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Unworking community: cultural imaginaries, common life, and the politics of division

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ABSTRACT
The theorisation of community as a central aspect of culture remains one of Raymond Williams’ most notable contributions. This article revisits some of its central points and critical contexts with the aim of interrogating the continuing relevance of community to any cultural project committed to the political critique of capitalism. The principal focus of the article rests on the notion, already advanced by Williams in the fifties, that any radical project of social transformation must necessarily target the dynamics of division without which capitalism itself is inconceivable. In its attempt to reconstruct the political significance of community, the article examines Williams’ debate with fellow British New Leftist E.P. Thompson and his own modified understanding of the concept in later years across the critical contexts that shaped it. The article ultimately argues (via a series of literary and historical references, including a discussion of Daniel Defoe’s Robinson Crusoe) that the social project of capitalism is inseparable from a strategy of ‘unworking’ or disarticulation of common life.

1. Culture and community

The work of Raymond Williams remains one of the most significant and original attempts in the twentieth century to think the political relationship between the concept of culture and the practice of community. One of the aims of this article is to examine a series of shifts and modulations in this author’s critical journey with particular attention to its changing historical contexts. The debate with fellow British New Leftist E. P. Thompson, and what I read as the triumph of the latter’s polemical emendation of Williams’ initial position, will be of central importance to my argument. I wish to emphasise that the deployment of community as an analytical and programmatic keyword cannot be abstracted from a general definition of capitalism in terms of division. Generally speaking, the politics of capital is always already a politics of division, a politics that arguably begins with capital’s paradigmatic separation between use and exchange value (and is then extrapolated and generalised at a multiplicity of levels). As a result, anti-capitalist politics must be defined in antagonistic relation to capital as a form of resistance to division: as an...
affirmation of the common in social life before and beyond the operations carried out by capital to secure its logic of appropriation.

In books such as *Culture and Society* and *The Long Revolution* (without forgetting his important fictional breakthrough in *Border Country*), Williams articulates a vision and a programme, rather than just a genealogy of historical definitions of the notion of culture. As the ‘Conclusion’ to *Culture and Society* famously argues, the ‘idea of culture is a general reaction to a general and major change in the conditions of our common life. Its basic element is its effort at total qualitative assessment (…) The working-out of the idea of culture is a slow reach again for control’ (Williams, 1958/1961, p. 285). Beyond the inventory and analysis of the responses which form the backbone of the book to this point, ‘culture’ calls for a more interventionist gesture, for a collective effort to assess change (of a social kind, in a radically totalising sense) *and* in doing so, ‘reach again for control’. The historical reality at which the proposed intervention is aimed concerns, as Williams explains, ‘the events which our meanings of industry and democracy most evidently define’ (p. 285). This particular articulation of concepts – or ‘meanings’ – reveals, not only a preoccupation with the historical nature of change in capitalism since the eighteenth century, but also a topical engagement with the immediate conjuncture that ultimately explains the strengths as well as the limitations of Williams’ ‘first stage radicalism’ in these early texts. For the ‘common life’ to which the idea of culture addresses itself in the 1950s and early 60s is indeed marked by a novel hybrid of industrial development and relative social democratisation that the Second World War had bequeathed in the form of a new institutional settlement for capitalism. From Fordism to the post-war consensus, many have been the designations proposed in subsequent years to describe this ‘general and major change’ (p. 285) which effectively represented a clean break with the instabilities of an earlier regime of capitalist accumulation but which also introduced a solid claim to future survival, and therefore historical continuity, for capitalism as a system. Writing at a time when the contours of the transformation were becoming all too apparent, Williams identifies a crisis. While the prospects of growth (primarily economic, but also social, in the sense of a perceived diminution of inequalities) are championed and assumed, their foundations in the collective areas of experience, in the sense of common life, are increasingly under pressure from imaginaries of division: from backward gestures of reticence and reaction against increased equality to descriptions of the masses – ‘a new word for mob’ (p. 287) –, mass communication and mass culture which, arising alternately from the left and the right, target and undermine the real possibilities of a genuinely democratic transformation. The only viable antidote to these threats is to be found in the active formulation of a ‘culture in common’. For Williams, this cannot be an achieved entity, reified or predetermined, as earlier attempts to define a proletarian or properly socialist culture had implied, for the fundamental reason that a ‘culture can never be reduced to its artifacts while it is being lived’ (p. 310), but also because a ‘culture, while it is being lived, is always in part unknown, in part unrealized’ (p. 320). What this insistence on life, on living as the (ontological) condition and substance of the idea of culture, suggests is that the bifurcation facing the social process in post-war capitalism can only be overcome, and effectively pushed in a radically transformative direction, if the collective response to cumulative change (re-)discovers community as both its object and its subject; if culture, that is, names the total process of reconstruction of a common purpose within an actively experienced common life.
Because the experiential approximates here the experimental, no given responses can be assumed as inevitable: ‘The making of a community is always an exploration’ (p. 320). And yet this openness can only be expansive; in no way tied to prearranged formulations but decidedly focused on a common growth – precisely the aspect which culture names in the first place: ‘The idea of culture rests on a metaphor: the tending of natural growth. And indeed it is on growth, as metaphor and as fact, that the ultimate emphasis must be placed’ (p. 321).

This organicist temptation to which the argument yields constitutes the main limitation (but perhaps also the most characteristic strength, insofar as it offers the utopian vision of a gradualist but decided road towards equality), of Williams’ early project. As Edward Palmer Thompson, the other leading voice of the British New Left in these years, would point out in a critical review of The Long Revolution, Williams’ choice of tone and emphasis in expressions such as ‘whole way of life’ and ‘growth’ only managed to distort, if not silence altogether, a history essentially defined by antagonism and struggle: ‘there are no good or bad men in Mr. Williams’ history, only dominant and subordinate “structures of feeling”. In the result, we are left with a general euphoria of “progress”; whatever has happened the emphasis lingers upon “growth”, “expansion”, “new patterns”’ (Thompson, 1961, p. 29). Thompson’s provocation is to suggest a reorientation of the problem and, while retaining the active and agential emphasis on ‘growth’, thus posit the proper task of Williams’ notion of culture as ‘the study of relationships between elements in a whole way of conflict’. ‘And a way of conflict’, he adds, ‘is a way of struggle. And we are back with Marx’ (p. 33). Williams’ full reply would come in the collection of interviews with the New Left Review published in 1979 as Politics and Letters, where he explains that the specificity and potential limitations of his position in the earlier texts had been shaped precisely by the characteristic historical profile of the period in which they were produced. Williams agrees that ‘[a]ny socialist account of culture must necessarily include conflict as a structural condition of it as a whole way of life’ (Williams, 1979, p. 135). But, he hastens to add, ‘if you define the whole historical process as struggle, then you have to elude or foreshorten all the periods in which conflict is mediated in other forms, in which there are provisional resolutions or temporary compositions of it’ (p. 135). In other words, the organicist connotations of his early critical vocabulary had been warranted by the apparent neutralisation of struggle inscribed in the forms and processes of post-war capitalism. Indeed, Thompson’s rhetorical suggestion of ‘a whole way of struggle’ seemed ‘peculiarly unfitted’ for periods such as the fifties (p. 135).

This line of argument of course reveals one of the main weaknesses in Williams’ approach, the lack of an explicit acknowledgement of colonialism as a social matrix where the proposed distinction between latent conflict and overt struggle invariably collapses. And it is precisely the resurgence in these years of a critical discourse invested in the explicit antagonisms of the colonial relation that makes this oversight especially problematic. For what anti-colonial critics such as Aimé Césaire and Frantz Fanon uncover in the fifties and sixties, from within the experience of decolonisation, is the irreducibility of antagonisms in the colonial setting, in effect, the undeniable pertinence of descriptions such as ‘whole way of struggle’. Published in 1950, Césaire’s Discourse on Colonialism paints an uncompromising picture of the relationship between colonisers and colonised, one where ‘no human contact’ is to be found ‘but relations of domination and submission which turn the colonizing man into a classroom monitor, an army sergeant, a prison
guard, a slave driver, and the indigenous man into an instrument of production’ (Césaire, 1950/2001, p. 42). Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth* (published, incidentally, in the same year as Williams’ *The Long Revolution*) defines this relationship as one of ontological rather than merely functional division. Since the ‘colonial world is a world cut in two’, the insidious operations of ideology, as registered by the industrial and democratic universe of post-war Europe and America, have no real purchase in it. Thus, while in ‘the capitalist countries a multitude of moral teachers, counsellors and “bewilders” separate the exploited from those in power’, in ‘the colonial countries, on the contrary, the policeman and the soldier, by their immediate presence and their frequent and direct action maintain contact with the native and advise him by means of rifle butts and napalm not to budge’ (Fanon, 1961/1963, p. 38). In such a context, where power speaks ‘the language of pure force’, ‘growth’ in Williams’ terms cannot be assumed as the semantic horizon of social change. This is by no means to say, however, that a common prospect does not impose itself as the radically transformative option in the colonies, but that only the struggle for (national) liberation can create the totality of social experience in and through which a common life is to be lived and pursued: ‘Decolonization unifies that people by the radical decision to remove from it its heterogeneity, and by unifying it on a national, sometimes racial, basis’ (p. 46). In the colonial setting, then, culture is, if anything, the conscious tending of a social (and therefore political) struggle. Indeed, of a whole way of struggle.

### 2. Capitalism and division

Williams’ initial organicism gives way in the 1970s to a much sharper awareness of antagonistic dynamics in capitalism, not least in its colonial dimension. *The Country and the City*, published in 1973, offers a significant recalibration (if not a fundamental reorientation) of the critical problems identified in *Culture and Society* and *The Long Revolution*. At the heart of its sustained analysis of shifts in literary attitudes to the changing relationship between country and city, there is an implicit acknowledgement (which often reads as a conscious demystification of his previous positions) of Thompson’s emphasis. The focus on community is not diminished, but rather conjoined to the fact that, in the history of capitalism, its condition of possibility is more often than not the sharp edge of unremitting division and antagonism. Ultimately, the ‘division and opposition of city and country, industry and agriculture’, as well as that between metropolitan centre and colonial periphery, ‘are the critical culmination of the division and specialisation of labour’ which capitalism historically developed ‘to an extraordinary and transforming degree’ (Williams, 1973/1993, p. 304). Against this formative background, community emerges neither as the retrospective monolith of cultural melancholia nor as the smooth function of organic progress warranted by a certain experience of post-war capitalism. It is to be observed, rather, in the decidedly conflictual realities of, for example, enclosure, where division, as materially enacted by a new legal and political construction of property rights as an encroachment on custom and traditional notions of use, shaped an active sense of common struggle and resistance:
In many parts of rural Britain, a new kind of community developed as an aspect of struggle, against the dominant landowners or, as in the labourers’ revolts in the time of the Swing machine-smashing and rick-burning or in the labourers’ unions from Tolpuddle to Joseph Arch, against the whole class-system of rural capitalism. In many villages, community only became a reality when economic and political rights were fought for and partially gained, in the recognition of unions, in the extension of the franchise, and in the possibility of entry into new representative and democratic institutions. In many thousands of cases, there is more community in the modern village, as a result of this process of new legal and democratic rights, than at any point in the recorded or imagined past. (Williams, 1973/1993, p. 104)

The 1970s of course provided an urgent occasion for pondering the significance of an irreducibly antagonistic definition of community and the common(s). The rise of what is now conventionally referred to as neoliberalism (or, concomitantly, the collapse of that post-war consensus in capitalism that lay behind Williams’ own optimistic sense of an ongoing ‘long revolution’) has been explained as a recrudescence of class division and conflict at a level of intensity and with a social and geographical remit that call to mind the formative processes of historical capitalism itself – what is known in Marxist discourse as ‘primitive accumulation’. As the Midnight Notes Collective has emphasised, enclosure is ‘not a one time process exhausted at the dawn of capitalism’; it is, rather, ‘a regular return on the path of accumulation and a structural component of class struggle’ (Midnight Notes Collective, 1990, p. 1). The ‘New Enclosures’

name the large-scale reorganization of the accumulation process which has been underway since the mid-1970s. The main objective of this process has been to uproot workers from the terrain on which their organizational power has been built, so that, like the African slaves transplanted to the Americas, they are forced to work and fight in a strange environment where the forms of resistance possible at home are no longer available. (Midnight Notes Collective, 1990, p. 3)

The strategic violence of this process whereby the relative compositions of post-war capitalism (the temporary class truce experienced in different forms throughout the so-called ‘glorious thirty’)⁹ have been effectively eroded since the 1970s is immediately reminiscent of the language of ‘pure force’ and the topology of division identified by Fanon in the colonial universe. As Maurizio Lazzarato has recently observed about the project of neoliberal globalisation as a whole, ‘If “living-together” was never part of the concerns of capital, it now seems to state without hesitation the objective that it pursues in an absolutely conscious manner: to become politically autonomous and independent of workers, of the poor, of the dispossessed’ (Lazzarato, 2019, p. 46, my translation).¹⁰ But then, just as in the colonial setting division provided an antagonistic framework in which community (the community of national liberation itself) could be thought anew by the oppressed, enclosure is also ‘one process that unifies proletarians throughout capital’s history, for despite our differences we all have entered capitalism through the same door: the loss of our land and of the rights attached to it’ (Midnight Notes Collective, 1990, p. 1). The struggle imposed by capital’s onslaught is thus undeniably productive of a kind of unity, a kind of wholeness, that overcomes the coordinates of division. Under neoliberal globalisation, the whole way of struggle constitutes a whole way of life for the different constituencies of the oppressed, a commonality of experience that post-war capitalism’s integrationist aspirations had ironically hampered.
3. Unworking community: the example of Defoe

Williams’ critical reflection beginning in the early seventies is unmistakably coloured by this urgent sense of revitalised conflict. In his book on the English novel, as well as in the more extensive investigation conducted in The Country and the City, community is invoked as a guiding principle in the general conception of the novel form itself. Thus, he proposes one of his most characteristic literary definitions: the novel as a knowable community. Williams begins, in the introduction to The English Novel from Dickens to Lawrence, by pondering the significance and exceptionality of ‘those twenty months, in 1847 and 1848’ (Williams, 1970/1987, p. 9) which saw the publication of landmark fiction by Dickens, Gaskell, and the Brontës, among others. He soon comes to the conclusion that what prompted this great creative surge was a mounting sense of crisis, ‘a crisis of experience’ (which is not entirely unlike his own sense of crisis when writing about the relations between culture and society in the fifties) around ‘the substance and meaning of community’ (p. 11). For these central years of the nineteenth century are a ‘period in which what it means to live in a community is more uncertain, more critical, more disturbing as a question put both to societies and to persons than ever before in history’ (p. 12). This new experience of the social causes a fundamental fracture in the ‘traditional method’ of the novel as a ‘knowable community’, that ‘underlying stance and approach’ whereby ‘the novelist offers to show people and their relationships in essentially knowable and communicable ways’ (p. 14), the assumption being that ‘from the middle term, of visible and comprehensible relationships, both societies and persons are knowable’ (p. 15). This naïve confidence was shattered ‘in the process of extraordinary change through which the new novelists were living’, which yielded the very different conclusion that ‘knowable relationships, so far from composing a community or a society, are the positive experience that has to be contrasted with the ordinarily negative experience of the society as a whole’ (p. 15). Thus, Williams suggests, the organic conception (and ‘method’) of the novel as a knowable community is essentially a stillborn project. It only becomes semantically available as its conditions of possibility in practical social experience are observed to be unavailable. It is in this sense that he would later refer to the notion of the knowable community as ‘a term used with irony because what is known is shown to be incomplete’ (Williams, 1979, p. 171).

But there is a more fundamental aspect – and indeed problem – to this concept and its historical periodisation within the narrow bounds of the early to mid-nineteenth century. For what it clearly alludes to, in a way that indeed actualises the idiom of conflict as against the neutral overtones of organic growth, is the modulation of capitalist sociality as an always already antagonistic formulation before and beyond the particular developments of a newly industrialised society. The opposition between community and society from which Williams never strays too far (and which rather clearly reiterates the classic distinction made by Ferdinand Tönnies, as the New Left Review interviewers remind him in Politics and Letters) ultimately refers to a general modality of division without which capitalism, and its politico-economic constitution around the category of property, becomes practically unthinkable. And this is not the exclusive province of the nineteenth-century novel. It is surprising that Williams’ critical histories both in The English Novel and The Country and the City relegate Defoe to a prior (and hence not-quite-relevant from the viewpoint of this problematic) literary moment. For beyond the ‘morality of improvement’
‘the abstracted spirit of improvement and simple economic advantage’ (Williams, 1973/1993, p. 62)) with which the author of Robinson Crusoe is aligned, what, for example, this novel immediately conveys is a sense of deliberate pursuit of forms and processes, of an undeniably social and political nature, that would pre-empt the constitution of community as the overcoming of precisely the sorts of division and enclosure that characterised the early development of capitalism.

What I would like to do next is to briefly reflect on the relevance of this novel to Williams’ more general argument as I have been engaging with it so far. My main claim is that the problem of the (un)knowable community is to be understood, first and foremost, as a strategy of unworking. Not merely a registering of crisis in the general textures of social experience, but a conscious political strategy of intervention against the totalising ontology of a whole way of life given in and through the inescapable realities of struggle. To adapt a famous phrase from Nancy (1986/1991), Defoe’s novel is, more than an unknowable community, an ‘inoperative community’, or, more precisely, an unworked community (communauté désœuvrée). From this perspective, unknowability is the sought phenomenological effect in a more general manoeuvre of pre-emption and disarticulation of the common.

Perhaps the central problem that Robinson Crusoe poses is that of the constitution of political society in the historical context of an expanding capitalist economy. This is, of course, the basic problem identified by the ideologies of colonisation, that of constructing society beyond, or rather against, the state of nature, on the basis of property and through the institutionalisation of mechanisms of protection from external threats and dangers. The scale and urgency of this challenge in the early eighteenth century, as the modern world system raced from an earlier stage of Atlantic expansion towards a new phase of industrialisation, and as new political languages sought to formalise the emerging realities of power, no doubt accounts to a significant extent for the specific complexities of this novel. As recent commentators such as Rebecca Bullard have reminded us, Robinson Crusoe is heavily invested in the political discourses and debates ‘that endured during the seven decades between the 1650s, when Crusoe left England, and the time of the novel’s publication in 1719’ (Bullard, 2018, p. 87). The novel, however, does not articulate ‘any single, particular political doctrine, but rather a polyphony of political ideas, which sometimes combine harmoniously but more often clash dissonantly with one another’ (p. 87). Crusoe’s alternation between an emphatically absolutist idiom, immediately recognisable to Defoe’s contemporaries as an endorsement of the divine right argument, and the explicitly contractualist tenor of many of his actions, may come across as contradictory and surprising. But it is not difficult to detect, in this doctrinal multimodality that the novel rehearses, a coherent understanding of political society in divisive and antagonistic terms. Whether it is in Crusoe’s Lockean discovery of labour or in his more Hobbesian approach when new subjects are incorporated into his island polity, the crux and general condition of political society in the novel is the excision of any actual or possible threat to property. In other words, the imagination of society propounded by this character implies violence, of one kind or another, against the menace of a return to an undivided, common world. The strident tone of Crusoe’s language of power may be read as satirical, but it is also a serious reminder that the underlying nature of the society in an economic system defined by private appropriation is necessarily violent. Manuel Schonhorn has convincingly demonstrated that, in Defoe’s novel, ‘Political society
originates, not from the “free resolve of free men,” but in violence. The society in Crusoe’s island affirms that truth; it does not create any precedent. It is the warrior-king and not the community who is the soul animating the body politic’ (Schonhorn, 1991, p. 154). Goaded by an uncontrollable fear of common, undivided life, Crusoe is led to his own absolutist *reductio ad absurdum* by insistently declaring himself ‘Lord of the Mannor’, ‘King’, ‘Emperor over the whole Country’, with ‘none to dispute Sovereignty or Command with me’ (Defoe, 1719/2008, p. 109). The passage from the state of nature to political society is not punctuated by rational choice and free will, but by pure force and the subordination of life to the protection of property. Thus, the relinquishing of natural right and the entry into the sphere of sovereignty and law is immediately articulated, in unmistakably biopolitical language, as having ‘the Lives of all my Subjects at my absolute Command. I could hang, draw, give Liberty, and take it away, and no Rebels among my Subjects’ (p. 125). With the arrival of Friday, Crusoe’s first human ‘subject’, this logic of political division is fully ritualised as a spectacle of absolute submission to power: ‘[he] kiss’d the Ground, and laid his Head upon the Ground, and taking me by the Foot, set my Foot upon his Head; this it seems was in token of swearing to be my Slave for ever’ (p. 172). And yet total subordination does little to exorcise the recurring sense of threat haunting Crusoe’s social construct. For despite his insistence on absolute power, he continues to protect his refuge in the trees as if an attack during the night is, not just possible, but imminent: ‘I barr’d it up in the Night, taking in my Ladders too; so that Friday could no way come at me in the inside of my innermost Wall’ (p. 176).

Defoe’s novel offers a precise articulation of the inoperative or unworked community of capitalistsociality, where the process of unworking amounts to the setting up of protections against the potential or actual struggles of those inhabiting a common, undivided universe outside the reach of capital’s law of division. According to Nancy, community ‘is, in a sense, resistance itself: namely resistance to immanence’ (Nancy, 1986/1991, p. 35). ‘Immanence’ here suggests a fusional project of ‘incarnated communion’ best represented historically by the ‘fascist masses’ (p. 35). But viewed from the general standpoint of the modern political project of capitalism, this identification is rather limiting and problematic. For what the actual experience of the unworked community, that pre-emptive articulation of political society around the defence of property, suggests is that it is threatened by the traditional, the customary, the unappropriated, which it necessarily constructs as an external arena beyond its reach and control. The common is not a fascist-like ‘delirium’ of ‘incarnated communion’, as Nancy suggests, but an experience of undivided social life: life, that is, without the implicit contents of violent partition and subordination that subtend political society. It is an experience of resistance, the resistance of the outside, always already put in antagonistic relation to the inside of property, sovereignty, and law by the historical process of capital.

4. ‘The State of Community opened’

The idea of a common life beyond and against property, a life outside the determinations of the sovereign law and its labour of division and socio-economic qualification, is central to Thompson’s investigation of radical eighteenth-century traditions arising from the maelström of the English Revolution. The latter is arguably a crucial historical context to make sense of the antagonistic logic informing the concept of culture as a whole way of
struggle, and also of my proposed reading of the unknowable community as an unworked community. In his book on William Blake and his relationship to seventeenth-century Antinomianism, Thompson reminds us of the fundamental opposition sustaining religious radicalism in this period between the idea of a ‘Moral Law’ – also often referred to as the ‘Mosaic Law’ – wielded by ecclesiastical hierarchies of all stripes against the living ‘Gospel’ of the community of believers. If the Antinomian project was (etymologically and practically) a project of antagonism to juridical conceptions of religion, according to Thompson, the ‘abrogation of the Moral Law’ it entailed ‘did not leave a vacuum, for Law was driven out by Love. This gospel (love against law) was sometimes known, by shorthand, as the Everlasting Gospel’ (Thompson, 1993, p. 23):

Thus the notion of the Everlasting Gospel had, by the late 1640s, become part of the available vocabulary of radical heresies. For Winstanley, in 1648, the time was expected when the authority of apostles and prophets would give way to the time when ‘the Lord himself, who is the everlasting Gospel, doth manifest himself to rule in the flesh of sonnes and daughters’. (Thompson, 1993, p. 24)

This anticipative temporal structure does not detract, however, from the fact that the ‘gospel of Love’ preached by religious radicals in the 1640s and 50s implied the existence of ‘the New Jerusalem’ already ‘among the faithful’ (Thompson, 1993, p. 28). In some versions of this idea, most notably perhaps in Gerrard Winstanley and his group of ‘Diggers’, affirmation of the gospel and rejection of the law ultimately amounted to the proclamation of a new ‘law of righteousness’ intimately connected to the socially antagonistic practice of commoning. Thus, by reclaiming the ‘common treasury’ of the earth, a new standard of right was affirmed, not just against ecclesiastical bondage, but also in the face of ‘courts, sizes, sessions, (...) justices and clerks of the peace’ still mobilised, despite many ‘protestations of liberty’ by the Cromwellian forces, against the poor (Winstanley, 1649/1973, p. 82). Beyond the Moral Law and beyond the legal ‘bondage of civil property’ (p. 83), that is, beyond the sovereign enclosures of a modern (and increasingly intelligible in class terms) complex of power arose the promise, as Winstanley announces in the subtitle to his True Levellers’ Standard, of a ‘State of Community opened, and Presented to the Sons of Men’ (p. 393). As Christopher Hill insists, what is most remarkable about Winstanley’s argument is the decidedly anti-sovereign quality of its juridical reasoning, as sovereignty itself came to be equated with the affirmation of capitalist property relations:

The important question for [theorists of sovereignty] was not who the sovereign was but whether or not he did his job of holding competitive individualist society together. Winstanley challenged the de facto theory at its strongest: if competitive individualist property relations were abolished, then the problem of sovereignty would sink into insignificance. Just as sin did not cause property, but vice versa, so only the abolition of property could get rid of the coercive state and the preachers of sin, both of which had come into existence to protect property (Hill, 1972/1991, p. 393)

As Thompson convincingly argues in his book on Blake, while the more radical experiments were soon defeated, this underlying logic was to survive as ‘an image of spiritual community’ shaped by the experience of persecution and as a concrete articulation of common life pitted against the ‘serpent reasonings’ of ‘a rotten social order based, in the last resort, on violence and material self-interest’ (Thompson, 1993, p. 109).
This more explicit – more heroic, we may say – context of renunciation of sovereign-legal reason may be juxtaposed to the more general process and opposition (also studied by Thompson, in the significantly titled *Customs in Common*) between agrarian custom and property law. Thompson’s whole way of struggle acquires here a more materially processual and temporally distended – and as such, less theological and exceptional – quality. Agrarian custom, as embodied in the logic of access to rural commons, is not a vanguardist or revolutionary project of subversion of property, but a traditional – an ‘ordinary’, in Williams’ terms – affirmation of collective practice at the interstices of juridically defined claims of appropriation. The customary exercise of common rights of usage is not wholly alien to the horizon of the law, but is ultimately to be defined negatively, in the course of the eighteenth century, as precisely that which property law cannot tolerate. As Thompson suggests, what for centuries had never truly congealed as fact (‘Agrarian custom was never fact. It was ambiance’ (Thompson, 1991/2010, p. 102)), was to be actualised in the antagonistic context of emerging capitalist relations and their legal definitions. If, in Locke, ‘the common was seen as a negative, not a positive community: it belonged to nobody and was open to any taker’ (p. 160), by the time of Adam Smith the emphasis of the rejection had become openly virulent. By the late eighteenth century, ‘both law and political economy regarded coexistent’ and competing claims between common property through customary usage and exclusivist stipulations of ‘absolute property’ ‘with extreme impatience’ (p. 162). It becomes increasingly clear, as the sovereign-legal logic of property develops, that the extending relations of community pose an existential threat, of an insidious, often foggy nature, but undeniable effects, to the project of capitalist division and politico-economic sanction. As one eighteenth-century commentator puts it: commoners ‘live at large, and prey, like pikes, upon one another’; like ‘[b]uccaneers’ they ‘sally out, and drive, or drown or steal, just as suits them’ (p. 163). The common behind this imaginary of social antagonism pertains to the same category as Crusoe’s outside: a viscerally abhorred and deeply feared growth (to return to Williams’ language) that is not just unknowable, but more crucially, uncontrollable – and that as such must be fought against.

An entire history of struggle and resistance (sometimes heroic, sometimes ordinary) reminds us that it is around these figures of unappropriated life in common that division first and last goes into crisis. This is the place where the theoretical paradigm of absolute property and its defensive affirmation of sovereignty is confronted by its practical negation. At the same time, history keeps reminding us that the ordinary process, the whole way of life, denoted by culture is never a spontaneous positivity or an organic growth, but always an antagonistic construction: a growth that struggles against the separatist project of capital, and refuses its refusal of community. It is hardly surprising to observe the mature Williams of *The Country and the City* insisting, while revisiting some of his recurring preoccupations since the fifties, on ‘imperialism’ and the colonial project as one of the culminating moments, historically, of ‘this division [which] can be found at every point in what is now our common life’ (Williams, 1973/1993, pp. 304–305). If division in the colonial mould is indeed the lifeblood of capitalism as a system and idea of collective existence, an essence of power enclosing its social forms across time and space, only community, understood as a conscious exertion against division, can offer an alternative. The collective experience on which such a way of life may be founded has to be formulated, necessarily, as a whole way of struggle against the unworking of the common by the always colonial, always insular, and always restrictive paradigms of capitalist sociality.
Notes

1. An analysis of Williams’ fiction, and of this extraordinary novel in particular, is beyond the scope of the article, although I briefly point to its relevance to my general argument in note 6 below.

2. This is Williams’ retrospective (and self-critical) characterisation in the late 1970s of the political critique he developed in Culture and Society. See Williams (1979, p. 110).

3. This sense of topicality is emphasised in The Long Revolution, where Williams insists that ‘Our whole way of life, from the shape of our communities to the organization and content of education, is being profoundly affected by the progress and interaction of democracy and industry, and by the extension of communications’ (Williams, 1961/1971, p. 12).

4. The term Fordism has been proposed by economists adhering to the French régulation approach, which was pioneered in the mid-1970s by Michel Aglietta. See Aglietta (1976/2015).

5. The reduction of economic inequalities in this period, recently studied in a wider context of post-2008 reassessments of inequality by economists such as Thomas Piketty, led revisionist social democrats such as Anthony Crosland to question, with symptomatic 1950s overoptimism, whether ‘this’ was ‘still capitalism’. See Crosland (1956/2006).

6. It is worth noting, however, that the acknowledgement of struggle as a formative dimension of the common experience in culture is central to Williams’ fictional idiom throughout his career, and already in his 1960 breakthrough novel Border Country. This is, among other things, a subtle reflection on the ordinary processes of composition and recomposition of common life through and beyond the experience of class struggle and its historical registering of defeat. With the General Strike of 1926 at its centre, the novel offers a meditation on the cumulative gestures of separation and dislocation (the border-crossings) on whose conscious measuring ‘the process of restoring the tissue’ of ‘common life’ may be built (Williams, 1960/2006, p. 402).

7. Williams’ New Left Review interviewers critically observe that, while in the period studied by Culture and Society imperialism had been, alongside industrialisation, the defining historical process, in the book itself ‘there is only one sentence which alludes in any way to that experience’ (Williams, 1979, p. 118).

8. The fact that colonial divisions are immediately given a racial, which is indeed a human, expression attests to the truly ontological character of the operation. As Fanon says: ‘The originality of the colonial context is that economic reality, inequality, and the immense difference of ways of life never come to mask the human realities. When you examine at close quarters the colonial context, it is evident that what parcels out the world is to begin with the fact of belonging to or not belonging to a given race, a given species’ (Fanon, 1961/1963, p. 40).

9. The phrase Les Trente Glorieuses (‘the glorious thirty’) was coined by French economist Jean Fourastié in an eponymous book (Fourastié, 1979) and refers to the thirty-year period between 1945 and 1975.

10. Lazzarato adds: ‘Politically at least, since from the “economic” point of view, capital needs them, in the same way that the planter needs his slaves’ (Lazzarato, 2019, p. 46).

11. The ‘idea of community’ was, precisely, the direct object of a major theory within European sociological thought. Tönnies’s opposition between “community” and “society” effectively contributed the concept as such in its wider currency (Williams, 1979, p. 114).

12. Authors such as Immanuel Wallerstein have emphasised the longue durée of capitalist development within which the Industrial Revolution of the later eighteenth century has to be contextualised: ‘There was a capitalist process going on from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century that made possible the industrial spurt’ (Wallerstein, 1980/2011, p. 28).

13. For example, when he claims that ‘I was King and Lord of all this Country indefeasibly, and had a Right of Possession; and if I could convey it, I might have in Inheritance, as completely as any Lord of a Mannor in England’ (Defoe, 1719/2008, p. 85). This is a line of argument, particularly associated in England at the turn of the century with Jacobitism,
which Defoe himself had satirised in his 1706 poem Jure Divino. See, for example, Backscheider (1988).
14. For an account of Hobbesian ideas in Robinson Crusoe, see Kay (1988).
15. ‘Culture is ordinary: that is where we must start’ (Williams, 1958/1989, p. 4).

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