

Raymond Williams: The Working-Class Academic

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Abstract

This paper highlights the continued relevance of the working-class academic Raymond Williams (31 August 1921 – 26 January 1988) to today's students and academics. It will do this by introducing Williams and his key ideas in the form of a short think piece. This overview can be used to compliment more in-depth studies for seeking to understand social phenomena. The key concepts introduced within this paper focus on, culture as a whole way of life, 'structure of feeling', Williams' debate with Marxism, historical analysis and his approaches to methodology.

1. Introduction

Raymond Williams (31 August 1921 – 26 January 1988), alongside Richard Hoggart and E.P. Thompson, are widely accepted as being the founding fathers of cultural studies (Hargreaves and McDonald, 2000). This study will help explain why the work of Williams remains relevant to today's students and scholars. It will set out to do this by exploring his key ideas for: culture as a whole way of life, 'structure of feeling', debates with Marxism, historical analysis and approaches to methodology. It takes the form of a short 'think piece' and provides an overview of his key ideas, for complementing more in-depth studies of his ideas for understanding social phenomena.

The work of Williams, Hoggart and Thompson helped lay out a new approach to analysing culture. They rejected the premise advocated by predecessors that the products of 'mass culture' must be inferior to those of 'high culture' and favoured appreciation of how the

former might have some value (Hall and Whannel, 1964). Williams (1958) believed that the 'common culture' of the everyday lives of 'ordinary people' could be both analysed and celebrated, rather than despised and denigrated as was the case in the past from scholars associated with earlier traditions of cultural analysis (Inglis and Hughson, 2003). Williams, Hoggart and Thompson also provided the inspiration for further analysis of the complexities of social, political and historical conditions of cultural formations (Hargreaves and McDonald, 2000). Williams made extensive contributions on a wide range of topics including cultural theory, cultural history, television, the press, radio and advertising (Storey, 2001).

Williams (1961a) challenged the idea that the existing canon of English literature and 'high' culture can be the only way of understanding a 'lived experience' of a period. According to Jones (2006), Williams was able to do this by not rejecting 'high culture' for 'low culture' or for an anthropological conception of 'way of life culture'; but by including all objective culture as a 'documentary culture' in the first stage of reconstructing a 'structure of feeling' of a period. This method based on its use in Williams' (1953) study on the structure of feeling in the 1840s, has been helpfully summarised by Jones (2006, p. 22):

It can be presented as four stages: (i) reversal of the literary selective tradition in order to generate a fuller field of documentary culture, (ii) location of this documentary culture within economic and technical changes within cultural institutions, (iii) location of these in turn within 'the general social and political history of a period, (iv) establishment of links across these three fields using the concepts of 'social character' and 'structure of feeling'.

The purpose of using Williams' definition of documentary is that it allows for critical cultural analysis. This can take a form of analysis similar to that adopted with regard to the 'ideal'; an act of critical sifting until the discovery of what Arnold (1869) calls 'the best of what is thought and said' (p. 5). It can also involve culture being seen as the critical object of interpretative description and evaluation. Finally, it can also take a more historical function, involving a critical reading of documents in order to measure their historical significance (Storey, 2001).

Williams' work was greatly influenced by his working-class upbringing in rural Wales, following which he was able to secure an education at Cambridge University in the 1940s.

After graduating he acquired employment at Oxford University as an adult educator, a position he held until 1961 when he was invited back to Cambridge as a lecturer. He remained there until his retirement in 1983, having been appointed professor in 1974 (Buchanan, 2010). Many scholars such as Storey (2001), Barker (2008) and Giulianotti (2005) argue that Williams' three most significant publications are *Culture and Society* (1958), *The Long Revolution* (1961) and *Marxism and Literature* (1977) due to the role they played in shaping and influencing cultural studies. Whilst society has changed since the time Williams was writing, I would like to suggest that his writing on class relations has maintained its relevance and still contains fruitful material for analysing the ordering of society.

2. Culture as a whole way of life

Williams (1958) contested the widely-held belief that culture could be reduced to a set of artefacts by adopting as an alternative a more social definition insisting, 'culture is not only a body of intellectual and imaginative work: it is also essentially a whole way of life' (p.310). This led to a new emphasis on the cultural creativity of 'ordinary' people in 'every day' contexts of homes and work places. It resisted the conflation of working-class culture and popular culture by clearly distinguishing:

...the extremely damaging and quite untrue identification of 'popular culture' (commercial newspapers, magazines and entertainments, etc.) with working-class culture. In fact, the main source of this 'popular culture' lies outside the working class altogether, for it is instituted, financed and operated by the commercial bourgeoisie, and remains typically capitalist in its methods of production and distribution. That working-class people form perhaps the majority of the consumers of this material ... does not, as a fact, justify this facile identification. (Williams, 1958, p. 425)

Williams also denied there was such an entity as 'the masses', as everyone was different and led their own lives; this helped cultural studies scholars conclude, 'the telly-glued masses do not exist; they are the bad fiction of our second-rate social analysis' (1961a, p. 361). Therefore, 'the masses' was merely a derogatory term coined by those wishing to preserve their social privilege by defending an elite culture (Carey, 1992). This approach could enable

academic writing and research to form a justification for the research of the working class and other marginalised cultures and communities.

3. 'Structure of feeling'

'Structure of feeling' was a concept Williams (1961a) used to describe what he called a 'lived culture' that related to, 'the meanings and values which are lived in works and relationships' (p. 293). It can be used to describe: 'a particular sense of life, a particular community of experience hardly needing expression, through which the characteristics of our way of life that an external analyst could describe are in some way passed, giving them a particular character and colour' (p. 48). Even though it is a vague term, Hughson, Inglis and Free (2005) defined the notion as, 'a collective mood that informs values and attitudes about life [in a particular social period]' (p. 160). They noted that it does not always reflect dominant ideologies in society and whilst not isolated from these, it can however, demonstrate aspects of oppositional and alternative collective opinion.

The 'structure of feeling' can represent differing class 'social characters' (Jones, 2006); with the bourgeois social character established as dominant via, 'its characteristic legislation, the terms in which were argued, the majority content of public writing, and the characters of men most admired' (Williams, 1961a, p. 78). This is contested by the social characters derived from the aristocracy and working class. An instance given by Williams (1958) is the rejection of the bourgeois notion of service by the working class who instead adopt a culture of solidarity. An example being the working class's own thriving culture and institutions which were rejected by the bourgeoisie and were based around, 'the basic collective idea, and the institutions, manners, habits of thought, and intentions which proceed from this' (p. 313) which emphasise 'neighbourhood, mutual obligation, and common betterment' (p. 15). He cites trade unions and the co-operative movement as examples of institutions created and inspired by these values. Whilst not fully independent from capitalism, this form of culture differs considerably to bourgeois culture which is individualistic in nature (Williams, 1958).

Williams (1958) was also keen to stress the significant difference between the cultural commodities created by the culture industry and what cultural forms individuals were able to make from such commodities. This added to the debate discussed in this study as to whether culture is actively made or solely consumed.

Williams' writing (1961a; 1961b) made it clear that the structure of feeling is something other than ideology, as by ideology we mean as advocated by most Marxists, a '*relatively formalised belief system, where the belief system of the dominant class becomes the dominant ideology*' (Milner, 2002, p. 73). In *The Long Revolution*, Williams chose to use the term 'social character' instead of ideology. However, he was still clear on the distinction by stating that the, '*structure of feeling ... is different from any of the distinguishable social characters, for it has to deal not only with public ideals but with their omissions and consequences, as lived*' (1961a, p.80).

4. Williams' debate with Marxism

Williams' approach was sympathetic with the position of orthodox Marxism as, for example, he accepted the Marxist emphasis on class conflict. However, Snedeker (1993) argues that Williams did not take Marxist literary criticism seriously in *Culture and Society* (1958); whilst in *The Long Revolution* (1961) he argues Williams sought to oppose the economic determinism of Marxism, substituting multiple dimensions of culture, politics, economy and family as an answer to the reductionism of the base-superstructure model of orthodox Marxism.

The theoretical position adopted by Williams enabled scholars to negotiate the cultural radicalism associated with the historical materialism of the Marxist tradition, and in so doing, open up a new intellectual space where culture becomes a mediator between individual experience and class relations.

In the later part of his career Williams became closer to the Marxist tradition for example in *The Country and the City* (1973) he began an engagement with the Marxist form of analysis of the rural-urban nexus in the development of capitalism. Williams' (1977) work also began to become increasingly influenced by the Marxist scholar Antonio Gramsci through his critical engagement with Gramsci's theory of hegemony:

A lived hegemony is always a process ... Moreover...It does not just passively exist as a form of dominance. It has continually to be renewed, recreated, defended, and modified. It is also continually resisted, limited, alternative political and cultural emphases, and the many forms of opposition and struggle, are important

not only in themselves but as indicative features of what the hegemonic process has in practice had to control (Williams, 1977, pp. 112-113).

So, for Williams hegemony is a process of cultural domination which is constantly reforming in continuous conflict with oppositional forces. He argues dominant culture can be challenged by what he terms residual and emergent forces, with the former representing a residue 'of some previous social and cultural institution and formation' but still being significantly practiced and experienced in the present (Williams, 1977, p. 122). An example according to Ingham (1993) is the concept of community, as at times the notions of the way collective life "used to be" provide vehicles of opposition to dominant culture. As Williams (1980) explains, they 'represent areas of human experience, aspiration and achievement, which the dominant culture under values or opposes, or even cannot recognise' (p. 42). This leads us to his concept of the emergent, where to continue with Williams (1977, p. 123):

By "emergent" I mean, first, that new meanings and values, new practices, new relationships and kinds of relationship are continually being created. But it is exceptionally difficult to distinguish between those which are really elements of some new phase of the dominant culture ... and those which are substantially alternative or oppositional to it: emergent in the strict sense, rather than merely.

Williams (1980) develops the concepts of emergent 'alternative' and 'oppositional' culture; with an example of emergent alternative culture being when an individual simply finds a different way to live and wishes to be left alone with it – such as a 'back to nature' cult. Whilst to be in an oppositional culture, an individual will find a different way to live whilst actively wanting to replace broader society - such as radical eco-anarchist activists (McGuigan, 1997). These ideas are often incorporated into the dominant culture (becoming merely novel) but there are elements which are not, therefore becoming a form of resistance. Modern day examples could include expanding democracy into areas of culture previously run privately in line with the dominant discourse of 'neo-liberal' capitalism (Bryson, 2008). An example of an alternative culture would be a fan owned football club with oppositional culture including a co-operatively owned radical media outlet whose aim is to replace capitalism as the dominant economic system. These forms of analysis make Williams' work relevant for any student focusing on the debates within Marxism and resistance to the dominant economic order.

5. Raymond Williams, history and historical ethnography

Williams' work can also be used within historical studies. On his death in 1988, his work was reviewed by the historian Raphael Samuel (1989) who argued that whilst Williams was not a historian in the conventional sense, he showed great historical intelligence within his writings. He claimed Williams was able to show this intelligence through his rigorous use of the key historical concept of change and continuity, whilst always maintaining a strong historical grasp of the deceptiveness of tradition:

...he was not interested in history for its own sake, or even, to judge by his writing 'as it happened', but rather in how it could be used, the 'basic meanings' it could be made to yield, and above all, the principle of hope that can be discovered in it'.
(Samuel, 1989, p. 151)

Williams studied the past in order to present a hopeful future. This can be seen in his study of the presentation of urban and rural life in the *Country and the City* (1973) and through his study of English social criticism in *Culture and Society* (1958). History also informs his theoretical writing as emphasised in the previous section on his commentaries on hegemony in *Marxism and Literature*, and the development of the key theoretical categories of 'the residual' and 'the emergent' (Williams, 1977, pp. 121-127).

Methodology is an important part of modern research and this part of the paper lays out why Williams' ideas are still incredibly useful for the modern researcher. Barker (2008) stated that methodologies in cultural studies have a broad tolerance to a variety of approaches but their scholars have predominantly focused on qualitative approaches including ethnography and a range of textual approaches. Even though Williams did not carry out traditional 'field work' usually associated with this form of research, it was his epistemological approach which links him with the methodology of ethnography. Aronowitz (1995) argued that Williams' work offered a form of 'historical ethnography' which is an important method that can be adopted by today's researchers. Crucial to this interpretation is Williams' (1961b) notion of 'structure of feeling', as the culture of a period of a given class. Aronowitz (1995) argues that the 'structure of feeling' of a period can be identified through documentary analysis and in the specific case of Williams, by reviewing texts and poems:

Williams takes fiction not as “representation,” if by the term we signify the problematic of correspondence between text and context that is independent of it. Rather, the text embodies its unique space and time; the characters of a novel or the poet’s evocations are as constitutive of the life world as a conversation between two bikers or dropouts in Hedbige’s and Willis’s texts. (Aronowitz, 1995, p. 329)

5. Documentary analysis

‘Documentary analysis’ can be expanded beyond critically analysing text and poems, it can involve a variety of additional items including newspaper and magazine articles, diaries, autobiographies, official records, songs/chants and memorabilia which can be accessed from newspaper and local archives (Finnegan, 2006). This approach can be linked with what Williams (1961a) defined as the documentary category of culture. In this definition, *‘culture is the body of intellectual and imaginative work, in which, in a detailed way, human thought and experience are variously recorded’* (p. 57). For Williams, documents are social constructs which are formed in the collective mode of community and not solely a product of individuality. In his essay, *‘Structure of feeling and selective tradition’* he writes a clear argument for the use of documentary analysis in research. He states documents are able to express the culture (or ‘structure of feeling’) of a period in direct terms, which become increasingly significant when the living witnesses are silent (1961b).

6. Conclusion

To conclude, it is clear that the work of Raymond Williams still offers a unique opportunity to understand the ‘every day’ culture of people in the past and in the present day. His approach is important as it enables activities to be analysed as culture in the same way as ‘high’ culture of art or literature. His work also helps us to understand the centrality of culture to ‘everyday’ people and the role they play in actively creating, forming and developing the values within it.

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