

The Country and the City

Raymond Williams

Raymond Williams was a good friend to the Russell Foundation for many years, until his death in 1988. So Spokesman are very pleased indeed to bring back into print his landmark work, The Country and the City, which Trevor Griffiths encouraged us to publish. To whet the appetite, we reprint an excerpt from chapter seven, which is entitled 'The Morality of Improvement'.

At the same time, Parthian in Wales are publishing a new edition of The Long Revolution, which first appeared 50 years ago in 1961. The Raymond Williams Society, and its journal Key Words, distributed by Spokesman, encourages us all by advancing Williams's influence on new generations.

The true history of the English countryside has been centred throughout in the problems of property in land, and in the consequent social and working relationships. By the eighteenth century, nearly half of the cultivated land was owned by some five thousand families. As a central form of this predominance, four hundred families, in a population of some seven or eight million people, owned nearly a quarter of the cultivated land. Beneath this domination, there was no longer, in any classical sense, a peasantry, but an increasingly regular structure of tenant farmers and wage-labourers: the social relationships that we can properly call those of agrarian capitalism. The regulation of production was increasingly in terms of an organised market.

The transition from feudal and immediately post-feudal arrangements to this developing agrarian capitalism is of course immensely complicated. But its social implications are clear enough. It is true that the predominant landowning class was also, in political terms, an aristocracy, whose ancient or ancient-seeming titles and houses offered the illusion of a society determined by obligations and traditional relations between social orders. But the main activity of this class was of a radically different kind. They lived by a calculation of rents and returns on investments of capital, and it was the process of rack-renting, engrossing and enclosure which increased their hold on the land.

Yet there was never any simple confrontation between the four hundred families and a rural proletariat. On the contrary, between these poles of the economic process there was an increasingly

stratified hierarchy of smaller landowners, large tenants, surviving small freeholders and copyholders, middle and small tenants, and cottagers and craftsmen with residual common rights. A process begun in the sixteenth century was still powerfully under way, with many of the smaller farms being suppressed, especially on improved arable land, while at the same time the area of cultivated land was itself steadily and at times dramatically increased. Even within the social relations of landowner, tenant, and labourer, there was a continual evolution of new attitudes. An estate passed from being regarded as an inheritance, carrying such and such income, to being calculated as an opportunity for investment, carrying greatly increased returns. In this development, an ideology of improvement – of a transformed and regulated land – became significant and directive. Social relations which stood in the way of this kind of modernisation were then steadily and at times ruthlessly broken down.

The crisis of values which resulted from these changes is enacted in varying ways in eighteenth-century literature. In poetry, as we shall see, the idealisation of the happy tenant, and of the rural retreat, gave way to a deep and melancholy consciousness of change and loss, which eventually established, in a new way, a conventional structure of retrospect.

But before this development, there was a lively engagement with the human consequences of the new institutions and emphases. Indeed it was in just this interest that the novel emerged as the most creative form of the time. The problems of love and marriage, in a society dominated by issues of property in land, were extended from the later Jacobean comedy and the Restoration comedy of manners, and from the moral epistles of Pope, to the novels of Richardson and Fielding, and in the mode of their extension were transformed. Allworthy and Squire Western, the neighbouring landowners in Fielding's *Tom Jones*, or Lovelace in Richardson's *Clarissa*, are in some ways lineal descendants of the world of Wellborn and Overreach, and then of Tunbelly Clumsey and Young Fashion. The plot of *Tom Jones* is based on the desire to link by marriage the two largest estates in Somersetshire: the proposed marriage of Sophia Western to Blifil is conceived for this end; her marriage to Tom Jones, when he is eventually revealed as Allworthy's true heir, achieves what had formerly, for personal reasons, been rejected. Similarly, Clarissa Harlowe's proposed marriage to Solmes is part of her family's calculation in concentrating their estates and increasing their rank; it is from this that she recoils to the destructive and cynical world of the established landowning aristocrat, Lovelace.

What is dramatised, under increasing pressure, in the actions of these novels, is the long process of choice between economic advantage and

other ideas of value. Yet whereas, in the plays, we saw this from one particular standpoint – the social world of London in which the contracts were made and in which, by isolation and concentration, the tone of the protesting and then the cynical observer could be established and maintained – in the novels we move out to the families themselves, and see the action in its homes and in its private character. For all the differences between Richardson and Fielding, this change is something they have in common. Instead of the formal confrontation between representatives of different groups – the wellborn and the overreachers – and the amused observation of a distanced way of the world, the action becomes internal, and is experienced and dramatised as a problem of character.

The open ideology of improvement is in fact most apparent in Defoe, but in an abstraction which marks an essential difference from Richardson and Fielding. There is some irony in this fact, in that in his *Tour of England and Wales*, in the 1720s, Defoe was an incomparable observer of the detailed realities of country life, with his notes on methods of production, marketing and rents. It is from him that we learn the degree of specialisation and market-production in early eighteenth-century agriculture, and its intricate involvement with the cities, the ports, and the early coal, iron and cloth industrial areas. It is a frankly commercial world, with hardly any pastoral tinge, and Defoe's combination of intense interest and matter-of-fact reporting is the true predecessor of the major eighteenth-century tradition of rural inquiry, which runs on through William Marshall, the *County Reports*, Arthur Young and the *Annals of Agriculture*, to Cobbett and the nineteenth century. This emphasis is the real line of development of a working agriculture, and is in itself a major index of change. Yet, with rare exceptions, this emphasis was in its own way an abstraction from the social relationships and the human world through which the new methods of production worked. It is only at the end of this line, in the crisis at the turn of the century, that the social and economic inquiries are adequately brought together. It is then not surprising that Defoe, for all his close and specialised observation of what was happening in the fields and markets, did not, in his novels, consider their underlying social reality. Rather he projected, into other histories, the abstracted spirit of improvement and simple economic advantage – as most notably in *Robinson Crusoe* – and created a fictional world of isolated individuals to whom other people are basically transitory and functional – as again in *Crusoe* and in *Moll Flanders*. Consciously and unconsciously, this emphasis of a condition and of an ethic was prophetic and powerful; but it is an indication of its character that what *Crusoe*

improves is a remote island, and that what Moll Flanders trades in is her own person. The important improvement and trading were at once nearer home and more general, but the simple practice and ethic of improvement could be more readily and more singlemindedly apprehended in deliberately isolated histories.

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Collier

He lies side on, man-foetus in the two-foot seam,
Half naked, hacking out the fires of ancient suns.
A mile above the laughing children dam the stream,
The hedges hang their flowers, the river runs.

Coiled in the Davy lamp dark he hews the coal, cuts
The black diamonds that power the dreadnought's screws,
That smelt the bullets' lead, that forge the iron boots
That police the Empire's bounds. Hunched

In the halo of the lamp's pale glow, curled,
Bent, he chops the boles of forests from a time
When giant lizards walked the world.
A mile above him in the summer sunlight

The rulers of a new world walk the links,
Gauge where their balls will fall. Belly-down, ink black
Below, the small man naked but for rags hacks on,
The weight of armies and empires on his back.

Mike Harding

Written earlier this year, after passing Agecroft where there was once a flourishing pit, the last in Manchester. Mike Harding's new book of poetry, Strange Lights Over Bexleyheath, is published by Luath Press.

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