**Raymond Williams’ Conclusion to *Culture and Society***

The history of the idea of culture is a record of our reactions in thought and feeling, to the changed conditions of our common life. Our meaning of culture is a response to the events which our meanings of industry and democracy most evidently define. (285).

In making his conclusions, a triad of influence that has preoccupied the book is raised again in the shape of culture, democracy and industry. Culture is according to Williams’ a reaction to changes ‘in the condition of our common life’ (285). Different reactions and resulting situations have created different cultures and consequently there are many different kinds of culture:

The idea of culture describes our common inquiry but our conclusions are diverse, as our starting points were diverse. The word, culture, cannot automatically be pressed into service as any kind of social or personal directive. (285)

Of the three major issues at stake in these developments (art, industry, democracy), each has three phases which Williams proceeds to describe. I outline his findings in the table below.

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| **PHASE** | Industry | Democracy | Art |
| *1. 1790 – 1870: a phase of working out new attitudes to industrialism and democracy.* | The rejection of production and the social relations of the factory system | Concern at the threat of minority values by popular supremacy of the new masses. | A period of questioning the intrinsic value of art and its importance to the common life. |
| *2. 1870 – 1914: narrower fronts, specialism in the arts, direct politics.* | Sentiment versus the machine. | Emphasis on community, society versus the individual ethic. | Defiant exile: art for art’s sake. |
| *3. 1914 – 1945: a phase of large scale organisations and the mass media.* | Acceptance of machine production. | Fears of the first phase are renewed in the context of ‘mass-democracy’ and ‘mass communications’. | The reintegration of art with the common life of society centred on the word ‘communication’. |

Some of these opinions concerning art, industry and democracy did of course cross periods, but they were not the common or general view according to Williams.

**Mass and Masses**

Williams notices that the word ‘masses’ is often associated with a ‘mob’ and he sees this emerging from three social tendencies:

1. the concentration of population in industrial towns;
2. the concentration of workers in factories;
3. and the development of an organized and self-organizing working class prone to social and political massing.

Yet the masses was a new word for mob, and the traditional characteristics of the mob were retained it its significance: gullibility, fickleness, herd-prejudice, lowness of taste and habit. The masses, on this evidence, formed a perpetual threat to culture. Mass-thinking, mass-suggestion, mass-prejudice would threaten to swamp considered individual thinking and feeling. Even democracy, which had both a classical and a liberal reputation, would lose its savour in becoming mass-democracy. (288)

Williams sees the new problem as the power of the media to change public opinion. Yet he also finds a certain prejudice in the term, ‘mass-democracy’. Democracy is the rule of the majority and Williams wonders whether this might also constitute mass rule, mob rule of the rule of lowness and mediocrity. Williams considers the label, ‘masses’, and identifies it with working people:

But if this is so, it is clear that what is in question is not only gullibility, fickleness, herd-prejudice or lowness of taste and habit. It is also from the open record, the declared intention of the working people to alter society in many of its aspects, in ways which those to whom the franchise was formerly restricted deeply disapprove. (288)

For Williams, Mass-democracy does not exist, there is only democracy: ‘Masses=majority cannot be glibly equated with masses=mob’ (289).

In continuing to challenge the term, ‘masses’, Williams considers the notion of the individual or ‘man in the street’. Williams asks, are we each only the man on the street or are we something more than that? In a collective image, the masses are different to us as we are unique individual yet they are similar so that the public includes us yet is not us.

I do not think of my relatives, friends, neighbours, colleagues, acquaintances, as masses ; we none of us can or do. The masses are always the others, whom we don’t know, and can’t know. Yet now, in our kind of society, we see those others regularly, in their myriad variations, stand, physically, beside them. They are here and we are here with them. And that we are with them is of course the whole point. To the other people, we also are masses. Masses are other people. (289)

This way of seeing others is sometimes exploited though for political and cultural motives.

**Mass Communication**

The rise of the printing press was intensified in 1811 by the invention of the steam driven press and by rotary presses in 1815. Transport links have improved as have telecommunications. Broadcasting, television and film have emerged. From these developments, Williams notes a greater number of paper publications at a lower price, more bills and posters, the rise of RV and broadcasting programmes and the art of film. How valuable are these developments?

The development of the media has brought a means of communication that is more impersonal: using photography of actors rather than actors, radio broadcasts rather than meetings. However Williams says that we cannot always compare conventional and mass communication fairly. The result of mass communication has simply been a change in the activities on which time is spent. Some critics dislike the one-way sending of information, but Williams points to reading, which has been providing information with no immediate possibility of response for centuries.

Williams uses the term ‘multiple transmission’ to describe the expansion of audience that mass communication has provided. The audience has grown as a result of growing general education and technical improvements and by some it is labelled mass communication. With such a large audience, the media can no longer retain such a personal feel, yet Williams bel;ieves that it is useful for some kinds of address. His question though is, what information is being communicated and how? It depends of course on the intentions of the broadcaster. Williams suggests that broadcasts can be, ‘art. education, the givingf of information and opinion’ or ‘manipulation – the persuasion of a large number of people to act, feel, think, know, in certain ways’ (292).

**Mass Observation**

Are the masses a mob? If it were so, then this would be a negative aspect to mass communication and also to mass culture or popular culture. Williams believes though that it is a question of interpretation. There is always bad popular art, ‘written by skilled and educated people for a public that hasn’t the time, or hasn’t the education, or hasn’t, let’s face it, the intelligence to read anything more complete, anything more careful, anything nearer the known canons of exposition or argument’ (294). However there is some popular art that is ‘bright, attractive, popular’ even if it is mediocre in comparison with high art (294).

Popular culture supposedly emerged after the Education Act of 1870 when a mass literate public developed. However points to the 1730s and 40s when a middle class reading public demanded ‘that vulgar phenomenon, the novel’ (295). Williams points out that there was literacy before 1870.

Williams notes also that much of the art produced for the working classes came from institutions on high, ‘for conscious political or commercial advantage’ (295). The working classes did produce some publications such as radical pamphlets, political newspapers and publicity, but this was quite different to the literature produced for them. This new bad literature from institutions was also absorbed by the middle classes and the masses cannot so easily be equated with the mob.

Contemporary historians concentrate on this bad literature and ignore the fact that as an introduction of a greater literate society, followers of all art forms have increased. Williams thinks that the problem is that of the high art critic comparing his own tastes to popular ones. What Williams calls strip papers (probably equivalent to our tabloids) reproduce the kind of communication that go on in working class communities to produce ‘that complex of rumour and traveller’s tales which then served the majority as news of a kind’ (298). Popular culture is not necessarily low in taste although appreciation of literature should be significant in a society’s education.

The problem with the mass media is that in order to make profit it needs huge audiences, and thus it will draw audiences in as much as it can and profit from people’’s ignorance. Williams praises the local newspaper which is higher in quality than the strip newspaper and is read by working class people: ‘Produced for a known community on the basis of common interest and common knowledge, the local newspaper is not governed by ‘mass’ interpretation’ (300). The regional newspaper is not based on the reader’s lack of education but on a regional and social grouping.

**Communication and Community**

Williams notes that communication, ‘is not only transmission, it si also reception and response’ (301). Williams shows anxiety about mass communications use of enticing psychological and linguistic strategies, but he states that, ‘any real theory of communication is also a theory of community’ (301). Williams believes that there has been a dominative theory of communication that has called for the science of penetrating the mass mind:

It is easy to recognize a dominative theory if, for other reasons, we think it to be bad, A theory that a minority should profit by employing a majority in wars of gain is easily rejected. A theory that a minority should profit by employing a mass of wage slaves is commonly rejected. A theory that a minority should reserve the inheritance of knowledge to itself, and deny it to the majority, is occasionally rejected. (301)

Mass communication has been though to be a minority exploiting a majority, yet Williams states that we are all democrats now. Some may wish to educate the majority through mass communication, but Williams questions their methods, because what is really called for is, ‘telling as an aspect of living; learning as an element of experience’ (302). Where education fails, it indicates a failure of communication which produces a reaction. Williams is adamant that people will not be told what to believe but must learn by experience. A dominative attitude indicates distrust concerning the masses with their strikes and riots, but Williams explains that there are not marks of untrustworthiness, but ‘symptoms of a basic failure in communication’ (303). Strike are then, ‘a confused, vague reaction against the dominative habit’ (303). Some governments rely on apathy and inertia to control the masses (this strikes a chord), but this is disastrous for democracy and the common interest. Transmission must be ‘an offering’ that recognises equality of being (304).

**Culture and Which Way of Life?**

Williams points out that while in the past culture was the pastime of ‘the old leisured classes’ it is now ‘the inheritance of the new rising class’ (306). For Williams, ‘working class culture’ is key. Working class culture is not the dissident element of proletarian writing such as post-Industrial ballads. Neither is it a simple alternative to Marxist-defined, ‘bourgeois culture’, a term that evokes Williams’ scepticism. Williams writes that, ‘even in a society in which a particular class is dominant, it is evidently possible both for members of other classes to contribute to the common stock, and for such contributions to be unaffected by or in opposition to the ideas and values of the dominant class’ (307). Williams is not then setting up Working Class Culture as an opponent to tradition, but suggests something more complex.

In the development of culture, Williams believes that the common language of English plays an important role. Williams criticises the upholding of standard English and he wonders whether the English language could be put to more interesting uses (308-309).

Williams wonders whether there is ‘any meaning left in “bourgeois” ’ and he notes that education has enabled a more even access to culture. Yet a culture is in turn dictated by a subject’s way of life:

We may now see what is properly meant by ‘working-class culture’. It is not proletarian art, or council houses, or a particular use of language; it is rather the basic collective idea, and the institutions, manners, habits of thought, and intention which proceed from this. Bourgeois culture, similarly, is the basic individualist idea and the institutions, manners, habits of thought, and intention which proceed from that. […] The culture which it [the working class] has produced […] is the collective democratic institution, whether in the trade unions, the co-operative movement or a political party. Working-class culture, in the stage through which it has been passing, is primarily social (in that it has created institutions) rather than individual (in particular intellectual or imaginative work). When it is considered in context, it can be seen as a very remarkable creative achievement. (313)

**The Idea of Community**

Williams believes that there are two notions of community: one of service (middle class) and the other of solidarity (working class). Williams describes his experience of growing up in a community of solidarity and his difficulty in understanding the servant system in England. He turns to a political pamphlet entitled *How we are Governed* which demands conformity in a kind of national service system, but Williams states: ‘The idea of service, ultimately, is no substitute for the idea of active mutual responsibility’ (316). The notion of service offers someone a role in which they simply perform a function and without the solidarity of Williams’ community must climb the ladder of promotion and success alone.

**The Development of a Common Culture**

Solidaity in contrast with service is, ‘potentially the real basis of a society’, yet Williams realises that the negative, defensive aspects of solidarity must be changed (318). Williams recommends that ‘diversity has to be substantiated within an effective community which disposes of majority power’ and that the aim must be that of ‘achieving diversity without creating separation’ (318, 319). Solidarity does not mean exclusion: ‘A good community, a living culture, will […] not only make room for but actively encourage all and any who can contribute to the advance in consciousness which is the common need’ (320). Neither does solidarity mean being closed to possibilities, since ‘while the closed fist is a necessary symbol, the clenching ought never to be such that the hand cannot open, and the fingers extend, to discover and give shape to the newly forming reality’ (320).

**Culture is ordinary**: that is the first fact. Every human society has its own shape, its own purposes, its own meanings. Every human society expresses these, in institutions, and in arts and learning. The making of a society is the finding of common meanings and directions, and its growth is an active debate and amendment under the pressures of experience, contact, and discovery, writing themselves into the land. The growing society is there, yet it is also made and remade in every individual mind. The making of a mind is, first, the slow learning of shapes, purposes, and meanings, so that work, observation and communication are possible. Then, second, but equal in importance, is the testing of these in experience, the making of new observations, comparisons, and meanings. A culture has two aspects: the known meanings and directions, which its members are trained to; the new observations and meanings, which are offered and tested. These are the ordinary processes of human societies and human minds, and we see through them the nature of a culture: that it is always both traditional and creative; that it is both the most ordinary common meanings and the finest individual meanings. We use the word culture in these two senses: to mean a whole way of life--the common meanings; to mean the arts and learning--the special processes of discovery and creative effort. Some writers reserve the word for one or other of these senses; I insist on both, and on the significance of their conjunction. The questions I ask about our culture are questions about deep personal meanings. Culture is ordinary, in every society and in every mind.

Williams says this about culture:

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| --- |
| **Culture includes the organization of production, the structure of the family, the structure of institutions which express or govern social relationships, the characteristic forms through which members of the society communicate.** |

#### Culture is ordinary: Raymond Williams and cultural materialism

##### Phil Edwards, July 1999

Raymond Williams developed the approach which he named 'cultural materialism' in a series of influential books - *Culture and Society* (1958), *the Long Revolution* (1961), *Marxism and Literature* (1977). I came to cultural materialism by another route. I'd just read Williams' *Drama in performance* - a survey of the conditions under which plays have been put on over the years, and how changes in staging practice parallelled developments in society. One night, I had a dream. I dreamed I saw a series of scenes, each showing a group of people in their usual surroundings; I remember a group of cardinals, standing outside St Peter's in Rome. The relationships between the elements in each scene - the architecture, the clothing, the rituals, the social roles - were luminously clear. I woke up with a clear, unshakeable sense of the validity and power of the cultural materialist approach.

By the time I read Williams' theoretical work, in other words, I'd already been converted. This experience has had some odd effects. I find Williams' writing clear and easy to read, for instance, which I gather is unusual; asked for a comment on *Marxism and Literature*, the historian Gwyn A.Williams said, "I defy anyone to read that book without going stark raving mad." With this in mind, I've attempted to suggest why Williams' work continues to merit the attention of socialists, eleven years after his death.

Cultural materialism was always, for Williams, a Marxist theory - an elaboration of historical materialism. "Latent within historical materialism is ... a way of understanding the diverse social and material production ... of works to which the connected but also changing categories of art have been historically applied. I call this position cultural materialism." Cultural production is itself material, as much as any other sector of human activity; culture must be understood both in its own terms and as part of its society. The implications for cultural work are vast: imagine relating Howard Barker's plots to the contemporary demographics of theatre-going, or setting the rise of Zoe Ball in the context of the economics of the BBC. Cultural studies - a discipline whose existence owes much to Williams - has scratched the surface of this approach to the arts, but following it through is a daunting prospect.

Williams' conception of cultural materialism went further, however. The key question was how the relationship between society and culture was understood. In his 1958 essay "Culture is ordinary" Williams cited the Marxist tenet that "a culture must finally be interpreted in relation to its underlying system of production" and glossed it as follows: "a culture is a whole way of life, and the arts are part of a social organisation which economic change clearly radically affects." The second part of this statement indicates Williams' resistance to the classical Marxist idea of culture as a 'superstructure' which echoes an economic 'base'. The first part suggests how he would bridge the gap: culture was "a whole way of life". This Williams counterposed to 'high culture' - "this extraordinary decision to call certain things culture and then separate them, as with a park wall, from ordinary people and ordinary work".

Hence, culture is always political. This is not to say that the crimes of the ruling class can be read off from a film or an advertisement, any more than they can from a party political broadcast. Still less does it imply that work which aims for that level of explicitness is the best or most important. Rather, culture is political because the social process addressed by political analysis is always embedded in culture. Williams reversed the terms of the usual analysis. Rather than being a specialised area in which we see reflections of the political processes governing society, culture is the "whole way of life" which makes up human society; political analysis is a specialised framework which can be used to understand it.

Much writing on culture treats political change as an external force: something which impinges on ordinary people's lives from outside, and which writers may choose to focus on or not. This assumption underpins the tendency of right-wing critics to claim authors for their own - 'apolitical' - perspective. "By the fifties the trick was being turned that if you thought George Eliot was a good novelist, you had to be against socialism. There was a directly political confiscation of the past that was intolerable."

Radical criticism is often little better. Even the approach of reclaiming 'apolitical' works, re-attaching them to their history - reading the Industrial Revolution into *Wuthering Heights*, for instance, with Heathcliff seen as a dispossessed proletarian - made the same mistake, Williams argued. "Social experience, just because it is social, does not have to appear in any way exclusively in these overt public forms. In its very quality as social reality it penetrates, is already at the roots of, relationships of every kind ... When there is real dislocation it does not have to appear in a strike or in machine-breaking. It can appear as radically and as authentically in what is apparently, what is actually family or personal experience." *Wuthering Heights* was "central to its time" because of the power of its articulation of emotional experience - an experience which was characteristic of a society which was being torn apart, psychologically as much as socially, under the stress of industrialisation.

Politics for its part is always cultural. The history of the Left and the labour movement is the history of attempts to develop an alternative culture - a long, complex and contradictory process. Williams resisted prescriptive approaches to culture: if it was intolerable for the Right to appropriate George Eliot, it was absurd for the Left to claim that certain art forms were or were not 'socialist'. "A culture is common meanings, the product of a whole people, and offered individual meanings ... It is stupid and arrogant to suppose that any of these meanings can in any way be prescribed; they are made by living, made and remade, in ways that we cannot know in advance."

The culture of the Left exists on a number of levels. There are continuing and developing art forms, such as the art of banners, flags and quilts. There are the achievements of the continual drive for working class 'self-improvement' - in fact a movement of resistance to exclusion from education - from the Institutes of mining villages through to today's WEAs and the Open University. More broadly again, there is the body of collective experience built up through struggle. ("The single most shocking thesis to established liberal opinion in *Culture and Society* ... was that I did not define working-class culture as a few proletarian novels ... but as the institutions of the labour movement.") Marches and demonstrations, strikes and occupations, all create new forms of consciousness and promote awareness of different ways of living; on a more mundane level, they also bring out ordinary people's ability to organise and co-ordinate activity. Williams insisted that those achievements - and resources - should not be forgotten or minimised.

Moreover, political struggle itself takes cultural forms. The 'DiY Culture' [sic] of squats, anti-roads protests and Reclaim the Streets actions is, among other things, a direct assertion of new cultural possibilities - and of a way of living in which culture, art, pleasure would play a central part. Actions such as these often involve the playful reappropriation of buildings and monuments, symbols of the dominant culture: in Williams' terms, an emergent culture is imposing itself, making itself heard. Predictably, the full armoury of the dominant culture and social order is brought into play to combat it: from "the scum on the front pages of the richer newspapers" (to quote Williams from 1968) through to direct - political - repression. For capitalism has not ceased to be victorious: the space available for cultural or political opposition is continually under attack, from the reappropriation of radical symbols to the literal occupation of social territory through CCTV. And culture cannot substitute for politics - cannot be a short-cut to a larger social transformation, any more than the instrumental model of left politics could function without culture. The complex set of transformations which Williams labelled 'the long revolution' could only triumph by dispossessing "the central political organs of capitalist society": "the condition for the success of the long revolution in any real sense is decisively a short revolution".

Williams' assessments of the prospects for change were sometimes bleak. He believed that neither the Labour Party nor the union movement had advanced a genuinely reformist project for many years, preferring to manage capitalism and take sectoral gains: "The underlying perspectives of a reforming Labour Party and of a steadily bargaining and self-improving trade-union movement - a perspective within which so many major gains have been achieved - suddenly look like and are dead ends," he wrote in 1982. The following year he developed this analysis in *Towards 2000*, in which he analysed the new managerial politics - a politics which he named 'Plan X', in which the only goal is the continued functioning of capitalism and the pursuit of strategic advantage. Williams didn't live to see New Labour, but I'm certain he would have recognised Plan X through the rhetorical fog.

That said, the space for alternatives is never entirely blocked: "no mode of production and therefore no dominant social order and therefore no dominant culture ever in reality includes or exhausts all human practice, human energy and human intention". There is always - must always be - space for opposition: for thinking and action directed towards the elaboration of another social order. This refusal of despair was also a refusal of indiscriminate anger and weightless theory, of critiques written in the margins of the dominant order. Its roots were in Williams' sense of loyalty: to class, to community and to history. The sense of community he had known in Wales was crucial to him: his recognition of green issues and the politics of place extended rather than diluting his earlier emphasis on class.

His loyalties gave Williams a quiet steadiness which sometimes made him seem like a placid gradualist - a deeply misleading impression. On other occasions the impression was more brutal. In 1985 he wrote: "As the [miners'] strike ends, there will be many other things to discuss and argue about; tactics, timing and doubtless personalities. But it is of the greatest possible importance to move very quickly and sharply beyond these, to the decisive general issues which have now been so clearly disclosed." After Williams' death R.W. Johnson recalled this passage, attacking Williams for attempting to forestall a critique of the NUM's 'tactics, timing [and] personalities'. The charge is accurate but irrelevant. Williams deliberately refused to play that game, for reasons which recall his enduringly controversial critique of George Orwell ("while travelling seriously, he was always travelling light"). Of Orwell's "plain style" Williams commented, "the convention of the plain observer with no axes to grind ... cancels the social situation of the writer and cancels his stance towards the social situation he is observing." The miners' strike, Williams believed, created new possibilities for oppositional thought and action, even in defeat; a socialist writer who ignored these possibilities in favour of post-mortem recriminations would truly be 'travelling light', cancelling out their own social position and political goals.

Three years earlier, Williams had helped set up a group aiming to work on those "decisive general issues": the Socialist Society. The work of the Socialist Society led to the Chesterfield Conferences, the Socialist Movement and the newspaper *socialist* - eventually reborn as [*Red Pepper*](http://www.redpepper.org.uk). Several of the people now involved in *Red Pepper* were active in the Socialist Society in the late eighties and early nineties - myself included. With this history in mind, it is worth asking, finally, what directions Williams' work suggests for the Left in 1999.

Firstly, work is still needed on understanding ['New Labour'](http://www.users.zetnet.co.uk/amroth/scritti/blair.htm). While the genuine reforms enacted by this government cannot be ignored, the heart of New Labour is an attempt to graft reactionary and managerial values onto the image, language and organisational resources of the Labour Party. The true dimensions of 'the project', and the weaknesses in Labour which allowed it to triumph, remain to be analysed. A second area in need of reassessment is the Left itself. The bizarre and disastrous positions adopted by much of the Left during the Kosova crisis attest to the work which now needs to be done, to reconnect the Left with its founding humanist - and Marxist - values.

In a small country undergoing rapid change, national identity is another important theme. While trans-European linkages may be beneficial, their uneven development, dominated by the requirements of capitalism, puts the identity associated with the British state under strain - particularly accompanied by Scottish and Welsh political self-assertion. One symptom is the English cultural valorisation, ever since *Trainspotting*, of a curiously regressive image of young Scottish masculinity. The advent of these Celtic rebels without a cause is related to a fourth theme, gender politics: in particular, the recurrent anxiety as to whether feminism has 'gone too far' or 'lost its way'.

Finally, the late nineties have given us two further concerns which Williams could not have foreseen. The Internet has been hailed as transforming the nature of work and even of capital. Serious work is now being done to test these claims; this needs to be complemented by an awareness of the real potential of the Internet as a medium for radical communication and action. Lastly, the nineties have been marked by an extraordinary growth in three inter-related ideologies: 'New Age' beliefs, often associated with alternative therapies; belief in the paranormal and extra-terrestrial life; and 'conspiracy theory'. While the last of these, at least, has something to offer serious politics, taken together these beliefs indicate a loss of belief in established authority - and a loss of faith in our own ability to reason and act.

Williams never lost that faith. He believed that the Left could understand the dominant order: we faced, not "some unavoidable real world", but "a set of identifiable processes of *realpolitik* and *force majeure*, of nameable agencies of power and capital, distraction and disinformation". But naming the blockages was not enough. "The dynamic movement is elsewhere, in the difficult business of gaining confidence in *our own* energies and capacities." The task was to establish the lines of development for an alternative. "It is only in a shared belief and insistence that there are practical alternatives that the balance of forces and chances begins to alter. Once the inevitabilities are challenged, we begin gathering our resources for a journey of hope. If there are no easy answers there are still available and discoverable hard answers, and it is these that we can now learn to make and share."