

# Reviews

## POLITICS AND LETTERS:

### Interviews with *New Left Review* Raymond Williams

New Left Books 1979. 390pp.  
Hardback £12.75.

In form (it's well over 400 pages long) this is an unusual book, being the well-edited reproduction of a series of interviews of taped discussions between the 'subject' — Raymond Williams — and three members of the editorial committee of *New Left Review*. It is a form which has been used in recent years in the more directly political statements of such writers as Regis Debray and Santiago Carillo and, indeed, in articles in *Marxism Today*; but this is a more ambitious enterprise, in the sense that, though quite complex theoretical issues are included, a good deal of the genuine flexibility and mutual enrichment of good discussion gets across. I don't think the danger of such a form — the imposing of a suspiciously 'rigged' pattern by the 'interrogators' — is altogether avoided; but in general the dialogue form has encouraged a more direct, unaffected and open kind of talk and language than either the average article in *NLR* or Williams himself have often managed to achieve individually. That the discipline of clear communication imposed on both sides of the dialogue-form should have so successful and desirable an outcome is in itself a suggestive and encouraging fact.

One doesn't want, however, to overdo the question of form, important as it is. The main thing about this interesting, and in many ways impressive book is that it helps us come to terms with the still developing contribution to socialist thinking of an impressive man. If it also helps him, that constitutes a bonus from which we shall all gain.

For many years, and especially since the publication of *Culture and Society* in 1958, Raymond Williams has been well-known as a writer and teacher in the fields of adult and university education as well as a novelist. Since 1961 he has taught in the English Faculty at Cambridge. For a short time, as a student, he was a member of the Communist Party and he has never been in the derogatory sense an anti-communist; but for the most part his more direct political 'interventions' have been in the New Left area. That area itself, however, has not been without its internal complications. One of its strands, from the first, was an emphasis on 'cultural' investigation and politics (often in reaction to what was felt to be a 'Stalinist' crudification of the relation between what Marx called

'base' and 'superstructure'). This 'culturalist' strand which, among much else, paid a good deal of attention to the 'Britishness' of the Left radical tradition, led its adherents to an attitude of simultaneous sympathy with and revulsion from other features of the New Left. On the one hand a socialist like Raymond Williams clearly found the New Left ambience sympathetic in the sense that it was less closely tied up than the Communist Party with immediate power-struggles, national and international, and their strategies and tactics, and therefore more 'open' when it came to theoretical speculation or political experiment. At the same time the deeply-ingrained sectarianism of Trotskyist politics and the increasingly obsessive interest of much of the New Left in various highly theoreticist and academic forms of continental Marxism (themselves often based in cultural situations and traditions not at all easily reconcilable with a homespun 'Britishness') could not be very sympathetic initially to someone as consciously rooted in 'England-and-Wales' and the Leavisite principle of the 'concreteness' of literature as Williams. The present book has emerged from the tangle of contradictory trends within — and also outside — New Left thinking. One of the many good things about the whole enterprise is that the stock-taking has been conducted with a good deal of objectivity and no-one concerned has allowed the search for fruitfully uniting concepts and formulations to be dominated by what can, fatally, seem to be an easy basis for such unity — hostility to the communist parties, even the most vulnerable ones.

What in fact this book seeks to do is (i) to clarify Williams's books by drawing out the main emphases in each and examining their more problematic aspects, (ii) to probe for connecting links between his various books, experiences and interests and (iii) to examine his work as a whole in terms of its development and its relevance as a socialist response to our time.

The biographical section which opens the book offers many fascinating insights, not merely of the more personal sort (like war-experiences) but also of a more general and speculative kind. For instance, it emerges as quite significant that Raymond Williams should have gone to Cambridge in October 1939 (as opposed to, say, 1937) and joined the Communist Party during the 'phoney war' period. Had he been a very few years older the student movement in which he became involved would itself have been different, fired and dominated by the need to rouse and unite people to recognise and oppose the direct threat of fascism. Williams says very little about the anti-fascist struggle and refers

to the popular front with some distaste. And though he was to modify the political starting-point from which he confronted Cambridge — socialist revolution *before* you could defeat fascism — that emphasis gives his thought the flavour of a different generation from that of the thirties and suggest why he came, in the fifties, to feel closer to the younger socialist of the New Left than to those whose most vivid experiences were centred on attempts to build a wide unity against the main enemy.

It is also from the biographical area of *Politics and letters* that there first emerges a theoretical emphasis that turns out to be very central to Raymond Williams's achievement as a whole. At one point in the book he speaks of basing his work on 'the indissoluble unity of personal and social experience'. What becomes clear is that not only his work in general but his *style* itself, with its tendency (outside the novels) towards a complex, indirect, and rather heavy impersonality and a reliance on the passive voice, has to be seen as part and parcel of the attempt to realise this conviction.

It's impossible in a short review to do justice to the sections in which Williams's books of cultural and literary criticism are discussed in detail. The details are themselves of great interest: he seems to me splendid on Hardy, excellent on Orwell; I am less certain about the treatment of Ibsen and Brecht. But what is specially valuable — quite apart from the impressive range of reading and scholarship — is the bringing out of connections between one area of activity and another, which clarify both, as when the work on modern drama is linked and contrasted with the problems of novel-criticism and concepts like 'structure of feeling' and 'the knowable community' examined in the light of developments both social and literary. The whole discussion of realism and naturalism, again, with its many links (both appreciative and critical) with the work of Lukacs, strikes me as very useful. So is the recurrent examination of the activity known to students of Eng Lit as 'Practical Criticism'. Threading its way right through the whole volume is a figure which readers who have never made an academic study of literature (especially at Cambridge) may find rather hard to know what to make of: you might call it the ghost of Dr Leavis. For it is in the course of emancipating himself from the powerful influence of Leavis that Raymond Williams has made some of his own most fruitful contributions.

If I find something missing, especially in the directly political arts of this book, it is a sufficient sense of what actual political activity, the organising of people to change

the world they live in, involves in practice. I say this with diffidence. Raymond Williams is not afraid of politics and makes many shrewd observations about political issues and tactics: yet one does sense in his attitudes and language a certain distance from the practicalities of day-to-day politics and in particular a certain unwillingness to recognise (what I'm sure he does in theory) that it is political parties, not political ideas as such, that actually change society. I find it a bit strange that in so humane and political a book by a man so conscious of his working-class allegiances no working-class politician — Labour, Communist or what-have-you — is referred to with any really close sympathy. I'm certainly not wanting to pose political practice *against* political ideas: obviously you can't have one without the other; nor to imply that Raymond Williams, whom I respect very much, lives in some sort of ivory tower. He doesn't and it's not nearly as simple as that; and in any case anyone who has long been a member of a communist party must be all too conscious of the opposite danger of permitting the pragmatic aspects of Marxism to take over.

I come back to the question of style because, like Raymond Williams, I am myself deeply convinced that the content and the form of effective writing, as of effective action, are inseparable and that the finding of ways to talk to one another is one of the most important *political* problems and tasks of the socialist movement.

Raymond Williams says at one point that what kept him at a distance from the Communist Party after the war was 'the style of work of the Party', by which he means the 'manipulation and centralism'. I understand this reaction, especially since he links it in particular with the Party's readiness at that period to fall so confidently into line with the Soviet Union on an issue like Yugoslavia. Yet there is another aspect of the style of work of the Communist Party which is also worth attention and that has been an effort — at its best — to bring together workers and intellectuals on the basis of a shared respect and a shared language. I don't say that effort has always been successful, nor do I wish to respond to a book I have found valuable, stimulating and moving by a new sort of reiteration of old divergences. But it has struck me, studying this most interesting (though terribly expensive) book, that if, as many of us believe, the Communist Party should not be afraid of changing its style, neither should the New Left. And it's not least because I see encouraging signs of this within *Politics and Letters* that I find Raymond Williams's book so welcome.

**Arnold Kettle**

**THE MAKING OF  
A RULING CLASS:  
TWO CENTURIES OF CAPITAL  
DEVELOPMENT ON TYNESIDE**

**Benwell Community Project,  
Final Report Series No. 6.**

Benwell Community Project,  
85 Adelaide Terrace,  
Newcastle upon Tyne NE4.  
1979 121pp. Paperback £1.50

This is one of the most penetrating and compelling studies of the British ruling class to appear for a long time. It examines the activities of a dozen of the richest Tyneside families from the early 19th century, and is indeed the only study to look in detail at how a particular segment of capital in Britain has developed from the industrial revolution to present-day state monopoly capitalism.

On the evidence they find its authors decisively support the continuing relevance of the concept of the ruling class and reject suggestions that contemporary Britain has either an 'open elite' or that the ownership of capital no longer implies control.

To quote: 'with the growing concentration of control in the economy, there has been a significant diffusion of power; no longer do a few individual dynasties visibly control the factories, the banks and the local council. But what clearly emerges from examining the 1930s and the post-war years of state intervention is not an erosion of dynastic influence but rather a subtle accommodation to change, which has enabled individual family members to move into commanding positions within the region and within the wider national economy'.

Power is still exercised by capital. The state continues to respond.

The great merit of this study, however, is to demonstrate in detail how this happens and to enable us to identify changes and discontinuities in the way in which capitalist rule is exercised.

Take the Riddleys. Originally Newcastle bankers, they were MPs for the city through most of the 18th century. Developing interests in coal and heavy engineering they continued to sit as MPs for Northumberland constituencies throughout the 19th century with the first Viscount Ridley becoming Home Secretary in 1895. Today the fourth Viscount has important interests in Barclays' Bank, the Northern Rock Building Society and Swan Hunter and serves, like his father before him, as chairman of Northumberland County Council. His brother, the ill-famed Nicholas Ridley MP, is one of the main architects, along with Keith Joseph, of the

new hardline Tory industrial policy.

The Cookson family repeats roughly the same story. Coalowners and bankers 150 years ago, R A Cookson currently chairs the Lead Industries Group, is a director of Lloyds Bank and chairman of the Northern Industrial Development Board. The Bosanquets, Peases, Anguses, Bensons and Stephensons show similar patterns over two centuries.

What, then, are the main changes which the authors discern in the *forms* of capitalist exploitation over this period?

Four principal phases seem to emerge. The formative period of the late 18th century saw the long established merchant dynasties of Newcastle moving out to establish dominance over the surrounding coal industry. From this base heavy engineering and shipbuilding was developed in the second half of the century with much of the capital for Armstrong's armaments combine being supplied by a cohesive network of coal-owners and bankers.

During both these periods Tyneside's families were firmly rooted in the locality, exercised power through local institutions and directly, often viciously as in 1844, confronted the problems of class rule. Later in the century, however, the authors note a growing tendency to diversify investment, establish overseas subsidiaries, push money into property development and nurture links with London banking. Interwar this tendency grew apace. Most of these families successfully jumped from heavy industry, sinking fast in the world depression, to investment trusts, public utilities, land, banking and a few select areas of monopolised manufacturing (like the Lead Industries Group).

Post-war they emerge, newly enriched with the royalties of coal nationalisation, to act as intermediaries in the north east for British-based banks and big business. Now securely positioned within both the merchant banks of the City of London and the property companies and councils of the north east, they direct the development of new towns, transport systems and universities. And with a clarity rare in works on this country, the authors show just how this tight network of political and family influence fits together to enable the direction and milking of non-monopoly, small investor capital in joint stock banks and building societies.

This is not to say that this study is not without a few, mostly inevitable weaknesses. On the evidence of these families it tends to present the rise and progress of the big bourgeoisie as something continuous and inevitable. It does not, and possibly could not, examine those families that failed to

make the grade, and is thereby unable to get a really precise focus on the crucial periods of crisis and discontinuity (like the 1920s). It is also unable to weight the relative importance of north east capital against other centres and particularly within London-based British finance capital today (how far are the Cooksons and Riddleys just regional message boys?). Finally, although it certainly illumines a segment of the ruling class, it can only obliquely reveal the relationship between the ruling class and the state and the processes by which the state responds to the needs of capital as a whole.

However, as long as we are clear about the limits of the approach adopted, this booklet will prove of invaluable assistance in understanding the society in which we live. Lavishly illustrated, and priced at £1.50, it should be in the pocket of every Marxist agitator and educator in the country.

**John Foster**

### STATE HOUSING IN BRITAIN

**Stephen Merrett**

Routledge, Keegan and Paul. £6.95. Pp376

It has been a curious feature of the attitude of the left in Britain towards the 'Welfare State' that there has been little serious analysis of the nature of state intervention in social welfare. The relationship between the impact of class struggle and the necessities of economics is still obscure, and this has led to an ambiguity among the left in characterising social welfare either as a direct concession won by class struggle or as a reform willingly conceded in order to maintain the legitimacy of the capitalist state, or as a development necessary to capital in order to produce a more highly skilled labour force. There has been a connected tendency in political practice to limit demands to calls for 'more of the same' or for 'at least as much of the same' in periods of cuts, and a deep reluctance to criticise the shortcomings and inadequacies of the existing provision for fear of underwriting the criticism from the right of the inefficiency, bureaucracy and paternalism of the Welfare State itself.

The author of this book was for a number of years the original convenor of the Political Economy of Housing Workshop, a sub-group of the Conference of Socialist Economists, and one of the most successful examples in recent years of a fruitful, non-sectarian discussion group on the left. The two publications of the Workshop, *Political Economy and the Housing Question* (1975) and *Housing and Class in Britain* (1976) give a selection of the early papers presented to the Workshop, while the Direct Labour Collective, itself a sub-group of the Workshop, has

published in *Building with Direct Labour* (1978) the only serious study of direct labour construction currently in existence.

In view of this rapid development of housing research with a Marxist orientation, the publication of this book, representing four years of research, is all the more disappointing.

This sense of disappointment stems in part from the ambiguous nature of the project itself: the author describes the subject of the book as 'the local authority housing sector in Britain' although the book actually deals with the more limited field of government policy formulation for investment and subsidy and the actual economics of the development process in land, construction and finance, while the title of the book itself, *State Housing in Britain* implies a study of the broader problem of state intervention in housing in Britain.

The author is not unaware of this problem, and has gone some way to provide a more coherent picture of the totality. In particular one of the most interesting chapters in the book, contributed by Fred Gray, is entitled 'Consumption: council house management' and gives a good summary of the problems of the selection and allocation process that admits people to the state housing sector and the professional or political ideologies that form the outlook of the managers of state housing in the local councils.

The book contains a clear and precise analysis of the evolution and development of government policy towards investment in local authority housing and its financing through the subsidy system. The account is however largely based on secondary sources, and lacks the stimulus which a direct study of the papers now available under the thirty-year rule would give of the actual considerations of state policy which operated on the politicians and civil servants at the time. This is an unfortunate weakness, which results in the curious ambiguity of the author's analysis of the state. After a coherent and detailed account which links the level of investment in local authority housing and the changes in the subsidy system to the fluctuations in the national economy as a primary determinant, the author proceeds to quote and reject the formulation of the *Communist Manifesto*: 'The executive of the modern state is but a committee for managing the common affairs of the whole bourgeoisie' in favour of emphasising the relative autonomy of the state from capital!

It is the theoretical sections of the book which expose its weaknesses, rather than the empirical account of policy and its formation. The theoretical content indeed is often attached to a chapter as part of a didactic

summary rather than forming an integrated part of the conception.

The author describes himself as belonging to a school of economic thought bringing together Ricardo, Marx, Kalecki and Keynes which he describes as the 'Anglo-Italian' school. It would be unfair to these writers however to ascribe to them the curious definition of exploitation as 'any social process which permits the owners of private property, whether it be real or financial, to appropriate part of the flow of national income so as to increase the value in constant prices of their capital'. This definition, which would now admit as exploitation the process of buying cheap and selling dear, allows the author to conclude that council tenants are only 'exploited' in paying rent when subsidies are less than the 'real' rate of interest. Since this has never occurred, the author concludes that council tenants are not exploited as tenants, but only as wage-workers.

The weakest section of the book is undoubtedly the final chapter, where the author puts forward proposals for the housing strategy to be pursued by a socialist government, defined as 'a Labour government committed to a major democratic transformation of British society by means of a transitional programme with a coherent socialist goal' and pursuing an alternative economic strategy. The weaknesses of this chapter are twofold. Firstly, the author is proposing solutions to problems currently being experienced, while any process of struggle likely to lead to the election of a left government will in itself transform radically the nature of the problems to be solved: for example, a solution to the problem of housing finance which is relevant to the current reality is unlikely to be applicable to a left government coming to power after a period of catastrophic inflation, or after a further long period of recession and de-industrialisation. Secondly, the proposals which the author puts forward tend towards an abstract instrumentalism of the state: there is too much made of the need for surveys and statistics by comparison with the process of decision, with the transformation of popular power. This revolution from the top down, not from the bottom up.

The criticism made of Sir William Beveridge by Beatrice Webb is apposite: 'He agrees that there must be a revolution in the nature of society; but it must be guided by persons with training and knowledge — ie by himself and those he chooses as his colleagues'.

It should be noted however that the author has at least made a coherent proposal, which is more than any other individual or group on the left has done to date. **Mike Jones**

Each of these different types of letters are written in a unique way so as to pass the required message. Below are some of the different types of letters; Invitation letters. Confirmation letters. Our aim is to help you write nice well laid out letters that capture the attention of the intended recipient. They are meant to help you get that important job or that date. We believe you will find our site a great resource when writing any kind of letters. Many others are already enjoying the benefits. Letters. Communication is a very integral part of living creatures, animals and humans. Communication may be verbal or written. Written communication, however, is only applicable to human beings. Can you even imagine the world without communication? Verbal communication can be through telephones, webcams or in person. Written communication is through letters, Verbal communication can be through telephones, webcams or in person. Letters of commendation are a form of employee appreciation, and companies send them out to the entire staff to congratulate an employee for a job well done. They may include the following: Purpose: Begin a letter of commendation identifying who is being commended and for what reason. Apology letters create a formal record of your admitting to and attempting to rectify a mistake or failure. An apology letter should include the following: An acknowledgement of the mistake. 2- Letters of orders. Order letters are issued by a consumer and received by a supplier. These letters are sent in order to ask the supplier a certain amount of products. The order letters should include the following aspects: - Quantity of product required. Letters of recommendation are documents attesting to the quality of a person's work. These types of letters are issued when a person wants to get a new job and are drafted by people who are in the ability to determine if the applicant's performance is optimal.