'The race for space': capitalism, the country and the city in Britain under Covid 19

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Abstract

This article draws on the work of Raymond Williams (1973) to argue that under covid-19 the dominant 'ways of seeing' the countryside and the city in Britain have been a key way of obscuring the structural violence of capitalism through which the virus is experienced. Cultural narratives of 'exodus' from urban areas have abounded in British media, fuelling a material 'race for space' as the middle class rush to buy up rural properties. Across social media, the 'cottagecore' aesthetic has proliferated, offering privatised solutions to the crisis through nostalgic imagery of pastoral escape. Nineteenth century discourses of the city in which bodies become transcoded as 'dirt' were rearticulated: the racialized bodies of migrant workers were framed as 'modern slaves' in the 'dark factories' of Leicester; this became the nation's 'dirty secret' which needed to be 'rooted out'' and blamed for the spread of the virus. We argue that these binary narratives and aesthetics of a bountiful, white countryside and an infested, racialized city are working to obscure the deep structural causes of poverty, inequality and immiseration. We develop Williams's analysis to show how these cultural imaginaries also help to sustain the gendered and racialized division of labour under capitalism, arguing that the country-city distinction, and the material inequalities it obscures, ought to become a more central focus for cultural studies itself.

Introduction

As we were writing up this article in April 2021, England[i] was slowly emerging from its second full lockdown, just over one year into the Covid-19 pandemic. The UK government's initial rather 'laissez-faire' strategy, which toyed with the idea of 'herd immunity' in the interests of protecting the economy, moved sluggishly to more strict lockdown rules and more rigid approaches to quarantine. Internationally, the pandemic has been an exercise in 'bio-political nationalism' (Kloet, Jin and Chow, 2020) and lockdown in the UK, as in most jurisdictions, came with the closure of public spaces, prescriptions of not mixing households, restrictions on travel, as well as the all-important instruction to socially distance. The nature of the transmission of the biological virus was met with social responses to space and place – new imperatives to re-distribute bodies, to establish appropriate distances, and prevent contact and transmission.

In this article we argue that the cultural responses to the virus must be understood through longer histories of capitalist enclosure and dispossession, and we argue that powerful media representations of rural and urban space are working to obscure the profound inequalities

in the ownership of, and rights to, land and resources. Our argument situates the present by developing an analysis influenced by Raymond Williams' classic text *The Country and the City* (1973). His compelling but complex argument is that the dominant *ways of seeing* the countryside and the city - as one another's antitheses - have long been part of an ideological mystification which sustains capitalist power. Historically, the cultural work that separates the ways we see the 'country' and the 'city' in Britain has helped to obscure the relations through which they are constitutionally interwoven as part of a more totalising capitalist schema. This ontological binarisation of country and city is a powerful diversion from the harms of capitalism as the underpinning, material system that shapes and pervades social and spatial inequality.

Under covid, British media has become preoccupied by the 'race for space' and new valorisations of the rural, and media discourses of 'exodus' from the city to the country have intensified. We draw on a range of media sources during the pandemic which have figured the British countryside as a place of retreat, innocence, and healthfulness to which the urban and suburban middle class are entitled to escape; in this apparent turn away from urban aesthetics and frenetic work temporalities, it is often implied that there is a turning away from capitalist values. This, we argue, obscures the extent to which these redrawings of social space are fundamentally borne from the intensifying power of capital. We then turn to a case study of Leicester as an example of how the 'city' has been figured through racialising discourses which redirect attention away from capitalist exploitation to connotations of urban disease and alien cultures which need to be 'rooted out' of Britain. Williams' account of how the country-city distinction operates as ideological cover for capitalism is valuable, but it requires additional work to account for the gendered and racialised structures upon which the cultural obscuration of capital accumulation rests, which we also explore in this article.

At the time of writing, the UK death toll from covid is running at around 158,664.[ii] The Prime Minister Boris Johnson really did 'let the bodies pile high in their thousands' - as he is reported to have said in a cabinet meeting.[iii] But how is this made palatable on a broader scale - how is the uneven distribution of *which* bodies are piling high, and *which* lives are 'grievable' (Butler 2009) not more acutely felt and resisted in the UK? Many bodies were already characterised as expendable under neoliberalism, in which state neglect by design had already laid the foundations for 'acceptable' levels of death (Dorling, 2019; Skeggs, 2019; Wood and Skeggs 2020). We know that the virus is not a great leveller and disproportionately affects people of colour, migrants and the poor (Hedge, 2021). The executive editor of the *British Medical Journal* argued that government responses to covid-19 were tantamount to 'social murder'[iv], with the UK an especially egregious example (Kabbassi 2021). In fact, the UK's initial response, which toyed with 'herd immunity', could be seen as nothing short of eugenics in the violence of neglect (Butler, 2020). One of the reasons that the stark numbers and realities are both so visible and yet *not felt* is the historic acculturation to extreme inequality. We argue that some of the basic ideological mystification of the rural and the urban - as part of the way in which contagion is culturally refracted during Covid-19 - continues a long tradition of obscuring capitalist exploitation that is a key way of *unseeing* and potentially *un-feeling* deep inequalities and social murder.

Bodies in space: Enclosures and commons

In the UK, while income inequality runs at one of the highest rates in the western world, there is an even more pronounced inequality in land ownership, most especially in England, where 1% of the population owns half of all the land (Shrubsole 2019). In Guy Shrubsole's analysis of current land ownership, he suggests that if land were distributed evenly across England's population each person would have half an acre. The parliamentary enclosures which reached their peak during the late 18th and early 19th centuries are recorded as the crux of the transformation of the economy from feudal to capitalist, and involved the brutal dispossession of the agricultural labourers who had depended upon rights of access to the commons. Marx (1867) called the English enclosures a form of 'land grabbing on a great scale' while the historian E.P. Thompson (1963) saw this process as a form of 'social violence' and 'class robbery'. While enclosure is often seen as a ruptural moment in British history and the development of a capitalist economy, Raymond Williams noted that it is 'necessary to see the essential continuity of this appropriation, both with earlier and with later phases' (1973:96). Silvia Federici has argued that '[t]he enclosures are not a one-time process [….] They are a regular reoccurrence on the path of capitalist accumulation and a structural component of class struggle.' (2019 p.27). Federici shows that contemporary enclosures are characterised by the expropriation of communal land as well as the generalisation of debt. Here, we emphasise the *continued* processes of enclosure, appropriation and dispossession as a current feature of the British political and economic climate, and in particular we draw on Williams's analysis to consider how this is ideologically obscured through dominant cultural imaginaries of rurality and urbanity. However, in doing so it is important to recognise Williams' failure to take gender and race into account in his theories of the country-city relation, as in his work more broadly (Harris, 2009; Lewis 2008; Kay 2021). Paul Gilroy (1987) has criticised Williams' 'strategic silences' in his swerving of questions of race in his analysis of Englishness as a cultural construct.

As Imogen Tyler (2020) shows, both historical and contemporary enclosures of public property (land and public resources) were attended by an enclosure of *social relations* and the production of new kinds of stigma. In the 17th and 18th centuries came the figure of 'paupers', whereas austerity under neoliberal capitalism has birthed the 'scrounger'- a particularly potent figure of contemporary UK media press discourse (Jensen 2019). Robbie Shilliam (2018) has demonstrated how the relations of African enslavement and the empire's appropriation of capital overseas were central to defining ideas about labour and the 'undeserving' poor in Britain. While Williams hints at racial capitalism interwoven into the emerging narratives of England as 'home' as compared to the troubled colonies, there is little in his analysis around how the structural violence of English agrarian capitalism takes its cues from the supranational dispossessions of lands and peoples (Gilroy 1992). Despite Williams's allusion to the way in which poverty affects women and children so disproportionately, there is also no direct analysis of gender in Williams' work[v]. Silvia Federici (2004) has shown how land enclosure and capital accumulation is carried out through violence against women and intensifying misogyny. Her work shows how the loss of the commons in the early modern period was attended, not coincidentally but constitutively, by the demonisation of women, and the decimation of their communal social power; the current resurgence of misogyny and violence is also the brutal but logical consequence of the new capitalist enclosures.

Discussion of the 'commons' has been important to contemporary cultural studies often largely tied to the discussion of the emergence of *digital* spaces as they both expand and restrict the potential for communicative debate (Andrejevic, 2007; Dean, 2005). Analyses of digital infrastructures must figure land into these dynamics, such Vicki Mayer's (2020) analysis of the material impact of Google's data farms in the Netherlands that uses Williams' work to show how digital infrastructures beget complex, historically informed structures of feeling around land, space and region. Few works have addressed land ownership directly, with the exception of Laura Clancy's (2021) analysis of the UK royal family that demonstrates how their private land ownership and corporate wealth is concealed by their role in the cultural imaginary of the UK. In Brett Christophers' (2018) critique of the privatisation of public land in the UK – what he calls the 'new enclosures' in neoliberal Britain - he speculates about why there has been no Polanyian 'counter-movement'. He begins to suggest that the process goes unnoticed and that the population do not see public land as rightfully theirs, and therefore in this article, we want to use cultural studies to illuminate how this works *through* cultural imaginaries of the country and the city, and their renewed permutation during coronavirus. Ownership, enclosure and rights of access to land and resources must be at the heart of an anti-capitalist, intersectional and anti-racist feminism - and at the heart of the critical project of cultural studies.

Green and pleasant land: escapes to the country under covid-19

Under covid-19, in the UK as elsewhere, there has been a renewed interest in 'green space' and the importance of access to nature for reasons of mental and physical health and recovery from the virus (Kay 2020). In the UK only one in eight UK households has access to a garden, and only 1 in 5 in London (Jenkins 2021).[vi]. However, a renewed focus on *access* has not cut through to ask more fundamental questions about *ownership* of land. One of the reasons for this, we contend, is the blueprint for which the countryside has historically been conceived. Williams' analysis of the powerful myths of both country and city in the English literary tradition, chiefly in the 18th and 19th centuries - which emphasise the *contrasts* between them, rather than their *interconnectedness* - demonstrates how this works ideologically to divert us from the overarching mode of capitalist production in our society and, importantly, its minority ownership. In this separation, the rural is imbued with nostalgic, idealised accounts of innocence and purity against the greed and dirt of the city.[vii] This mystification asserts a sense of 'natural order' which erases the violence of agrarian capitalism in the countryside, and the connective flows of capital between the country and the city, turning attention away from the exploitation and dispossession that has formed and shaped rural communities. It serves to cloak capital relations by symbolically tying ideas of corruption and greed to the processes and aesthetics of *urbanisation* rather the underpinning system of widespread capital accumulation. It is because of these 'problems of perspective' in the English imagination that it has become possible to see the British rural landscapes as empty wildernesses or extra-capitalist adventure playgrounds to escape to, whereas actually they are themselves 'soaked with labour' (Williams 2003 [1975], p.6). This is how we see large country houses as expressions of quintessential Englishness and 'responsible civility' rather than of landgrabbing, social violence, colonial theft and slavery (see Fowler 2020; Kay and Patel 2019).

Covid-stricken Britain has spawned refreshed cultural imaginaries of the country-city relation, and intensified idealisations of the pastoral, in a context where a widespread existential crisis has led to extended cultural conversations about 'what really matters'. To take just one example: the BBC identified 'the standout aesthetic of the year 2020' as 'cottagecore' – this is a social media aesthetic which 'romanticises the return to traditional bucolic attributes', such as 'rural self-sufficiency and delicate décor, with a heavy dose of nostalgia' (Kashi, 2020). Cottagecore abounds on platforms such as Instagram, Facebook and Pinterest, as well as in the music videos of performers such as Taylor Swift, promoting 'modern escapist fantasies'. Social media posts are:

> full of foraged mushrooms, long billowy dresses, gingham tablecloths, baskets of wildflowers, sourdough bread and mossy terrariums. There are babbling brooks surrounded by woodland, snails, beeswax candle-making, delicate doilies, farm animals, forest bathing and rustic simplicity.

A researcher of human behaviour cited in this BBC article suggests that these shifting aesthetic tastes represent 'almost a stepping away from conventional urban modernity' – as though these aesthetics are expressive of a widespread rejection of dominant social (and ecological) norms and materialist desires. Following Williams, we want to draw attention to the *misdiagnosis* of the problem, from which this need for 'escape' is imagined; that is to say, the problem is here construed as urban aesthetics and industrial production, rather than the system of capitalism per se. Furthermore, the framing of 'cottagecore' and pastoral scenes as escapes from contemporary ills continues a long narrative tradition that obscures the fact that the countryside is also scarred by inequality, poverty and exploitation. Of course the desire for a cottagecore aesthetic took on a material, literal form only for those who could afford it – and many wealthy city dwellers, who are highly unrepresentative of most people in the UK, were able to 'escape' to rural areas to 'sit out' the pandemic in rented cottages and second homes.

Exodus: 'the race for space'

Since 2020 reports abound of a longer-term 'exodus' from cities, with London's population set to decline for the first time since 1988 (Partington 2021), and spacious rural properties now increasingly sought-after, by the mobile, high-tech middle classes who are able to work from home. This is in contrast to the frontline key workers of the cities whose bodies must still crowd onto public transport as one of the 'starkest images of Britain's class divide' (Stern 2020). The mediated countryside has become an idealised escape, not only from the virus, but from bourgeois accounts of over-work and alienation – or perhaps as the reward for the latter. This repeats older longings found in English poetry and literature, from the 1880s onwards, for the 'green peace' of England that was set up in contrast to the alienation and 'tropical or arid places' of Empire (Williams 1973). The 'birds and trees and rivers of England', as well as the English natives speaking in one's own tongue, were the yearned-for rewards upon return from imperial 'service'. In these literary texts, the idea of 'home' was powerfully tied to 'the residential rural England, the "little place in the country" to return to' (Williams 1973: 282).

In the pandemic, broadsheet newspapers have been replete with articles wrestling with whether to up-sticks and leave the pressure and pollution of the city for a simpler life in the countryside. A *Times* article in April 2021 entitled 'Should I move to the country?' provides a balance sheet of pros and cons to help conflicted readers answer this question. Pros include: 'Afford a bigger house and garden, where property prices are cheaper'; 'Reduce your mortgage or even pay it off completely' and 'Improved quality of life, with green spaces, fresh air and fewer people'. Cons include: 'Less varied choice of restaurants, cultural attractions and leisure opportunities on your doorstep'. In October 2020, an *Observer* headline read: 'Green and pleasant beats urban buzz as families opt to leave cities' (Osborne 2020).

An article in the conservative *Telegraph* was headlined: 'Moving to the country: History repeats itself as urbanites flee virus-hit cities for rural retreats', and it was noted that

> city-dwellers [are fleeing] to the countryside to escape the density of virus breeding grounds and[viii] lack of outdoor space. Just as the miasma theories of the 1800s led to the creation of parks as a 'vital lung' in London and the well-to-do sought to escape the "Great Stink"; urbanites in the times of Covid want a slice of country life to improve their mental and physical health. (Butcher 2020)

Property prices in many rural areas continue to rise, in what many media outlets report as 'the race for space'. In May 2021, it was reported that prices in the least-densely populated areas of the UK have risen almost twice as much as those in the most-densely populated areas. Lockdown has 'fuelled a desire for space, access to gardens, and less crowding' and this is likely to become a longer-term trend.[ix]

Meanwhile 'second homes' have been a source of tension as many have used theirs as a space to lock down (Zogal and Emekli 2020) in order to get away from the city, but potentially placing pressure on rural communities and their depleted health infrastructures.[x] Despite this, the 'entitlement' to second home ownership is never pitched against the startling picture of rising homelessness in austerity Britain. In fact, whilst some hotels were encouraged to take in homeless people for a relatively brief period in 2020 under the 'Everybody In'[xi] initiative, the private second home was still seen as sacred. Of all the apparently more 'socialist' measures brought into cope with the virus - such as the guaranteed furlough schemes for (some) employees, which were granted in the name of saving 'business' - property ownership and privatisation was never up for discussion. Despite the virus creating greater need for space, clean air and safe homes, second home entitlement continues to be supported by a moralising agenda in which appropriate guardianship of England's 'green and pleasant land' is protected and hoarded.

'Responsible civility' as anti-materialism

Earlier romantic notions of the landowner as the moral custodian of nature, in 'his' proud care of home, land and the 'national' table through the maintenance of his country house were drawn out in English literature and poetry as examples of 'responsible civilisation'. This was part of an 'improving' rhetoric of progress, covering over the violent outcomes of the

exploitation of production (Williams 1973:27). This is now extended in the present, in which the current cultural longing for the countryside and a better 'quality of life' is now so often construed as a form of self-responsibilisation and anti-consumerism. An article in *Vice* magazine on changing consumer habits - for example a global drop in sales of luxury goods such as jewellery and perfume – even suggested that covid-19 has seen 'a very strong backlash against this land-grabbing of material ownership'[xii]. It is precisely the figuring of the country as *outside* of, or in opposition to, capitalism (which is associated with the power and industry of the city) that allows its visual fetishisation to be taken as a *rejection* of capitalism. What this obscures is that such a choice is materially premised on the capitalist system of private property and symbolically coded as retreatist, anti-social, fantasy of *privatised* escape.

This rejection of 'materialism', and of the frenetic temporalities of work in the city, are made possible precisely through the logics and inequalities of financialised capitalism. As William Davies and Nick Taylor (2020, np), in their study of elites who have moved to the countryside, speculate: 'we could be witnessing a new compact between wealth and the countryside' with 'a new type of "environmentalism of the rich" […] and the deployment of private capital in pursuit of elite visions of "nature", "wilderness" and a de-commodified existence'. This appears to be 'a deliberate distancing from the urban world of exchange values, heteronomous work practices and consumerism' but the authors note that it would 'be odd to describe this as "anti-capitalism", when it is so buttressed by asset prices and the human capital of the elites concerned'. As such, while the 'race for space' is constitutive of deepening spatial inequalities, it is *culturally* imagined as a form of responsibilisation, illustrative of benign and communitarian social impulses. It is this 'problem of perspective', as Williams puts it, that underpins and animates capitalist power.

Mother/Nature

Our understanding of how certain spaces and spheres of life can be symbolically cleansed of the exploited labour that sustains them must also be informed by feminist theories of social reproduction under capitalism. Jilly Boyce Kay (2020) has argued elsewhere that the state missive to 'stay at home' under coronavirus has particular implications for women because the home is also a site of labour, exploitation and often violence. As the violence and exploitation that exist in the countryside are invisibilised through idealised images of the rural, so too is the private, domestic household imagined as a place of safety and retreat in dominant media discourses of 'home'. According to the Centre for Women's Justice, figures for domestic violence have spiked during lockdown in most countries[xiii], and gender inequalities have sharpened and deepened for the poorest as well as for those middle-class professional women for whom doing both paid and unpaid labour in the domestic space meant that 2020 was a 'lost year' for their careers (Ferber and Swindells 2021). We might see the romanticised images of domestic bread-making, crafting cultures (Martin 2020) and elaborate home-decor projects as operating a similar set of mythical denials of the socially reproductive *labour* that constitutes capitalism's background conditions of possibility (Fraser 2016).

The virus has further exposed that the undervalued, feminised work of care is vital to recovery. This has been both spectacularly visible, through public displays of affection and

the instruction to 'clap for carers' across the UK, with loving images of NHS workers cropping up across cities and the countryside - and yet simultaneously covering over the increasing march of the privatisation of care and health services (Wood and Skeggs, 2020). Care labour is primarily undertaken by women and ethnic minorities; the deaths of labourers in the front lines have been disproportionately black and minority ethnic (Kabbassi 2021). The exploited labour of marginalised people in the service of venture capital is therefore made to look like an act of freely given heroism, service or love.

The countryside, much like idealised images of the family around 'hearth and home', is imagined as an extra-capitalist zone, a place for retreat, respite and replenishment. Both 'mother' and 'mother nature' appear as a guaranteed and ever-available resource for physical and emotional nourishment. Williams shows how the fruits of the country are made to appear as 'magically self-yielding' where their production is construed as free of violence. Similarly, feminists have shown how institution of motherhood is seen as a source of freely given love. Adrienne Rich wrote of motherhood, there is 'no symbolic architecture [that] comes to mind, no visible embodiment of authority, power, or of potential or actual violence' (Rich 1976, 274). These are debates which have been extensively developed in questions around eco-feminism and cyborg feminism (see Alaimo 2010) which we do not have space to do full justice to here. But we note that the patriarchal family unit, like the countryside, is not outside of capitalism but fundamental to its sustenance and replenishment which these mythical sets of relations, which produce terms like 'mother nature', help to render unseen and exploitable. Indeed, scholars of 'green thought' have noted that the nature/society duality underpins the structural violence against women and people of colour: Jason W. Moore argues that: 'No less than the binaries of Eurocentrism, racism, and sexism, Nature/Society is directly implicated in the modern world's colossal violence, inequality, and oppression' (Moore 2016, p.2).

Feminist theorists seek to abolish or re-invent the distinction between productive and socially reproductive labour and it is important to recognise the current calls to re-centre care as part of the vision for a new sustainable future (Care Collective 2020). Williams's call, following Engels, to abolish the ideological distinction between town and country, and dismantle the capitalist division of labour between industrial and agricultural, cannot therefore proceed fully without being enriched by feminist and anti-racist theories. Cultural imaginaries of the country-city relation - and the ways that exploited labour becomes, in Williams's terms, 'dissolved' into our ways of seeing the land - work in ideological co-production with the valorisation of privatised conceptions of 'home' and 'care' which similarly 'dissolve' the structural violence of heteropatriarchal and racial capitalism.

Dark factories and dirty secrets: images of Leicester under covid-19

Thus far we have considered how the violence of heteropatriarchal and racial capitalism is ideologically 'cloaked' through discourses of privatised escape to bucolic pastoral scenes. But the ideological potency of idealised rurality is only made possible through its binarized relationship to its 'other': a corrupt and diseased urbanity. Here we turn to the example of mediation of the city of Leicester during lockdown, and the ways in which systemic exploitation and oppression in this urban space were also – albeit differently – obscured

through these media representations. During the summer of 2020, at around about the same time as Black Lives Matters protestors had pulled down the statue of the slaver Edward Colston in Bristol, a 'national shame' came to media prominence around exploitation of textile workers in Leicester, a city in the East Midlands of England with a population of around 350000. While media reports of Leicester's 'dark factories' had been made before, they resurfaced in June 2020 as part of the rationale for Leicester's strict local lockdown, the first in the country, due to comparatively higher rates of infection in the city. An undercover reporter from the *Sunday Times* had been offered a job for as little as £3.50 an hour — less than half the minimum wage — to pack clothes for Boohoo, the internet fast fashion retailer, in a factory in the eastern part of the city. This was then widely reported across national and international media as Leicester's – or Britain's – 'dirty secret'.

Leicester is significant because it has become the first city in the UK where white people do not constitute the majority of the population (Leicester City Council 2020) and in 2016, when Leicester City football club won the Premier League against the odds, international media heralded the city as a beacon of hope for multiculturalism[xiv]. However, in the context of the pandemic, the racialised identity of Leicester has been weaponised for the purposes of racist misinformation on social media, in which minority ethnic communities have been *blamed* for the spread of the virus and the ensuing local lockdown in Leicester (see Day 2020). High rates of infection, coupled with the BooHoo scandal, re-framed Leicester's Black and Asian populations from that of 'exoticism' to 'dirt' in a process of 're-colonisation', argues Bal Sokhi-Bulley (2020). Stallybrass and White (1986), in their analysis of the generation of 19th century bourgeois 'civilised' society in Britain, discuss how the disease and dirt of the city was symbolically transcoded onto those living in poor conditions. In the classifying discourses the poor literally became the sewage, disease and dirt that the bourgeois middle classes feared - processes that are still at work in contemporary British digital tabloid culture (Wood, 2018). Here, discursive classifications of the exploited people of Leicester's 'dark factories' – mostly women - are not seen as part of the global working class in need of structural liberation, but as alien bodies whose very presence within the country was a source of 'shame'.

One example of these logics in play was a *Sky News* report entitled '10,000 could be being kept in slave-like conditions in factories in Leicester' which showed a white female reporter intrepidly entering into the Imperial factory building in the east of the city[xv]. The establishing shot showed the imposing, decaying multi-storey building before honing in on the bodies of Asian women workers, briefly glimpsed through smashed windows or behind quickly-slammed doors. The reporter's voiceover tells us: 'Hundreds of factories in crumbling buildings [are] divided into a maze of workshops where our cameras weren't welcome'. On the *Sky News* website is written text by the reporter:

> At first glance it looks like a run-down relic of a bygone era.
> But as you walk into the courtyard behind the building, it's like entering a land that time has forgotten.
> Many of the windows have been smashed and patched up from the inside with cardboard.
> Fabric is draped across any windows that still have panes of glass. It's impossible to see in.
> There's rubbish everywhere. The fact it's raining doesn't help.
> Some people appear on a staircase, only to see me and run back inside
> […]

Many other newspapers, broadcasters and media outlets then followed up with reports into the 'Victorian' and 'Dickensian' conditions of garment factories, contributing to a discourse of 'concern' and 'shame' about 'modern slavery'. A sense of incredulity pervaded media and political responses - that such a thing could possibly be happening in 21st century Britain. This is a move that pitches the factory conditions as backward, regressive and illicit and as somehow antithetical to the contemporary operations of the capitalist system. These powerful *ways of seeing*, in which the bodies of workers were themselves coded as a 'dirty secret' or 'matter out of place' (Douglas 2002), helped to shape and legitimise the dominant political and media response where migrant worker literally *became* the virus.

'Modern' slavery

Many of the workers in the factories, as elsewhere in Britain, have the immigration status of No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF), meaning they are not eligible for statutory sick pay; they are employed by firms with no union recognition that lack health and safety provisions (Sokhi-Bulley 2020). Voices pointing to the structural preconditions of their extreme exploitation, or the continuities of their treatment with the logics of racial capitalism, were marginalised in mainstream media framings. The white Conservative MP for North-West Leicestershire, Andrew Bridgen, featured as the leading expert in mainstream media coverage; he decried the 'modern slavery' of the 'Leicester sweatshops' claiming that 'there are probably ten thousand modern slaves in Leicester' and that 'one in eight of the people walking the streets of Leicester East is a slave'[xvi]. His repeated figuring of people as 'slaves' – not as exploited and unprotected workers with no other access to the means to sustain life, but as bodies transcoded as *always-already* 'slaves' – contributes to the way of seeing the situation as an isolable problem to be 'rooted out', rather than to be structurally transformed. In these classifying discourses, the bodies of the garment workers became symbolically transcoded as embodiments of corruption, uncleanliness and disease, and even as coronavirus itself. As Bridgen repeatedly said: 'you will not sort out the virus flare-up in Leicester until we sort out the slave sweatshops'.

This logic of 'rooting out', cloaked in discourses of concern and care for the vulnerable, was also mobilised in a report commissioned by the so-called Centre for Social Justice, a right-wing think-tank, which was quoted extensively across media coverage, entitled: 'Parallel societies: slavery, exploitation and criminal subculture in Leicester'. To accompany this report, the think-tank's co-founder and Conservative politician Iain Duncan Smith (2020) wrote an article for the *Telegraph* entitled, 'It's not just the migrant boats that we need to go after', read: 'We must act now. […] We have to go after the criminals, no matter who they are and despite any cultural sensitivities, while rooting out corruption in official circles wherever it exists'. This is a particular *way of seeing* the problem of exploited labour - as a 'parallel' world of moral and literal disease, aberration, and criminal subculture - is consistent with the problematic labelling of labour exploitation as 'modern slavery' which invokes a criminal justice response rather than one focussed on labour protections and human rights (see Webber 2019; Craig et al 2019; Goodfellow 2018). As Emily Kenway

(2021) points out: 'The modern slavery story is adept at providing moral legitimacy for the very policies that enable severe exploitation in the first place'.

We can easily see the continuities with Williams' analysis of images of the 'darkness' and 'poverty' of city in nineteenth century England - in his case, he showed how East London was figured as the most abject urban space in the country, as 'unknown' and 'unexplored' (2015 [1973], 318) – as with the impenetrable 'dark factories' of Leicester. This way of seeing the problem of the city – in which the darkness and squalor are condemned, but not the system that produces them - repeats 'the illusion in the crisis of our time: that it is not capitalism which is injuring us, but the more isolable, more evident system of urban industrialisation' (1973:96). In the 19th century, the dominant response to the 'problem' of dirty and unruly urban bodies in 'murky, swarming, rotting London'[xvii] was to assimilate and educate them into cleanliness and respectability. In 2020, however, the response to the 'problem' in Leicester – 'all smelly, sticky and rotten' as the think-tank report put it[xviii] - is one of 'rooting out'. The symbolic loading of the 'dirty scandal' facilitates the ideological separation of the problem from the broader structures of racialised capitalism and gendered exploitation. It allows for the invocation of narratives of '*modern* slavery' but simultaneously cleanses them of any direct connection to colonial histories, violence, or even the contemporaneous prominence of the Black Lives Matter movement.

Conclusion: Uncloaking the enclosures

These cultural narratives during Covid 19 repeat the imaginary separations of the country and the city and make it very difficult to 'recognise, adequately, the specific character of the capitalist mode of production, which is not the use of machines or techniques and improvement, but their *minority ownership*' (Williams 1973 p.422, our emphasis). These cultural representations, we argue, must form part of our understanding of why there is not a Polanyian 'counter-movement', as Christophers notes, against the new round of enclosures. It is therefore a pressing political project to continually assert the interconnectedness of urban and rural realms - against the enormous cultural forces determined to set them in contrast to one another. The economic structures that force migrant women into unsafe and exploitative waged work in the post-industrial, crumbling factory buildings of Leicester are the same that allow wealthy elites to 'up sticks' and buy eco-properties in the countryside, complete with their high-tech home offices and rustic vegetable gardens. But these systems are ideologically obscured by the particular, powerful figurations of 'dark cities' and 'rural retreats', by the failure to see the exploited workers in Leicester and elsewhere as part of the working class, by the failure to see the social and reproductive labour that sustains capitalism and breaks lives, by the failure to see capitalism at all.

We argue that these ideological articulations of the country and the city are exacerbated and fuelled under covid. The more the virus exposes the need for collective action and interdependence, for sustained care structures, for more solidarity - the more that capital and the mainstream media must sell us the idyll of private escape. Since the advent of coronavirus, new permutations of this 'protecting illusion' have emerged; in this logic, the solution to what are understood as the intrinsic harms of city-dwelling are not to build a 'new Jerusalem', but to stage an individual exit and expel the 'rottenness' from the nation.

==In this context, we might see the 'race for space' as the latest of many rounds of enclosure, but this time in a context of an 'environmentalism of the rich' (Fraser 2021).== In these powerful ethno-national logics, it is clear that not everyone is entitled to this land, and not everyone should be trusted with it[xix]. This is the 'natural order' where the rural is figured as a private place to escape for the entitled few, and the 'commons' is restricted, surveilled and policed. This enables increasing violence towards those who dare to gather in common, or seek refuge in Britain, which will only help sustain capitalism in its new post-covid phase. As such, we argue that Raymond Williams's critique of cultural representations of the country and the city, enriched by feminist and anti-racist theory, ought to become a more central focus for cultural studies. This constructed dualization of city and country obscures the need for making all spaces clean, sustainable, and liveable for everyone, therefore rather than heralding the solution to the coronavirus crisis as private rural escape, what we really need - following Federici (2019) - is a communal re-ruralisation of the world.

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[i] In this article we primarily focus on England, which is one 'country' within the state of the United Kingdom and the politically dominant entity, however this is increasingly complicated by devolution of powers to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, which were exercised during Covid.

[ii] https://coronavirus.data.gov.uk/details/deaths (Date accessed 6/10/21)

[iii] https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2021/apr/26/pressure-mounts-on-boris-johnson-over-alleged-let-the-bodies-pile-high-remarks

[iv] The term 'social murder' was used by Engels in his 1845 book *The Condition of the Working Class in England.*

[v] Although some have noted how women's experience does feature in his fictional, rather than theoretical writing (see Mitchell forthcoming)

[vi] The Ramblers, Britain's walking charity, found that while 58% of white people could walk to green space within five minutes, this was only true for 39% of people who identified as Black, Asian or minority ethnic.

[vii] This contrast can also be put the other way, as Williams shows – with the country as backward and the city as enlightened.

[viii] https://www.southhams.gov.uk/article/6865/Coronavirus-Open-Letter-to-Second-Home-Owners

ix Resolution Foundation, May 2021

x This tension has been played out with vigilantes in Wales angry at second-home dwellers (BBC 2020) and South Hams district council pleaded with second home-owners not to visit their homes at Easter.

xi https://www.theguardian.com/society/2020/jun/18/hotels-used-to-house-rough-sleepers-during-pandemic-return-to-business (date accessed 13/05/21)

xii https://www.vice.com/en/article/akdyee/post-pandemic-world-luxury-materialism-experiences-new-normal-covid (date accessed 13/05/21)

xiii https://www.centreforwomensjustice.org.uk/new-blog-1/2020/11/10/covid-19-and-surge-in-domestic-abuse-in-uk

xiv For example, 'How Leicester Became UK's Multicultural Model', in the *Times of India* (2016)

xv The Imperial Typewriter factory building has a longer history of capitalist exploitation of Asian workers. See https://strikeatimperial.net/

xvi See for example LBC Radio 2020

xvii George Gissing, cited in Raymond Williams 1973.

xviii As cited in the Centre for Social Justice report

xix Parallel reports during lockdown of 'louts' occupying and littering public space (see The Sun's Headline of June 2020 *The Sun*'s, 'Lockdown Louts: Revolting pics show piles of rubbish, bottles of wine, used BBQs and booze left on Britain's beaches') which marries human waste with collectivity might be seen to contribute to narratives of who 'deserves' the land. Similarly, resistive bodies collecting together, such as those attending the Vigil for Sarah Everards murder or the Black Lives Matter Movement were heavily policed. This is starkly set against the way that collective bodies were tolerated – and even valorised - for the nationalist and nostalgic celebrations of 75 years of VE Day in May 2020 that saw street parties strewn with Union Jack bunting.