next year throughout Michigan by the impact of automation. Management’s intransient attitude toward right-to-work laws and its disavowal of social responsibility for the unemployed scarcely offer the proper background for a worthwhile conference.

David J. McDonald of the Steelworkers Union and Benjamin F. Fairless of U. S. Steel may retain a high regard for each other, but can either of them control the steam built up by the demands of the Steelworkers Union in advance of next summer’s negotiations with the steel industry, especially since automation has already displaced at least 200,000 steelworkers who dream—as the auto workers once did—that a shorter work week could solve their problem?

THE theory of amicable coexistence between trade unions and big business worked, by and large, in the last decade primarily because an expanding economy and relative prosperity enabled both sides to feel that basic progress was being made. Now conditions have been changed by two new and decisive factors. The first is the existence of a permanent strata of unemployed, including many previously unionized workers. The other is the weight that the social and political influence of sixteen million organized workers has given the trade-union movement—a weight which has not been sufficiently understood either by industrial leaders or, in many cases, by trade-union spokesmen.

In the background of these new and varied developments, far too little attention has been paid to the observation of that great scholar of the labor movement, John R. Commons, who wrote in 1932: “The labor movement is always a reaction to and a protest against capitalism.” What forms this protest may take is the big question facing American society in the coming period. At the present time this much may be said authoritatively: the pace of the reaction and protest has quickened far more than most observers foresaw.

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THE CULTURE OF POLITICS... by Raymond Williams

Oxford, England

THERE IS A marked change in current social thinking in Britain, so marked that we can begin to think of it as a movement. It is never easy to give the history of these changes, but I can offer some personal evidence, and a personal assessment. In 1950, when I began work on my Culture and Society [just published by Columbia University Press] I felt deeply isolated (not only in politics—though by then the Labor Government was almost everything I had been brought up to oppose—but also in deeper terms, in the whole sense of a community of effective social values. My book was a response to that situation: an attempt to recover and revalue the tradition to which I felt I belonged; a further attempt to begin restating and extending this tradition, in mid-twentieth-century society. I felt isolated, but I was not in fact alone. Now, in the later fifties, I find myself part of an effective movement of ideas, most of them wrought out in those years of baffled withdrawal. I realized this most clearly when I read the recent symposium, Conviction.* I had been invited to contribute to this, knowing hardly any of the other contributors, never meeting them to discuss any kind of line. Yet what came through in Conviction, when for the first time, with the book published, I read my fellow contributors, was just that effective community of values, in many different fields and from many kinds of training, which in 1950 I had looked for in vain.

There were other, equally important signs. There was Richard Hoggart’s The Uses of Literacy, which I could not wholly accept, but which brilliantly identified the complex of concerns that seemed to me decisive. Then, quite independently, a group of young men in their twenties had begun the Universities and Left Review, and started the liveliest movement of social ideas, among a young generation, since the thirties. Both Hoggart and I were delighted, if surprised, to discover that what they were interested in was what we had been working on. Neither was cause or effect; it was a genuine confluence. The first signs had come earlier, in certain aspects of the work of Osborne, Amis and Wain. Distinctly, in 1955, there was a revolt against the established categories and currency. Nevertheless, at that time, politics were not, in the famous phrase, “about us.” In the last three years, and with gathering momentum, this too has been changed. But the politics that are about us are what I am calling here the politics of culture.

Many events can be cited, which might serve to explain these changes. Butskellism, not merely in the stagnation of its politics, but in the smugness of its social assumptions, provoked a very deep, if largely negative, reaction. The beginning of commercial television was the decisive sign that a paternalist culture, as represented by the BBC at its best, could in fact not hold. Popular journalism was getting worse and, in the cost-pressure after Korea, an alarming polarization of the press became evident: the best papers gaining slowly, the worst papers gaining rapidly, and the compromise middle papers losing very heavily, in all classes and age-groups. There was...
another illusion going: that a good, healthy, cultural range, at varying but continuous levels, was the necessary pattern of our future. Other, more spectacular events had their influence. Suez provoked real anger, and brought politics on to the streets again. The hydrogen bomb sent young people marching and campaigning for the first time since the thirties. Hungary had the important effect of breaking the barriers on the intellectual Left, bringing scores of good men out of Britain’s Communist Party and leading immediately to another part of this movement—the redefinition of Socialist humanism which The New Reasoner was founded to explore. These are all vital factors; but events could change again, and the movement die away, if its basis were only reactions of this kind. Suppose, for instance, that Labor won the next election: would our objects have been achieved? In fact, though we shall work for Labor to win, I doubt if any of us, in this movement I am describing, feels that such a government would be of much more than negative value. We should hope for changes, but one of the things we would be trying to change is the Labor Establishment we had helped to return. The movement, if I am right, runs deeper than parliamentary change.

THE DECISIVE factor, in my view, is a fundamental and I, think, irreversible social change. We have heard a lot, recently, about the “scholarship boys,” the young men from working-class homes who have got to university and stared round at an established middle-class culture. They have, in fact, been around for some time, as the odd, gray-haired scholarship boy will remind us. But there has been, in the fifties, a decisive change in these young men as a class. D. H. Lawrence had to choose between Bloomsbury and New Mexico; he chose, very wisely, New Mexico. But, with occasional exceptions like Lawrence, what was offered, before 1939, was assimilation, either into the ordinary middle class, or into its cultural fringe. Middle-class English intellectuals, who still think of class as a natural organ like the liver, kept emphasizing how difficult it was for the poor boys; how unhappy and nervous or brash it would make them, having to mix with so brilliant a society, with different livers. They even invented a pseudo-category called “inter-class stress,” and started explaining unhappy marriages in its terms, wholly confusing personal and sociological facts. What did not occur to them, yet is in fact quite obvious, is that to get into the English middle class, socially, is a terribly easy thing. The differences the old middle-class preserves are trivial; blow on them and they are little more than dust. And the people in question, the scholarship boys, were, of all people, those who could adjust very easily; who had got their scholarships, in fact, largely because they had adjusted adequately to the way of life the schools and universities were offering them. My estimate is that it takes, at longest, about two years, for a clever working-class boy to become an indistinguishable middle-class Englishman, always supposing that this is what he wants to be. And the evidence is that this is in fact what happens to the great majority. Sectarian politics was almost the only alternative course.

In the fifties, there is an obvious change. Such young men are more numerous, and gain confidence from each other. More particularly, having had a long look at it, they are increasingly clear on one thing at least: that middle-class Englishness of the old kind is not for them. Amis made fun of it; Osborne swore at it: those were the first healthy signs. Still, they were negative signs; the alternative was lacking. Americanism, to many, seemed to be such an alternative. Already, on the radio, American or Canadian accents were popular, and British people of all kinds were picking them up for the primary reason that they went right outside the British class-accent complex. Many of our younger writers are doing at their level what English popular singers are doing at theirs: becoming pseudo-Americans as an escape from the old impasse of class. It is understandable, but it is still only play-acting. The decisive importance of this recent movement is that it is attached, socially, neither to the English middle class nor to the crude imitation of aspects of Americanism, but to the way of life from which most of these young men have come—the way of life of the English working class.

Here is the center of the movement; here the creative problems and challenges. In detail, there is still confusion and controversy, but in atmosphere, unmistakably, there is confidence, dedication and a sudden extraordinary release of energy. Nobody is entitled to speak for the movement as a whole, but certain common attitudes are clear. The attachment to the working class is not, for example, the romantic over-valuation of the beautiful poor, of which there have been many previous examples. The life is known too personally and directly for anything so abstract. Certain virtues are valued, in particular that complex of irony, tolerance and charity which most working-class communities have kept as a saving strength. At the same time—and Hoggart, particularly, has stressed this—this complex has been easily exploited, has in some ways invited exploitation, by the advertisers, the popular persuaders, the professional opponents of social change. There is also very little romanticism about the externals of working-class life—the nostalgia for the back-kitchen, the cloth-cap, the local accent. These are a part of our childhood, but we do not want to go back to them, in any simple regression. The fact is that English working-class life is, in these respects, changing very rapidly. The families are coming out of the back streets into the new housing estates, and everyone is glad of this, though it has recently been valuably emphasized, by the lively Institute of Community Studies, that the old family and neighborhood patterns must not be surrendered simply for better houses and equipment; that these patterns, in fact, must become the social basis of the new estates.

IN ALL THIS, there is one very important factor: that we are trying to think, not what might be best for the working people considered as objects of benevolent social change, but what we and our families, who are
the working people, ourselves want. This same principle applies to recent thinking about education and, the welfare services: not what should be done for the poor and the underprivileged, leading to the old thinking about minimum standards, but what common services we all need, and what scales and attitudes in them we ourselves are prepared to accept. This emphasis is a result of the movement of so many working-class boys into professional work, and of the simultaneous acceptance, by at least a large minority of professional people, of this common-service principle. The changes are happening, and a different, less divided community is in some ways emerging.

**THEN WHY** the insistence on the working class as such? It is not a matter of any temporary way of living, but of fundamental ideas of the nature of social relationships. We base our values on the working-class movement because it is the main carrier of the principle of common improvement as against individual advantage. The working-class movement, in its characteristic institutions, offers the example of community, collective action and substantial equality of condition, as against the prevailing ethos of opportunity and hierarchy. We believe, in fact, that the spirit of these working-class institutions—the cooperatives, the trade unions, the numerous voluntary associations—is the best basis for any future British society. This is the British working-class culture we value: the institutions of democracy, equality and community.

The emphasis was the first thing to get: an emphasis which gave us our general directions, and which also, in substantial terms, gave us back our unity with our own people, from whom otherwise, by our training for different work, by the constant pressure to accept not only middle-class jobs but the old middle-class values, we were in danger of being separated. The policies which may flow from this emphasis are still, necessarily, controversial.

In terms of politics in the narrow sense, we of course look to the Labor Party, as our own movement, but we are attacking its domination not only by certain acquired Establishment ideas, which came in the first brush with power, but also by its main recent intellectual tradition, that of the Webbs and the Fabians. We respect the work the Fabians got done, but we are against them on two counts: first, that they were interested in change as something organized from the top, a social engineering by experts for an abstraction called the public interest; second, that as a result of this, they steered the Labor Party into a position where it could be fairly regarded, as by a majority of the British public it now is, as the party not only of social justice but of bureaucracy, not only of reform but of constant nay-saying, petty control and the philosophy of the minimum standard. We think the imaginative narrowness of the Fabians, their characteristic penchant for organizing people “for their own good,” their complacent over-valuation of experts and under-valuation of ordinary people, have all but wrecked the Labor Party, and would wreck it altogether if the redeeming values of ordinary working-class life were not also present, shaping the movement and giving it different objectives.

EQUALLY, we are opposed to the Communist tradition, in which the working people are regarded as “masses” to be captured by an organizing minority. We say that there are no masses, but only ways of seeing people as masses, and that these are ways which we did not learn and do not intend to learn. The “masses” are our own families, and we are not interested in capturing them. We want, rather, a Socialist movement that is at every level a movement involving choices. We want genuine industrial democracy, and we do not think we shall get it if the parties paying lip service to it are themselves organized on faction-ridden, opposition-hating, bureaucratic lines. We see not only the Communist Party, but our own Labor Party, as a party of this kind.

We do not, in fact, think of the working class in primarily political terms. The transfer of power, in the name of a class, is not our objective. Our emphasis is on the quality of ordinary life, not on the superstructure of power. We believe, certainly, that under the new capitalism, as under the old, work is being degraded by the fact of treating human labor as merely a raw material, and leisure increasingly is being degraded in being treated as an object of profit. We say, then, that social ownership must replace capitalism, but we are well aware that what may pass for social ownership—a managerial elite mixing with an old owning class—could have precisely the same effects. The belief in workers’ control, which was good for a laugh only a year or two back, is reappearing in interesting and practical ways. The belief that work should be judged, not only by whether it is useful or profitable, but also, and primarily, by its effect on the man doing it, is also again being put forward. And behind all this loom the huge problems of culture in the narrower sense: education, arts, leisure.

**HERE, I think, is our essential campaign.** What we see is a selective, minimum-standard education system, and this we are determined to change. We see also the mass media being used, not for popular education and entertainment, but for the substitute idea of public relations with the masses. We see our arts reduced to a marginal existence, unless they fit in to this philistine system. In one way and another—in exhibitions, meetings, films, books, periodicals, lectures and classes—we are trying not only to fight the system, but to make the alternatives practical. Our politics are the politics of culture, not only because of this central emphasis on the arts and education, but also because of the substance of ordinary living which, to us, these represent. We are interested in the politics of power only insofar as change gives choice and the means of choice to the ordinary families from which we have come. This very principle, however, seems to us the most radical challenge to our existing social system. Whether the challenge will be successful it is much too early to say, but that it exists, as a practical new direction, an increasing number of us are certain.