Re-enchanting the crisis: Reflections on rurality, futurity and COVID-19 in the United Kingdom

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Since the sudden, mass experience of spatial contraction through lockdown in the Covid-19 pandemic, ‘nature’ has come to the symbolic fore in diverse and teeming ways. Amidst the anxiety, anger and the escalating inequalities, I have been struck – from within my particular context in the United Kingdom – by a discernible aesthetic shift in my social media feeds, where there is a new visibility of, and perhaps a re-enchantment by, the natural world. My Facebook and Instagram feeds are now fertile grounds for friends’ photos of wildflowers, spring blossoms, spinneys and streams, whether in country fields, home gardens or municipal parks. Other friends are sharing images of their first forays into home horticulture, surprised by their own joy at sprouting beans in windowsill pots.

This re-enchantment by fresh air and foliage appears to be part of a much broader shift in our sensual relationship to nature – one that has been seeded in, and nutrified by, the new spatial conditions of pandemic. A UK poll conducted in early May 2020 showed that 53 percent of people expressed more appreciation for parks and the countryside since social distancing measures began, and 63 percent said protecting and enhancing such areas should be more of a priority in the wake of the pandemic (ITV, 2020b). Home gardening has proliferated, and the UK’s Royal Horticultural Society reported a fivefold rise in queries for advice.1

Nature has also become newly visible as a frame for articulating social inequalities. Public discussion of material inequality is now very often routed through the modalities of access to fresh air and greenery – as a Guardian headline put it, ‘There are now two classes, people with gardens and the rest of us’ (Blackall, 2020). In London, while those who frequented city parks were condemned as ‘selfish’ for daring to populate outdoor public areas, huge swathes of urban green space in the form of private golf clubs remained

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jealously closed, prompting petitions for opening up public access in the emergency.\textsuperscript{2} The state injunction to stay indoors seems to have conferred an illicit thrill upon being outdoors, prompting much forbidden flocking to national parks and beauty spots. City dwellers with the economic means to do so ‘escaped’ to the countryside on ‘coronavirus holidays’, unleashing local resentments about weekend visitors and second-home owners. In Bala, north Wales, signs were erected by local people for the benefit of would-be visitors, reading ‘STAY HOME IDIOT TOURISTS’, and ‘GO HOME RATS’ (\textit{ITV}, 2020a). In June, there have been calls for a ‘national nature service’ that might tackle the crises in wildlife and climate change, as well as in impending mass unemployment.

What might we make of these myriad and pullulating conceptualisations of rurality and green space? What kinds of political impulses are coursing through the new hyper-visibilisation of nature in the crisis? If the ‘rats’ that are being told to ‘go home’ are the super-rich whose callous contempt for common life has turbo-charged the inequalities that scar rural populations, then perhaps there is hope. But if ‘go home’ is a subterranean, racialised injunction directed at those whose bodies have long been figured as ‘out of place’ in the British countryside (Chakraborti and Garland, 2004), then clearly there is not.

Other, overlapping questions also arise: in the context of the climate crisis that pre-exists and will outlive coronavirus, might we detect green shoots of hope in the new spellbound love of plant life – and in the desires for care and cultivation of the earth that seem to be blossoming before our eyes? Or is this a growing desire not for the protection of our common land and shared environment, but more worryingly for the opposite impulse of enclosure – might this suggest an intensifying attachment to \textit{private} green space, for a garden of one’s own, uninfected by the hated virus that is other people? Could this seeming new re-enchantment by the great outdoors provide the grounding for a ruralised left populism and the radical commoning of green space – or will it work in the service of a reactionary and nationalist nostalgia for a mythologised White past?

This is a dense tangle of possible paths to choose from in exploring the cultural politics of green space in lockdown, and this essay beats just one idiosyncratic trail through the conceptual thorns and thickets of rurality, futurity and cultural studies, from a perspective located in the United Kingdom. I want to take this seeming great collective re-enchantment by verdure – as well as the ways in which rurality is being symbolically re-seeded in our imaginings of the good life – as starting points for exploring wider questions about the role of the rural in envisioning radical futures and expanding the commons.

\textbf{Reading the rural: cultural studies and Raymond Williams}

Raymond Williams’ argument that ‘culture is ordinary’ is one of the foundational conceptual insights of cultural studies. It does the crucial work of denoting the double sense of ‘culture’, so that it encompasses both the ‘arts and learning – the special processes of discovery and creative effort’, but also, and more radically, the meaning of culture as ‘a whole way of life’ (Williams, 1989 [1958]). Williams’s foundational ‘Culture is Ordinary’ essay opens with a bus journey; he describes this seemingly unremarkable trip, which first sets off from a bus stop in the rural English city of Hereford, close to the
Welsh border, with its medieval cathedral and its commercial cinema. The bus drives out over the old bridge, into ‘orchards and green meadows and fields red under the plough’; it then climbs through the steep fields of the Black Mountains, granting views of bracken and Norman castles; and finally, steeper even still, the bus drives into the narrower valleys where stand the ‘steel-rolling mill, the gasworks, the grey terraces, the pitheads’. The narrating of the journey dramatises the ceaseless and often barely perceptible crossings of blurry borders – national, geological, industrial – that characterise culture as lived experience. But it also cues us in to the fact that, while the rural is often imagined as pre-political and without culture, it is actually continually and deeply shaped by history, industry, labour and capitalism.

In his 1973 work *The Country and the City*, Williams shows how, since classical times, rurality has been imagined into being through its symbolic relation to its ostensible opposite, the city. Where the city has been construed as full of vice, the country is seen as full of innocence and virtue. But in parallel imaginings, the city is the seat of worldliness and knowledge, whereas the country is ‘a place of backwardness, ignorance, and limitation’ (Williams, 2016 [1973]: p. 1) – we need only think here of Marx and Engels’ famous formulation of the ‘idiocy of rural life’.

A powerful ideological effect of the ways that the rural is imagined is that it is extremely difficult to read the processes of exploitation that have constituted the countryside as we know it: Williams suggests that this exploitation has been ‘in effect, dissolved into a landscape’ (p. 64). To call the countryside ‘unspoiled’ is to perpetuate a powerful ideological mystification, in which the exploited labour that built the country houses, ploughed the fields, planted the hedgerows and cut the canals is made to disappear from conceptual view: it amounts to a symbolic depopulation of labouring bodies from the countryside. The rural most often appears as a space of simplicity, innocence and purity – a place of retreat or escape from the harshness and heartlessness of capitalist modernity, rather than inextricably tangled up in it.

Reading Williams alongside walks in the countryside during the pandemic has tuned me into histories of exploitation that are secretly landscaped into the very shape of the earth. Many fields where I now walk around the edges of Leicester, the city where I live, still bear the distinctive corrugated patternings of ridge and furrow, the agricultural system used in medieval times, where small strips of land were cultivated by tenants and serfs in massive, open fields. The deciduous hedgerows dividing the fields were planted here in the late-18th century as part of the Enclosure Acts, which dispossessed peasants of the right to share and farm the land, thus destroying the commons. E.P. Thompson (1963) called this process a plain case of ‘class robbery’, a form of ‘social violence’ in which capitalist property relations were forced upon rural populations. Now, when I see the hedgerows, I sometimes think about the 17th-century anti-enclosure protest song:

The law locks up the man or woman

Who steals the goose from off the common

But leaves the greater villain loose

Who steals the common from off the goose.
Silvia Federici shows in her history of the enclosures how women in particular suffered acutely from the loss of the commons, because here had been found a ‘web of cooperative relations’ where women could meet, exchange ideas and develop their own viewpoints, autonomous from those of men (Federici, 2014: 71–72). That the witch-hunts of this time were contemporaneous with the enclosures is no accident; Federici argues that women’s collective, shared knowledge of nature had to be destroyed in order for agrarian capitalism to take root and prosper.

Reading the rural, then, can be a way of re-vivifying and giving shape to histories that have been ‘dissolved’ into the landscape. Perhaps the current attunement to nature, and to people’s right to enjoy it for reasons of mental health and well-being, might yet be connected with more radical demands for public ownership and the reclamation of common space. Half of all the land in England is now owned by 1 percent of the population (Shrubsole, 2019) – but the fact of this gross inequality is not yet registering in debates about access to green space. It is another oppression that is ‘dissolved’ into invisibility, both in the land and in our imaginations.

This points us back to the question of how the symbolic rural may help to seed progressive forms of resistance. This question has proved incredibly thorny for the left in the English context, because the symbolic power of a ‘green and pleasant land’ has often functioned as a technology of racialised exclusion and obfuscation of class hierarchies. Even those who have attempted to create a radically alternative left-wing vision of rural English patriotism – drawing on the Peasants’ Revolt and the Tolpuddle Martyrs, for example – have struggled with the fact that ‘England’ is too diverse and unstable an entity to be represented through any particular modality or set of images (Niven, 2020). Paul Gilroy (1993) has shown how New Left historians such as E.P. Thompson and Eric Hobsbawm, as well as Raymond Williams, enforce a ‘doggedly ethnocentric focus’ in their presentations of radical English traditions, failing to account for the ‘supranational’ histories of colonial exploitation and violence that have shaped the land. Marshall Berman expressed deep misgivings about what he understood as Williams’s conflation of the urban with alienation, and the rural with authentic human connection, which he saw as susceptible to a conceptual sliding into an anti-urban, regressive politics of ‘blood and soil’ (Berman 2017 [1965]). The Black British artist and photographer Ingrid Pollard’s 1998 work ‘Pastoral Interlude’ powerfully dramatises the ways in which the English countryside is imagined as the essence of Whiteness, in which Black bodies, so thoroughly associated with the urban, are made to appear as discordant and incongruous.

The symbolic rural then, is heavy with the weight of the exclusionary histories and the ethnocentric representations that are tilled into its very being. A love of rural place in England is perhaps never uncomplicated, never not implicated in deep histories of racism, class and colonial exploitation, and nationalistic fantasies whose impulses are to expel difference. This raises the questions grappled with by Doreen Massey (1991), who identified the ways that ‘place itself, the seeking after a sense of place, has come to be seen by some as necessarily reactionary’. Massey’s analysis shows how attachment to place is often construed as a conservative ‘evasion’ from the vitality, mobility and dynamism necessary to human life. It seems to me that seeking a sense of rural place might be construed as most reactionary of all – as a parochial flight from encounters with difference that the paradigm of the urban seems to embody.
For Massey, the conflation of spatial attachment with reactionary politics is ultimately reductive and unhelpful, riding roughshod over the deep desires for space-based belonging that many people have. At the same time, her analysis cues us into the real dangers that a sense of (rural) place might entail in an increasingly ethno-nationalist world. Certainly, melancholic laments for the ‘rootlessness’ of the contemporary world are now more and more mobilised by the far-right, providing ideological nutrification for a resurgent Heideggerianism, which entails the symbolic conflation of ‘unspoiled’ countryside with racial purity, feeding into an eco-fascist politics of ‘blood and soil’ (see Earle, 2019). Anti-nationalist and techno-feminist thinkers have also pointed to the forms of violence that are done to the queer, trans and differently abled when ‘nature’ is conceptualised as pure, timeless and untouchable: for Helen Hester, this ‘risks lending huge conceptual resources to the punishment of radical difference’ (Hester, 2018: 19); the xenofeminist collective Laboria Cuboniks (2015) state that ‘the glorification of “nature” has nothing to offer us’.

Given the disturbing political implications of imaginings of ‘nature’, as well as the racist inflections in articulations of rural place, Massey’s question becomes more pressing than ever: she asks how we might develop ‘an adequately progressive sense of place, one which would fit in with the current global-local times and the feelings and relations they give rise to, and which would be useful in what are, after all, political struggles often inevitably based on place’. As Alex Niven (2020) similarly argues, ‘Even an internationalist left must make some allowance for both identification with place and the basic democratic impulse to build a new homeland that is rooted in the humane traditions of the past’. So how might a sense of rural place, or more precisely a ruralised sense of place, fit into a progressive and humane vision of the future?

### Re-ruralisation, desire and utopia

Silvia Federici argues that the process of ‘re-enchanting the world’ is a necessary ‘pre-condition for resistance to exploitation’ (Federici, 2019: 188). She sees struggles that are seeking to ‘re-ruralize the world’ – through ‘land reclamation, the liberation of rivers from dams, resistance to deforestation and, central to all, the revalorisation of reproductive work’ as crucial to our survival (p. 189). In a context where, as Federici says, capitalism has divided us from nature, from each other and from our own bodies, then the hope will come from ‘knowing’ and ‘craving’ that which is not produced by capitalism. Resistance to capitalism will emerge, then, in the form of recognising ‘our need for the sun, the wind, the sky, the need for touching, smelling, sleeping, making love, and being in the open air, instead of being surrounded by closed walls’ (p. 190). If nothing else, then lockdown during the coronavirus pandemic may have unleashed yearnings for that which is outside of the walls of the privatised, disenchanted household. The linking of subjective ‘craving’ with anti-capitalist resistance has affinities with Ruth Levitas’ discussion of utopian thinking. For Levitas, utopia becomes possible when people learn ‘to want differently, by thinking and feeling themselves into an alternative world’ – utopia, then, is about the ‘education of desire’ (Levitas, 2017).

The current digital propagation of images of sprouting beans and cherry blossom on Instagram is hardly sufficient to challenge capitalism’s systematic degradation of the earth. But what it may point towards are the subtle bloomings of shifted desires – an
incipient yearning for different kinds of growth, and a re-education of our collective wants and cravings. Perhaps this may, in turn, seed stronger political impulses for the re-ruralisation of the world, not in the reactionary sense of a return to some bucolic, pre-industrial time that never was, but in reclaiming common land from ongoing capitalist enclosures, as well as liberating the rural - both symbolically and materially - from the jealous, vicious, colonising grip of Whiteness.

**Backwards looks**

I was born in Hereford, the point of the bus’s departure in Williams’s ‘Culture is Ordinary’ essay. I grew up in a small village at the end of a different bus route, in another part of the borderlands between England and Wales. I only read ‘Culture is Ordinary’ fairly recently, some years deep into my relationship with cultural studies; the discovery of this geographical connection to one of the founding texts and pivotal figures of cultural studies felt surprising and profound. I had assumed – rightly or wrongly, but like many others – that cultural studies is a project oriented to the urban, and that my attachments to a rural place were somewhat tainted, evincing the kinds of uncritical and regressive nostalgia that cultural studies is committed to undoing.

But reading Williams within my shifted experience of space during the pandemic has helped me to think about the possibility of a critical attachment to rural place – as well as the need to radically rethink rurality as essential to progressive futures. Intellectuals who still implicitly repeat the discourse of the ‘idiocy of rural life’, and conservatives who pine for a mythologised lost countryside cleansed of difference, all contribute to the ways in which rurality is perpetually associated ‘only with the past or with distant lands’ (Williams, 2016 [1973]: 431), and never with the future or the vital, messy present. The temporal archiving of rurality in our political imaginations obscures the crucial fact that to resist capitalism will require new kinds of connection to, and work on, the land. In Federici’s terms, our visions for the future must entail a process of ‘re-ruralization’ – not simply of cultivating pastoral scenes for our aesthetic or nostalgic appreciation, but in more fundamentally recalibrating our relationship to the land. The task, then, might be to conceive of and build a radical rurality capable of responding to the colossal, co-constituting challenges of the climate crisis and capitalism – and one that consciously and explicitly works against any mobilisation of ‘nature’ as a technology of racialised exclusion or gendered essentialism.

In seeking to construct a radical rurality, we might heed Williams’ words of caution against the persistent propensity to look backwards when imagining the rural. His writing explains how there is a entrenched historical pattern of lamenting the loss of conditions in the countryside that, actually, were themselves oppressive. For example, he shows that to straightforwardly celebrate the pre-enclosure commons as a space of rich autonomy and full communion with the land is to obscure the material fact that peasants were deeply exploited by their manorial lords. Similarly, then, to cry for the loss of a social-democratic, post-war countryside peopled by benevolent family structures and warm community is to foreclose the possibilities of more radical rural futures, and for better models for living that are still yet to come.
To return to where we began, with the 63 percent of people who said that ‘protecting and enhancing’ parks and the countryside should now be prioritised – what might it mean to cultivate this desire further, and to grow a more radical demand for the common ownership of land? We might look again to the 17th-century anti-enclosure poem. The last verse points to the vital importance of ownership to the struggle for access to the land:

The law locks up the man or woman

Who steals the goose from off the common

And geese will still a common lack

Till they go and steal it back.

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Notes
1. https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-gardens/home-gardening-blooms-around-the-world-during-coronavirus-lockdowns-idUSKBN2220D3
2. https://www.citymetric.com/fabric/should-cities-be-turning-golf-courses-parks-5034
3. http://www.ingridpollard.com/pastoral-interlude.html

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