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The Legacy of Raymond Williams in Sociology

Jim McGuigan's collection of the "most sociological writings" of Raymond Williams is entitled *Raymond Williams on Culture and Society: Essential Writings*. The volume consists of 20 chapters of Williams' texts that were originally published as book chapters, articles or speeches. McGuigan's motivation is to show the legacy of Williams within Sociology as a discipline, and to make it easier to teach this legacy to students of social sciences. The text is not the only existing effort of this kind (see e.g. Jones 2004) but it has to be welcomed with approval. Following his death in 1988, many of Williams' writings were edited and republished and a number of obituaries stressed his importance within the social sciences. Still, some of the texts in this edition had never been anthologized before.

As McGuigan writes in his acknowledgements, to this day, the study of culture is somewhat marginalised in many social science departments. Indeed, it is likely that many sociologists of the younger generation are not even aware of the works of Raymond Williams, or do not know much about his thinking in relation to social and cultural theory, at least. It is the right time, therefore, for us to be reminded about Williams' role as a sociologist.

McGuigan has placed the writings of Williams in a chronological order, which is an obvious and fitting solution: it shows how Williams' notions about culture evolved and how the core theoretical elements of his work developed over the decades (notably, ideas about signifying practices and the links between culture and social relations). Furthermore, chronology helps to situate the texts in their own historical contexts, the importance of which Williams himself consistently stressed in making cultural analysis coherent and relevant. As McGuigan emphasises in his introduction, this volume follows the path towards Williams' ultimate conceptualisation of culture as "a realized signifying system".

Through reading these selected "essential" writings, it is easy to see how and why Williams, who hailed from a Welsh working-class family, began to wonder about the peculiarities of the British elite as a young student. Thanks to his social background, he could see the hollowness of many of the dominant concepts in (British) culture.

Despite the importance of Williams' rootedness to the Welsh soil and his attachment to Britain, McGuigan could have perhaps added some lines about the international influences that affected Williams' thinking. The writings in this compilation make many references to classic social theorists (e.g. Weber, Gramsci and the Frankfurt School), but McGuigan offers little more than vague clues regarding the effect of continental theorists upon Williams' thought. Moreover, not much is said about his influence upon the development of Cultural Studies and Sociology outside the Anglo-American world. Consequently, this seems to be a book in which a Brit examines the legacy of another Brit, with, ostensibly, a primarily British readership in mind. Nevertheless, the introductory chapter positions Williams in his context effectively and helps the reader to evaluate what is presented in the following chapters. The volume also focuses explicitly on Williams' political side, which is deeply relevant, considering that he joined the Communist Party at one time and favoured Green-Socialist politics in the 1980s.

In terms of the actual chapters written by Williams, his work clearly shows that we cannot afford to neglect his role when we talk about social and cultural theory. His understanding of the process-like nature of culture goes beyond that of many of his contemporaries and is still thoroughly relevant.

Perhaps the most important reason for this is the deep importance he placed upon historical development. The historical perspective involves an inherent appreciation of change that is essential for understanding how culture is connected with social relations and power. As Williams wrote in his book *Culture* (1983, 33), “any adequate sociology of culture must, it seems, be an historical sociology”.

Theory-wise, this book gives many examples of how Williams combined the interests of cultural analysts with the viewpoints of social scientists. This is evident especially in his use of concepts like “the structure of feeling”, “incorporation of dominant culture”, “selective tradition” and “residual” and “emergent” cultures. For example, in his critique of Marxist materialism, he demonstrates how all social systems are created using certain traditions, values, practices and expectations. For Williams, culture is not located within “the superstructure”; instead, cultural processes play a focal part in the primary production of society itself. This is evident even in Williams’ famous early essay “*Culture is Ordinary*” (1958), where he wrote: “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”.

This volume does not just open up a particular aspect of the theoretical thinking of Williams; it also touches upon his concrete contribution in the development of Cultural Studies, in which it was crucial for Williams to recognize communication as a practice. His writings demonstrate that, understandably, he was reluctant to use terms like “mass-communication studies” or “mass-media”, which concentrate on large audiences and thus divert the focus away from specific communication situations, conventions and forms. It is illuminating to read Williams’ 1970s musings, which demonstrate how [British] sociology at the time “had produced not a single piece of cultural analysis of its own and indeed showed no signs of wanting to try”.

As McGuigan writes in the introduction, we who belong to the community of cultural policy researchers should not lose sight of the bigger picture when concentrating on specific areas such as sectoral policy analysis or tracking money flows. Any scholar of cultural policy should understand how closely culture and social relations are tied together, (slowly) affecting and changing institutional structures and power dynamics. Williams is one of the best-equipped thinkers, conceptually speaking, to help us to fulfil this task. Through reading his work, the persistence of residual practices, for example, becomes easily understandable. For these reasons, this compilation of Williams’ writings deserves to be widely noticed and, above all, read.

References

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