

## The Politics of Culture

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This article provides an overview over the evolution of thinking about “culture” in the work of Raymond Williams. With the introduction of Antonio Gramsci’s concept of hegemony culture came to be understood as consisting of not only shared, but contested meanings as well. On the basis of this redefinition by Williams, cultural studies was able to delin-

eate culture as the production, circulation, and consumption of meanings that become embodied and embedded in social practice

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Raymond Williams once described culture as one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language. Cultural studies, mainly with the help of Williams himself, has gradually come to define culture as a material practice, what Williams eventually called a “realized signifying system.” In order to explain this I will outline the shift in his thinking about culture, from seeing it as a network of shared meanings, to seeing it as consisting of both shared and contested meanings. The latter position, I will argue, is a result of the introduction in the 1970s of Antonio Gramsci’s concept of hegemony into his thinking on culture. It is the coming together of Williams’ concept of culture and Gramsci’s concept of hegemony that situates realized signification and power as the central object of study in cultural studies.

In all his definitions of culture (see especially Williams, *The Long Revolution; Culture; Keywords*), Williams works with an inclusive definition of culture. Writing in 1961, he proposed what he called the social definition of culture, in which culture is defined as

“a particular way of life, which expresses certain meanings and values not only in art and learning but also in institutions and ordinary behaviour. The analysis of culture, from such a defini-

tion, is the clarification of the meanings and values implicit in a particular way of life, a particular culture ... the characteristic forms through which members of the society communicate." ("Analysis of Culture" 32)

This definition is crucial to the development of cultural studies for three reasons. First, Williams' definition "democratically" broadens the then dominant Leavisite definition of culture (Storey, *Cultural Theory*), producing a more inclusive definition, in which instead of culture being defined as a body of only "elite" texts and practices, ballet, opera, the novel, poetry, for example, it is redefined to include as culture television, cinema, pop music, sport, for example. Second, culture as a particular way of life further broadens the definition of culture. So, for example, rather than culture being media as text, culture is embodied in the particular way of life that is involved in, say, the production, circulation, and consumption of media. These two aspects of Williams' definition are usually noted and the discussion ends there. However, there is a third element in Williams' definition, one I think that is far more important for the intellectual formation of cultural studies than the other two: this is the connection he makes between culture and signification. The importance of a particular way of life is that it "expresses cer-

tain meanings." Furthermore, cultural analysis from the perspective of this definition of culture "is the clarification of the meanings ... implicit in a particular way of life." (The Long Revolution 57) In other words, in Williams' social definition, cultures are networks of meanings that are embodied, performed and made concrete in particular ways of life.

In *Culture* he further clarifies his position and redefines culture as "a realized signifying system" (12), arguing that it is fundamental to the shaping and holding together of all ways of life. This is not to reduce everything to culture as a realized signifying system, but it is to insist that culture defined in this way should be seen "as essentially involved in all forms of social activity" (13). As he further explains, "the social organisation of culture, as a realized signifying system, is embedded in a whole range of activities, relations and institutions, of which some are manifestly 'cultural'" (209). While there is more to everyday life than signifying systems, it is nevertheless the case that "it would ... be wrong to suppose that we can ever usefully discuss a social system without including, as a central part of its practice, its signifying systems, on which, as a system, it fundamentally depends" (207). In other words, signification is fundamental to all human activities. Nevertheless, while cul-

ture as a realized signifying system is "deeply present" in all social activities, it remains the case that "other quite different human needs and actions are substantially and irreducibly present." Moreover, in certain human activities signification becomes dissolved into what he calls "other needs and actions" (209). To dissolve can mean two quite different things: to disappear or to become liquid and form part of a solution. For example, if a parliament is dissolved it ceases to exist. However, when we dissolve sugar in tea, the sugar does not disappear; rather it becomes an invisible but fundamental part of the drink. It is the second meaning of dissolve that best captures Williams' intention. So, to be clear, signification is fundamental to all human activities, but sometimes it is obscured by other needs and actions. Culture, therefore, as defined by Williams, is not something restricted to the arts or to different forms of intellectual production, it is an aspect of all human activities. For example, if I pass a business card to someone in China, the polite way to do it is with two hands. If I pass it with one hand I may cause offence. This is clearly a matter of culture. However, the culture is not simply in the social act, nor in the materiality of the card, nor in the meaning of the card and act—it is in the entanglement of meaning, materiality and social practice. More-

over, the passing and/or receiving of a business card in China is not simply a symbolic performance in which meaning is represented, it is a performative event in which meaning is enacted and realized. Similarly, as Marx observes, “one man is king only because other men stand in the relation of subjects to him. They, on the contrary, imagine that they are subjects because he is king” (*Capital* 55). This relationship works because they share a culture in which such relations are meaningful. Outside such a culture, this relationship would have no meaning. Being a king, therefore, is not a gift of nature (or of a god), but something constructed in culture; it is culture and not nature or a god that gives these relations meaning: makes them signify, and, moreover, by signifying in a particular way they materially organize social practice. Therefore, as Williams insists, “Signification, the social creation of meanings ... is ... a practical material activity” (*Marxism and Literature* 34). It is a social practice that requires human agency and human interaction. It is not something abstract; it is always something embedded in human action and interaction. To share a culture, therefore, according to this preliminary definition, is to interpret the world, make it meaningful and experience it as meaningful in recognizably similar ways. So-called “culture shock” hap-

pens when we encounter radically different networks of meaning; that is, when our “natural” or “common sense” is confronted by someone else’s “natural” or “common sense.”

So far I have focused on culture as a system of shared meanings. This is more or less how culture tends to be presented in Williams’ early work. Although I started with a quotation from *The Long Revolution*, the idea of culture as a realized signifying system is in fact first suggested in his essay “Culture Is Ordinary.” The formulation is quite similar to that found in *The Long Revolution*, “A culture is common meanings, the product of a whole people” (“Culture Is Ordinary” 8). Ten years after “Culture is Ordinary,” in “The Idea of a Common Culture,” he is even more explicit about the ordinariness of the making of meanings, “culture is ordinary ... there is not a special class, or group of men, who are involved in the creation of meanings and values, either in a general sense or in specific art and belief” (34). When Williams said that “culture is ordinary,” he was drawing attention to the fact that meaning making is not the privileged activity of the few, but something in which we are all involved. However, this does not of course mean that we are all involved in it in the same way; meaning-making, like all other social activities, is always entangled in

relations of power. While we may all be involved in the making of meanings, it is also the case that some meanings and the people who make them have more power than other people and other meanings. Having said this, Williams’ early work is not totally unaware that power features in the embodying and social embedding of meanings. For example, in “The Idea of a Common Culture” he observes,

“If it is at all true that the creation of meanings is an activity which engages all men, then one is bound to be shocked by any society which, in its most explicit culture, either suppresses the meanings and values of whole groups, or which fails to extend to these groups the possibility of articulating and communicating those meanings.” (35)

In fact it would be very unfair to Williams to suggest that even in this early work he is simply unaware of power. The essay “Communications and Community” makes this absolutely clear:

“For in fact all of us, as individuals, grow up within a society, within the rules of a society, and these rules cut very deep, and include certain ways of seeing the world, certain ways of talking about the world. All the time people are being born into a society, shown what to see, shown how to talk about it.” (21-22)

What is the case, however, is that he had not yet found a fully adequate way of articulating the relations between signification and power. In *The Long Revolution*, for example, he is still able to claim that culture is “the sharing of common meanings ... [in] which meanings that are valued by the community are shared and made active” (55). Contrary to this, and to put it very simply, most meanings are not of our own making, they are generated by dominant groups and dominant institutions. Moreover, these meanings tend to operate in the interests of dominant groups and dominant institutions. It is not until “Base and Superstructure in Marxist Cultural Theory,” *Marxism and Literature and Culture* that Williams really insists that signifying systems consist of both shared and contested meanings. As he consistently argues from 1973 onwards, cultures are where we share and contest meanings of ourselves, of each other and of the social worlds in which we live. For instance, to return to an example given earlier, people may recognize the meaning of the relations of kingship but reject and struggle against these relations. Such rejections and acts of struggle are part of the processes Gramsci calls hegemony. After the introduction of hegemony into Williams’ work in the 1970s, culture as a realized signifying system is always understood as

consisting of both shared and contested meanings. Moreover, it is when Williams embraces Gramsci’s concept of hegemony that he locates culture and power as the object of study in cultural studies.

Gramsci uses hegemony to describe processes of power in which a dominant group does not merely rule by force but leads by consent: it exerts “intellectual and moral leadership” (“Hegemony” 75). Hegemony involves a specific kind of consensus, a consensus in which a social group presents its own particular interests as the general interests of the society as a whole; it turns the particular into the general. Hegemony works by the transformation of potential antagonism into simple difference. This works in part through the circulation of signification that reinforces dominance and subordination by seeking to fix the meaning of social relations. As Williams explains,

“It [hegemony] is a lived system of meanings and values—constitutive and constituting—which as they are experienced as practices appear as reciprocally confirming. It thus constitutes a sense of reality for most people ... It is ... in the strongest sense a ‘culture’ [understood as a realized signifying system], but a culture which has also to be seen as the lived dominance and subordination

of particular classes.” (*Marxism and Literature* 110)

If we substitute the word culture for hegemony we are very close to Williams’ social definition of culture. The difference being that the definition now includes relations of dominance and subordination.

Hegemony involves the attempt to saturate the social with meanings that support the prevailing structures of power. In a hegemonic situation subordinate groups appear to actively support and subscribe to values, ideals, objectives, etc., which incorporate them into the prevailing structures of power: relations of dominance and subordination. However, hegemony, as Williams observes, “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, altered, challenged” (112). Therefore, although hegemony is characterized by high levels of consensus, it is never without conflict; that is, there is always resistance. However, hegemony seeks to arrest the proliferation of meanings; it seeks to reduce signification to meanings that can be controlled. For it to remain successful conflict and resistance must always be channelled and contained—re-articulated in the interests of the dominant.

There are two conclusions we can draw from Williams' concept of culture as a realized signifying system. First, although the world exists in all its enabling and constraining materiality outside culture, it is only in culture that the world can be made to mean. In other words, signification has a "performative effect" (Austin, *How to Do Things*; Butler *Bodies That Matter*; *Gender Trouble*); it helps construct the realities it appears only to describe. As Gramsci points out,

"It is obvious that East and West are arbitrary and conventional (historical) constructions, since every spot on the earth is simultaneously East and West. Japan is probably the Far East not only for the European but also for the American from California and even for the Japanese himself, who, through English political culture might call Egypt the Near East ... Yet these references are real, they correspond to real facts, they allow one to travel by land and by sea and to arrive at the predetermined destination." (*Prison Notebooks* 176)

Moreover, as Gramsci continues, "East and West ... never cease to be 'objectively real' even though when analysed they turn out to be nothing more than a 'historical' or 'conventional construct'" (175). In other words, East and West are historical constructions, directly connected to

the imperial power of the West. However, they are also forms of signification that have been realized and embedded in social practice. Cultural constructs they may be, but they do designate real geographic locations and guide real human movement and organize real political perceptions of the world. As Gramsci's example makes clear, meanings inform and organize social action. To argue that culture is best understood as a realized signifying system is not, therefore, a denial that the material world exists in all its constraining and enabling reality outside signification. As Williams makes very clear, "the natural world exists whether anyone signifies it or not" (*Politics and Letters* 67). But what is also absolutely the case is that the material (or the natural) world exists for us—and only ever exists for us—layered and articulated in signification. And how it is made to signify helps organize our relations with it. He had been aware of this since as early as 1961:

"It is impossible for us to assume that there is any reality experienced by man into which man's own observations and interpretations do not enter ... Yet equally, the facts of perception in no way lead us to a late form of idealism; they do not require us to suppose that there is no kind of reality outside the human mind; they point rather to the

insistence that all human experience is an interpretation of the non-human reality ... We have to think ... of human experience as both objective and subjective, in one inseparable process ... We create our human world." (*The Long Revolution* 36, 54)

The second conclusion we can draw from seeing culture as a realized signifying system concerns the potential for struggle over meaning. Given that different meanings can be ascribed to the same "sign" (that is, anything that can be made to signify) meaning-making is always a potential site of struggle. The making of meaning is always confronted by what Valentin Volosinov identifies as the "multiaccentuality" of the sign (*Marxism* 23). Rather than being inscribed with a single meaning, a sign can be articulated with different "accents;" that is, it can be made to mean different things in different contexts, with different effects of power. The sign, therefore, is always a potential site of "differently oriented social interests," and is often in practice "an arena of ... struggle." Those with power seek "to make the sign unaccentual" (23): they seek to make what is multiaccentual appear as if it could only ever be uni-accentual. In other words, a "sign" is not the issuing source of meaning but a site where the articulation of meaning (variable meanings) can be produced

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as it is re-articulated in specific contexts. We continually acknowledge the multi-acculturality of the sign when we describe an interpretation as, for example, a feminist reading, a queer reading, a post-colonial reading, or a Marxist reading. In such instances, we implicitly acknowledge that the text in question has been made to mean from the critical perspective of a particular reading practice. This is not simply an issue of semantic difference, a simple question of interpreting the world differently. The different ways of making something signify are not an innocent game of semantics, they are a significant part of a power struggle over what might be regarded as “normal” or “correct”—an example of the politics of signification. It is about who can claim the power and authority to define social reality to make the world (and the things in it) mean in particular ways and with particular effects of power. Therefore, rather than engage in a fruitless quest for the true or essential meaning of something, cultural studies at its best fixes its critical gaze on how particular meanings acquire their authority and legitimacy. This makes culture and power the primary object of study in cultural studies. As Hall explains,

“Meanings [i.e. culture as a realized signifying system] ... regulate and organize our conduct and practices—they

help to set the rules, norms and conventions by which social life is ordered and governed. They are ... therefore, what those who wish to govern and regulate the conduct and ideas of others seek to structure and shape.” (“Introduction” 4)

Meanings have a “material” existence in that they help organize practice and they establish norms of behaviour. My examples of the passing of name cards in China and the relations of kingship are instances of signification organizing practice. Moreover, as Hall indicates, those with power often seek to regulate the impact of meanings on practice. In other words, dominant modes of making the world meaningful are a fundamental aspect of the processes of hegemony. As Hall makes clear, “The signification of events is part of what has to be struggled over, for it is the means by which collective social understandings are created—and thus the means by which consent for particular outcomes can be effectively mobilized” (“The Rediscovery” 123). On the basis of Williams’ redefinition of culture, cultural studies has gradually come to define culture as the production, circulation, and consumption of meanings that become embodied and embedded in social practice. To paraphrase what Williams said about communication systems in “Communications and Community” (22-

23), we cannot think of culture as a realized signifying system as something which happens after reality has occurred, because it is through culture, as a realized signifying system, that the reality of ourselves, the reality of our everyday lives, is constituted and contested—and always entangled in relations of power.

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