the value of superordinate languages to subordinated groups in multilingual societies:

Where there is multilingualism, there will also be lingua francas, shared second languages that enable communication across linguistic difference. Where there is empire, the imperial power quickly ceases to own the imperial language, as English stopped belonging to England, and Spanish to Spain. Imperial languages tend to become the lingua francas of the dominated, through which, among other things, they demand justice or emplot the demise of empire. (27)

This potential has been harnessed by socialists in the past. In her history of twentieth-century American women’s movements, for instance, the historian Annelise Orleck mentions that trades unions in the first half of the century sponsored classes in which immigrant workers of many nationalities learned English alongside the techniques of labour organising and political campaigning. The purpose was not to integrate workers into the system that exploited them, but to enable them to challenge that exploitation more effectively.

Pratt’s point is relevant to the case of contemporary Britain in another way. Current integration policies often seem to be based on the assumption that there is some necessary connection between the language(s) someone speaks and the values or belief systems they subscribe to. Above I cited two occasions (the civil disturbances in 2001 and the London bombings in 2005) when the issue of ‘not speaking English’ was raised in commentary on the problem of the disaffected young British Muslim who engages in rioting or terrorism, even though in both cases the British Muslims concerned were indisputably native
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speakers of English. In the case of the 7/7 bombers particularly, it was as though commentators could not reconcile the Britishness of their speech with the un- and anti-Britishness of their beliefs and their actions.

Similarly, the applied linguist Sohail Karmani notes that after 9/11 the US initiated a policy of funding the teaching of English to both primary and secondary school pupils in countries such as Pakistan, which were seen as centres for the radicalisation of future terrorists, through educational aid packages worth millions of dollars. This policy was intended to assist in de-Islamicising the education system and fostering more positive attitudes to the West. In assuming that English teaching would have those effects, though, the policymakers overlooked Pratt’s point about ‘lingua francas of the dominated’: they are not simply vehicles for the ideologies of the imperial power, but may equally serve as resources for those who wish to ‘emplot the demise of empire’. Karmani points out that global terrorism, no less than global trade, is facilitated by global languages – the 9/11 hijackers could not have executed their plan if they had not had some knowledge of English. 18

As I have argued in more detail elsewhere, when language is presented as a problem in political discourse it is usually serving as a proxy for some other problem which people prefer not to broach directly. 19 In this case, the issue of language is being raised in response to perceived threats that can be related to the economic and geopolitical upheavals of the period since the end of the Cold War: the steady shift of power and economic control away from national governments, the increased dependence of countries like Britain on importing labour to maintain their economic position, the growth in ethnic and cultural diversity entailed by that dependence (and also by associated political developments such as the enlargement of the EU with its open labour market) and the insecurities which are one by-product of post-Cold War global conflict and competition. These issues need to be talked about directly, not buried under a pile of platitudes about integration, ‘British values’ and the English language. Conversely, where language actually is a legitimate object of discussion and policymaking it should be discussed on its own terms rather than made into a symbol or proxy for other issues, and the discussion should be based on evidence rather than prejudice (it would be an advance on the current situation, for instance, if it were acknowledged that 99.7 per cent of the population of England and Wales already speaks English, and that English is the main language used in 92 per cent of households). The scapegoating of people who do not speak English well should cease, along with the endless competition between political parties, including the one that claims to represent Britain’s socialist tradition, to find new ways of stigmatising and punishing them. For socialists there can be no linguistic preconditions for equality, no form of discrimination that is not an affront to our principles. There can also
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be no advantage in denying that, in Mary Louise Pratt’s words (used about the US, but also applicable to Britain, and particularly to those parts of it, like London, where the effects of ongoing change are at present most visible): ‘alongside a powerful lingua franca, multilingualism is a permanent, systemic aspect of how this society puts itself together’ (Pratt, 28).

Notes

1 This article was written several months before the referendum in which the UK voted to leave the EU. That decision may have implications for future language policy, but at this stage any discussion of them would be purely speculative. The article has therefore been published without alteration.


9 English is the majority language of the UK but it does not have the legal status of the UK’s national or official language. Sensitivity on this point reflects the fact that the UK is a union of four historic nations, in three of which English was a colonial imposition, displacing (though not completely extirpating, despite the colonisers’ best efforts) an indigenous Celtic language. Welsh and Gaelic predated English in the British Isles (English was the language of Germanic migrants who arrived in the early middle ages), and they have ‘recognised’ status in the nations where they are used. Citizenship applicants in those nations are entitled to take the test in either English or Welsh/Gaelic. However, the number of applicants who have chosen to take it in a language other than English since 2005 is so small that the Home Office does not supply figures.


Census data on language are not unproblematic: in this case one obvious potential problem is that people may have over- or underestimated their proficiency in English. It is also possible that the true number of non-English speakers has been underestimated because certain groups who are particularly likely to lack proficiency in English are also particularly likely not to have been counted in the census at all (for example undocumented migrants). However, I will take it that the 2011 census data are a reasonable approximation of the relevant facts, and certainly more reliable than anecdotal observations made by politicians and media pundits. All figures cited are taken from the ONS website: it should be noted that they are for England and Wales rather than the whole UK. See http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/rel/census/2011-census-analysis/language-in-england-and-wales-2011/sty-language-in-england-and-wales.html (accessed 29 March 2015).


I looked at the current policy statements of several parties to the left of Labour, and found no specific discussion of language policy at all, though the UK Green Party does propose that immigration and citizenship requirements be reformed to make them less discriminatory, which might be taken to entail the abolition of the current language qualifications.


Annelise Orleck, Rethinking American Women’s Activism (New York: Routledge, 2015).


Global English and Marx’s ‘General Intellect’
Peter Ives

Introduction

In 1977 Raymond Williams wrote that

Marxism has contributed very little to thinking about language itself. The result has been either that limited and underdeveloped versions of language as a ‘reflection’ of ‘reality’ have been taken for granted, or that propositions about language, developed within or in the forms of other and often antagonistic systems of thought, have been synthesised with Marxist propositions about other kinds of activity, in ways which are not only ultimately untenable but, in our own time, radically limiting to the strength of the social propositions.1

At first blush, it may seem that since this assessment there have been influential contributions by Marxists to thinking about language. These would certainly include Eric Hobsbawm’s analysis of the role of language and language standardisation within the rise of nationalism and the nation-state, and Benedict Anderson’s frequently invoked Imagined Communities, which draws heavily on Walter Benjamin’s distinctions between messianic and modern time.2 However, the global transformations in capitalism and language occurring since the 1970s demand that Marxists pay much closer attention to language, specifically the rise of ‘global English’. The massive increase in the use of English cuts across the imbrications between Marxist concerns with nation and state, and the current analyses of the neoliberal state within global capitalism with its emphasis on the internationalisation of commodity production and exchange, migration and labour processes and the increase in linguistic, information laden commodities. I will argue that whereas earlier analyses consider the relations of specific languages, paying heed to the important processes of the standardisation of national languages and resistances against them, more recent work leaves us with an overly abstract conception of language. By making such abstractions more concrete, I hope to show why it is important within Marxist analyses of cognitive capitalism whether ‘language’ refers to multilingualism (or an ecology of languages) or to global English. If the latter, we then also need to raise questions concerning varieties of English and tensions among them.

The initial proposition that we need to ground political analyses of language dynamics, especially the rise of global English, within the economic contexts of
global capitalism has been addressed in differing ways by numerous important Marxist works. These include texts by David Block, John Gray, Marnie Holborow, Tony Crowley, Jeff Bale and others, which insist on the political, economic and social contexts of language use and change within the historical vicissitudes of global capitalism. However, there remains much untheorised space between standardised national languages, which belong in the ambit of nation-building and state regulatory practices, and the massive spread of English across the globe supposedly stemming from a vaguely conceived process of globalisation. This article hopes to take a first step towards a discussion of these larger issues. It focuses on revealing the centrality of language in current discussions of the ‘general intellect’ as one example of the wider literature on immaterial labour and cognitive capitalism. While not fully endorsing either the articulation of the ‘general intellect’ given by Paolo Virno and Carlo Vercellone, or their conception of ‘immaterial labour’, I wish to use their work to begin a more intimate analysis of the politics of global English and the developments of global capitalism. In relation to the pressing political issues caused by the spread of global English, I argue for bringing together the often separate economic analyses of post-Fordist production and the political analyses of the neoliberal hegemony. I propose that until such a link is made between the rise of global English and the economic and political dynamics of global capitalism, Marxists will remain constrained within the limits indicated by Williams – either implicitly accepting a theory of language as merely reflecting ‘reality’ or implicitly synthesising propositions about the rise of global English from antagonistic forms of thought, in this case neoliberalism.

Virno’s ‘General Intellect’

Much has been written about Marx’s few pages in the Grundrisse concerning the ‘general intellect’. Paolo Virno, Carlo Vercellone, Maurizio Lazzarato and others have used it as a key concept by which to theorise the developments of ‘late capitalism’ that non-Marxists have dubbed the ‘knowledge economy’, the ‘information age’, and such, in order to capture the massive changes associated with the advent of the internet and other advances, including ever cheaper and more efficient transportation and the like. In their influential readings, Virno and Vercellone emphasise that Marx provides a specific articulation of the formal subsumption of labour to capital as a more specific process whereby ‘an automatic system of machinery’ absorbs what had been the skill and knowledge located within labourers themselves. In this way, Marx describes how science and knowledge become ‘fixed capital’, how they are absorbed by, and exist within, machinery and the production process itself.
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In describing how the advent of the ‘machine’ is a move away from the ‘merely formal modification’ of the means of labour, Marx describes how the change from ‘formal’ to ‘active’ or ‘real’ subsumption of labour to capital occurs. It is, he argues, ‘not as with the instrument, which the worker animates and makes into his organ with his skill and strength, and whose handling therefore depends on his virtuosity. Rather, it is the machine which possesses skill and strength in place of the worker, is itself the virtuoso, with a soul of its own in the mechanical laws acting through it’. Key to this analysis is Marx’s assertion of a change in the role and character of knowledge. He describes this shift by which ‘the accumulation of knowledge and of skill, of the general productive forces of the social brain, is thus absorbed into capital, as opposed to labour, and hence appears as an attribute of capital, and more specifically of fixed capital, in so far as it enters into the production process as a means of production proper’ (694). It follows that from the perspective of capital, this is viewed as part of ‘general progress’ whereby ‘capital appropriates [this accumulation of knowledge leading to the growth of the productive force of capital] free of charge’ (694–5). In this regard, the role of state funded and directed education policy is crucial both in understanding developments in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, but also in the analysis of global English today.

Virno and Vercellone argue that Marx’s account is necessary for an analysis of the post-Fordist, cognitive capitalism of the late twentieth century and the present. I will summarise their argument to highlight the extent to which they develop Marx’s insights into how knowledge is ‘socialised’ and converted into ‘fixed capital’ through mechanisation, by shifting the focus away from mechanical automation and towards the immaterial realm of knowledge, science and especially language. Indeed, I would argue that language is paramount. Because although the temptation is to see language in an abstract metaphorical manner, a closer reading shows that a consideration of actual languages is required both by the conceptual development of Virno’s analysis and the historical context of global capitalism and the spread of global English. Conceptually, what the development of a ‘general intellect’ in Virno’s sense requires is mutual communication, for which either a regime of multilingualism or a single common language, could suffice. Yet in actuality we are witnessing a political project to develop the ‘general intellect’ through global English with some parallels (and many differences) to the projects of creating national standardised languages through mandatory education systems. But just as there always was, and continues to be, resistance to national language projects, there are also forms of resistance to the imposition of English in non-anglophone countries, for example the protests of over 8,000 that turned violent in Kuala Lumpur in 2009 against the policy of teaching maths and science in English,
after which the government reversed their education policy. In addition to which, the advocates of multilingualism often see their cause in competition with the hegemony of English.

As we shall see, a focus on Marx’s ‘general intellect’ involves a non-teleological approach to the increase in the use of English by non-native speakers, particularly given that multilingualism can, does and perhaps will facilitate the generalisation of the intellect within global capitalism. But within state education practices across the globe in the era of neoliberalism, policies fostering global English are much more dominant, at least in the present phase of neoliberal governance, than support for more general multilingualism. But without a specific focus on language, the economic dynamics of global capitalism, and thus what is happening to us as labourers and consumers, will remain abstracted from the role and tensions within the political realm of state activity concerning education, language policy and our roles as subjects and citizens.

It is for this reason that Virno criticises Marx because he ‘neglects the way in which the general intellect manifests itself as living labour’. Citing innovations on the factory floors of Fiat in Melfi in the early 1990s, Virno argues that:

rather than being exhausted by the system of machinery, the relation between knowledge and production is articulated through the linguistic cooperation of men and women and through their concrete acting in concert. In post-Fordism, conceptual constellations and logical schemata that cannot be reduced to fixed capital play a decisive role, since they are inseparable from the interaction of a plurality of living subjects. The ‘general intellect’ comprises formal and informal knowledge, imagination, ethical inclinations, mentalities and ‘language games’.

While the specific language in this Fiat factory was Italian (of a sort), given that it is located in southern Italy between Naples and Bari, such linguistic cooperation is only made possible by the national standardisation of Italian that scarcely existed prior to the late nineteenth and into the twentieth century. Moreover, with workers recruited from throughout Italy, some of whom were trained in Turin, the work in the factory undoubtedly involved negotiations among regional variations of Italian. And in the larger picture, Fiat is a multinational company with an international supply chain and many production plants located in South America, South Africa and throughout Europe, thus linguistic cooperation does not depend on monolingualism in Italian. As this example shows, therefore, approaching language as a central feature of the ‘general intellect’ can provide useful insights for understanding both general intellect and the rise of global English as an alternative to multilingualism.
In his criticism of Marx, Virno develops his concept of the ‘general intellect’ so that language becomes central, even the epitome of the ‘general intellect’ today. And it is also this centrality of language that places the ‘real’ subsumption of labour to capital in a more dialectical set of relationships, containing the potential for ‘a radically new form of democracy, a public space antithetical to the one anchored in the state and its “monopoly on political decisions”’(8). Indeed Virno argues that Marx’s ‘general intellect’ needs to be placed in the collective tradition of Rousseau’s ‘general will’ and Aristotle’s ‘nous poietikos’, even invoking Hannah Arendt and the public intellect (4, 7). In the context of the spread of ‘global English’, theorising the role of language becomes more significant.

Serhat Koloğlugil has highlighted that Virno ‘finds an analogy not in scientific knowledge but in language’ and this, according to Koloğlugil, ‘helps us think about general intellect outside the political economy of industrial capitalism based on material production’ and points towards a ‘postindustrial Marxism’. This leads Koloğlugil to focus on the potentialities of the ‘sharing economy’ of the internet that can occur ‘outside the direct control of capital’, but which capital still attempts to exploit and profit from. In making this perhaps overly optimistic argument, Koloğlugil discusses what he labels Virno’s ‘language analogy’. But Virno is not making an ‘analogy’ in the sense of a comparison of two different topics. On the contrary, Virno is talking about language literally becoming a factor of production. Nevertheless, Koloğlugil is correct in showing how language is central to Virno’s reading of Marx’s ‘general intellect’ and that the borders between capital control and exploitation are indeed shifting within late capitalism.

Virno argues that today the issue is not ‘the scientific erudition of the individual labourer’ but the more generic ‘faculty of language, the disposition to learn, memory, the capacity to abstract and relate, and the inclination towards self-reflexivity’. He goes even further by placing language at the centre of his elaboration of the ‘general intellect’: ‘like the intellect and memory, language is the most common and least “specialised” thing we can conceive of. A good example of mass intellectuality is the simple speaker, not the scientist’ (Virno, ‘General Intellect’, 6). But it would be a mistake to interpret ‘most common and least “specialised”’ as indicating some distinction between language-in-general and particular languages. For while Marx’s argument about the ‘general intellect’ is that it is generalised, collective and potentially social, his point is that the movement from ‘formal’ to ‘actual’ subsumption of labour to capital is not an abstract generalisation. Rather it is the transformation of the conditions of the new processes of production. Virno’s emphasis on language, in other words, does not bring us back to speculations about the human potential to
use language. Rather, the point is that both theoretically and historically, post-Fordist production processes entail a shift in the use of actual languages.

Glyn Williams claims that the workforce of multinational corporations, including those like Fiat, is responsible for about two-thirds of world trade. He also argues that given the mobility of both the workforce and the companies themselves, there is a requirement for ‘knowledge of one or other of a limited number of lingue franche. English predominates in this respect’. The concrete implication here is that what Virno calls ‘simple speakers’ are not just language users in the general sense, but users of a specific language or set of languages within a language regime that allows them to communicate with each other creatively and to be innovative within the labour processes. This is especially true of the producers of ‘linguistic commodities’ such as computer programmes, video games, apps, call-centre work, tourism, movies, or other effective-emotional work central to cognitive capitalism. If language is to be understood as more than just a skill, it is precisely its collective character, the creativity it enables, that is central. And this collective character demands that we be clear about whether we are discussing one common language, such as ‘global English,’ or a set of languages and translation processes among them.

As we shall see, it is not coincidental that creativity features so prominently in both discussions of the ‘knowledge economy’ and ‘cognitive capitalism’ as well as discussions of global English. But it is important to note that in the global context we are talking about shared languages, most commonly English, rather than an abstract notion of language use in general. Moreover, it is clear that in the use of the notion of the ‘general intellect’ we have a critical tool against the liberal or neoliberal argument about a global lingua franca being a ‘common good’. And one clear advantage of this Marxist rendition is that this prerequisite for much global capitalist production remains dialectical in character. It is not an external condition or skill but the actual result of real human beings using their time, energy, creativity and labour in order to learn English (even if not entirely by free choice or under conditions of their own choosing as part of mandatory or heavily incentivised education systems).

My aim here is not to access the adequacy of Virno’s and Vercellone’s readings of the Grundrisse, or the empirical applicability of their analyses of the current global capitalist production processes, although I will comment on both below. Rather, I want to focus on the way in which language becomes central to such analyses. Because Virno is not using language as an analogy, instead he poses the real question of whether ‘global English’ is best understood as part of the ‘general intellect’, and thus as one of the ways in which capitalism is subsuming living labour, transposing it from individual workers and speakers to the general knowledge required for contemporary commodity production within global capitalism. To the extent that this is the case, we can move away
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from the type of analysis of ‘linguistic imperialism’, as a part of a more general critique of cultural imperialism directed by specific states, that we find in Robert Phillipson’s work. For instead of seeing the spread of English as primarily the result of the hegemony initially of Britain and then the US, we shift to a model where states are encouraged and constrained in various differing ways to use educational resources traditionally focused on general education and the propagation of national standard languages (to foster citizenship, identity, patriotism and so-called social integration), to transform their school systems to the instruction in English. Such countries are confronted with complex issues such as which ‘standard’ English is to be taught (no longer simply a choice between British or American English, but increasingly involving questions around the standardisation of non-native English varieties), whether English is to be taught as a subject or a medium in which other subjects are taught (Content and Language Integrated Learning), and how such decisions complicate questions of national and ethnic identity.

Placing the advent of global English in the context of Marxist debates on the ‘general intellect’ performs another important connection with debates on ‘global English’, one that concerns ‘ownership’ of a language and a questioning of the assumption that it is native speakers who have authority over correct and proper speech. Again, it is no accident that this is one of the major debates raging in critical language scholarship, from sociolinguistics and applied linguistics through education studies and literature. Braj Kachru has launched a clear critique of the hegemony of British and American prestige English spawning the ‘World Englishes’ paradigm to pluralise Englishes, and shows how not only are new varieties of English as worthy and rich as others, but that, for example, different versions of ‘Asian Englishes’ contain distinct Asian values and elements of identity that resist the hegemony of standard varieties of native English (Kachru, Asian Englishes). But Alastair Pennycook and Suresh Canagarajah have criticised the approach of Kachru and his followers, arguing that they have succeeded only in pluralising an overly centralised view of standardised languages, one that remains top-down and does not go nearly far enough in rethinking language practice.

Perhaps the most simplified version of this concern over the ownership of English and the contradictions and tensions it entails is seen in David Graddol’s English Next, commissioned by the British Council. In his Foreword to that work, Lord Neil Kinnock notes that ‘[t]he English language teaching sector directly earns nearly £1.3 billion for the UK in invisible exports and our other education related exports earn up to £10 billion a year more’. And Graddol predicts that the dominance of English worldwide will be to the disadvantage of both Britain and monoglot English speakers as English spreads and is taught less and less by formal instruction and increasingly through informal
means. In other words, as the varieties of English proliferate, Britain will lose its monopolistic prestige derived from its former ownership of the language;\textsuperscript{22} this is what François Grin has labelled the ‘banalisation of English’.\textsuperscript{23} But while Graddol seems to underestimate the role of non-anglophone countries’ education policies in spreading English, his analysis speaks to the interplay between education and global capitalism, supporting the reading of English as a substantive element of the developing ‘general intellect’.

We might see this debate as one in which Kachru’s shifting of the question of who ‘owns’ English and who gets to decide what version of it has ‘prestige’ and ‘dominance’ is set against the calls by Pennycook and Canagarajah, heavily influenced by post-structuralist theory, for an undermining of the very concept of ownership and with it the notion of a bounded language as a system (in favour of a model of language as an action and a practice). But neither of these antagonists sufficiently address the role of global English within the production, exchange and consumption of commodities (especially linguistic ones) and its connection to the role of states. There is clearly not space here to expand on such complex issues, but hopefully by raising the issue of the ‘general intellect’, I have indicated some ways in which these debates ignore the context of the developments of global capitalism when they analyse global English.

Moreover, whereas other Marxist engagements with language have remained substantially confined to questions of nationalism and the state (e.g. Hobsbawm, Anderson), Virno and Vercellone may help bridge the gap between language standardisation as the terrain of nation-building and politics more narrowly defined, and the economic realities of global capitalism. Specifically, the way in which the spread of English across the globe is presented as an economic necessity due to the so-called needs or ostensible requirements of global capitalism. Nonetheless, despite their strengths, we have to be cautious in utilising Virno and Vercellone’s analyses. For one of the disadvantages of following Virno and Vercellone as I have done is that they understand the role of language in the capitalist production process as a radically new, post-modern, post-industrial phenomenon, in ways that are questionable both in terms of interpreting Marx, but more importantly on historical grounds. Despite such questions, there is still something to be gained from thinking through ‘global English’ with Marx’s concept of the ‘general intellect’.

The New ‘Linguistic Turn’ in Marx’s ‘General Intellect’?

I have suggested a parallel between Virno’s and Vercellone’s turn towards the concept of language within Marx’s conceptualisation of the ‘general
intellect’ (and in Virno’s case away from specialised scientific and technological knowledge) and global educational trends since the second half of the twentieth century. Marx himself does not show specific interest in language per se, but as Raymond Williams argues, ‘signification, the social creation of meanings through the use of formal signs, is then a practical material activity; it is indeed, literally, a means of production’ (Williams, 38). Williams in fact criticises Marxism for developing an overly narrow and abstract concept of ‘labour’ which means that the intimate relationships between labour and language are denied. Indeed one of the reasons why Maurizio Lazzarato developed the concept of ‘immaterial labour’ was to capture the increase within capitalism of activity that had not been considered as ‘work’; that is ‘activities involved in defining and fixing cultural and artistic standards, fashions, tastes, consumer norms, and more strategically, public opinion’. Of course, the concept of ‘immaterial labour’ fits with Virno’s and Vercellone’s discussion of cognitive capitalism and the general intellect. But as Wolf Fritz Haug has shown, Marx did consider the concept of ‘immaterial labour’, and remained quite sceptical of it. Haug is also convincingly critical of the concept of ‘immaterial labour’ both on theoretical grounds and due to its connection to the neoliberal discourse that dematerialises the economy in order to obscure material labour and labour as such.

As Kees Van Der Pijl has observed, Marx notes in the Grundrisse that it is the community itself that ‘appears as the first great force of production’. This reinforces Williams’ point that the concept of ‘force of production’ needs to be understood broadly and that we should not follow Marx’s own distinction between the productive piano maker and the unproductive piano player (Williams, 90–3). Given that Marx, in the Grundrisse and elsewhere, sees language as a defining feature of a community (Marx, 490–5), it is difficult to accept Virno and Vercellone’s trajectory from nineteenth-century industrial capitalism based on material labour, to late twentieth-century, post-Fordist, post-industrial, cognitive capitalism based on immaterial labour where the development of the ‘general intellect’ depends on an increase in the linguistic forms of knowledge as a precondition of capitalist production. That is not to say the role of language in general – as part of production processes as well as aspects of important commodities – has not been transformed systematically. Nor is it to deny that there have been systemic trends concerning specific languages, especially English. But these points do not detract from the role of language standardisation and projects of nation-building in the nineteenth century and their important relations with capitalism. It also seems questionable whether indeed the real subsumption of labour to capital, including the double-edged push to learn English, is directly related to a direct transition to communism or radically new configurations of capital and labour, but rather
to transformations of already existing dynamics between both state strategies and national languages and newer state strategies involving ‘international’ languages. In essence then, the significance of Virno’s and Vercellone’s development of Marx’s ‘general intellect’ is not tied to their periodisation of capitalism and its latest phase, but to a broadening of Marx’s conception of ‘forces of production’ to include the community, and then by extension to language and specific languages. The transformations at hand then have more to do with the internationalisation of the workforce, production processes and the exchange and consumption circuits than any shift from an earlier capitalist phase of predominantly material production where language was not involved to a new phase of immaterial labour where language is central. In this re-working, the ‘general intellect’ becomes a conceptual tool to grapple with our current phase of neoliberal governance and post-Fordist production, exchange and consumption.

Education and the General Intellect

Despite the weaknesses in Virno’s and Vercellone’s readings of Marx’s ‘general intellect’, they importantly focus on the complex process of ‘real’ subsumption of labour to capital and thus highlight the location of the conflictual processes that lead ‘to the socialisation, on the part of the state, of certain costs of the reproduction of labour-power’, which include the rise of the welfare state as well as the rise of mass education.27 Thus Vercellone draws from Capital and Theories of Surplus-Value to provide a reading of the ‘general intellect’ that sees the partial democratisation of compulsory public elementary education as both a ‘concession wrung from capital’ and a socialisation of the costs of the reproduction of labour-power essential for wage-labourers ‘to accumulate a “technical, theoretical and practical” knowledge adequate to the level attained by the capitalist development of the social and technical division of labour and, at the same time, to undertake its supersession’ (Vercellone, 27). There is insufficient space here to engage with the historical complexities of the establishment of elementary public education and the imposition of standardised languages,28 but it is clear that the link between the economic requirements of an industrialised workforce were connected to the political projects of citizenship and patriotism.

One key issue then, when neoliberalism is dismantling the welfare state, is to resist any non-dialectical analyses whereby the state, its power and national projects involving language instruction become irrelevant. As noted above, even scholars of English like David Graddol who are attuned to educational issues, seem to underestimate the continued, active role that countries such
as China, Mexico and Colombia are playing in teaching English. Evidently, the origin of such policies is an important and complex issue, but it is an open question whether the teaching of English can be seen as a ‘concession wrung from capital’ (indeed this may not even be accurate in relation to the nineteenth-century projects of general mandatory education). In fact, critical language scholars are becoming ever more suspicious of contentions that English is a vehicle of social and economic mobility.\(^{29}\) They have, for example, cast significant suspicion over the claim that knowledge of English actually has significant positive impact on the lives of those who learn it. Paul Bruthiaux has described it as an ‘outlandish irrelevance’ and argued that the use of such public resources to alleviate poverty is ‘misguided and wasteful’ (31). And Luisa Martín Rojo’s micro-level ethnographic research in Spain has shown the ways in which the introduction of English in schools specifically aimed at well-performing migrant children is ‘reinforcing social stratification and producing a social selection process’ that she labels ‘decapitalisation’.\(^{30}\)

If we view language as central to the ‘general intellect’ and the global dynamics of late capitalism, we can begin to understand how state policy is framed in a particular way, with particular interests, in order to foster both a global workforce and a hierarchical system of class markers to control populations of migrant workers. This key point enables us to theoretically connect the historical role of language standardisation and education in the nation-building projects of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries with the recent global developments in the teaching of English across the globe in countries where English has no official standing or historical relation to the state or nation. For whereas many liberal and mainstream accounts of the rise of global English depict it as some sort of automatic process, or the result of some rational-choice type incentives to increase one’s communicative potential,\(^{31}\) there has been much less attention paid to language education policy. While we lack systemic analysis at the macro-level, it seems clear that many countries are playing very active roles in the advent of global English, and for similar reasons of ‘modernisation’, ‘development’ and ‘progress’ that accompanied the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century language standardisation projects at the core of mandatory national education.

For example, in 2009 Mexico launched an ambitious programme aiming to have all 12 million public education students learning English by 2015, with the goal of having grade 9 graduates achieving the B1 level of the Common European Framework (where A1 is beginner, C2 is fluency, and B1 is an ‘independent user’ understanding main points of conversation encountered in work, leisure, travelling or school).\(^{32}\) Citing UNESCO reports and the ‘new communicative challenges of a globalised world’, policy documents assert that Mexican success requires multilingualism. And yet, in practice it is not that a
set of major languages is being taught in Mexican schools, rather the focus is on bolstering English in the national curriculum. Thus, by analogy with Marx’s classic analysis of how the bourgeois particular standard is presented as universal, the use of one particular language, English, is presented as the achievement of multilingualism. Even more ambitious rhetoric is being used in the Colombian government’s National Bilingual Program 2004–19, the goal of which is to make Colombian high school graduates bilingual by 2019 ‘in accordance with international standards’. Again, ‘bilingualism’ is the ostensible goal, but the real project is the teaching of English.

China is perhaps the key case in relation to the quantitative spread of English across the globe, for as Guangwei Hu states, ‘in the last quarter century, English language education has been a subject of paramount importance in China, and proficiency in English has been widely regarded as a national as well as a personal asset’. Hu traces the history of changing notions of English language education, from ideological positions to the emphasis on facilitating economic development and modernisation. Thus, beginning with Deng Xiaoping’s drive for ‘modernisation’ in the 1970s, Hu traces a trajectory through to the policies of 2001 that marked a significant expansion of English in the national curriculum, and places these developments in the context of China joining the World Trade Organisation and its success in the bid for the 2008 Olympics. Against assessments that English language teaching in secondary schools had not been sufficiently successful (10–11), the new emphasis on English teaching means that ‘English is firmly established as a core subject in secondary schools nationwide and in the primary curriculums in developed regions’ (17). Thus while we should be cautious in making broad generalisations and assumptions, in this case at least it is clear that there is a significant intersection between the state-logic of ‘modernising’ its citizenship through mass education systems and the supposed requirements of global capitalism.

Despite such clear evidence of massive state involvement and investment in the spread of English across the globe, the dominant explanation of the quadrupling of the number of English users from about 250 million in the middle of the twentieth century to estimates closer to two billion today has focused on the choices of individuals to learn English and/or technological economic determinism. While much more needs to be said about the specific examples I have cited and the wider phenomena that they represent, my central point is relatively modest. It is that when it is claimed that English is inevitably spreading around the globe as the result of individual choices, in reality many of the mechanisms of its expansion resemble closely the ways in which the standardised, national languages were formed and disseminated during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. But whereas Hobsbawn, Anderson
and others detail the importance of language to questions of national identity, and the imagining of community and nation-building in these earlier linguistic projects, the contemporary spread of English is taking place in very different global economic contexts.

In many places English has become a prerequisite for higher education and an aspect of the general knowledge expected of average citizens. Thus it seems reasonable to draw parallels between the rationale for teaching English in Mexico, Colombia, China and many other countries (‘modernisation’, ‘development’ and economic success), with those of national language education projects of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Of course the obvious factor differentiating the two historical projects is the earlier focus on unifying the nation and national identity. And this highlights the need for a closer look at the role of language in general, versus the question of which particular languages might be pivotal for understanding the latest phases of capitalism. But evidently, if the power of Marx’s analysis involves the ways in which capitalism structures our daily lives, our senses of who we are, how we communicate and what communities we belong to, the question of what languages we learn and use, and under what circumstances, is clearly central.

To the extent that English language education is deemed by policymakers around the world to be a core component of the reproduction of the capitalist worker in the twenty-first century, living labour and human creativity is being subsumed to the requirements of cognitive capitalism. The rhetorics of modernisation, development and progress have been dusted off from the nineteenth-century projects of teaching and propagating national standardised languages and are now being applied to the political project of global English.

Conclusion

How we understand one of the most significant changes in societies around the world in the last half-century, the use and teaching of some variation of English, is of significant political importance. The very promise that the advocates of global capitalism attach to it and the confidence with which liberals – even of the ‘left’, progressive and social-democratic stripes – feel any disadvantages and inequalities can be ameliorated, should draw Marxists’ attention to the advent of ‘global English’. I have written substantially elsewhere about how Antonio Gramsci’s Marxist approach to language has much to offer contemporary political understandings of this phenomenon. But if Marxism is going to engage with and change the dominant discourse of the spread of English, we will have to use all the theoretical resources available, and despite some limitations, Marx’s conception of the ‘general intellect’, as resurrected by
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Paolo Virno and Carlo Vercellone, can help us grapple with the language as a complex terrain of struggle, increasingly central to the production, culture and dominance of, and resistance to, global capitalism.

Notes

5 Karl Marx, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy*, trans. Martin Nicolaus (Middlesex: Pelican, 1973), 692–3. While beyond the scope of this essay, the question of creativity within language is at the centre of recent analyses of the ‘native speaker’ and ‘mother tongue’ and especially the concept of genius. See note 16.
7 This may be an overly bold contention, but I will give examples to support it, including that of China which carries great weight. Unfortunately, very little research has been done on the prevalence of the shift to English-language instruction in the national curricula of many countries.
11 To the extent that neoliberalism anchors decisions concerning language teaching within public education systems, we may question the democratic possibilities that Virno emphasises. But it does compel us to think more specifically about the need to view education policy as an important issue in need of more public awareness and political consideration.
13 I will argue below that Virno’s reading of Marx is anachronistic to a certain extent, since Marx considers language as a productive force in all modes of production.
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15 For one example of a linguistic commodity and the linguistic complexities involved in its production, see the thematic issue on international call centres of *Language Policy* 8, no. 1 (2009) edited by Kendall King.

16 Braj Kachru refers to varieties of English that are ‘norm dependent,’ and thus ‘uncreative’ versus ‘norm providing’ and thus innovative’. See Braj Kachru, *Asian Englishes Beyond the Canon* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2005), especially 9–28; 78–93 and 99–120. For a different approach to issues of language creativity see Alastair Pennycook, *Language as Local Practice* (New York: Routledge, 2010), especially 34–51.

17 I do not want to rule out the possibility of multilingualism and overlapping language repertoires as a possibility, and perhaps even as a political project, but it is a political project that is having little success against the juggernaut of global English and the growing significance of English teaching in education policies around the globe.


20 A key aspect of this question is also which English is being taught, as current debates extend well beyond American English versus British English to arguments concerning the advent of a lingua franca English defined precisely by non-native users (as proposed by Jennifer Jenkins and Barbara Seidlhofer), or the burgeoning varieties of Englishes (as analysed by Braj Kachru and others). See Peter Ives, “‘Global English’: Linguistic Imperialism or Practical Global Lingua Franca?’ *Studies in Language and Capitalism* 1 (2006): 121–41.


24 Maurizio Lazzarato, ‘Immaterial Labor’, in *Radical Thought in Italy: A Potential Politics*, ed Paolo Virno and Michael Hardt (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 133–46. The other key aspect of immaterial labour that Maurizio notes is the more specific skills of ‘cybernetics and computer control’.


28 It is important to remember that such significant political developments as the Soweto uprisings, so crucial to the anti-apartheid movement, were spurred by protests against language instruction in Afrikaans.

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31 Abram de Swaan is the most explicit example of this, calculating Q-values of the communicative potential of various languages and declaring what he labels the ‘hypercentrality’ of English as a purely rational outcome. See Abram de Swaan, Words of the World (Cambridge: Polity, 2001).


From the Place Vendôme to Trafalgar Square: Imperialism and Counter-Hegemony in the 1880s Romance Revival
Owen Holland

Trafalgar Square, one of London’s foremost national monuments, offered an obvious symbolic target against which fin de siècle socialists and their fellow travellers could articulate an anti-imperialist politics. The Square’s only historian, Rodney Mace, has described it as ‘an impenitent and rather vulgar commemorative edifice to both men and events which had, by force of arms, extended the hegemony of British capital over large areas of the globe’.¹ The bas-reliefs at the foot of the Nelson Memorial, erected between 1840 and 1843, commemorate British naval victories at St Vincent (1797), the Nile (1798), Copenhagen (1801) and Trafalgar (1805). Daniel J. Walkowitz and Lisa Knauer have pointed out that such civic statues and monuments are ‘time-honoured, spatially fixed, and unquestioningly acknowledged as “public history” sites’; they are objects in which narratives of national history are ‘condensed and congealed’.² In fin de siècle London, Trafalgar Square was the site of numerous demonstrations and rallies by groups seeking to transform the course of that national history, from Irish republicans to unemployed workers and socialist agitators.³ Partly as a consequence of its status as a focal point for protest, cultural representation of the Square also played a role in the strategies of ideological production adopted by socialist writers and propagandists.

For instance, in Chapter 7 of his utopian romance, News from Nowhere (1890), William Morris re-imagined the Square as an orchard. Morris’s speculative re-planting of Trafalgar Square is an exemplary instance of his deployment of the genre of utopian romance to consolidate a putatively anti-imperialist and internationalist structure of feeling, pushing back against what Nicholas Daly characterises as the ‘cultural work’ of mainstream romance revivalists, such as Henry Rider Haggard and G.A. Henty, who propagated pro-imperialist assumptions by emplotting them in narratives of adventure.⁴ As well as constituting a propagandistic intervention into the 1880s romance revival, Morris’s re-imagining of Trafalgar Square was counter-hegemonic in the way suggested by Raymond Williams, who notes the significance of ‘creative practice’ in his elaboration of the concept of hegemony: ‘[c]reative practice … can be the long and difficult remaking of an inherited (determined) practical consciousness … not casting off an ideology … but confronting a hegemony in the fibres of the self and in the hard practical substance of effective and continuing relationships’.⁵ Morris’s re-imagining of Trafalgar
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Square as an orchard was indebted to the organicist sensibilities of his master and mentor, John Ruskin, even as he departed from Ruskin’s strenuously pro-imperialist prejudices. It is the purpose of this article to trace the ways in which Morris’s creative practice during the 1880s played a functional role in the wider propaganda efforts of the Socialist League, using the genre of utopian romance to imagine a future beyond the imperial present, even as his vision of that future was clearly indebted to the patterns of thought and feeling that he had inherited from nineteenth-century romanticism and historicist medievalism.

I

Morris’s narrator in News from Nowhere, William Guest, first arrives in Trafalgar Square whilst on his way to the British Museum in Bloomsbury. In the midst of ‘the fair abode of gardens’, he is immediately possessed by a ‘strange sensation’, which precipitates a phantasmagorical hallucination of ‘a paved and be-fountained square, populated only by a few men dressed in blue, and a good many singularly ugly bronze images (one on top of a tall column)’. The incongruous appearance of ‘tall ugly houses’, ‘an ugly church’, ‘omnibuses’, ‘horse-soldiers’ and ‘a fourfold line of big men clad in blue’ (CW, 16: 41–2), along with the sudden change in weather, signal a momentary return to the nineteenth century. The latent, historical content of Guest’s utopian dream of Nowhere briefly commingles with the manifest content, to perturbing effect. Guest’s fleeting memory of the ‘Bloody Sunday’ demonstration, which took place in Trafalgar Square on 13 November 1887, interrupts the dream-vision, before he ‘opened [his] eyes to the sunlight again and looked round [him], and cried out among the whispering trees and blossoms, “Trafalgar Square!”’ (CW, 42). Morris had participated in and helped to organise this demonstration and wrote ‘A Death Song’ (1887) in commemoration of Alfred Linnell, one of the demonstrators who had been heavily injured as a result of police violence during the demonstration and later died of his injuries.

In News from Nowhere, Guest encounters the re-planted Square as a ‘large open space’, lined with ‘tall old pear-trees’ and ‘apricot trees, in the midst of which was a pretty gay little structure of wood, painted and gilded, that looked like a refreshment stall’ (CW, 41). This use of space is inextricably bound up with seasonal patterns of change and renewal as well as, in this instance, generous provision guaranteed by fruitful abundance. The orchard offers a vision of plenitude, at odds with the imperialist organisation of the abstract space of the global economy that presupposes that rival nation-states will compete for ‘scarce’ resources. Henri Lefebvre has delineated the
way in which this conceptualisation of space came into being through wars of accumulation, such as those commemorated at the foot of the Nelson memorial, and through the concomitant imposition of a ‘unitary, logistical, operational and quantifying rationality which would make economic growth possible’. The refreshment stall, by contrast, is an instance of communal provision, the strangeness and unfamiliarity of which is intimated in Guest’s simile: the wooden structure ‘looked like a refreshment stall’, but he cannot quite be sure because the existence of such unattended way-stations of communality was unknown in the nineteenth-century society from which he hails. The use of the simile here alerts readers to the utopian function of estrangement in Morris’s text, whereby an apparently familiar, everyday object is wrenched out of an immediately recognisable context and thus becomes partly unrecognisable as a result.

In the long central chapter of Nowhere, ‘How the Change Came’, Old Hammond describes a mass demonstration that took place in Trafalgar Square during the revolution which brought Nowhere into being, referring to ‘the monument which then stood there’ (CW, 16: 155) in the past tense. The implication is clear, although implicit: at some unspecified point in Nowhere’s history, Nelson’s Column will have been pulled down to make way for an orchard. The stall and the trees displaced the assemblage of symbolic monuments recalled by Guest, including Nelson’s Column and Hamo Thornycroft’s statue of General Charles George Gordon, killed in Sudan in 1885 whilst attempting to put down a rebellion against British rule. As Morris noted in one of his journalistic contributions to the Socialist League newspaper, Commonweal – in which Nowhere was first serialised – the statue of Gordon had been ‘unveiled with very decidedly “maimed rites”’ in Trafalgar Square in October 1888.

Old Hammond’s reference to the Nelson monument, meanwhile, alludes to the Parisian Communards’ spectacular demolition of the Vendôme Column on 16 May 1871, which remade the Place Vendôme as social space. The column had been erected by Napoleon I, between 1806 and 1810, to celebrate the military triumphs of the imperial Grand Army, on a site formerly occupied by a statue of Louis XIV that had been destroyed during the revolution in 1792; each year a special parade and review of the imperial troops were organised in the Place Vendôme. The Communards’ iconoclasm, directed against a crucial symbol of Napoleonic imperialism, furnished Morris with a means of imagining possibilities for similar action in his own national context. Before the publication of Nowhere Morris had already experimented with the narrative transplantation of French revolutionary aspirations into a British context. His stage-play, The Tables Turned, or, Nupkins Awakened (1887), concludes with a collective dance and performance of ‘La Carmagnole’ in a post-revolutionary scene in the British countryside, set to words that Morris had written for the
purpose. Similarly, ‘Socialists at Play’, which was spoken as a prologue at the Socialist League entertainment held at the South Place Institute on 11 June 1885, concludes with an invitation to sing the ‘Marseillaise’: ‘We pray you ere we part to raise/ Your voices once more in the “Marseillaise”,/ The glorious strain that long ago foretold,/ The hope now multiplied a thousand-fold;/ Nay, hope transfigured; since at last we know/ The world our country, and the rich our foe’ (AWS, 2: 626).

Commemoration mingles with transfiguration in Morris’s narrative poem of the Paris Commune, The Pilgrims of Hope (1885), which concludes with a reconstruction of the defeat of the Communards and a mnemonic affirmation that ‘Year after year shall men meet with the red flag over head,/ And shall call on the help of the vanquished and the kindness of the dead’ (CW, 24: 406). In the eleventh section of the poem, ‘A Glimpse of the Coming Day’, the young narrator experiences the ‘city’s hope’, precipitating a desire to carry the hopes of Paris back with him to England:

Strange how my heart went back to our little nook of the land,
And how plain and clear I saw it, as though I longed indeed
To give it a share of the joy and the satisfaction of need
That here in the folk I beheld. (402)

This passage typifies Morris’s experimentation with poetic narrative in Pilgrims as a means of figuratively translating a notionally foreign structure of feeling into an indigenous context, augmenting what Morris and Bax elsewhere referred to as the ‘permeation of Socialist feeling from its centres on the Continent’. Morris’s mobilisation of revolutionary song-culture and poetic narrative had earlier analogues in his translation of Icelandic sagas and his study of Eastern pattern designs, which had informed his interventions into poetic and visual culture during the 1870s.

Anne Janowitz has commented on the way in which the narrative structure and lyrical patterning of Pilgrims integrate a memory of the Commune which ‘offered itself’ to Morris as a representation both external to England, and also internal, by virtue of an analogous vernacular structure. Janowitz identifies this structure with the archive of radical-communitarian and Chartist poetry, suggesting that Morris extended its construction in Pilgrims, implicitly recognising the way in which British society was riven by class antagonisms which, in the French context, had given rise to the Commune. According to Janowitz, Morris thus elucidated the ‘connections between the values of the Commune and a set of values already deep in a British tradition’ (228–9). A similar process of future-oriented vernacular grafting is at work in Nowhere, in which Morris overlaid a memory of the Parisian Communards’ iconoclastic
destruction of the Vendôme Column onto the British space of Trafalgar Square. Morris’s utopianism can thus be said to have emerged amidst what Margaret Cohen and Carolyn Dever refer to as the ‘cross-Channel literary zone’, which animated numerous ‘processes of literary and cultural exchange’ during the long nineteenth century, including Baudelaire’s influence on Swinburne’s poetics, Wilde’s exile in Paris, and the aesthetic displacement of revolutionary aspirations onto the French ‘other’ in Charles Dickens’s *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859). In speculatively transposing the Communards’ desire from one national and metropolitan context to another, Morris reasserted the revolutionary aspirations of the Commune, at the same time as he wove an internationalist thread into the fabric of his utopian romance, thus complicating critical judgements of the nationally delimited scope of his utopianism.

II

That Morris was aware of the action of the Communards in the Place Vendôme is confirmed in Chapter 12 of *Socialism from the Root Up*, written in collaboration with Ernest Belfort Bax between 1886 and 1888. The text supplies a series of historical articles (from ‘Ancient Society’ to the French Revolution) and exegeses of Marx’s value theory. In the section treating ‘The Paris Commune of 1871, and the Continental Movement Following it’, Morris and Bax referred approvingly to the ‘international character’ of the Communards’ aspirations and comment that ‘the destruction of the Vendôme Column may seem but a small matter, yet considering the importance attached generally, and in France particularly, to such symbols, the dismounting of that base piece of Napoleonic upholstery was another mark of the determination to hold no parley with the old jingo legends’ (Morris, *Political Writings*, 560). Bax elaborated further in *A Short History of the Paris Commune* (1895), noting that the column ‘was very properly regarded as a standing insult, not only to every other European nationality, but, before all, to a Revolution based on the principles of Internationalism’.

These brief accounts of the pulling down of the column are likely to have been based on a reading of Eleanor Marx’s translation of Prosper-Olivier Lissagaray’s *Histoire de la Commune de 1871* (1876), published by Reeves and Turner in 1886, where a lengthier account is given. Morris echoed these references in an interview conducted by R. Ponsonby Staples for the *New Budget* magazine in 1895. In the wide-ranging conversations that took place over a series of morning visits, Morris remarked on the work of the pro-Communard artist Gustav Courbet: ‘one good thing he did was to pull down the Column Vendôme, which was a horrid piece of Imperial upholstery!’
a term of abuse in his lectures on the decorative arts (\textit{CW}, 22: 254), is significant both because it suggests Morris’s co-authorship with Bax of the corresponding section in the earlier piece, and because of its invocation of the furnishings trade, with which Morris was well-acquainted. Morris’s jibe at his younger self marks the political distance he had travelled between his days as a renowned poet and respectable proprietor of a furnishings business in Oxford Street during the 1860s and 1870s and his subsequent re-invention as a communist agitator during the 1880s. Morris’s affirmation of the Communards’ hopes also marks a point at which he broke with his ‘master’ (\textit{CW}, 23: 279), John Ruskin, who had denounced the Communards’ iconoclasm in the sixth letter of \textit{Fors Clavigera} (1871–84), singling out the destruction of the Vendôme Column for special criticism: ‘My friends, I tell you solemnly, the sin of it all, down to this last night’s doing, or undoing (for it is Monday now, I waited before finishing my letter, to see if the Saint Chapelle would follow the Vendôme Column).’

Post-1871, the fear of the Communards’ iconoclasm, in particular, cut across both popular literature and journalism of the period. According to Gareth Stedman Jones, ‘three major waves’ of bourgeois anxiety occurred in Britain between the 1840s and 1880s: the first was connected to the militancy of the Chartists and the aftermath of the 1848 revolutions; the second (1866–72) was precipitated by the Second Reform Bill and was intensified by the events in Paris in 1871; the third ‘reached its peak in years between 1883 and 1888’ owing to a sustained period of economic downturn. James Francis Cobbs’s historical novel \textit{In Time of War} (1883) reproduces an image of the fallen Vendôme Column from the \textit{Illustrated London News}, attesting to the generic cross-fertilisation between journalistic reconstruction and fictional representation of historical actuality. Ruskin was particularly troubled by the perceived threat of Communard internationalism, an idea that, were it to have taken hold amongst the working class in England, would have posed a distinct threat to the patriotic enthusiasms he hoped to inculcate under the auspices of the Guild of St George. According to Judith Stoddart, ‘[i]t was against the cosmopolitan example of the Commune [as mediated in the writings of his Positivist contemporaries] that Ruskin defined his paternalistic nationalism.’

In alluding to the Communards’ iconoclasm Morris differentiated his utopianism from Ruskin’s paternalistic patriotism, yet the re-planting of Trafalgar Square simultaneously evoked Ruskin’s concern for the natural world (the opposition of garden and wasteland was an important leitmotif in Ruskin’s writings). Ruskin’s vision of an ideal city, outlined in the concluding paragraphs of \textit{Sesame and Lilies} (1865), included proposals for a ‘belt of beautiful garden and orchard round the walls’ (Ruskin, \textit{Works}, 18: 183) – a motif with which Morris and John Henry Dearle had experimented in their 1863 cotton warp tapestry \textit{The Orchard}, produced by Morris and Co. (see Fig. 1).
Fig. 1 The Orchard, cotton warp tapestry woven in wool, silk and mohair, designed by William Morris and John Henry Dearle around 1863, produced by Morris & Co. (© Victoria & Albert Museum).

The motif, which reappeared in Nowhere, also features in the prologue to the ‘April’ section of The Earthly Paradise (1868–70) (CW, 3: 169), as well as in the ‘Verses for Pictures’ included in Poems by the Way (1891). The section of ‘Verses’ entitled ‘The Orchard’ had been embroidered on the 1863 tapestry, declaring the symbolic resonance of the space: ‘Midst bitten mead and acre shorn,/ The world without is waste and worn,/ But here within our orchard-close,/ The guerdon of its labour shows’ (CW, 9: 193).

As well as being an anti-imperialist parody, the orchard in Trafalgar Square is an exemplary instance of the wider transformation envisaged in Nowhere, in which England and, through the medium of translation, the ‘world without’, is made over into a Ruskinian garden where the fruits of non-alienated labour are reaped and universally shared.26 As Old Hammond informs Guest, nineteenth-century England ‘became a country of huge and foul workshops and fouler gambling-dens, surrounded by an ill-kept, poverty-stricken farm, pillaged by the masters of the workshops’. In Nowhere, by contrast, ‘[i]t is now a garden, where nothing is wasted and nothing is spoiled, with the necessary dwellings, sheds, and workshops scattered up and down the country, all trim and neat and pretty’ (CW, 16: 72). This description recalls Ruskin’s statement that ‘[t]he whole country is but a little garden … And this little garden you will turn into furnace-ground, and fill with heaps of cinders, if you can’ (Ruskin, Works, 18: 134). The moment of rupture with the nation’s imperialist past, symbolically figured in the projected removal of Nelson’s Column, is simultaneously coterminous with an organicist vision of continuity and permanence, in which Ruskin’s trope of the nation-as-garden is reworked and re-contextualised. If
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Morris’s re-planting of Trafalgar Square constituted a counter-hegemonic intervention into the pro-imperialist cultural ambience of the romance revival, an argument to which I will turn in the next section, it must be remembered that this aspect of his creative practice was indebted to a deeply ingrained and long-standing set of commitments, never straightforwardly oppositional or antagonistic, to the ‘nation’ and national history. It is in this sense, then, that Morris set out to confront hegemony in the terms set out by Williams earlier in this essay.

It is appropriate, at this point, briefly to consider Williams’s own treatment of Morris, particularly insofar as he acknowledged Morris’s indebtedness to the ‘Culture and Society’ tradition of Carlyle and Ruskin. For Williams, ‘[a]s the new industrial society established itself, critics like Carlyle and Ruskin could find the “organic” image only in a backward look … It was not, in this tradition, until Morris that this image acquired a distinctly future reference – the image of socialism’. Employing an appropriately organic metaphor, Williams went on to note that ‘Morris’s socialism … grew out of the tradition [of Carlyle and Ruskin]’ (160), but argued that Morris represents a moment of rupture with that tradition insofar as ‘he sought to attach its general values to an actual and growing social force: that of the organised working class’ (153). In Politics and Letters (1979), Williams reiterated that he saw in Morris the ‘transvaluation’ of the tradition, because of his political commitment to social revolution, but Williams was pressed by his interlocutors about the lack of any extended discussion in Culture and Society (1958) of the ideological force of imperialism in fin de siècle British culture. The interviewers implied that Williams omitted sufficiently to acknowledge that the ‘historical process’ of imperialism was centrally present to the consciousness of all those who lived through the period whom you discuss. It was not something which was secondary and external – it was absolutely constitutive of the whole nature of the English political and social order. This is something which for anybody looking at the English social experience from the outside, a Frenchman or an Italian or a German or a Russian – not to speak of a Jamaican, a Nigerian or an Indian – is the salient fact. If you ask them what they associate with 19th-century England, they do think of the industrial revolution of course, but even more they think of the Pax Britannica. (117–8)

John Higgins has more recently commented that ‘[c]ritics of Culture and Society are surely right to see [Part II] as the weakest part of the book as a whole … and point rightly to the implications of this blindness to what was, after all, the main period of Victorian imperial expansion’.
According to the *New Left Review* interviewers, the danger in Williams’s inclusion of Morris in the book was that it has the ‘subtle effect of reassimilating or neutralising Morris, who is sandwiched between Ruskin and Mallock as if [Williams was] just proceeding from one equivalent author to another’ (Williams, *Politics and Letters*, 128). Part of this neutralisation involved an omission on Williams’s part, conscious or unconscious, of any discussion of Morris’s anti-imperialist politics. If, then, the hegemonic role of pro-imperialist ideology and texts was something of a blind spot in Williams’s criticism, what follows is an attempt to think about how critical accounts of the popular print and literary culture of the *fin de siècle* might appear differently if the reality of ideological conflict over imperialism were restored to its central place. With regard to Morris’s attachment to the working-class movement – the key, for Williams, to his transformation of the ‘Culture and Society’ tradition – the following discussion illuminates one of the ways in which that attachment involved the waging of polemical argument within a mutable and highly contested ideological milieu.

III

The Franco-Prussian war of 1870–71 and the Paris Commune of 1871 had an undoubted impact on political and popular literary culture in Britain throughout the closing decades of the nineteenth century. Despite its eventual suppression, the Commune became an important talisman for the emerging socialist movement across Europe. In the aftermath of the Franco-Prussian war and the events of the Commune, eye-witness accounts from Paris and anticipatory histories of similar events in London proliferated. In these documents, public statuary and civic spaces became sites of class anxiety in which the apprehensions of the respective national bourgeoisie can be seen to cluster. The Vendôme Column in particular, as David Harvey has pointed out, represented for the Communards ‘a hated symbol of an alien power that had long ruled over them; it was a symbol of that spatial organisation of the city that had put so many segments of the population “in their place”, by the building of Haussmann’s boulevards and the expulsion of the working class from the central city’. The symbolic cachet of the national monument, and the underlying assumption of permanence with regard to the nation’s longevity which the monumental aesthetic inculcates, was directly confronted both in the radical action of the Communards and, over twenty years later, in Morris’s utopian transfiguration of Trafalgar Square.

The Communard example, which was widely reported in the British press at the time, furnished Morris with a means to imagine the prospects for similar
action in his own national context as he moved towards a more coherently anti-imperialist politics during the 1880s. The ground had been prepared for the Commune’s reception in the socialist revival of the 1880s by popular radicals and positivists, such as Frederic Harrison and E.S. Beesly, during the 1870s. The ‘image and memory’ of the Commune, as Janowitz argues, ‘was an important screen onto which British Socialism came to project its own representations and fantasies’ (Janowitz, 228). The projected re-planting of Trafalgar Square in Nowhere was one such representation. It provided a utopian supplement to the commemorations of the Communards which Morris undertook elsewhere in his journalism and in public lectures such as ‘The Hopes of Civilisation’ (1885) (CW, 23: 74; Morris, Political Writings, 232–5). These different kinds of writings all had the common aim of consolidating a putatively inter-nationalist structure of feeling.

Morris’s utopian transfiguration of Trafalgar Square also constituted a counter-hegemonic intervention into contemporaneous popular literary culture. ‘[Morris’s] shelves’, as Paul Thompson has noted, ‘were full of cheap yellow-backs bought for train journeys’, suggesting his acquaintanceship with the popular fiction of his day. In the Pall Mall Gazette’s 1891 review of Nowhere the anonymous reviewer rebukes the long chapter ‘How the Change Came’ for being ‘devoid of the vividness of realisation and consistency of detail on which the effect of this Battle-of-Dorking style literature depends’. The comment is remarkable less for the judgement given than because of the reviewer’s decision to situate Morris’s utopian romance in a generic lineage dating back to Colonel G.T. Chesney’s sixpenny ‘novelette’ The Battle of Dorking Reminiscences of a Volunteer (1871), written in response to the anxieties engendered by the Franco-Prussian War. Chesney’s text, which imagines a Prussian invasion of Britain, spawned a host of imitators reflecting a climate of imperial anxiety about foreign invasion. The Pall Mall Gazette reviewer thus missed the extent to which Nowhere belongs among such texts only to the extent that it constituted a polemical assault on the ideological assumptions that motivated their composition.

Patrick Brantlinger has grouped such texts in a generic formation which he designates ‘imperial Gothic’, most prominent in the years between 1880 and 1914. He identifies the genre with different kinds of fictional writing, clustered around ‘popular romance formulas’, particularly in the works of romance revivalists such as Haggard and Henty, along with Wellsian science fiction and the proliferating sub-genre of invasion-scare fantasies inaugurated by Chesney. The ideological function of such texts in supporting the hegemonic imperial edifice was implicitly acknowledged by the pro-imperialist critic Edward Salmon, who wrote that it was ‘impossible to overrate the importance of the influence of [stories of the “brave old days”] on the national character
and culture’. Leading authors in the romance revival of the 1880s strongly identified with the New Imperialism of the same period, an identification that Wendy R. Katz describes as the ‘most striking by-product’ of the ‘dynamic relationship … between late nineteenth-century imperialism and the literary climate of Great Britain’.

‘Imperial Gothic’ constituted the discursive base of Morris’s counter-hegemonic intervention which re-purposed the romance revival with a view to consolidating an anti-imperialist structure of feeling. The strategic aspect of Morris’s work could be construed as proto-Gramscian insofar as he recognised that the internationalist sections of the working-class movement must, in Gramsci’s words, ‘face the problem of winning intellectual power. Just as it has thought to organize itself politically and economically, it must also think about organizing itself culturally’. Morris’s decision to subtitle News from Nowhere a ‘Utopian Romance’ consciously situated the text in proximity to the ‘popular romance formulas’ that Brantlinger and Katz identify with a pro-imperialist structure of feeling. Despite this, the imperialist dimension of the romance revival has been largely overlooked in existing studies of Morris’s engagement with the genre of romance.

Morris’s replanting of Trafalgar Square is particularly significant in this regard because public statuary figured as an important site of symbolic anxiety in the imperial Gothic texts. Throughout the 1880s Morris’s anti-imperialist propaganda offered a forceful riposte to the hegemonic jingoism propagated by writers like J.R. Seeley, the Regius Professor of History at Cambridge, as well as the supporters of the Imperial Federation League (IFL), formed in 1884, who included J.C.R. Colomb, Frederick Young and the literary critic Edward Salmon. Morris, by contrast, polemically argued that Britain’s territorial expansion was predicated on a dynamic of competition and ‘commercial war’ between rival nation-states, the systemic violence of which would, with alarming frequency, spill over into the physical brutality of colonial conquest or the militaristic violence of warfare between competing imperialist states. Morris explicitly attacked Seeley’s The Expansion of England (1883) in a review of Charles Rowley’s Social Politics (1885), pointing out that Seeley’s envisaged expansion ‘means the expansion of capital’ (Morris, Journalism, 12). Morris was similarly frank about the project of the IFL and writing in 1885, a year after its formation, he identified it with a ‘bolstering up of the decaying supremacy of England in the world-market with the help of a worthless sentiment called patriotism’ (82). He later likened it to ‘a plot for … bolstering up the tottering capitalist régime by finding new markets for it’ (627–8). Against the ‘monster of Commercial Militarism’, Morris believed it was necessary to ‘further the spread of international feeling between the workers by all means possible’ (173). These brief journalistic polemics constituted one of Morris’s lines of attack, but his utopian intervention into
the romance revival was another ‘means’ by which he sought to accomplish this. Morris’s journalism launched fragmentary broadsides against Seeley and the IFL. In *Nowhere*, by contrast, Morris appropriated and reworked different aspects of contemporaneous popular print culture, particularly the motifs of the invasion narratives and other popular romances.

The expansion of ‘Greater Britain’ advocated by Seeley, Colomb and J.A. Froude (Thomas Carlyle’s biographer), along with a bipartisan coalition of politicians including Charles Dilke, W.E. Forster, Lord Rosebery and Joseph Chamberlain, were underwritten by an ever-present fear of catastrophic contraction. Such anxieties were apparent in the imperial Gothic sub-genre of fictional anticipatory histories playing upon the fear of a foreign invasion. Chesney’s *The Battle of Dorking* and its host of imitations did not occupy the same kind of discursive territory as Colomb’s *The Defence of Great and Greater Britain* (1880) or Seeley’s *The Expansion of England*. These texts were written as different kinds of response to the Franco-Prussian War and the fears for national security which were triggered by this unexpected military conflict. Colomb, for example, published two pamphlets in 1871, entitled *Imperial Strategy* and *The Reorganisation of Our Military Forces*, acknowledging that the recent conflict between Prussia and France had sparked ‘rumours of war’ both ‘at home and abroad … the consequences of which to civilisation would be still more terrible to contemplate’. The shock of the Prussian victory over the French forces created a market for imaginary invasion narratives, playing upon national security fears by projecting cautionary scenarios in which Britain is conquered by Prussian or French troops, or a coalition of foreign powers. These exercises in anticipatory history expressed the ideological reflexes of the conservative and nationalistic elements of the popular imaginary, during a period in which ‘Britain … was becoming a parasitic rather than a competitive world economy, living off the remains of world monopoly, the underdeveloped world, her past accumulations of wealth and the advance of her rivals’. As the gleam of Empire began to fade, the metropolitan centre itself began to be perceived as susceptible to attack, fears which Morris relentlessly satirised in his journalism and in *News from Nowhere* (*CW*, 16: 78), at the same time as he clairvoyantly understood the possibility that imperialist rivalry might eventuate in a devastating international war ‘which will embrace all the nations of Europe’ (*PW*, 219–20).

IV

The multifarious instances of imperial Gothic fiction played a reciprocal role in producing the climate of anxiety. Chesney’s text spawned a host of
imitators, including an anonymous riposte, *The Battle of Dorking, A Myth. England Impregnable; Invasion Impossible* (1871), John Stone’s *What Happened After the Battle of Dorking or, the Victory of Tunbridge Wells* (1871), Maximilian Moltruhn’s *The Other Side at the Battle of Dorking; or, The Reminiscences of an Invader* (1871), and anonymous texts such as *The Second Armada: A Chapter in Future History* (1871) and *Forewarned! Forearmed!: The Suggested Invasion of England by the Germans* (1871). H.F. Lester’s *The Taking of Dover* (1888) demonstrates the persistence of the sub-genre well into the 1880s. The market for slightly more substantial one-shilling narratives in coloured boards was supplied by pseudonymously published texts such as Grip’s *How John Bull Lost London; or, the Capture of the Channel Tunnel* (1882) and Posteritas’s *The Siege of London* (1885). Chesney’s inaugural text is typical of the genre in its lament that the ‘warning given by the dangers that overtook France was allowed to pass by unheeded’. External threats to national security were bound up with anxieties about domestic class antagonism, which engendered a number of modulations in the genre of anticipatory history, including the barrister-at-law Bracebridge Hemyng’s *The Commune in London; or, Thirty Years Hence* (1871), *The Socialist Revolution of 1888* (1884) by ‘An Eye-witness’, and *England’s Downfall; or, the Last Great Revolution* (1893) by ‘An Ex-revolutionist’, all of which typify the fear of domestic insurrection.

One feature common to the imaginary invasion narratives and the reactionary portrayals of mass insurrection is a marked anxiety about the security of the nation’s cultural, architectural and monumental heritage. In Grip’s narrative, for example, ‘[t]he treasures of art which had been collected in past years were either destroyed or stolen’, leading the narrator to the instinctively xenophobic conclusion that the ‘enemy behaved as Frenchmen always do under similar circumstances’. In the concluding pages of *The Siege of London*, meanwhile, readers learn that ‘the Houses of Parliament and the magnificent pile of Westminster abbey were almost totally destroyed’ by French batteries. Morris played upon such fears by re-imagining the Houses of Parliament in *News from Nowhere* as a storage place for manure – not demolished, just suitably re-purposed. Bracebridge Hemyng’s ‘Chapter of Anticipated History’ similarly exemplifies the status of public statuary as a symptom of bourgeois cultural anxiety and the intensely class-conscious fear of revolution. As the melodramatic narrative unfolds, evoking numerous parallels with the historical events of the Paris Commune, a number of key symbolic sites in London are targeted for demolition by the insurgent Communards. In a scene that would have fascinated Morris, the narrator discovers a set of barricades on Hammersmith Bridge and, finding the Broadway bristling with cannon, he subsequently remarks upon
a scaffolding erected around the gaudy if not meretricious memorial to the Prince Albert … in Hyde-park. Workmen were swarming about it like bees. The Commune had declared that it should come down … I think it is a pity to destroy any sort of public monuments. If the opinion of the day in which they were erected sanctioned their erection, surely posterity should respect the wishes of those who have gone before.\footnote{47}

Similar fears also percolated ‘upwards’ and were woven into the dense web of Henry James’s \textit{The Princess Casamassima} (1886), in which the protagonist Hyacinth Robinson fantasises about the role that his paramour, Millicent Henning, might play in an English revolution:

Hyacinth could easily see her (if there should ever be barricades in the streets of London), with a red cap of liberty on her head and her white throat bared so that she should be able to shout the louder the Marseillaise of that hour, whatever it might be. If the festival of the Goddess of Reason should ever be enacted in the British metropolis … if this solemnity, I say, should be revived in Hyde Park, who was better designated than Miss Henning to figure in a grand statuesque manner, as the heroine of the occasion?\footnote{48}

The migration across the Channel of the anxiety about Communards or revolutionary insurgency clearly led to a change in the monumental sites around which such anxieties clustered.

Unsurprisingly, Trafalgar Square provided a key focus in the fictional mediation of anti-communist feeling, signifying the symbolic importance of the Square in the conservative imaginary and altering the stakes of Morris’s transfiguration of the space. For instance, \textit{The Socialist Revolution of 1888} (1884) features the Square as a meeting place for discussions between Prime Minister Salisbury and a group of socialist insurgents who meet ‘at the Lions’.\footnote{49} It becomes apparent to the narrator that an insurrection has broken out when he ‘[sees] the street beneath [his] window [in Whitehall] filled with a dense crowd … These people were the Socialists, and they were about to rendezvous at Charing Cross’ (4). The Square also features in \textit{England’s Downfall; or, the Last Great Revolution} (1893) by ‘An Ex-Revolutionist’. As the Great Revolution unfolds, a rampaging crowd reaches a square which has been renamed the ‘Square of the 17th May, in commemoration of the day on which the Republic was proclaimed [but which] was known in [earlier] days by the more honourable name of Trafalgar, after the battle which you have all read about’.\footnote{50} The renaming of the Strand as the Street of the Republic, the Thames Embankment as the Liberty Boulevard and Whitehall as the Street of the Republican
Guard, typify anxieties about the spread of French-influenced Republican ideas amongst British radicals. These narratives of domestic insurrection also intersected with longer-term projections of imperial decline, for which Edward Gibbon’s *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776) was a model. Henry Crocker Marriot Watson’s *The Decline and Fall of the British Empire; Or, the Witch’s Cavern* (1890) imagines Britain’s descent into poverty and ruin in the year 2990, when ‘Nelson’s monument lies buried [in Trafalgar Square], or what remains of it’. During the projected insurgency, ‘The Sack of London’, ‘[i]t had been arranged that all routes should converge upon Trafalgar Square’ (266).

Trafalgar Square features as a site of patriotic longing and interrupted nationalist desire in the texts of ‘An Ex-Revolutionist’, ‘An Eye-witness’ and Henry Watson. Reading Morris’s utopian romance with and against these texts clarifies the interventionist character of his utopianism given the Square’s unambiguous status as a symbolic target in the socialist imaginary. An anonymous reviewer of Morris’s *A Dream of John Ball* (1886–87) commented in the socialist periodical, *To-day*, that ‘we are not altogether without hopes of some day being present when Mr Morris unveils a statue of John Ball in Trafalgar Square’, attesting to a desire to construct a counter-martyrology designed to destabilise the cult of imperial hero-martyrs commemorated in the Square. When read against the backdrop of ‘imperial Gothic’ anxiety about national monuments, and the iconoclastic aspirations of *fin de siècle* socialists, Morris’s utopianism appears less as an exercise in heuristic projection, as E.P. Thompson has argued, than it does a counter-hegemonic intervention into contemporaneous popular print culture. Responding implicitly to Thompson, Raymond Williams noted that heuristic utopia is always at risk of ‘[settling] into isolated and sentimental desire, a means of living with alienation’. There is nothing sentimental, however, about the interventionist aspects of Morris’s utopianism, intimately interwoven as it was with the ideological struggle of the 1880s. Hammond’s reference to Nelson’s Column in the past tense parodied the fears about imperial longevity which Morris frequently mocked in his journalism, and which were synecdochically concentrated on public statuary and symbolic national monuments.

Commenting on the fallen empires of Spain, France and Portugal, J.R. Seeley argued that ‘Greater Britain … remains the single monument of a state of the world which has almost passed away’, unconsciously acknowledging the fragility of Britain’s control over its territorial possessions even as he set out to prove its dominance. In Lefebvre’s *The Production of Space* (1974), monumental space has the characteristic that it ‘seems eternal, because it seems to have escaped time’ (Lefebvre, 221). Morris’s replanting of Trafalgar Square debunked this myth, probing the spatial boundaries of revolutionary
praxis which are imposed by the imperialist construction of the spatial present in the form of the nation-state. In opposition to the many historical attempts of counter-revolutionary forces to isolate an unfolding revolutionary process in space and time, Morris took the events of the Commune as an inspirational conduit for a belated act of imaginative solidarity, binding the imagined future to a definite past whilst simultaneously making a propagandistic intervention into the cultural politics of the romance revival.

Notes

From the Place Vendôme to Trafalgar Square


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40 Seeley's book, comprising two courses of lectures delivered in Cambridge, sold 80,000 copies during the first two years after its publication, which indicates its considerable popular appeal. See Deborah Wormell, *Sir John Seeley and the Uses of History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 1–10.


Keywords

Terrorism

There are few terms more politically significant than terrorism in its variable contemporary usage. It derives from Latin terror—a person, thing or quality that causes dread or absolute fear (terrēre—‘to frighten’, hence ‘terrifying’, ‘terrible’) and appears in English, by way of French, from the late medieval period, often in theological discourse. ‘Terror’ retains its radical sense of extreme fear (with the exception of the ironic ‘holy terror’, or ‘little terror’) throughout its history. Perhaps the most important development of the term, however, was the late eighteenth-century coinage, ‘The Terror’, to refer to the period during the French Revolution (early 1793–mid 1794) in which the revolutionary State enacted repressive violence against its political opponents. The use of the term as a mass noun, to mean organised repression and violent intimidation, dates from this point and leads to a series of phrasal derivatives (almost all of which were American coinages): ‘terror act’ (1921); ‘terror attack’ (1929); ‘terror bombing’ (1933); ‘terror campaign’ (1909); ‘terror group’ (1919); ‘terror organisation’ (1886); ‘terror plot’ (1905); ‘terror raid’ (1917); ‘terror suspect’ (1934); ‘terror tactics’ (1913); ‘terror threat’ (1917).

‘The Terror’ is the immediate precursor to terrorism, coined in English in 1795 by Thomas Paine (imprisoned under the ‘reign of terrorism’), from French ‘terrorisme’. Importantly, in its early uses terrorism unambiguously refers to violence carried out by the State for political purposes: ‘government by intimidation as directed and carried out by the party in power in France during the Revolution of 1789–94’ (OED). Almost immediately after it was coined, however, another sense developed that was less clear. Again the OED definition is significant: ‘the unofficial or unauthorized use of violence and intimidation in the pursuit of political aims; (originally) such practices used by a government or ruling group (freq. through paramilitary or informal armed groups) in order to maintain its control over a population’. The definition is revealingly indeterminate: its first phrase could describe the activities of the Irish Republican Army in its war against the British State in the recent conflict in Northern Ireland; the second phrase could refer to the British State’s running of Loyalist paramilitaries in its campaign against the Irish Republican Army in the same war.

The difficulties are not simply matters of semantic clarification since terrorism, either implicitly or explicitly, is usually used evaluatively. In 1941, for example, Winston Churchill asserted that ‘in German-occupied Poland the most hideous form of terrorism prevails’; while in 1979 an article in The Spectator refers to an author’s ‘war-time exploits as a terrorist in the Resistance’. 
In the first example, terrorism, perpetrated by the State, is evidently pejorative, whereas in the second, the terrorism that the non-State agent carries out is validated. One popular response to this evaluative openness is to treat it as a matter of personal political preference (‘one person’s “terrorist” is another person’s “freedom-fighter”’) but the issue is deeper and more difficult than this.

What is at stake in the use of terrorism is the crucial question of the legitimacy-claims made for the use of violence for political purposes. And yet, strikingly, most contemporary uses of the term function precisely to elide the issue of legitimacy by taking it as simply given that the use of violence is the sole preserve of the State. This is usually based on a loose understanding of the Hobbesian social contract between the sovereign State and its subjects, exemplified in the liberal democracies, under which the right to resort to violence is given up in exchange for basic securities and freedoms. But this arrangement, whose status was always, even in Hobbes, conditional and therefore contingent, is normatively presented as given and irrevocable. As a consequence, all violence carried out by non-State actors must be illegitimate and therefore terrorism (as opposed to the legitimate use of terror and violence on which the State is predicated). So rigid is this linkage between State, legitimacy and violence that the recent coinage ‘State terrorism’ appears oxymoronic, while ‘State-sponsored terrorism’ simply reinforces the notion that although States may finance terrorism, they are not perpetrators of it. Yet while hegemonic, it is important to recall that this conceit has been established only relatively recently. For as the history of the term terrorism indicates, from its very inception, the question of the legitimacy of the use of violence by the State has been a central concern.

Terrorism cannot be defined as a particular mode of violence; it matters little in terms of effect whether a bomb is launched from an unmanned drone flying at 33,000 feet or left in a bag in a bar. Nor can terrorism be identified on the basis of those who perpetrate it; as noted above, despite its now usual association with non-State actors, terrorism has been linked to the State since its first use. Nor can the term be determined simply in relation to the victims of violence; despite the proper distinction made between intended and unintended targets, the power of modern armaments entails the inevitability of civilian casualties (notwithstanding the mythology of ‘bombs so ‘smart’ that they knock politely on the door to make sure there are no children present before blowing a building to smithereens). But if terrorism cannot be defined in these terms, what sense can be made of this troubling word?

It is crucial to note that the dominant use of terrorism is obfuscatory and it is important therefore to recall the issues that it is designed to elide. This means, in relation to the use of violence for political aims, a series of...
pressing questions: who is using it? Why and how is it being deployed? What are the legitimacy-claims attached to it? What is its purpose? What is a proper response to it? Needless to say, identifying such questions is but the first step to proper analysis. But even to get that far it is necessary to identify and challenge the reductive and simplistic ways in which terrorism is used in contemporary media and political discourse.
**Recoveries: Dorothy Edwards, *Winter Sonata*¹**

Elinor Taylor

Dorothy Edwards is an intriguing figure whose slight body of work has received increasing scholarly attention in recent years. Born in Ogmore Vale, near Bridgend, in 1903, Edwards published a short story collection, *Rhapsody*, in 1927, and the short novel, *Winter Sonata*, in 1928. Her father, a schoolteacher and Independent Labour Party activist who died when Edwards was in her teens, seems to have left a lasting influence on her work which, while rarely explicitly political, nonetheless engages with problems of class and gender and, in *Winter Sonata*, the relations between class and culture. Edwards’s literary career was decidedly marked by these predicaments. She was educated at boarding school via a scholarship and took a degree in Greek and Philosophy at the University College of South Wales and Monmouthshire (the predecessor institution of Cardiff University), before embarking on a professional writing career in circumstances that were, as Claire Flay’s introduction to this edition makes clear, extremely difficult. The poet, critic and editor Edgell Rickword was an early supporter of her work, and his *Calendar of Modern Letters* published three of Edwards’s stories in 1925–26. These stories appeared in *Rhapsody*, which was shortly followed by *Winter Sonata*. Together these works caught the attention of David Garnett, who became a patron of the woman he considered a ‘Welsh Cinderella’, and for a time Edwards seems to have been a peripheral figure among the Bloomsbury group. But these were years of mounting frustration and depression, as Edwards was caught in a cycle of being unable to secure sufficient financial stability to obtain space and time to write under intense domestic and financial pressures. Work on a new novel stalled, and after a troubled year working for Garnett in London, she returned to Wales in late 1933. Increasingly debilitated by depression, she committed suicide on a Cardiff railway line a few weeks later, aged thirty-one.²

Read in the light of Edwards’s early death, *Winter Sonata* appears as a profoundly sad, disappointed novel. And yet this is also a novel of early success; the second book by a twenty-five-year old whose work had already received critical acclaim, it should also be read as a novel of promise and experimentation. Through four chapters that correspond roughly to the movements of a sonata, the novel examines the relationships between a post office clerk, Arnold Nettle, his working-class landlady Mrs Clark, her wayward teenage daughter Pauline, and the wealthier residents of a large house nearby: the sisters Eleanor and Olivia Neran, their aunt Mrs Curle, and her son George. Arnold Nettle becomes fascinated by the seemingly cultured Neran household, and falls in love with the beautiful but austere Olivia. Set over a
single winter, the novel ends with a vague hope for the coming of spring, but, as a sonata returns to its main theme at its conclusion, there is very little sense of any conventional narrative progression. The sense of immobility, or perhaps cyclical, is reinforced by Edwards’s intensely repetitive prose, which is presumably intended to resist the progressive expectations of realist prose by adopting a poetic or musical approach to description that would harness the aesthetic power of repetition so central to these other forms. Descriptions of characters are repeated almost verbatim throughout. This is particularly true of Olivia Neran, the elder sister, who seems to be caught in a state of emotional immobility that is disturbingly suggested by Edwards’s almost obsessive reiterations of apparently innocuous descriptions. Olivia has ‘a round pale face and large, rather sad eyes’ (2); a ‘round pale face and […] large childlike, rather sad eyes’ (73); ‘large, rather childlike but sad eyes’ (86), and so on. The oddly featureless village and its surrounding landscape are similarly constructed by a sparse set of descriptors deployed with unnerving frequency and consistency. The sky is always grey; the trees are always bare; the wind is always cold.

This is a risky technical move, and Edwards does not always manage to avoid monotony, particularly in the landscape descriptions. But as a method of characterisation – working consciously against the principle of characterisation through the accumulation of detail – Edwards’s experiment is nonetheless interesting. The repetitions of Olivia’s appearance reflect an emotional repertoire that is gradually depleted as the novel progresses. She appears increasingly depressed, a condition attributed to the bleak winter weather, but whose real origins, the novel suggests, are elsewhere and are merely projected onto this austere external world, as when the trees take on ‘an air of tragedy and a kind of endless suffering’ (98). By the end of the novel, she is on the brink of recoiling from life altogether, feeling ‘an almost intolerable distaste for life, a kind of nausea’ (127).

In Olivia, then, the novel’s glacial, repetitive style finds its subject. Around her, there is more vigour and at points more colour. Splashes of colour in the landscape – especially red – indicate momentary escapes from the monochrome world of winter. The arrival in the second chapter of George Curle’s friend, the literary critic Mr Premiss, introduces a more varied palette suited to his role of attempting to stimulate the emotions of the Neran sisters and, rather more successfully, the sexuality of Pauline Clark. In addition to colour, Edwards associates him with musical diversion as he likens the shape of the trees against the grey sky to ‘a little scherzo’ (47). As this musical motif implies, Premiss brings a certain – welcome – humour and playfulness, but only temporarily. His invigorating effect quickly dissolves into careless flirtatiousness, and on his departure the wintry, monotonous theme is restated and even reinforced as ‘the unchanging, dull white of the sky gave to everything an air of permanence,
motionlessness, and even silence’ (143–4). While ambitiously experimenting with representational means, therefore, the novel is deeply uncertain about the prospects of emotional and aesthetic renewal. Just as Winter Sonata envisages no lasting movement beyond the emotional impasse encoded in the landscape, so the talents of the amateur musicians Nettle and Pauline seem destined to be frustrated: Pauline’s by her social class in general and her abusive mother in particular, and Nettle’s by his desire to ingratiate himself with the disengaged Neran family and their superficial sense of culture.

Despite this overwhelming sense of stasis, the novel intriguingly hints at an emotionally intense (perhaps scandalous) past underlying the frozen, conventional present. Mrs Curle refers elliptically to her late husband who, disregarding the formalities of courtship she now believes in, ‘carried [her] by storm’ (100), and ‘used to come into the house sometimes and say, “Maria, I can’t stand this life any longer.” What life he could not stand I never could find out’ (99). The deaths and departures of the many absent parents in the novel also form part of this submerged narrative layer that, one suspects, may be the key to understanding Edwards’s cryptic rendition of the present. Winter Sonata is an enigmatic work that perhaps inevitably feels like an experiment with an immature but distinctive technique. Its republication should, however, contribute to the welcome resurgence of interest in British women modernists in recent years evident in renewed attention to figures such as May Sinclair and Mary Butts. Like other works in Honno’s Classics series, it also makes accessible a significant element of the archive of Welsh women’s writing.

Notes

2 The biographical information in this paragraph is drawn from Claire Flay’s introduction to the Honno edition, vii–xxi. Flay has also published a literary biography, Writers of Wales: Dorothy Edwards (Cardiff: Cardiff University Press, 2011).
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The regulation and control of sexuality were central to the project of national identity formation in twentieth-century Ireland, producing a bitter legacy of exile, abuse and incarceration. Acknowledgement of these injustices, experienced most acutely by those living at the margins of Irish society, has only slowly entered into public discourse over the past two decades, provoking an intense debate and reflection on how gender and sexuality have profoundly affected Irish history and society. Sexual Politics in Modern Ireland, edited by four of Ireland’s leading historians in the field of women’s history, is a welcome contribution to this debate and to the growing field of literature on gender history in Ireland. The collection originates from the 2011 Women’s History Association of Ireland conference on sexual politics in Ireland, a conference that has produced a number of important publications. The editors are mindful of this legacy and explicitly locate their volume in the tradition of women’s history established with the publication of the pioneering 1978 collection Women in Irish Society: The Historical Dimension, one of the foundational texts of Irish women’s history.

The eight essays in the collection offer different challenges to conventional understandings of gender and sexuality, drawing attention to how bodies were, and continue to be, regulated and contained on the basis of gender. In the introduction, the editors contend that the politicisation of gender, particularly in relation to its encounter with the public sphere, is essential in order to understand how people are shaped by, and, in turn, shape their own societies. Emphasising personal experience, the collection includes the voices of those who have been marginalised, suppressed and ignored. These previously silenced voices offer stories that are not just incidental to mainstream history but also crucial in creating a wider sense of inclusiveness in our construction of the past. They also allow us to understand how gender and sexuality have historically shaped debates on questions of employment, sex, prostitution, the

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2 Margaret McCurtain and Donnchadh Ó Corráin (eds), Women in Irish Society: The Historical Dimension (Dublin: Arlen House, 1978).
Reviews

legal system, sex education, the treatment of intersex persons, and abortion and the relationship between Church and State. The role that the Irish state has played in the regulation and containment of the gendered body is a consistent theme that emerges from all of the essays, allowing us to reconsider our understanding of the state and how its actions have been, and continue to be, shaped by questions of gender and sexuality.

In a generally strong collection a number of essays stand out for their insight into the complex questions of gender and sexuality in Ireland. Maeve O’Riordan’s essay examining the personal relationship of Mabel Smyly and Dermot O’Brien through their private and intimate correspondence offers a rare insight into the private life and sexual desires of an upper-middle-class couple in the early twentieth century. O’Riordan’s account of their relationship adds considerably to our understanding of the complexity of sexuality and reveals how individuals of that time sought to navigate around as well as conform to societal expectations.

Jennifer Redmond’s essay on female emigrants from post-Independence Ireland is one of the strongest in the collection. Redmond argues that the national obsession with the control and regulation of sexuality extended beyond Ireland’s physical borders as the body continued to serve as the ‘site of success or failure’ for female emigrants embodying anxieties about sexual morality as well as economic and national failure.

Following the successful and jubilant Marriage Equality Referendum campaign of 2015 it is too easy to assume that the Irish’s state’s problematic relationship to gender and sexuality that dominated twentieth-century Ireland has been safely consigned to the past. The final two essays in the collection focus on the contemporary moment and serve as useful reminders that for all that appears to have changed in debates around gender and sexuality in Ireland, there remain important struggles ahead and battles to be won. A constitutional prohibition on abortion introduced in Ireland following a referendum in 1983 means that Ireland continues to have some of the most restrictive abortion laws in the world, with abortion illegal in all circumstances except where there is a risk to the life of the pregnant woman. In her essay, using oral histories from pro-choice activists involved in recent campaigns, Mary Muldowney explores the changing attitudes to abortion in Ireland, reminding us that this is ‘living history’ and that there remains much to be done before women living in Ireland achieve full equality before the law. Finally, Tanya Ní Mhuírthile’s chapter on the legal history of intersex persons in Ireland is a fitting conclusion to the volume. Ní Mhuírthile reveals how our understandings and regulation of sex and sexuality encroach into the category of gender itself, resulting in the legal erasure of intersex persons.
Sexual Politics in Modern Ireland challenges our assumptions of sexual and gender politics in Ireland and by including the voices of marginal groups and individuals across the nineteenth and twentieth centuries allows for a more complex and nuanced understanding of sexuality and gender and its relationship to political, social and cultural life.

_Sinéad Kennedy_
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Stuart Hall spent a lifetime trying to understand how people come to accept political systems that exploit them. These two books, and particularly The Kilburn Manifesto, sum up his legacy. Forty years ago Hall was central to the drafting of the *Marxism Today* manifesto, _The Forward March of Labour Halted?_, on why workers increasingly supported Thatcher. Today _The Kilburn Manifesto_ seeks to explain why neoliberalism remains dominant despite the economic crisis of 2008.

Hall brought to the earlier manifesto the insights of the newly founded Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies. He argued that British politics had reached a key turning point at which workers increasingly accepted the legitimacy of the market and of individual endeavour within it. This new common sense was, as Hall described it, crystallising within a wider politico-economic conjuncture that was itself structurally over-determined. The contradictions of post-war managed capitalism could no longer be contained, and a new political settlement was demanded. Neoliberalism was capital’s only alternative. Althusser was added to Gramsci to cap the argument.

_The Kilburn Manifesto_ concerns the sequel. In 2008, most people would have thought that this particular conjuncture had run its course. The contradictions of financialised capitalism had been fully exposed. The system was no longer able to continue without state support and, even with it, was manifestly failing to meet its own goals. Yet neoliberalism’s grip on popular consciousness survived stronger than ever. The two books, both written cumulatively between

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2010 and 2014, grapple with the reasons for this and ask what strategies might prevent the congealing of a new and even more dangerous conjuncture.

In reviewing the current manifesto, I have to revisit old memories. In the 1970s I was part of the minority on the Marxism Today editorial board that opposed the adoption of the new line. Sometimes yesterday’s reasons fade and lose relevance; in this case they do not entirely. Our opposition was not to new approaches to popular consciousness: John Hoffman, who wrote the classic analysis of Gramsci on the state, was part of the minority. Nor was it about broadening social alliances. It was about something far more fundamental: the approach to the working class and how to understand its movement – issues not entirely resolved in The Kilburn Manifesto.

In The Long Revolution, written against the background of the earlier debates on working class co-option in the 1950s, Raymond Williams addressed similar issues but answered them differently. He started by challenging the stereotype of a heroic proletarian past and a tame consumerist present by pointing out that far more workers voted Labour in the 1950s than in the 1930s. He then went to the issue of definitions and attacked the disabling character of the commonplace distinction between working class and middle class. ‘Most of us live’, he commented, ‘by selling our labour … setting one kind of worker against another has the effect of directing social consciousness into forms that simply perpetuate the overall system’.2

In The Forward March, the authors surrendered this broader definition of all those who sell their labour by hand and brain – the definition used by Marx – and unaccountably substituted the formulation used by Max Weber, that of manual labour. Statistical conclusions followed. The manual working class was now a minority of the population but was at the same time, given the rising number of strikes in the 1970s, becoming more stridently economistic. And this, in turn, was moving British politics towards a fatal occlusion with the neoliberal conjuncture. Thatcherism was able to exploit the manifestly statist and instrumental character of the post-war state sector to proclaim a new era of anti-statist choice and freedom. The result was what Hall described as the ‘Great Moving Right Show’ driven by the twin engines of working class economism and neoliberal individualism. Hence the need to look outside the working class to new social forces as the basis for progressive change.3

Again it is salutary to return to Williams’s more anchored understanding of the working-class movement. In The Long Revolution he remarked that he ‘surprised many people’ when, in Culture and Society, he claimed that ‘the institutions of the labour movement – the trade unions, the cooperatives, the Labour Party – were a great creative achievement of working people’, and

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that growing out of the sectional defence of self-interest, because it was also collective, came ‘ways of living that could be extended to the whole society: collective democratic institutions and the substitution of cooperative equality for competition’ (328).

The importance of this insight is readily appreciated when we look at the labour movement of the 1970s. There were indeed more strikes. But an increasing proportion involved solidarity action, and for the first time since the 1920s some were directly political. These strikes also increasingly encompassed that broader working class, with white-collar local government workers turning out to support women, mainly from the Indian subcontinent, at Grunwick. And there was also something of that wider political transformation that Williams saw as inherent in collective action: a renewal of democracy and socialist commitment within both the trade union movement and the Labour Party.

None of this is to gainsay the degree to which Thatcherite Conservatism did successfully play to working-class economism. But it is to challenge both the scale and inevitability of its success. Colin Hay has amply demonstrated how the ‘winter of discontent’ was constructed as an ideational device – with virtually no basis in actual life – to service a mass media campaign insisting the country was out of control. Unfortunately the Great Moving Right Show tended to promote an assessment within sections of the Left which, albeit from another direction, also questioned the political wisdom of trade union militancy. It was for this reason that the minority on the Marxism Today board saw the Forward March thesis as being, again to use Williams’s words, part of that ‘continuous campaign to check, confuse and side-track’ and one that ultimately played some part in the rise of New Labour.

In hindsight this judgement may well have been too harsh. It certainly would be for the authors of this collection, who have sharply distanced themselves from that project. If there is a continuing uneasiness about the intellectual framework provided, it is that the concepts of conjuncture and over-determination tend to suggest levels of inevitability that may not be warranted and can be politically disabling. Looking back, Thatcher’s success in the 1980s would seem to have been highly contingent. Without the Social Democrat split from an increasingly left wing and mobilised Labour Party and an unpredicted war in the South Atlantic, the Tories would have been out of office before they were ready to take on the miners. The concept of ‘over-determination’ may well be over-determinist.

That said, The Kilburn Manifesto and its sister volume are very welcome contributions to debate. They provide a depth of sustained analysis of the

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current crisis that is distinguished by its attempt to integrate explanations of what has happened economically with wider trends of social change. Doreen Massey and Mike Rustin highlight the increasingly exposed position of the City of London as a global hub for US banks in a world where the balance of economic power is shifting, still quite slowly but nonetheless surely, towards the BRICS countries. They also document the lethal effects of the City of London dominance, and the resulting financialisation, on the wider economy and its exacerbation of pre-existing differences between a blighted and de-industrialised north and west and a choked and dysfunctional southeast.

What marks out these two volumes from most existing commentary is the attempt to understand the relationship between the increasingly fraught management of Britain’s financialised economy and the continuing grip of market-focused attitudes – particularly, and most worryingly, among the generation that has entered, or tried to enter, the labour market over the past two decades. Stuart Hall himself contributes a notable chapter in which he argues that one key factor that gives strength to an ideology is its ability to contain internal contradictions – using as an illustration materials drawn from readers’ contributions to the Sun’s blog pages – and the need for those contesting this ideology to externalise and explode these contradictions. This analysis is taken forward by Ben Little, focusing particularly on the dissonance between generations, and by John Clarke and Janet Newman, who detail a wider disaffection with what they call ‘publicness’, the sphere of traditional politics. Written before the 2015 general election, this chapter nonetheless prefigures aspects of the outcome, particularly the distrust in a Labour Party that in terms of actual policy had shifted somewhat to the Left, and the electoral advances of populist nationalism.

If lingering doubts remain, they do so on two fronts. One has already been mentioned. The authors still seek to distance themselves from ‘classical Marxism’, which they persist in describing as ‘economically-determinist’. Yet their own amalgam of Gramsci, Althusser, Foucault and Laclau sometimes seems to take them into the territory where their ideological constructs have an unduly determinist character. The other doubt is linked to this. The authors seek an agency that can ideologically challenge the hegemony of neoliberalism. Political parties are mentioned: Labour, Green, sometimes even the Liberal Democrats. So also, more directly, are popular movements. But there remains a reluctance to give any central role to the trade union movement and organised labour – and to appreciate, as Williams argued, the interlinkage between a myriad of small, local, personal battles of people defending their own hopes and dignity and the collective organisation which can sometimes bring victory.

Today these personal battles are being imposed on an ever-widening range of people. But, the key question remains and is not really posed here. It is
about class politics – and agency. By what means will this diffuse awareness of
the need for collective organisation be transformed into an understanding that
is sufficiently robust to defeat the practice of neoliberalism and the power of
the class that benefits from it?

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Nicola Wilson, Home in British Working-Class Fiction. Farnham: Ashgate,

‘The house had a tale to tell’, sounds the striking epigraph, by the Liverpool
author James Hanley, to the final section of Nicola Wilson’s rich and revealing
book about the place of home in working-class British prose fiction. Wilson
makes it clear throughout her study that this tale of home reaches beyond the
perceived limits of the family and private life, and in doing so adds to a field
of enquiry that situates the domestic as a varied and complex site in modernity
– a place of labour, politics, economy and class relations. Showing how an
exploration of the significance of domestic space, and not just the more
commonly encountered workplace or urban setting, provides a key site for a
consideration of working-class literature and culture, Wilson’s work also serves
to bring to light overlooked domestic spaces within literary studies. It is the
kitchen, for example, that emerges as a space of literary and social significance
in this analysis of home – ‘a central and formative site of class experience and
consciousness’ (78) – rather than the more well-observed parlour or study.

Among the valuable things this book offers are a scrupulously researched
and always engaging presentation of twentieth-century working-class culture
and politics, and an account of the specific material circumstances and social
pressures within and against which the surveyed writers lived, wrote and were
published. Wilson’s work is consciously indebted to the work of Raymond
Williams, and the study cleverly proposes a materialist version of home and
property in contradistinction to Henry James’s oft-cited ‘house of fiction’.
The book goes on to draw important contrasts between the narrative modes
and forms through which the working-class home is perceived or framed:
the contrasting implications, for example, of the type of description which
surveys in nostalgic detail the material objects furnishing the working-class
home, alongside a markedly different politics in the presentation of interiors
that are ‘un-narrated … rooms that are taken as read’ (194).

While modes of ‘kitchen sink realism’, as one might expect, form a key
part of the book’s survey of post-Second World War literature, particularly
in the chapter ‘Anger, Affluence and Domesticity’, Wilson also shows how
attending to working-class writing on home requires attention to literary
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modernism, social realist documentary film and its visual techniques, and post-modernism. This alertness to the variety of forms through which the home is rendered is particularly effective in the book’s chapter on Robert Tressell’s *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists* and D.H. Lawrence’s *The Rainbow* and *Women in Love*, in which Wilson unravels the significance of these novelists’ strikingly contrasting ways of inhabiting and surveying – or indeed rejecting – the place of home. Wilson is also carefully attentive to the cultural politics of working-class writing itself. She shows how this category has sometimes been narrowly conceived, convincingly revealing how Lawrence’s atypical presentation of working-class home life has tended to be viewed as expressive of literary modernism rather than as part of a variegated tradition of working-class writing. A central achievement of the book is its rigorous and tenacious delineation of a tradition of working-class writing on the home, primarily from the perspective of writers who self-reflexively engaged with this social category, and in the face of what she notes as the ‘undesirability of “working-class writing” as a subject area in spite of a critical interest in “minority” and “peripheral” literatures’ (171).

In tracing this tradition, *Home in Working-Class Fiction* brings into focus work by neglected women writers (including Ellen Wilkinson and Ethel Carnie Holdsworth) while also suggesting how this writing may serve to enrich cultural histories of masculinity and the underplayed evidence of a significant ‘male investment in domesticity’ (136). The book also carefully delineates the complex gender, class and sexual politics that underlie twentieth-century writing on the home – a place frequently portrayed in terms of femininity and the maternal, but one that it is also framed by tropes of intrusion and voyeurism, as well as a significant setting for forms of violence and abuse.

Indeed it is clear that the ‘tale’ of home, as outlined in this book, is one that can be bleak and pretty brutal. Ending as the book does with a chapter charting the literature of the Thatcher years (‘Estates and the New Slum Life’), the analysis inclines towards a narrative of decline and apparent loss. This later section bears important implications for literary approaches to working-class writing, since Wilson’s reading of texts broadly defined as ‘postmodern’ – by authors including Janice Galloway, Livi Michael, Pat Barker and James Kelman – highlights a tradition of experimental and stylised prose which is in service not of postmodern *jouissance*, but of the social and psychic damage associated with post-industrialisation, privatisation and the emergence of a new ‘underclass’. But it is also hard not to be struck by the unrelenting grimness of ‘home’ which emanates from the book’s later sections, with the focus laid squarely on the struggles of the working-class family, rather than, say, emergent or alternative forms of working-class domesticity or ‘home’ conceived in contradistinction to the institution of the family.
Wilson’s *Home in British Working-Class Fiction* is an essential addition to studies of working-class writing as well as a significant resource for the field of home studies that has had a tendency to elide the subject of class as a significant category of enquiry. Its engagingly readable and historically-detailed narrative charts a tradition of working-class fiction that demands more attention from readers, while tracing a social history – with the richness of the domestic at the centre – which is crucial to any understanding of twentieth-century British culture.

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**Christos Efthathiou, E.P. Thompson: A Twentieth-Century Romantic.**

Historians of British socialism tend to see 1956 as a year of profound political rupture. The orthodox view goes something like this. As the world communist movement lurched into crisis – a crisis precipitated by Khrushchev’s ‘secret speech’ and the Soviet invasion of Hungary – Marxist intellectuals made a decisive break with the shallow Stalinist prejudices of their youth. Men like E.P. Thompson, Raphael Samuel and Christopher Hill turned their backs on the Communist Party and set about forging a more sophisticated form of socialist ideology. The result was the emergence of the first New Left, a movement defined by its audacious humanism and its preoccupation with issues of ethics, culture and human agency. The political and cultural doctrines associated with the world communist movement would never again exert a significant influence on the British left, or so it is said.

In this important, carefully researched and eminently readable book, Christos Efthathiou seeks to modify but not overturn the orthodox account of 1956 and its aftermath. He focuses primarily on the career of E.P. Thompson, but he also ranges widely across the history of the modern left. While recognising that Thompson entered a new phase of his intellectual evolution after leaving the British Communist Party, Efthathiou argues that his break with communist thinking was never quite as decisive as some people believe. In particular, he claims that Thompson was influenced throughout his life by the political and cultural assumptions of the Popular Front period. Indeed, in one of the most evocative sections of his book, he shows that Thompson’s sustained commitment to communist principles was partly an expression of deep-rooted family loyalties. The adolescent Thompson was introduced to the Popular Front strategy by his older brother Frank, a brilliant linguist who died a hero’s death in 1944 while serving with the Special Operations Executive in Yugoslavia. It was under Frank’s influence that he immersed himself in the
work of communist intellectuals like Edgell Rickword, Christopher Caudwell and A.L. Morton. Insofar as he never abandoned the lessons he learned from them, it was partly – or so Efstathiou implies – because he wished to keep his brother’s memory alive.

According to Efstathiou, Thompson’s thinking was shaped by his political apprenticeship in the Popular Front in at least three ways. In the first place he acquired a visceral dislike of sectarianism and a corresponding taste for unity. Inspired by the Popular Front’s call for the broadest possible alliance against fascism, he passionately came to believe that progressive movements should eschew ideological hair-splitting and err on the side of inclusivity. Secondly, his reading of the Popular Front historians imbued him with a fascination with the role of human agency in history. One of the central cultural projects of the 1930s was the attempt to popularise the story of the so-called ‘English radical tradition’. What particularly impressed Thompson about this body of work was its challenge to crudely mechanistic versions of Marxism. When men like Morton and Rickword wrote about the English Jacobins or the Chartists, they challenged the idea that their revolt against the status quo was the product of a purely instinctive reaction to oppressive circumstances. Instead they argued – or at least implied – that plebeian radicalism had usually arisen from a conscious attempt to create alternative institutions and alternative forms of morality. It is here, in Efstathiou’s opinion, that we find the origins of Thompson’s later interest in the political and ideological creativity of working people. In a similar vein, Efstathiou also argues that Thompson’s understanding of the relationship between politics and culture was profoundly influenced by the work of Christopher Caudwell. As one of the several British intellectuals who gave his life in Spain in the service of the Popular Front, Caudwell figured in the young Thompson’s imagination as an exemplar of anti-fascist heroism. Efstathiou’s argument is that Caudwell’s work went a long way towards shaping Thompson’s awareness of the aesthetic and affective dimension of social life. What Thompson took away from Caudwell’s theory of cultural crisis – a theory to which he paid extended tribute in his great essay on Caudwell in the 1977 edition of the Social Register – was the realisation that capitalism had robbed the labour process of the last vestiges of personal creativity. The result was that he came to think of socialism in decidedly spiritual terms, seeing it not merely as a means of ending poverty but also as a means of restoring what Ruskin might have called ‘joy in labour’. Another way of putting it would be to say that his pre-war interest in Caudwell prepared the ground for his post-war obsession with William Morris.

Efstathiou sets out in the final sections of his book to trace the influence of the Popular Front on Thompson’s restless and protean post-war career. Seeking to transcend the purely literary focus of much of the existing
scholarship, he moves deftly back and forth between Thompson’s political activism and his work as a historian. Thompson’s involvement in the New Left and his seminal contribution to the politics of nuclear disarmament are seen as a latter-day expression of the Popular Front’s hunger for unity. Similarly, his scholarly work on the evolution of English radicalism is persuasively linked to the pioneering efforts of Morton, Rickword and their contemporaries to equip the Popular Front with a sense of its own historical forebears. Efstathiou’s discussion of *The Making of the English Working Class* is an especially useful resource for anyone wishing to understand the roots of Thompson’s famous desire to rescue English radicalism from ‘the enormous condescension of posterity’.

Efstathiou writes accessibly and makes his case persuasively. The only significant problem with his book relates not to what it says but to what it leaves out. One of the most important aspects of the Popular Front was the way that it forced British Marxism to come to terms with native democratic traditions. Having set themselves up as defenders of ‘English liberty’ against its fascist opponents, British communists were changed utterly by their encounter with an ideological tradition that owed more to Locke, Paine and Mill than to Marx. This makes it all the more regrettable that Efstathiou fails to pay much attention to Thompson’s path-breaking analysis of the relationship between liberalism and plebeian radicalism. In books as dissimilar as *The Making of the English Working Class* and *Writing By Candlelight*, Thompson did much to substantiate the Popular Front intuition that popular radicalism had often involved the creative adaptation of Whiggish notions of individual liberty. In so doing he confronted the socialist movement with a lesson of overwhelming importance: that its efforts to build a new society will do more harm than good unless it seeks to modernise liberalism rather than smash it. However, Efstathiou’s reluctance to get to grips with this aspect of Thompson’s work in no way detracts from his broader achievement. Apart from anything else, his important book reminds us of one of the great unspoken truths of British political life. No one who resigns from the Communist Party ever truly leaves it. Its influence persists.

*Philip Bounds*

*Independent Scholar*


At the height of the Cold War, MI5 held around two million files of surveillance material on individuals and organisations, a significant proportion of which
chronicled the activities of leftist intellectuals. The secret state’s own running commentary on these subjects tends to reveal more about the watchers than the watched (‘he has the appearance of a Communist Jew’, runs a 1938 Special Branch report on one individual). But the plethora of material archived in the course of such assiduous monitoring – newspaper cuttings, intercepted correspondence, whereabouts tracking, and transcripts of public lectures and telephone conversations – is potentially of more general interest. To date the declassified files have mainly been used by biographers in search of new angles and researchers working in the field of security studies. The central innovation of James Smith’s book is to run together these two approaches.

Smith’s timeframe (1930–60) is determined by his sources; only in 1931 was MI5 fully mandated to pursue domestic subversion, and the ‘fifty-year rule’ dictates that little has been declassified covering the years since 1960. Smith describes the surveillance of three distinct but sometimes overlapping cultural groups: the Auden Circle; Ewan MacColl, Joan Littlewood and their Theatre Workshop; and George Orwell and Arthur Koestler. These selections are not justified at length, and there’s a tension in the book between a more ambitious project – drawing on the files to challenge and thicken our understanding of mid-century culture and the structures of feeling of those British intellectuals who came of age in the 1930s – and the more modest one of saying something new about well-known figures by tracking their dealings with the deep state. Some of Smith’s other recent publications, including excellent articles on forgotten cultural journals and the networks of communist film, have met the former agenda. A narrower, more canonical framework structures this book, and the inevitable consequence of privileging the usual suspects is that the narrative tends to reinforce the familiar story of youthful radicalisation giving way to middle-aged disavowals of the ‘low, dishonest decade’.

The book is more or less compelling according to the complexities of the relationship between the state and the individuals described. The chapter on enduring Leftists MacColl and Littlewood contains few surprises. Little that’s new is revealed by either George Orwell’s short MI5 file or from those kept on Auden and Isherwood. The richer plotlines concern Leftist poachers turned Cold War gamekeepers, and it is in analysing the longer trajectories of writers – through mid 1930s radicalisation, wartime propaganda activity, and the emerging networks of the cultural Cold War – that Smith’s book most effectively defamiliarises its key figures. He details, for instance, Arthur Koestler’s capacity for self-preservation and self-promotion across very different ideological contexts. He shows that MI5’s monitoring of Cecil Day Lewis in the 1930s paradoxically served the poet well with the wartime Ministry of Information (they knew of his talents already). Wartime service, Smith argues, then facilitated the assimilation of Day Lewis into the cultural
mainstream, which culminated in his poet laureateship. Even more revealing is the section on Stephen Spender, the 1930s Communist turned freelance ambassador for intellectual freedom who now appears consistent at least in his capacity for turning a blind eye. If Smith is correct – and the combination of his evidence and reasoning is difficult to resist – Spender’s claim that he did not know that the journal *Encounter*, which he edited, was funded by the CIA now looks highly questionable.

As Smith notes, only around 5,000 MI5 files have been released to date and the declassification of others should enable more detailed plotting of the cross-currents connecting writers, cultural institutions and geopolitical priorities through the Cold War period. But this tightly-focused, thoroughly researched and elegantly written account is a substantial piece of that larger project.

*Ben Harker*

University of Manchester


The ‘linguistic turn’, for many a contemporary critic, is decidedly out of fashion; its emancipatory promises have been exhaustively tested and allegedly found wanting. In its place the so-called ‘affective turn’, and a ‘new’ materialism that does, frankly, little to improve upon long established historical and cultural materialisms, have commandeered the critical idiom with mixed and often dubious results. Against this backdrop, Marnie Holborow’s *Language and Neoliberalism* provides a welcome respite from an academic repertoire which itself betrays certain characteristics of the ‘entrepreneurial university’ – the genesis of which is one of many cultural shifts lucidly explained in the book.

Holborow presents a focused investigation of how the neoliberal ‘market’ has insinuated itself into our language, our ‘common sense’ and the conceptual frameworks through which we make sense of the world. Starting with the intersection of language and ideology – the way that language, as a social force, shapes our interpretations of lived reality – Holborow explains the hegemonic power of neoliberal ideology as articulated in the repackaging of language as commodity, in concepts such as ‘human capital’ and the ‘entrepreneurial university’, in the metaphorical personification of ‘the markets’, in their permeation of every field of symbolic and material exchange, and even in some of the ways we have theorised language itself.

Holborow’s methodology is firmly grounded in the cumulative legacy of Marx, Gramsci, Vološinov, Williams and Hall, a tradition, she notes, that is wrongly dismissed as ‘reductionist, out of date and irrelevant to the
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contemporary world of micro-patterns of social consciousness’ (9–10). Her approach is also painstakingly clear: having scrupulously qualified her use of the term ‘neoliberalism’, Holborow puts forward a meticulous account of ideology from the perspective of Marxist political economy, and proceeds to elucidate the relations between ideology and language, the latter of which she insists is an irreducibly social practice. If neoliberalism likes to present itself as a fait accompli, reveling in the ‘appearance’ of ‘its own version of an ideal world’ (9), she usefully reminds us that ideology is, to the contrary, never ‘settled’; its ‘common sense’ is ‘tempered by people’s actual experience of the social world’ (5), and its coordinates, as such, are always subject to contestation. As neoliberalism is above all a political project, its ‘class dimension’, she points out, ‘can hardly be ignored’; accordingly the book makes a solid case for the enduring value of both Marxist political economy and ideological critique as essential in confronting hegemonic ‘common sense’ (10).

This approach entails that Holborow take on some formidable critics to secure her theoretical scaffolding. Michel Foucault, Pierre Bourdieu, George Lakoff, Steven Pinker, Norman Fairclough and Ferdinand de Saussure, among others, are in turn systematically and judiciously addressed: if their critical interventions into language, ideology and subjectivity prove disabling for want of some essential ingredient (typically some declension of ‘the social’), Holborow nonetheless acknowledges their enduring relevance alongside these limitations, and mobilises the former towards her own, more robust critique. For instance, in a fascinating chapter on the functions of metaphor and metonymy, Holborow discusses the media’s personification of the ‘market’ as a powerful agent that ‘speaks’, ‘hears’, ‘reacts’, and so forth, as well as the metonymic subsumption of fields as diverse as health and education under the rubric of ‘the market’; here she draws on Johnson’s and Lakoff’s ‘conceptual metaphors’ while stopping short of attributing their force to ‘neural binding’ within the individual brain, or promoting a ‘cognitive voluntarism’ as an alternative to the conservative monopoly on ‘moralizing metaphors’ (44–6). Her Williams-inspired reading of ‘entrepreneur’ as a ‘linguistic-ideological hub’ (71), in turn, acknowledges Foucault’s insights regarding the ‘entrepreneur of the self’ while refusing to mistake neoliberalism’s ‘grand narrative’ for its lived reality (77), that is, to reify neoliberal subjectivity as something already achieved. Instead, she measures the narrative against lived reality, denouncing its exaltation of supposedly ‘innovative’, ‘adaptable’, ‘risk-taking’ neoliberal subjects who in reality comprise a dismal minority (92) of a chronically underemployed and heavily indebted populace. The word ‘entrepreneur’ and its cognates, spun into spurious concatenations such as ‘social enterprise’ and the ‘entrepreneurial university’, are progressively demystified as Holborow re-grounds them in the material realities from which they emerge. In the case of the ‘entrepreneurial
university’, for instance, the austerity-driven reduction of public funding inevitably recast universities as ‘enterprises’, competing for private donations through epic ‘branding’ efforts, all the while under the scrutiny of agencies and public bodies whose insistence on financial sustainability, performance indicators and proliferating metrics have ‘displaced the economic reality onto another plane with specific ideological intentions’ (98). While she focuses in particular on measures developed in Ireland to shift the funding burden onto universities – which in turn obediently adopt the jargon of ‘enterprise’ as both corporate entity and attitude (102) – similar claims could be made about higher education institutions in almost any country. Further, Holborow leaves no stone unturned in allocating blame where it’s due: it is not just austerity governments or compliant universities but also various ‘neoliberal think tanks’ and agencies like the OECD, she observes, that have played ‘pivotal’ roles in the rebranding of higher education worldwide (105). Indeed in my own view much of the more fashionable, obscurantist criticism for which the present book serves as a meaningful antidote can be attributed to precisely these transformations.

I have only minor reservations about parts of Holborow’s argument. She is not wrong to point out that Saussurean structuralism, according to which signs are ‘exchanged’ and possess ‘value’ in relation to one another, replicates the (mis)perception of the market as a site of ‘pure’ exchange (52–4). The immediate relevance of this point, however, is not entirely clear given that Saussure’s work antedates neoliberalism by at least half a century. Likewise, it seems out of place to critique (as many have already done) his abstraction of language from its social moorings, given his explicit methodological focus on the synchronic over the diachronic. Among other things, he never claimed to be a Marxist, and the fact that his priorities differed from hers does not invalidate the immense contribution he made to the study of language and culture – a contribution without which, arguably, her own intervention would look considerably different, if indeed it could be offered at all.

Holborow is more on point, at least chronologically speaking, when she notes that the failure of post-structuralists to interrogate the ‘market metaphor’ has led to their ‘entrapment within a language system which leads to the severance of language from social reality’ (54). Bourdieu’s theories of linguistic and other symbolic ‘capital’ likewise come under fire for a certain conceptual incoherence; though he does reassert the importance of the social, with its ‘monopolies and oligopolies’ (56), he nonetheless employs, she claims, a neoliberal market model that seems at odds with his distaste for neoliberalism itself. Ultimately, the unqualified privileging of the cultural and the symbolic over the economic, she argues, cannot expose neoliberal ideology as embedded in and conveyed through linguistic practices; it ascribes
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to language more stability than it actually possesses, allowing the ‘presence of discourse [to] crowd out social developments’ (118). Contra Foucauldian analyses, which privilege the individual as the ‘source’ and ‘victim’ of social power (120), Holborow insists on ‘[identifying] the link’ between the language of the ruling class and the ‘specific social world that it seeks to represent, including its distortions of reality which have the potential to undermine its hegemony’ (121). ‘The speech act is by nature social’, she reminds us, citing Bakhtin, and the challenge is to ‘refocus on the dynamic, social nature of language’ to permit a ‘re-theorisation of ideology’ in relation to it (124).

A review this brief necessarily omits other insights offered by this dense yet eminently readable intervention that is at once insightful, empirically grounded, and scrupulously documented. At its best, the book is a notable contribution to the study of neoliberalism as a political as well as an economic project, and its emphatic distinction ‘between the ideological representation of the world and … the real experience of class conflict’ (130) constitutes, amongst other forms of praxis, a crucial dimension of ‘the much needed challenge to neoliberalism’ (131) – a challenge that many of our more ‘fashionable’ theories are unable to present.

Liane Tanguay
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In its first two decades the Communist Party of Great Britain attracted a remarkable collection of writers and artists, many of them as uncomfortable in conforming to the Party rule book as the Party was in accommodating itself to a restive bunch of ‘petty bourgeois intellectuals’. Recent scholarship has started to look beyond the familiar luminaries of the literary left to examine this larger constellation of poets, novelists, historians and philosophers who did so much to shape the distinctive culture of 1930s Communism, often from oppositional positions against the grain of the dominant Stalinist orthodoxy. These two collections, from the indispensable small press Smokestack Books, add a significant dimension to our knowledge of two now largely forgotten figures who were part of that cultural efflorescence.
Tom Wintringham (1898–1949) was a founder member of the CPGB, as editor of *Workers’ Weekly* one of twelve Party members gaol in 1925 for seditious libel and incitement to mutiny. (Among other things, he had written a pamphlet urging the armed forces to ‘[u]se your arms on the side of your own class. Turn your weapons on your oppressors.’) A veteran of the Great War, he became the Party’s expert on military strategy in a series of regular articles in *Labour Monthly*, and in 1936 the military correspondent for the *Daily Worker*, the newspaper he had helped to launch in 1930. Also in 1936, with the Party’s active backing, he put his military expertise at the service of the embattled Spanish Republic, and is credited with originating the idea of the International Brigades, organising a British Battalion, and participating as a weapons instructor and then a combatant, in which capacity he was twice wounded. For many years a protégé and comrade of the ruthlessly doctrinaire Palme Dutt, he nevertheless had various disagreements with the Party, particularly over its ‘Class against Class’ policy. He was finally expelled in 1938 for refusing to break with his future wife, the American journalist Kitty Bowler, whom he’d met in Spain and who had been denounced by the Comintern as a Trotskyist spy. In the later thirties, outside the Party, through numerous broadcasts and articles in the *Daily Mirror, Picture Post, Tribune* and elsewhere, as well as a series of widely read pamphlets and books, he became, in George Orwell’s words, ‘a notable voice in stemming the tide of defeatism’ in a Britain stumbling towards war. As director of the Guerrilla Warfare Training School at Osterley Park, he laid the foundations of citizens’ defence brigades which were to become the Home Guard. In 1942 he helped found the Commonwealth Party, which became a thorn in the side of the Conservative-led National Government, campaigning vigorously from the left and winning three by-elections during the course of the war.

He was a founding editor in 1934 of *Left Review*—one of the most interesting journals to come out of the thirties left, notable, despite its Party imprimatur, for its broad Popular Front tolerance of contending political views; it is in this journal that several of the poems collected here first appeared. Among them ‘Monument’, published in October 1937, a visionary roll-call of the places and people of Spain that envisages their ultimate victory over fascism, owes much in tone and form to Jack Lindsay’s ‘On Guard for Spain’, which had appeared in the journal earlier that year. Both poems exemplify the new mode of ‘Mass Declamation’ innovated by Lindsay as a form appropriate to an age of popular insurrection and mass politics, recalling, in long declaratory lines, Blake’s Prophetic Books and Whitman’s sprawling parataxes, and combining ferocious denunciations of capitalism and its murderous agencies with encomia to the labouring masses, together with exhortations and rebukes to those who had not yet joined the struggle or sought to turn their faces away.
The central motif of ‘Monument’ is ‘metal and earth’ – metal from which the Spanish people made bullets and earth with which they mingled their blood. Wintringham’s earliest poems are unexceptional exercises in the Georgian mode. The language begins to harden and sour in a series of 1917–18 poems which register the shock of modern warfare, in which ‘The guns awake to anger’ and ‘The crowded guns are cursing, while faint dawn breaks’ (‘Below Vimy’, 43). Thereafter, it is all cursing and anger at a post-bellum world where ‘a few men hold black tyranny / Over man’s work and will’ (‘Awakening’, 45). The word ‘metal’ clangs and reverberates through subsequent poems, revealing a mind galvanised by that 1920 trip to a Moscow in revolutionary ferment recorded in ‘Against the Determinate World’. Wintringham’s political conversion to what ‘Revolution’ in 1925 calls ‘the steel of … wills pointed by bitterness’ (57) is now matched by the harsh metallic imagery of an Expressionist poetic which celebrates ‘the lathe’s steel teeth’ and the ‘flare-metal birth’ of industrial machinery in such poems as ‘The Test’ (70) and the Stakhanovite ‘The Immortal Tractor’, which assumes the default rhetoric of 1930s ‘pylon poetry’:

We are moulding, forging, shaping the steel of our wills
Into pinions, into pistons, crankshaft-web and crankshaft-throw,
We are building Lenin's Tractor. It will grow. (65)

Sometimes, though, as in the title poem to this collection, in a ‘Dynamo-driven city waiting bombers’, ‘the mind remembers / What it’s all for’, and in such moments of tenderness, where ‘Love [is] dialectical with anger’ (75), Wintringham finds a less rancorous, more human voice. Even then, ‘It’s a Strange Thing …’, a 1936 poem of some delicacy recalling, in the midst of war, the embrace of lovers ‘In a strange far-off past, our bodies welding’ (79), can’t entirely forget the metalwork classes it’s attended.

The Australian-born Jack Lindsay (1900–90), once widely influential on the literary left, didn’t actually join the Party till 1941, presumably after its line on the war changed overnight with Hitler’s invasion of the Soviet Union; but he had already been a fellow-traveller for some time when his long declamatory poem ‘Who are the English?’ was first published in *Left Review* in May 1936. Although he often differed vigorously from Party policy (in 1950 he was even denounced in the *Daily Worker*), and despite a serious wobble after Krushchev’s denunciation of Stalin at the 20th Congress of the CPSU in 1956 and the subsequent Soviet suppression of the Hungarian Uprising, he was to remain a member until his death in 1990. The ‘abject dismay’ (118) and inward struggle fought out in the sarcastically entitled satire, ‘Sudden Discords in the Trumpets of Overdelayed Last Judgment, 1956’, did not however drive him to join the
over 7,000 members, including friends such as Edgell Rickword, Randall Swingler and E.P. Thompson, who left the Party at the time; but, a permanent irritant to the Party apparatchiks, he helped fan the winds of change that began to blow through its corridors from the 1970s onwards.

Lindsay was always a maverick, steeped in the European intellectual and artistic traditions, influenced as much by Nietzsche, Freud and Dadaism as by Marxism (the poem ‘Paris Midnight’ is dedicated ‘to Tristan Tzara at a corner of the Boulevard St Michel’). As he wrote in his 1937 ‘attempt to fuse the basic ideas of Marx and Freud’, The Anatomy of Spirit: ‘Marxism is not a given body of doctrines, a dogmatism (as it is commonly misrepresented)’; rather, ‘Marxist materialism seeks to grasp the living fact in its dialectical fullness – that is, to see the fact as a whole; as related to past, present, and future; as organic process’. Like many of the best minds in the Communist movement in the 1930s, Lindsay sought to wrest what he (somewhat quixotically) here dubs ‘spirit’ from the mechanistic materialism of Stalinist doctrine, in which consciousness is simply a ‘passive reflection of the material fact’, insisting instead, in a move similar to that of Raymond Williams later, that ‘The idea is indeed as material as the fact itself’ (Anatomy, 5). Lindsay’s poetry is preoccupied with the drive, as he wrote elsewhere, to ‘incarnate the idea … in every aspect of my living’, to seek what a 1928 essay speaks of as ‘the concrete universal, the human dynamic’, or what Anne Cranny-Francis, in her valuable introduction to the collection, calls an ‘embodied engagement’ with the world of material beings (14–15).

Lindsay’s poems are crowded with objects and events, with living and historical individuals and mass movements apprehended as part of a continuing and ongoing stream of life, the flow of history. ‘Requiem Mass for Englishmen Fallen in the International Brigade’, for example, reworks the traditional *ubi sunt* motif of Villon’s ‘Ballade des dames du temps jadis’ to present a roll-call of the dead who have fallen in Spain, in a series of vivid cameos of their former lives that runs from the famous (Ralph Fox, John Cornford) to the hitherto anonymous workers, trades unionists and others, each individually named in the closing line of each stanza. But these ‘types of the English dead in Spain’ (57) are not stereotypes so much as archetypes, embodied metonymies of the cause they have espoused – in other words, ‘concrete universals’. The title poem’s conjurations of proletarian life down the centuries, from the Peasants’ Revolt, through the Lollards, the swirling sects of the English Revolution, Luddites and Chartists, and ending in his own day with the miners of Rhondda and Durham in the General Strike, evoke an alternative Englishness to that of the ruling classes, in which ‘The disinherited are restored’ to ‘England, our England, / England, our own’ (34). This poem

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set a pattern for Lindsay’s subsequent work in the Party, extending into the 1950s, to realign the allegedly ‘alien’ ideology and values of Communism with a tradition of homegrown, native radicalism.

Lindsay’s poetry can fall into hectoring and harangue, its ubiquitous vocatives and interrogatives striving too hard to drum up passion and remorse. ‘The Factory of Death’ exhort its reader to ‘see yourself / in that dark place, / meeting evil / face to face’, and closes with questions which are also rebukes: ‘Can you understand? Can you atone?’ (71). The use of the second person is insistent and recurrent in these poems, though sometimes, as in ‘Where are We Hopelessly Wrong?’ (104), he can acknowledge a more encompassing collective complicity. But, for all the finger-jabbing, one is left in the end with a sense of a man who speaks to us directly, person to person, about causes and catastrophes in which he is deeply, passionately involved. Not for nothing is his favourite adverb ‘here’ (‘Here is the end of the world’ (70), ‘Here the tumultuous centre’ (75), ‘The boundary is here’ (68)), or his favourite rhetorical device the demonstrative adjective ‘this’, as if simply pointing out what’s in front of our eyes, in a world for which we share the responsibility: ‘Look closely. Has this woman your own face?’, he demands in ‘She Began No Wars’ (66). For us all, ‘This night of all night any night tonight’, the poem affirms, ‘This face looks in through every pane of fear − / Answer! Whose voice is calling?’ ‘On Guard for Spain’ calls on the reader directly to ‘Face here the map of your own fate, and say: / This suffering shall not be in vain’ (42), ‘For the war in Spain is war for the human future’ (51). ‘Buffalo Stadium, Paris, 1948’, dedicated to Paul Eluard, speaks of ‘This day in Paris / this day everywhere /catching in its handclasp / all days that have been, all days that are yet to be’ (83). At its best, Lindsay’s button-holing, interpellatory urgency succeeds in catching and defining ‘this moment of freedom … in the concrete here-and-now’ of which he wrote in the unpublished manuscript Fullness, cited by Cranny-Francis. For Lindsay, the aesthetic process which embodies ‘the concrete apprehension of the living moment as one of freedom’ was totally consonant with his Marxism, was, indeed, one of ‘the three freedoms defined by Marx’ (21).

Stan Smith
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Benjamin Kohlmann’s recent study of 1930s British literature argues that the modernist aesthetic of literature as a self-contained, autonomous form underlies the works of several self-consciously political writers of the 1930s.
Existing scholarship on the literature of the time developed largely under the influence of Samuel Hynes’s *The Auden Generation* (1976), though Hynes’s identification of 1930s literature with predominantly Oxbridge-educated, middle-class, male writers has been questioned by subsequent studies which have redrawn the literary map of the period. Although Kohlmann’s book is aware of its limited scope compared to these predecessors – its focus on just such a small group, most of whom were educated at Cambridge under I.A. Richards and contributed to the students’ magazine *Experiment* (1928–31) – the aim of the book is less to provide a comprehensive narrative of the 1930s literature than to analyse the residual influence of modernist aesthetics in the politised writing of that decade.

The book’s focus on modernism in the 1930s might give the impression that it is yet another variation on recent discussions of ‘late modernism’ or ‘intermodernism’. But Kohlmann consciously keeps his distance from these studies, arguing that while the attention paid to ‘late modernist’ writers in the thirties has significantly expanded the hitherto limited view of modernism based on the texts from the 1910s and 1920s, it has also ‘enforced exclusion mechanisms which are nearly as strict as the ones that used to be associated with the idea of “high” modernism itself’ (11). What Kohlmann calls the ‘exclusion mechanism’ is the tendency of recent modernist studies to ignore or dismiss overtly political writings, thereby implicitly reinforcing the hierarchical view of modernism in which purely aesthetic (i.e. not political) literature is celebrated. Kohlmann attempts to historicise this hierarchy by drawing on thirties writers’ dichotomous view of literature as autonomous art and literature as a medium for political or moral agendas. In this sense, Kohlmann’s book questions the problem of aesthetics and politics not only in thirties literature but also in today’s academic study of modernism.

The book’s main argument is that the writers it discusses – William Empson, British Surrealists such as David Gascoyne and Hugh Sykes Davies, Mass Observers such as Charles Madge and Humphrey Jennings, and Edward Upward – were, despite their inclination towards radical politics, largely influenced by Richards’ concept of ‘pseudo-statements’ as the form of ideal poetic language. The concept invites readers of literature to view literary works as autonomous, self-sufficient bodies of writing separated from external reality. Kohlmann’s critical procedure can be seen as the inverse of Marxist ideological critique in its questioning of the preoccupation with ‘pure poetry’ in manifestly political works, which he refers to as an ‘apolitical unconscious’.

Although the distinction between art and politics sometimes looks too schematic, he pays attention to their complex overlap by effectively employing some ‘keywords’ which, in Raymond Williams’ formulation, bind ‘together certain ways of seeing culture and society’ (quoted in Kohlmann, 15). In other words, for thirties writers, keywords such as ‘honesty’, ‘revolution’, ‘fact’, and ‘dream’ functioned to negotiate, or ‘bind together’, two ways of understanding literature.

Chapter 1, which discusses the Cambridge magazine Experiment’s ambivalence between artistic purity and politics of literature, is centred on the discussion of the keyword ‘belief’, which, in Richards’ view, belongs to the realm of reality outside autonomous poetic language. Kohlmann elaborates the concept as having a weak version (‘a passive presence in poetry which complicates the idea of a text-centred critical hermeneutics’) and a strong version (‘the possibilities of advertising and propagating belief, whether religious or political, by artistic means’) (18–19). By carefully tracing how these two versions appeared in Experiment, and the debate between Richards and Eliot that had instigated the magazine’s political-aesthetic discussion, Kohlmann successfully demonstrates the complex imbrication of aesthetics with politics in the magazine.

Subsequent chapters employ similar procedures of detecting ambivalences between pure art and politics by tracing developments of keywords. In Chapter 2, Kohlmann questions the conventional reception of William Empson’s ‘neutrality’ as an untroubled detachment from the political turmoil of the 1930s by closely examining his experiences in Japan and China; he also illustrates the precariousness of Empson’s ‘impartiality’ by discussing the notion of ‘honesty’, which also has two versions that are commingled in his works (‘honesty-as-conformity’ and ‘honesty-as-independence’). Chapter 3 examines the dilemma of politics and art in British Surrealism’s oscillation between the aesthetic ‘purity’ inherent in the French Surrealist movement and the Communist Party’s demand for propaganda. Here the keyword is ‘revolution’, which held for the Surrealists both artistic and political meanings. Chapter 4 reveals the artistic side of the Mass-Observation movement that has been largely regarded as a sociological survey. Kohlmann salvages the artistic dimension of the early years of M-O by focusing on the different prospects of the movement held by Humphrey Jennings and Charles Madge, each representing M-O’s artistic, utopian dimension and its political, social realist aspect. M-O’s notion of ‘fact’ is at the same time ‘poetic’ and ‘scientific’; overall, it aspires to the integration of these two incongruous notions.

The final chapter examines Edward Upward’s preoccupation with ‘dreams’, with its two dimensions, ‘fantasy’ and ‘prophecy’ (borrowed from E.M. Forester). ‘Fantasy’ is a ‘bad dream’ that can be dismissed as ideological
false consciousness, whereas ‘prophecy’ envisages the future by extrapolating from elements within the present reality. Drawing on Ernst Bloch’s notion of daydreams, which ‘rehearse the basic structures of utopian thinking not by offering up an alternative world but by defamiliarizing everyday reality’ (191–2), Kohlmann detects what Bloch calls ‘anticipatory consciousness’ in Upward’s ambivalence between a commitment to the present reality and a vision of the future. Kohlmann’s observation that Christopher Caudwell’s critique of utopianism in *Studies of a Dying Culture* shares with Upward’s *Journey to a Border* a recognition of ‘action’ as a prerequisite for a not-yet imaginable future is very compelling; in particular, it reveals the utopian impulse in Caudwell’s ostensibly anti-utopian writing, though I would have found it more convincing if it were accompanied by more detailed accounts of Caudwell’s and other Marxists’ discussions on utopia.

Indeed, the problem of utopia seems to be an undercurrent that runs through the book. The conclusion of Fredric Jameson’s *The Political Unconscious*, the book which inspired Kohlmann’s concept of an ‘apolitical unconscious’, suggests the need for Marxist criticism not only to reveal ideologies in art works but also to recognise utopian impulses in ideologies of art works. Kohlmann’s attempt to reverse ideological critique and to examine the ‘apolitical unconscious’ in politicised literature is aimed at revealing utopian impulses in seemingly ideological texts of the 1930s. If Richards’s concept of autonomous poetic language aspired to a utopian realm of language untainted by political turmoil, Kohlmann demonstrates that writers in the 1930s could pursue such a utopian vision of art only negatively, as something that is always-already hindered by the present reality. Such a question of utopia vis-à-vis reality still haunts many people who think seriously about art and society; and Kohlmann’s *Committed Styles* provides us with invaluable records of a struggle that remains unresolved today.

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A long time ago, as an undergraduate, I studied Wittgenstein for an entire year for the Philosophy half of my degree, reading virtually everything he had written. Simultaneously, my final year English option was a course in

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modernism. However, never the twain met, and the modernist literature I encountered was never really connected with any of the philosophical currents informing the analysis of modernity and modernism as one might expect to find on similar courses today. I was left alone to ponder the strange, elliptical and austere style of the Austrian philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein in the only book he published in his lifetime, the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1922), and then to ponder further the more discursive mini-narratives of his *Philosophical Investigations* (1953): was this, I wondered, not some form of modernist writing, straining the boundaries of a philosophical textbook in order somehow to ‘make it new’? Was there not something ‘poetic’ about the *Tractatus*? Wittgenstein himself seemed aware of this feature of his writing, explaining that ‘the work is strictly philosophical and at the same time literary’.¹

I never really pursued this line of thought but have always considered Wittgenstein as a thinker whose central investigations into the nature of language and thought deserved to be considered as fundamentally modernist, and have always believed his theory of language more productive than, for instance, that of Saussure, a writer whose influence upon the French tradition of structuralism and post-structuralism has made him a much more familiar figure to those studying modernism on literature degrees than the work of Wittgenstein. So it was enjoyable to read Ben Ware’s illuminating attempt to position Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus* within what he calls ‘the force-fields of modernism and modernity’ (xiii). If the book doesn’t always succeed in the bold claims it asseverates, the promise of its rapprochement between Wittgenstein and modernism is to be warmly applauded. Given the fierce complexity of Wittgenstein’s thought, Ware is to be praised for the clear exposition of his philosophy and for the many helpful suggestions he proffers for how the philosopher’s ideas might be relevant to those studying modernism. Influenced by the work of Stanley Cavell, Ware is particularly good in tracing the divisions between the secondary interpretations of Wittgenstein, carefully elucidating then critiquing points of view before forwarding his own dialectical reading of Wittgenstein’s philosophy. There is something seemingly counterintuitive in Ware’s interpretation here, given that Wittgenstein’s work is normally perceived as being antithetical to the German Hegelian tradition of dialectical thought (he once said that ‘Hegel seems to me to be always wanting to say that things which look different are really the same. Whereas my interest is in showing things which look the same are really different’).² However, Ware makes a strong case for this perspective, particularly in the latter chapters of the book.

¹ Wittgenstein to Ludwig von Ficker, cited in Ware, *Dialectic of the Ladder*, p.xii.
The opening chapter presents a summary of debates around the terms ‘modernity’, ‘modernism’, and ‘the avant-garde’, and will be perhaps overly familiar to many readers, betraying some of the origins of the book in a PhD thesis where such contextual overviews are necessary. The expository mode continues in the second chapter which, though titled ‘Ethics and the Literary in Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus*’, is more of a careful plotting of some of the main philosophical ideas of the text (the nature of propositions, showing and saying, the role of nonsense, limits and the mystical), along with a nuanced account of different schools of interpretation of the text. It becomes clear here that Ware reads the *Tractatus* very much through the lens of the *Philosophical Investigations*, rejecting those interpretations that insist upon an absolute divide in style and argument between the ‘early’ and the ‘later’ Wittgenstein. Ware instead views this division as ‘a transition from high to late modernism, where the latter sees itself (although not always correctly) as the former’s completion and fulfilment’ (48). This reading thus stresses the dialectical interconnection of the two texts, emphasising how they both share a ‘therapeutic aim’ (139) to resolve not only the problems of philosophy, but also the alienated condition of modernity. What emerges is a Wittgenstein whose formally innovative texts – *pace* Adorno – constitute a modernism against modernity. This is an intriguing suggestion, but the use of the deeply problematic categories of ‘high’ and ‘late’ modernism, which require much further elaboration than they receive here, is not quite convincing.

Chapters 4 and 5 represent the heart of Ware’s book, and what emerges clearly is the notion that Wittgenstein’s texts address and seek to ‘cure’ central problems that have often been articulated by many other modernist authors. Raymond Williams, in *The Politics of Modernism*, long ago noted that one distinctive feature of the attitude to language amongst modernists was that it was a block or hindrance to clear expression, hence prompting various attempts to reform or deform linguistic practice to overcome such barriers, in practices such as the Futurist’s words-in-freedom or Surrealism’s interest in automatic writing. One of the strongest points of Ware’s book is that he not only situates Wittgenstein within this tradition (a point already known from work on the environment of Viennese modernism out of which he emerged), but, more tellingly, argues that both the *Tractatus* and *Philosophical Investigations* present a form of ‘immanent critique’ of this strain of thinking in modernism.

There are times when it feels as if the book really requires more than 140 pages in which to develop and interrogate fully some of its claims. For instance, when examples from modernist literature are invoked, such as the references to Imagism in Chapter 4, these are only sketchily discussed and the putative connections between the two are not really drawn out. The illuminating discussion of Wittgenstein’s view of solipsism in the same chapter could
also benefit from some comparison to the subjective or psychological strain endemic to many modernist narratives, or even to the many ‘talking heads’ that occur in the work of Samuel Beckett. The account of Kafka’s short story ‘The Burrow’ in Chapter 5 is stimulating and acute, but the main theoretical points of reference here seem more those of psychoanalytic theory than the ideas of Wittgenstein. Such moments feel like something of a missed opportunity for a book that promises to finally establish Wittgenstein’s continuing relevance for the study of modernism. However, this should not detract from what is a stimulating account of why Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus* deserves to be considered central to questions of language and modernism.

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Raymond Williams Foundation (RWF)

In the last year RWF has continued consolidating partnerships and developments, not least with the Raymond Williams Society. The annual Society lecture, given by Susan Watkins in November 2015 at Ruskin College, Oxford, and based on Modern Tragedy, was supported by RWF. Four discussion circle sessions were organised for the morning and late afternoon on themes related to the lecture; twenty-two people attended these discussions, with a number staying overnight at Ruskin.

In August 2015 a residential weekend at Wortley Hall was devoted in the main to the keyword aspirational. The posting of the essay on this word – based on discussions during the Wortley sessions and written comments from participants afterwards edited by Joseph Boughey – effectively launched the new RWF Keywords project. This connects to other Keywords projects, national and international, with RWF’s distinctive contribution being the organisation of educational sessions and courses open to all adults whose goal is to debate words and meanings as part of the process of updating Raymond Williams’s Keywords. Another weekend at the same venue in January engaged the same small group, and several newcomers, in a discussion of charity, philanthropy and voluntarism. This resulted in the posting of a long essay, written and edited by Sharon Clancy, on the web pages. The RWF Keywords project is a promising development and embraces several Foundation aims in exciting new ways.

Our Sylvia Pankhurst Library project at Wortley Hall gained further financial support from Sheffield University for a second librarian intern appointment to work on the on-line catalogue of special collections within the expanding library. This significant development was celebrated at a special short weekend in October 2015 at which the Chair of the National Public Library Campaign gave a lecture to more than forty people on the future of books and libraries. The event included the launch of a Pamphlet on the life of Clive Edwards (TUC Gold Medal award winner for his contribution to Trade Union education and a former trustee of RWF) and the unveiling of a portrait of Raymond Williams by Stephen Samuel, an Adult Education activist from South Wales. This now hangs at the entrance to the Sylvia Pankhurst Library.

The annual Raymond Williams weekend ran in April 2016, again filling all available bedrooms at Wortley Hall, on The Future of the EU and Europe. The keynote lecturer was Derek Wall, International Co-ordinator of the Green Party; small-group discussion sessions throughout the weekend focussed on many of the central issues in this debate.

Partnership with the Democratic Society and Gladstone’s Library, Hawarden facilitated a successful, experimental, Festival for Democracy over
Raymond Williams Foundation (RWF)

a two-day weekend using the library buildings and gardens. The festival embraced lectures, discussions and workshops involving searching and radical political education with cross-generational participation. More than a hundred people attended and this could now become an annual event.

Derek Tatton
Administrator, RWF. www.raymondwilliamsfoundation.org.uk
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