The perspectives of radical democracy: Raymond Williams’ work and its significance for a critical social theory

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1. Introduction

The following contribution deals with the significance of Raymond Williams’ works for a critical social theory. Like Jean-Paul Sartre, to whom he has been compared frequently, or Pierre Bourdieu, Williams also does not live up to the cliché that a young radical usually turns into a reactionary as they grow older. Not only did all three of them remain true to their ideals, but both their social critique and their political involvement increased during the course of their lives. At first, Williams was committed to a left-wing reformism but his ideas became more radical towards the end of the 1960s. He showed his solidarity with both the student movement and the protest against the Vietnam War, he emphasized the dangers of the nuclear threat and reflected on a socialist democracy. Having belonged to the left wing in the tradition of Leavis first, he developed a cultural materialism after a long-lasting critical analysis of Marx’s ideas. Science and politics merged in his works, which followed the intention of ‘making hope practical, rather than despair convincing’ (Williams 1989h).

It is the aim of a critical social theory to understand and to transform the socio-historic context of the (global) society (see Pensky 2005) along with its power dynamics and forms of social injustice by asking questions which are necessary for a thorough analysis and by searching for answers and solutions which establish social and economic justice and contribute to a radicalization of democracy (see Kellner 1989). However, critical theory must not be considered as a completed project with ultimate knowledge and ultimate answers. It is altered by the confrontation with new social circumstances as well as by the formation and the development of new theoretical insight and interpretations (see Winter and Zima 2007). According to Paolo Freire’s oppositional pedagogy, it is sustained by the idea of a transformative dialogue, of the mutual creation and the sharing of meanings, knowledge and values which are supposed to contribute to living together in a constructive way, to altering power structures, to an ‘empowerment’ and to emancipation (see Hardt 1992; Fiske 1993; Denzin 2003; Kincheloe and McLaren 2005).
Raymond Williams’ manifold, complex and inventive works offer a variety of starting points, ideas and conceptions for a project such as this. He has made very important and fundamental contributions to various areas such as the history of ideas, literary sociology, cultural studies, cultural theory and media studies. No matter how Williams’ work has been sociology and media studies. No matter how Williams’ work has been sociologically judged or classified in retrospect, he himself did not consider it as the isolated action of an academic but as a part of democratizing our entire way of living, as the historical project to which he dedicated his intellectual and political life. Williams was convinced that serious theoretical work is both important and relevant. He wanted to contribute to understanding the social reality in a critical and transformative way and to intervene in the current social struggles and conflicts. Williams aimed for a radically democratic and popular kind of socialism which realizes the idea of a common culture (see Milner 2002: 105).

Williams, much like the Frankfurt School in the 1930s or Pierre Bourdieu, represented a socially committed interventionist conception of science which connected the academic world with everyday life. He considered his work in the context of political movements which fight for a just and democratic society in a ‘long revolution’. Williams’ studies, which essentially influenced the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CSCS) in Birmingham (see Winter 2001), aimed at analysing the social order, which influences and regulates the lives of the people, beyond discipline boundaries. Furthermore, he wanted to create knowledge which could be used for solving urgent social, political and economic problems. He wanted this knowledge to be introduced into the cultural and political reflections of the groups which fight against social injustice and for a transformation of the system. Williams called this kind of collectivization ‘knowable communities’. A current example is the ‘social justice’ movement which is fighting for an alternative globalization and radical democracy (see Leistyna 2005; Neate and Platt 2006). According to Williams, culture can be understood as an active and creative generation as a slow, yet steadily continuing process of shared meanings. In this chapter, we will discuss central theoretical considerations and conceptions of Williams which are of significance for a critical social theory.

2. Culture and a democratic society

According to Williams, his most famous and most successful book Culture and Society (1958, 1963a) has to be understood as an oppositional piece of work (Williams 1979d: 98). On the one hand Williams reconstructs the development of the idea of culture by means of a ‘close reading’ of several texts from the ‘English’ tradition, which developed in a critical opposition to utilitarian thinking. Ever since the beginning of the Industrial Revolution, this term has been connected to a social idea which describes and interprets the novel experiences of the social transformation. Cultural texts express the kind of experience of life which can only be accessed through texts. Furthermore, they allow for sophisticated insight and contain utopian possibilities which have not been implemented yet. Williams deals with visions of the ‘Noch-Nicht-Sein’ (Ernst Bloch). Tendencies towards this concept can be found in cultural texts. Williams frames those hopeful moments which suggest a change, even though it is not clear what this change might look like. His immanent analysis also resembles the approach of ideology criticism of the Frankfurt School, which has complained that the emancipatory promises of ideologies, like the civil ideal of democracy and justice, have not been implemented thus far (see Jones 2004: 62ff.). Just as Williams does in Culture and Society, Jürgen Habermas (1963) also proceeds methodologically in the lines of historic semantics in Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit.

On the other hand, Williams aimed at developing a critical and emancipatory version of culture in order to disassociate the term from the elitist, conservative tradition of Leavis and Eliot, who regarded culture as ‘common intellectual property’ which belongs to a ‘minority elite’ and which needs to be defended by it. Williams attacked this position, which uses the term ‘culture’ in opposition to the working class, to democracy or to socialism and, in doing so, has significantly shaped the contemporary way of thinking (Williams 1979d: 98). But, his project was set out not just to be reconstructive but deconstructive as well. For it aimed at presenting the complexity and the significance of the ‘culture and society’ tradition, criticizing the selective use of the term culture and replacing it with a democratically coined understanding of culture which rejects hierarchical classifications such as ‘minorities or masses.

At the end of Culture and Society and after analysing Leavis’s idea of a ‘mass civilization’ Williams concludes: ‘There are in fact no masses, there are only ways of seeing people as masses’ (Williams 1958, 1963a: 289). Whereas both Leavis and Eliot do not just relate culture to art but to an entire way of living, Williams goes even further by including a society’s collective democratic institutions such as labour unions, associations or the political party of the working class into his idea of culture (Williams 1958, 1963a: 327). For Williams, their culture, which is founded on solidarity and helped create these institutions, represents the idea of social inhabiting which he opposed to the bourgeois-individualistic conception of society.

Thus, Williams used the term ‘culture’ in a critical and radically democratic way. In distinction from traditional conservative points of view on the one side and modernist vanguard opinions on the other, he postulated the assumption that ‘culture is ordinary’ in an early essay, first published in 1958, like Culture and Society.

Every human society has its own shape, its own purposes, its own meanings. Every human society expresses these, in institutions, and in
We speak of a cultural revolution, and we must certainly see the aspiration to extend the active process of learning, with the skills of literacy and other advanced communication, to all people rather than to limited groups, as comparable in importance to the growth of democracy and the rise of scientific industry.

(Williams [1961c: xi])

Williams' sociological approach helped him develop two concepts which he had already used in earlier works. On the one hand, he shows that, as long as there is no common culture, a literary and cultural tradition is based on selections which are made in the present and which are shaped by value decisions and power interests. In doing so, Williams deconstructed the idea that the truth is inherent in a literary tradition (see Milner 2002: 70). Thus, for Leavis and his supporters a literary or cultural tradition was still an objective development of a nation's consciousness, the expression of an organic community. Milner rightly points out (ibid.) that Williams anticipates poststructuralist presumptions such as the idea that the production of knowledge is based on a social foundation and that cultural texts have manifold meanings (see Gergen 1999). On the other hand, based on the level of experience, Williams examines how forms or structures develop and can be defined.

The most difficult thing to get hold of, in studying any past period, is this felt sense of the quality of life at a particular place and time; a sense of the ways in which the particular activities combined into a way of thinking and living.

(Williams [1958] 1963a: 47)

In this case, Williams emphasizes the social nature of experiences which are embedded in communities or social relationships and he suggests the term 'structure of feeling' for the analysis. 'In one sense, this structure of feeling is the culture of a period: it is the particular living result of all the elements in the general organization' (Williams [1958] 1963a: 48). At the same time he points out that a 'structure of feeling' may not be equated with an ideology since it is neither specific to a class nor universal. This term, which rather emphasizes the dimension of the experience, also ties in with Leavis. So, in an interview with New Left Review at the end of the 1970s, Williams stated the following:

Yes, 'experience' was a term I took over from Scrutiny. But you must remember that I was all the time working on historical changes in literary conventions and forms. Leavis's strength was in reproducing and interpreting what he called 'the living content of a work' ... The notion of a structure of feeling was designed to focus a mode of historical and
social relations which was yet quite internal to the work, rather than
deducible from it or supplied by some external placing or classification.
(Williams 1979d: 163f.)

In his later works Williams (1977) defines ‘structure of feeling’ as the ten-
sion between a consciously taken ideological position and a newly emer-
ging experience. It indicates cultural and social changes, which can be
counter-hegemonic.

3. The challenges of hegemony

Throughout his entire life Williams kept developing his cultural theory
and, at the same time, continually specified and modified the meanings of
terms which he had already applied in his early works. For instance, the
main features of his attitude towards cultural materialism, which he
convincingly elaborated in Marxism and Literature (1977), can already be found
in his early culturalistic works. Hoping for a socialist society which is both
organized democratically and popularly anchored has remained a funda-
mental motive of his entire work. During the 1960s and 1970s he occupied
himself with studying translations about Western Marxism in New Left
Review. Antonio Gramsci’s research began to take a central role. This is
especially true for his concept of hegemony, which significantly changed the
CCCS’s analysis of culture (see Winter 2001) but does not remain confined
to the realm of culture. For it refers to the whole social process and how it
is embedded into structures of power and authority.

To say that ‘men’ define and shape their whole lives is true only in
abstraction. In any actual society there are specific inequalities in means
and therefore in capacity to realize this process ... What is decisive is
not only the conscious system of ideas and beliefs, but the whole lived
social process as practically organized by specific and dominant mean-
ings and values.

(Williams 1977: 108f.)

A ruling class has succeeded in establishing a hegemony if their ideas of
values and concepts have become generally binding for the entire society.
This process is characterized by the dominance and the subordination of
classes, as the example of common sense shows. Common sense
appears to be a natural concept, but it has been constructed in accordance
with those in power. However, constructing and preserving a dominant or
hegemonic culture is an active process. Hegemony is neither ultimate nor
unassailable, and it is prone to being challenged by alternative social powers.
The idea of Gramsci’s became the centre of Williams’ critical social
theory. For he elaborated the idea that the dominant culture does not
include the lived culture as a whole. In doing so, he opposed both Althusser’s
ideology theory, which was prevalent in British thinking at that time, as well as
the ‘dominant ideology thesis’, which was accepted in sociology.

What has really to be said ... is that 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.

(Williams 1977: 125)

Choosing from the possibilities of human practice, every ruling regime
establishes a central system of practices, meanings and values which is
dominant and excludes other practices, meanings and values.

The incorporation, which is a constitutive practice executed by every
hegemony, deeply penetrates the opinions and values of a society. For
instance, a hegemonic culture selectively absorbs meanings and values which
are an alternative to the dominant culture. According to Williams ([1973]
1980a), however, this is what also makes it vulnerable. In contrast to Stuart
Hall’s ‘encoding-decoding’ model (Hall 1973), he emphasizes that counter-
hegemonic possibilities do not only exist in the realm of consumption or
decoding but in the area of production as well. That way, independently
produced forms can be incorporated by the culture industry (Williams
1974) and still present possibilities for an oppositional or alternative
‘encoding’.

4. Practices and agency

The attempt to appropriately theorize the concept of culture led Williams
equally to becoming intensively involved with the significance of culture for
Karl Marx as well as to a new conceptual design of the Base-Superstructure-
Model. According to him, it is Marx’s opinion, ‘to insist that all cultural
processes were initiated by humans themselves, and, second, to argue that
one of them could be fully understood unless they were seen in the con-
stated in Marx’s concept of the totality of social processes, which
means the examination of the interaction between those various forms of
practices in a society. That way the material production is embedded in
more extensive social ways of life.

In addition, Williams explained that the ‘productive forces of “mental
labour” have in themselves, an inescapable material and thus social history’
(1983: 211). As he showed in a differentiated analysis of Marx’s writings,
cultural practices may not be understood as secondary in relationship to
the material production but that they are part of the totality of the social-
material processes. Since the superstructure itself has a material structure,
Williams demanded abandoning the opinion that only some of our productive practices are material. According to Williams, cultural practices in the realm of art, philosophy, aesthetic or ideology needed to be understood as 'real practices' (Williams 1977: 94) as 'elements of a whole material social process; not as a realm or a world or a superstructure, but many and variable productive practices, with specific conditions and intentions' (ibid.).

Williams did not exclusively assign the term 'productive forces' to the realm of economy but rather included every activity of the social process. It was not until capitalism that the idea of production in general was reduced to the production of goods, that is, the production in particular (see Williams 1977: 90ff.). Williams joins Lukács for whom the predominance of the economy was not a general characteristic of human life but a specific characteristic of the capitalistic economy (ibid.: 141).

Having dealt with Volosinov's language philosophy in a sophisticated way, he also identifies language as a material and social practice.

Signification, the social creation of meanings through the use of formal signs, is then a practical material activity: it is indeed, literally, a means of production. It is a specific form of that practical consciousness which is inseparable from all social material activity.

(Williams 1977: 38)

Williams resolutely rejects both subjectivistic and objectivist theories of language. He especially criticizes Saussure's idea of language as an objective system which is based on the abstract binary distinction between 'langue' and 'parole' and the arbitrariness of the sign. Following Volosinov's conception of the multi-accidentuality he points out that the ambiguous meaning of the sign is determined by the social situation in which it is used. Using them in a creative way can result in novel accretions and shifted meanings. Here, Williams anticipated opinions like the ones held in the approach of social construction. In reference to Wittgenstein's language-game concept, Gergen (1999) points out that the playful and sometimes subversive process of signification, the 'différence', which Derrida postulates, is not unlimited but limited by a given social-historic situation. Ways of life and interpersonal relationships create and reproduce ways of understanding. Finally, Williams defined language as a constitutive human faculty: exerting pressures and setting limits (Williams 1977: 43). It is a material practice of human sociality.

By critically dealing with Marx's thinking, Williams' cultural materialism approach succeeds in creating a 'radically novel theoretical position' (Milner 2002: 105) which assumes that practices are socially determined but still holds on to the idea of 'agency'. That way the potentials of practices which are neither derived nor autonomous, are fathomed and their immensity potential is presented. Practices constitute the social process. Thus, to some extent, Williams anticipates the current 'practice turn' in social and cultural studies.

5. Raymond Williams today

Our reason for explaining and discussing important concepts and perspectives in Raymond Williams' work is its significance for a critical social theory. Thus, relating his works, which deal with specific historical constellations, to the present, rereading them and readopting them in the face of current (global) relationships, is a necessary step. In our opinion, Williams' theoretical positions are of enormous relevance for the twenty-first century as well. They show a strong affinity to the perspectives of the new social movements.

For both Stuart Hall and Williams, theoretical work in the realm of culture did not replace political activism, which greatly distinguished them from Adorno and Horkheimer. Williams aimed at supporting and promoting radically democratic movements with the help of his intellectual work. Furthermore, in the realm of adult education and the university, he wanted to represent positions which corresponded to his own political experiences and analyses and displayed counter-hegemonic perspectives. Thus, the university-based implementation of the Cultural Studies-project, which originated from adult education (see Winter 2005), created a 'certain significant intellectual difference in the university' (Williams 1986: 1989: 155). Democratic ideals were introduced to the realms of learning and education in order to make culture accessible to everybody. Williams owes his radically democratic perspectives to his socialist ideals. They correlated with respective positions in the British working class (see Gilbert 2006: 184).

Both Towards 2000 (1983) and Resources of Hope (1989) show that Williams felt obliged to the democratic political movements of his time, supported them and, in dealing with them, he developed critical positions which were supposed to promote a creative, democratic culture.

By criticizing utilitarianism and carefully analysing anti-capitalist attitudes in Burke, Eliot or Caudwell, his book Culture and Society is also relevant for the emotional structure of today's generation. Furthermore, considering the predominance of neo-liberal beliefs and practices, which, bound to the ideological doctrines of a free market, preach and strive for an unregulated economic liberalization, it is alarmingly up to date as well. The global anti-capitalist movement, the 'movement of movements' which has emerged during the past couple of years, questions the hegemony by aligning with global issues of social justice and radical democracy and representing an emergent emotional structure in correspondence to Williams, which is both orientated towards an oppositional and an alternative way.

On the one hand they offer resistance to the neo-liberal economy politics and its effects by protesting against it. Both the Zapatista uprisings in
Mexico, which, by using the Internet, received global support for their opposition against the Mexican government and the North American Free Trade Agreement, as well as the organized campaigns against the WTO's policies in Seattle in 1999, are outstanding example of this resistance (Starr 2005). Richard Kahn and Douglas Kellner (2005) show that many forms of oppositional politics and alternative cultures develop and enunciate via the Internet.

One the one hand, by referring to the human collective, both the privatization and the commercialization of collective goods (such as water, health, education or the traffic system), as practised by today's governments, is criticized. This idea shows a great affinity with Williams' ideal of a 'common culture' in which competitive individualism is contrasted with the formation of communities. Considering this background, Williams can also be considered a precursor of Agamben's, Nancy's or Hardt and Negri's current occupation with the topic of community (see Gilbert 2006: 191f.).

On the other hand, alternative forms of economizing, of operational organization (see Wall 2005) or of trading, as practised in the Fair Trade movement (see Grimes 2005), are being tested. This occupation with a radical form of economy, as it can be found in Friends of the Earth, had already been anticipated by Williams who not only dealt with the conception of nature early on in his works (Williams [1972] 1980b) but who commented on questions concerning ecology as well (Williams 1983f). In doing so, he laid the basis for an ecological criticism of capitalism and called for both taking responsibility for the human ecology and creating a new idea of society (see Williams 1973c).

The novel meanings, values and practices, which have developed in the context of criticizing neo-liberal globalization, are aimed at the implementation of an actual alternative with a radically democratic orientation. This idea clearly reveals a resemblance to Williams' concept of a 'long revolution'. This anti-capitalism is therefore not a revolutionary utopianism, but just the kind of open-ended, pluralistic refusal to endorse the hegemony of contemporary capitalism that the New Left always argued for (Gilbert 2006: 190). Instead, it is rather about a gradual implementation of a creative democracy.

The foundation of the World Social Forum in Porto Alegre in 2000, which represents a novel form of a democratic institution, is an example for this. On the one hand, it is a platform on which various social movements can cooperate. On the other, it is a forum of deliberative democracy, which promotes counter-hegemonic alternatives from below, which are based on solidarity, and contrasts them with the market's neo-liberal utopia. It strives to become a cosmopolitan place of critical utopianism. Analogies to Raymond Williams' work are obvious here as well. His analysis of emergent meanings, perceptions and practices already partly anticipates the work of the World Social Forum. For instance, the Portuguese sociologist Boaventura de Sousa Santos calls for a sociology of emergences.

The sociology of emergences is the enquiry into the alternatives that are contained in the horizon of concrete possibilities. It consists in undertaking a symbolic enlargement of knowledges, practices and agents in order to identify therein the tendencies of the future (the Now Yet) in which it is possible to intervene so as to maximize the probability of hope vis-à-vis the probability of frustration.

(De Sousa Santos 2006: 31)

Furthermore, Lawrence Grossberg (2007: 288) points out that the term 'structure of feeling' belongs to the realm of emergence and creativity in Williams' late work because it refers to the gap between the experience and the discursive, what is known and what could be known, the lived and the articulation. 'It is the event of the virtual' (ibid.: 288). This is the starting point for the quest for other modernities, which Grossberg advocates.

It is only in the imagination of other ways of being modern that we can at least begin to re-imagine imagination itself. The virtual, unlike the possible, is grounded in the real, offering a different notion of imagination. Raymond Williams seems to have understood this, giving it substance in his concept of the structure of feeling.

(Grossberg 2007: 288)

The examples reveal how close the concepts and perspectives developed by Williams are to social movements and critical theory construction in the twenty-first century. His work itself is a reservoir of 'resources of hope', which, of course, need to be read and adapted in the context of today's social-historic situation. Thus, Siemen Connors (1997: 175) is wrong when he believes that 'Raymond Williams's time is not our time'. We have tried to show that the work he has created is a work of and for the future of the twenty-first century. On this note: 'Towards 2050' (Milner 2002: 162f.) along with Raymond Williams!

Notes


2. According to Habermas, the rational-critical public sphere by Jürgen Habermas, which Milner (2002: 163f.) synthesized, can be traced back to the tradition of the ideal speech situation and the rational-critical public sphere by Jürgen Habermas, which Milner (2002: 163f.) synthesized, can be traced back to the tradition of the ideal speech situation and the rational-critical public sphere. Both Williamson's (1997) and Milner's (2002) works are highly critical of the postmodern 'new social movements' in Habermas's sense that of Weber, in Williams' that of Lévi-Strauss. Both Williamson and Milner are enthusiastically sympathetic to the postmodern 'new social movements' (Habermas 1981) as they were suspicious of postmodern theoretical relativism...
(Müller 2002: 163). Admittedly, Habermas's theory of society is not oriented in an anti-capitalist way but it accepts the capitalist economic order. 

3) Just like Walter Benjamin or Bertolt Brecht, Williams was interested in the emancipatory and democratic possibilities of new communication technologies. He wanted the public to be in possession of the means of communication (cf. Williams [1962] 1976a: 176f.) and argued for a participatory use.

4) In Politics and Letters Williams (1979b: 330) criticised de Saussure's conception of language. 'But to describe the sign as arbitrary or unmotivated prejudices the whole theoretical issue. I say it is not arbitrary but conventional, and that the convention is the result of a social process. If it has a history, then it is not arbitrary – it is the specific product of the people who have developed the language in question'.


Chapter 5

The 1968 May Day Manifesto

Stephen Woodhams

Raymond Williams' engagement in politics remains a lesser-known feature of his life, yet he came from a political household, his father Harry being a parish councillor and effectively running the Labour Party in Pandy (Smith 2003: 59–60). That Raymond himself was nearer the edge of the Labour Party may be appreciated from his participation in the local Left Book Club, his membership in the popular pre-war Communist Party at Cambridge and the 1980s when he joined with his friend Gwyn Alp Williams to become a member of Páid Cymru (Williams, D. 2003). Placed in the context of these activities, the initiative of the May Day Manifesto may seem less exceptional. However, what marks out the years 1966 to 1969 was that Williams was pressed into a public role to which he rose and assumed the mantle of speaker and organizer. In what follows, the Manifesto is linked back to the New Left of the early 1960s, and out to the convulsive politics of the years, in particular the anger raised by the American presence in Vietnam. The main part of the essay is concerned with the organizing around the Manifesto leading to a National Convention of the Left, the Bulletin that accompanied activities and those who were drawn to its support.

The May Day Manifesto appeared in its popular form in 1968. The year came down in public memory as a time of progressive revolt in forms ranging through music, demonstration, dress, violence and sex. Yet it was also the year when the state responded to a possible movement of 'Asian' British citizens from Kenya by introducing legislation effectively setting barriers to non-white peoples (Miles and Phizacklea 1984). These contradictory histories form a context for the Manifesto and informed correspondence in the Bulletin. The effects of the conflicts and allegiances emanating from the changes at the New Left Review in 1962 had caused considerable waves. In content, the Review embarked on an international path engaging with theoretical and political currents across the world. A group of editors and contributors centred on Perry Anderson caused rifts and dissension that carried through the necessary task of establishing a journal that turned theoretical thinking into a political activity. Facilitating the change in direction, the new editorial group gained the support of Raymond Williams. An
About Raymond Williams

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