

A welfare culture?

Hoggart and Williams in the fifties

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– It is time to think again. An older phase of capitalism has ended. A received culture of class has declined with it, disarticulated by new forms of industrial organization, a transformed information economy, and changed patterns of consumption and recreation. The right has thematized these developments and prospered from them, as successive Conservative electoral victories demonstrate. The left has been slow to respond in anything like an effective contemporary spirit; but here too, now, there is potential for change. A new generation of Labour leaders, alert to the social novelties of the period and unwilling to bear another parliamentary season in exile, is proposing bold revisions of the party's programme; communism, which twenty years ago bewitched a whole radical generation, is surely finished. The left can make a new start.

– It is the 1990s. Or it is the 1950s. The comparison is of course selective, deliberately overdrawn; no one will confuse the two periods. Yet the objective resemblances are close enough to be perhaps interesting. Can the familiar terms of a certain style of left-intellectual annunciation so fully replicate that of an earlier time and yet be lucid, or even self-consistent? A second-hand apocalypse is a poor revelation. Or, if the similarities really do run deep enough to justify the echoes, may it not be that the concerns of the fifties are more actual than they are conventionally thought to be? The intellectual left, above all in those densely populated quarters where cultural analysis goes on, habitually thinks of the fifties as a cradle, a thing well remembered but hardly suited to the purposes of later years. The founding texts of socialist cultural theory in Britain are just that: enablers of a certain history, not actors in it. But there may be critical value in anachronism, in returning to the period as if without the knowledge of what followed, to remember afresh the terms of its arguments as they emerged, to consider whether they may not have retained – perhaps regained? – a certain value for the present. What follows here is a contribution to such a project.

After 1945: welfare liberalism

It has been claimed that effective political victory in 1945 went not to Labour but to liberalism, in its generic post-classical form. Drawn into an early contest by an over-confident Churchill, Labour acceded to office through a slump in the Conservative vote and went on to implement a social programme that had been designed largely by reformers in Westminster's senior parties.¹ A parallel claim may be pressed more strongly in respect of cultural policy after 1945.

Post-elementary state education was made available to all, and compulsory to the age of fifteen; merit rather than money determined access to the upper echelon of the new tripartite system, the grammar school. Higher education expanded rapidly in the early postwar years, though from a tiny demographic base. Radio, continuing as a public monopoly, expanded and diversified its programming, but again – like education – on strict hierarchical assumptions. Access to television viewing widened dramatically, though without prejudice to Reithian paternalism. The licensing of commercial television in the middle fifties caused widespread foreboding, but in fact the new service was subject to significant public-service constraints. A government-funded council was created, succeeding the wartime CEMA, to support the arts and promote wider interest in them. And in the bookshops, the shelves turned orange and blue, the colours of Penguin and the mark of cultural quality as bestowed by Allen Lane, a more affable, more radical Reith of the printed word.² Of course, pure commerce too was active in every paper shop and cinema; but in the old and new centres of cultural policy, a common formula had been set in place. A minority culture, received and continuing, would be diffused to an ever-widening audience. All the terms of this summary should be noted. The expansion was real; but there was no fundamental questioning of what counted as cultural value or of the proper forms of cultural participation. Self-confirming traditions would now be unveiled for a

deserving population. Culture – ‘the best that is known and thought in the world’, ‘sweetness and light’, in Arnold’s famous gloss – would now, literally, be broadcast.

The formula governing this emerging world of policy and practice was a Victorian bequest; its classic exponent was Arnold. In its mid-century applications, it was to a great extent the achievement of the two salient tendencies in liberal minority culture between the wars: the Bloomsbury circle and the group around F.R. Leavis and *Scrutiny*. It has been usual in retrospective commentary, as it was at the time, to stress the contrasts between the two formations. Bloomsbury was an upper-middle-class bohemia, a congeries of families and friends whose unity and security in the face of commercial pressure and ancestral philistinism were sustained by private money. *Scrutiny* was proudly petty bourgeois, hostile to all metropolitan ornament and hereditary presumption, the self-conscious vanguard of a ‘critical minority’ that sought nothing but – and nothing less than – the recognition due to unaided intelligence. However, these social-stylistic differences were variants of a shared liberal formula, which both helped to promote after the war. John Maynard Keynes was not only the pioneering theorist of the new macro-economic policy; he also founded the Arts Council. Bloomsbury’s free-thinking modernism was hardly consonant with Lord Reith’s cultural preferences, yet that ‘civilized’ manner eventually lightened his own puritan tone in the BBC, just as it also became standard in the formerly ‘middlebrow’ cultural and recreational pages of the polite press. *Scrutiny*’s insistence on careers open to talent appeared to find some acknowledgement in the weakening of class privilege in education – where, at the same time, Leavisian accents were more and more widely heard. The new styles of cultural seriousness, in education and in the media, were essentially generalizations, named or not, from these interwar models.

Two counterpointed sequences patterned the new period. On the one hand there were expansionary trends: a significant system of welfare, rising working-class confidence and spending-power, enhanced public cultural provision, and, together with these, intensified cultivation of consumer-goods markets, including, very prominently, strictly commercial cultural enterprise. However, these trends developed within a contrary historical tendency: Britain’s long relative decline as a capitalist power continued, and was now invested with a special politico-cultural pathos by the postwar retreat from colonialism, the loss and symbolic redemption of Empire in the Commonwealth. ‘Progress’ was the

officially favoured gloss on this configuration of change, and, in the ordinary terms of liberal politics and culture, the word was not inapt. But, looking back from beyond the seventies and eighties, we can see the decade after 1945 as the formative moment of an abiding crisis. The re-balancing of existing class relations in a caste-ridden society and a declining economy, the seeding of new black communities through reverse migration from the colonies, and, pervading all things, the scarcely articulate faltering of Anglo-Britishness as a self-evident identity and mark of precedence: these familiar pretexts of the late-twentieth-century reaction against consensual liberalism were shaped together within a short historical span.

Indeed, amid all the signs of liberal paramountcy, the liberal intelligentsia itself was not free of discontent. Cultural life had become narrower and meaner since the war, according to one Bloomsbury survivor. The twenties and thirties had been bohemian and cosmopolitan; the fifties were provincial and earnest, their tone set by ‘lower-middlebrows’ who approached the arts in the spirit of sanitary engineers.³ Among a younger generation inspired by Leavis, there were those who would have smiled at this caricature of themselves, who affirmed that their kind of intellectual was now poised to take possession of the heritage.⁴ But others of them were disturbed by postwar Britain (or England, as they would more typically say). *Scrutiny* itself, now closed, had recoiled from the approach of educational reform; Leavis himself could see only further

deterioration, the nearing extinction of English minority culture. The official vaunting of liberal nostrums, in the heyday of *Encounter* and the Congress for Cultural Freedom, intensified the air of paradox, as the highbrow passions of the thirties became the good sense of the fifties. Assimilation as rejection, advance as continuing decline, intellectual freedom as voluntary conformism: these apprehensions were voiced by both kinds of liberal intellectual as they contemplated their given place in the incustomary social landscape of postwar Britain.

Among conservative intellectuals, there was unequivocal resistance to the prospect of a diffusionist welfare culture. The best-known initiative from this quarter was T.S. Eliot's *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture*, a Burkean defence of customary inequality in intellectual life and education.⁵ But had that book been signed by anyone other than the canonized master of the new English poetic, it would have passed more or less unnoticed. Those minority liberals, like Leavis, who raged against the unheroic fulfilment of their desires were isolated as cranks.⁶ For now, and for most, liberalism was an ecumenical, not a sectarian rite; in effect, an established church – the unsaid, often enough the unthought, of intellectual initiative and exchange.

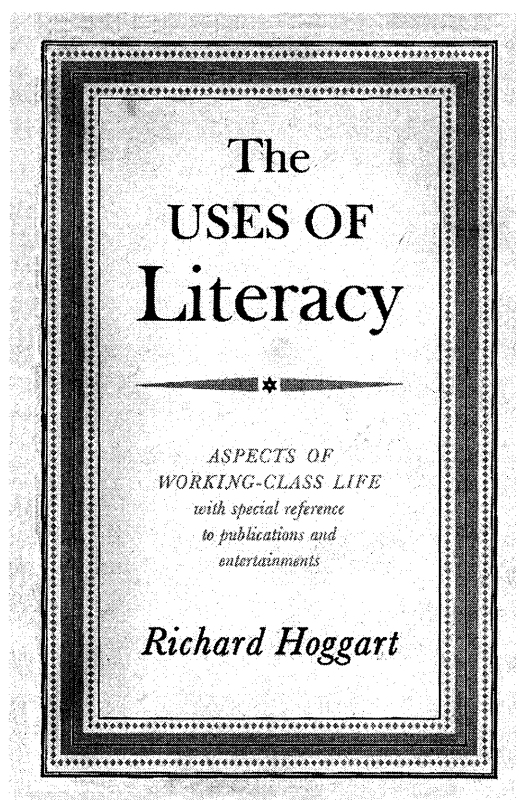
Hoggart and the abuses of literacy

In the middle 1940s, when *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture* was written, Eliot's sense of English popular culture was already anachronistic. His vision of the English everyday – the famous montage of boating, Elgar, cabbage and the rest – was as if a reprise of his own earliest impressions, one expatriate American's version of pastoral. By the turn of the 1960s, when he reissued the book without alteration, the loss of reality was complete. Between the first and second editions of *Notes*, the cultural universe of the social majority had been extensively reordered, in part by those ominous education reforms and an associated widening of cultural opportunity, and in greater part through the ever more vigorous commercial traffic in words and images. 'Classless' was the widely promoted description of a process in which the inherited signs of cultural caste were displaced in the mock-popular interest of the commercial optimum, or were themselves commodified as style and spectacle. Converging with marketing strategies in this, public policy sponsored a vision of classlessness – through equality of opportunity – but, precisely in doing so, instated the working class as a real cultural presence and topic. Among the effects of these cooperating tendencies was the emergence of a new minority in British intellectual life, a scattering of writers and artists of working-class origin, who now moved into the

approved spaces of cultural production, there to assert or explore the values and prospects of the half-known, half-acknowledged social world from which they had come and to which, more often than not, they remained committed.

One of these was Richard Hoggart. Born into the Leeds working class at the end of the First World War, Hoggart made his way through a local grammar school and thence to the university, graduating in English Literature on the eve of the Second. After wartime service, he joined the Department of Adult Education at Hull University, from which he worked as a tutor until the end of the fifties. Hoggart's first book was a conventional work of literary criticism: *W.H. Auden*. However, he was also writing short sketches of working-class life for the Labour left weekly *Tribune*, where T.R. Fyvel had succeeded George Orwell as literary editor. And by the beginning of the 1950s, he was clarifying the terms of another kind of project, 'a new and natural extension', as he later described it, of 'the true stream of English studies' into the landscape of contemporary culture.⁷

His critical point of reference was Q.D. Leavis's *Fiction and the Reading Public* (1932), the founding text of *Scrutiny*'s cultural diagnostics. Twenty years on, Hoggart proposed 'a sort of guide or textbook to aspects of popular culture' that would make good the unfulfilled promise of Leavis's title by integrating the critical study of texts within an analysis of the already-formed culture of their readers: 'one had to know very much more about



how people used much of the stuff which to us might seem merely dismissible trash, before one could speak confidently about the effects it might have.⁸ The work, whose precise focus would be the impact of mass-marketed cultural forms on the inherited ethos of the working class, was to be called *The Abuses of Literacy*.

The book eventually published in 1957 differed significantly from its early design. The title was shorn of its provocative first syllable, in an attempt to mollify a publisher fearful of crushing litigation; and for the same reason, Hoggart was obliged to pastiche much of his printed evidence rather than quote it. But the major change was structural. The original analytic scheme furnished only half of *The Uses of Literacy*, its second part, which was now preceded by a long, hybrid discourse – part autobiography and memoir, part exemplary fiction, part social phenomenology – on working-class life between the wars, offered as the necessary context for the analysis of popular culture in the fifties.

It was this reflection on ‘an “older” order’ that gave the book its tone, distinguishing it very clearly from its Leavisian antecedent – and also from a left-wing inspiration like Orwell. Hoggart wrote here with the assurance and feeling of one who had come from the world he described, with an unflagging consciousness of Britain’s class order and his own dislocated relation to it. He was, in his own later words, ‘a once-born socialist’ immovably committed to the welfare of his native class.⁹ The contemporary cultural materials that he went on to dissect – the glossy magazines, the pulp fiction, the popular song lyrics – did not express the traditional ethos of this class and did not (yet) define it, he argued. The populism of the cultural market was an ‘approach’ from the outside, exploiting inherited strengths and weaknesses alike, threatening to reduce its working-class audience to a demoralized lower caste; it was a kind of spiritual ‘robbery’.

However, altered social sensibility and political alignment did not undermine discursive continuity. Hoggart’s evaluative idiom was saturated with *Scrutiny*’s clinical metaphors of health and sickness, vigour and debility. His writing was at times quite possessed by the spirit of the Leavises:

The hedonistic but passive barbarian who rides in a fifty-horse-power bus for threepence, to see a five-million-dollar film for one-and-eightpence, is not simply a social oddity; he is a portent.¹⁰

His closing remarks read like an oath of allegiance: here was one individual’s ‘contribution to a much wider discussion, a single diagnosis offered for scrutiny’.¹¹

Working-class welfare: culture or civilization?

Hoggart professedly saw *The Uses of Literacy* as disjunct, and has remained unmoved by those who have read it as a single composition.¹² But it is just here, in the forms of the book seen as a whole, that his discursive affiliation is more strongly registered. The dominant mode of the work is narrative; the story it tells is of decline already far gone and perhaps unarrestable. The contrast that emerges in his account is not simply between two periods in the life of working-class Leeds. His story begins with an evocation of his country-born grandmother, with her customary knowledges and skills, then remembers two generations of native city-dwellers, and turns finally to observe the life-patterns of a fourth generation, the working-class young of the early 1950s. Hoggart was aware of the temptation to nostalgia, and tried repeatedly to check it. But his qualifications were too punctually stated, too evidently concessionary in their acknowledgement of an improved material existence, to remake what was a canonical narrative of the descent from rural tradition into urban-industrial anomie.

The two-part organization of the text recalls Orwell’s *The Road to Wigan Pier*, and its suasive gesture is of the same kind, though potentially more effective. In both cases, a record of experience purports to validate a critical analysis: because I have known this life, the tacit reasoning goes, I may reliably make this judgement. Yet the truth must be otherwise. Memory is a construction of the past, and in Hoggart’s descriptions (as in Orwell’s) there was much that was already familiar from literary characterology. In practice, Hoggart’s writing appealed to a quite different kind of moral authority, as was evident in its strategy of quotation. The text draws heavily on working-class idiom, and on the actual or mimicked words of commercial culture. These are clearly marked, by punctuation or typography, as evidence for analysis; they might be termed *object*-quotations. At the same time, the text avails itself of another kind of citation, which is granted a different status. These are the epigraphs that introduce his own words, and the many phrases that occur with little or no formal marking, woven into the syntax of his own discourse as elements of itself. They are, in contrast, *subject*-quotations. Assembled as resources for Hoggart’s own prose, Locke, Tocqueville, Arnold, Gorky, Benda, Auden, Forster, Lawrence, Yeats and others form a veritable chorus of wisdom and insight. Theirs is the true authority of the book, the collective voice of *culture* raised against a wayward *civilization*.

This conceptual binary, familiar from more than a

century of English cultural criticism, governed the vision of *The Uses of Literacy* and accounted for its most significant absence: the record of working-class self-organization in politics, work and education. Hoggart's disarming explanation for the omission was that these were the interests of a small, 'earnest' minority untypical of their class. This, coming from an active Labour Party member and WEA tutor, was hardly compelling. A stronger, though not more sympathetic explanation would cite the spontaneous perceptual effect of the convention that framed his analysis. Cultural criticism, in the strict sense I invoke here, is not one specialism among others; it proposes a certain understanding of society as a whole. The binary culture/civilization classifies all social tissue as either quality or quantity, purpose or mechanism, end or means. And the logical effect of this construction is to render politics unintelligible as a meaningful social activity; rarefied as 'values' or banalized as practical administration, its specificity is lost. Working-class political activists are no smaller a minority than the far less class-typical bourgeois novelist. If the one seemed so obviously less meaningful than the other, it was because in Hoggart's received scheme of analysis, politics as such was a secondary moral reality.

'Labour Leavisism' would be one summary of Hoggart's distinctively bifocal cultural vision. Yet he was both politically less demonstrative and culturally less desperate than these categories suggest. A moment's reflection on his subsequent work prompts a more exact characterization. Throughout his career – in the Arts Council and UNESCO as well as in public education – Hoggart thought to serve his class of origin as a *Kulturträger*, and to serve culture through the 'practical criticism' of policy and administration. (Fifty years after the founding enactments of welfare Britain, he continues to believe that his people, as he thinks of them, are being robbed.) His model institutions, the three volumes of his memoirs confirm, were adult education, the BBC and Penguin Books. Hoggart's specific novelty was to renew, in modified social conditions, the liberal tradition of the public-service intellectual. In him, the postwar British Labour movement found its own Matthew Arnold.

After 1956: a new Left

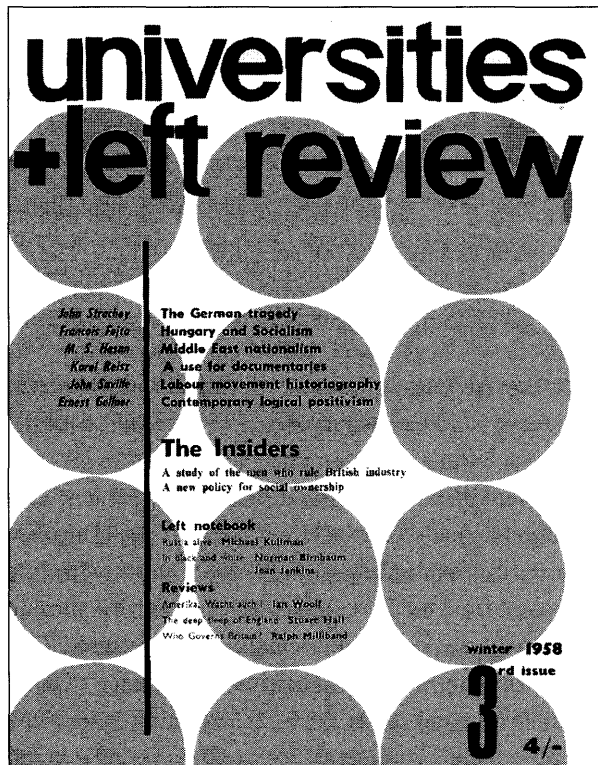
Between the writing of *The Uses of Literacy* and its publication came 1956, a year of shocks and portents that confounded the settled imagination of British politics and culture and unveiled the shapes of domestic and international relations after reconstruction. The Suez fiasco dramatized the predicament of an imperial ruling caste that could neither check its hereditary arrogance in

the face of anti-colonial revolution nor readily accept its subaltern standing in an international capitalist order now dominated by the USA. Popular revulsion from the Anglo-French adventure was one sign that, at home as much as abroad, old political nostrums were losing their potency; and the scandalous cultural successes of the year – Colin Wilson's *The Outsider*, John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* and the film *Rock Around the Clock* – gave early warning of new collective sensibilities in the making. 1956 was also a year of crisis for the Left. Opening with Khrushchev's post-mortem denunciation of Stalin's rule, it ended, in bloody irony, with the crushing of the Hungarian revolt by Red Army tanks. The effect of these revelations in word and deed was convulsive, throughout the communist movement. The British party lost one-fifth of its members, as some 7,000 militants, including a disproportionate number of intellectuals, resigned or were driven out.

It was possible to see in this constellation the hand of liberal progress: the passing of Empire, the advent of welfare and affluence, the Cold War adversary chastened, contained and discredited. In another perspective it signified complacency and exhaustion in a time of discoverable hope and shadowing danger. Intellectual disaffection mounted in the later fifties: academics, novelists, playwrights and publishers collaborated in terse collective interventions like *Declaration* (1957), *Conviction* (1958), *The Establishment* (1959); *The Glittering Coffin* (1960) was Dennis Potter's scabrous figure for Macmillan's Britain. In the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, launched shortly after the Suez affair, these and broader currents of dissent found more challenging means of expression. Within this array of dissident forces, the clearest and most radical voices were those of the intellectual tendencies now converging in what soon came to be called 'the New Left'.

Two journals, both founded in 1957, formed the intellectual nuclei of the New Left. *The New Reasoner* was edited from the North of England by two ex-Communist historians, John Saville and Edward Thompson; having begun as an irregular oppositional organ within the party in direct response to Khrushchev's revelations, the journal was dedicated to the moral renewal of communism in 'socialist humanism'. Ex-Communists also featured among the editors and collaborators of *Universities and Left Review*, and the theme of a post-Stalinist socialist humanism was reiterated there. However, the more emphatic concern of the journal, which emerged from a group of Oxford students, was to elaborate an analysis and a programme that would supersede not only orthodox Communism but

Labourism as well, a thoroughgoing socialist critique of contemporary, welfare-capitalist Britain.¹³ A new Left for a new historical *situation*: this was *ULR*'s distinctive appreciation of the intellectual challenge facing socialists after 1956. 'The New Conservatism' and Britain's modified class relations in a period of expanding social provision and imperial decline were the subject of Stuart Hall's opening contribution to this analytic agenda. This was followed, in the second issue, by a symposium on working-class culture occasioned by the newly published *Uses of Literacy*.



It is instructive to be reminded, nearly forty years later, just how critically Hoggart's classic was received in the New Left's leading forum. The editors' opening question was courteous but incisive:

Would a direct account in terms of readership reaction differ from Hoggart's content-analysis of the publications themselves?¹⁴

John McLeish likened the book's protagonist to 'a visiting anthropologist of a behaviourist persuasion'.¹⁵ The common, though unspoken, suggestion of these remarks was reinforced *a contrario* by a Welsh contributor, Gwyn Illtyd Lewis, who shared Hoggart's apprehensions of 'commercial devitalization' in the English-speaking population.¹⁶ *The Uses of Literacy* in practice reanimated the critical discourse it offered to supersede, inflecting but not displacing the conventions of Leavisian cultural analysis. Raymond Williams, in the opening contribution to the symposium, saluted Hoggart's 'deep loyalty to his own people', but then, the

more tellingly for that, made two fundamental objections. In present conditions, he insisted, 'working-class materialism' must be defended as a 'humane' value. And Hoggart was mistaken in excluding working-class activism as a 'minority' case, in effect relegating the culture of specialized class representatives to the status of social eccentricity. This minority, as he would later maintain in a recorded conversation with Hoggart, inherited and sustained a general history of struggle for democracy, trade unions and socialism – 'the high working-class tradition'.¹⁷ The implication of these remarks was far-reaching: in reclaiming material desire as a moral good and politics as a 'high tradition', Williams was not simply adjusting the balance of Hoggart's analysis; he was disorganizing its basic terms, the binaries that framed it, and so intimating the possibility of an alternative way of seeing, beyond the perceptual scheme of liberal cultural criticism.

Williams: beyond culture-and-society

Williams closely resembled Hoggart in his origins and career trajectory. A few years younger, Williams too had been born into a working-class family, risen through a local grammar school to study English at university, served in the army during the war, then gone to work in adult education, where he combined his ordinary duties with various independent writing and publishing projects. However, the differences of formation were at least as significant. Williams's family was actively socialist. Whereas Hoggart came from an urban English working class, Williams's early years were spent in the mixed-class environment of a Welsh village. Hoggart completed his formal education in his home town, where his left-wing convictions developed without assuming definite programmatic form. Williams, in contrast, crossed the national and social border to Cambridge, where, as he later recalled, the Communist Party and the University Socialist Club provided the staples of his intellectual life. These variations on an apparently common biographical scheme formed two quite different politico-cultural sensibilities: in the one case a congenital class tenderness sustaining allegiance to the dominant traditions of British labourism; in the other, a more radical and more consequent political training combined with an egalitarian self-possession conceding nothing to the deep fatalism of England's culture of class.

Formed once in the confident Communist subculture of the late 1930s, Williams underwent a difficult, protracted re-formation in the altered conditions he found upon returning to complete his studies in 1945. Although still a communist, he was now outside the party, distrustful of its official publicity and unimpressed by its

cultural orientation.¹⁸ The red network of his first Cambridge period had collapsed, and the student socialists with whom he now sought constructive engagement took their cultural bearings from Leavis. The immediate outcome of these new associations was the short-lived journal *Politics and Letters*, which, together with its sibling, *The Critic*, explored an alliance of independent socialist politics with literary-cultural themes familiar from *Scrutiny*. This initiative has been mourned as the lost British counterpart of Sartre's *Les Temps Modernes*, but it is difficult to imagine that unrealized future.¹⁹ *Politics and Letters* – the broken register of the title was sign enough – was the expression of a certain intellectual crisis, not a coherent intervention in it, and would have ended in confusion had not circumstantial difficulties foreclosed its development. The ground of this crisis, as Williams began to understand it, was the meaning of 'culture' itself, and 'a long line of thinking about culture' that had been 'appropriat[ed] ... to what were by now decisively reactionary positions'.²⁰

Out of this perception, which had begun to form as a response to the Cambridge Leavisians and then been clarified with the appearance of Eliot's *Notes*, came the inquiry that led, over the next eight years, to *Culture and Society*.²¹ If the founding motive of the book was political, its critical strategy was, crucially, historical. The idea of culture, as a privileged term of evaluation, had emerged during the industrial revolution, Williams argued, and must then be understood as a critical actor in the remaking of social meanings that attended it. In order to undo the moral spell of 'culture', it would be necessary to retrace the process of its formation:

For what I see in the history of this word, in its structure of meanings, is a wide and general movement in thought and feeling. ... I wish to show the emergence of *culture* as an abstraction and an absolute ...²²

– as a separate and higher social sphere, from which final moral judgement might be given and something of a moral alternative sustained.

Organized as a long sequence of author-specific analyses, *Culture and Society* was in substance the history of a discourse, its formation, variation and transmutation. Over the 150-year span from Burke to Leavis, it analysed the progressive rarefaction of *culture*, the defence of a whole and present social order narrowing, in stages, to the lament for an irrecoverable past and the desperate self-assertion of a specialized minority as the only sure trustees of an unattainable general spiritual welfare. Williams identified

fundamental breaks where there was the strongest evidence of continuity (William Morris) and continuity where there was the most vigorous proclamation of a new departure (in the Marxism of the thirties). In a long concluding chapter, he synthesized the meaning of this complex, unfinished history, and situated himself within it:

The idea of culture is a general reaction to a general and major change in the conditions of our common life. Its basic element is its effort at total qualitative assessment.... General change, when it has worked itself clear, drives us back on our general designs, which we have to learn to look at again, and as a whole.

The meanings of 'culture' were not unequivocal:

The word ... cannot automatically be pressed into service as any kind of social directive.... The arguments which can be grouped under its heading do not point to any inevitable action or affiliation.

Yet they 'define ... a common field' and subserve, apparently, a common purpose: 'The working-out of the idea of culture is a slow reach again for control.'²³

Formulations like this, abstract in reference and seemingly inclusive in address, were themselves less than unequivocal. *Culture and Society* was evidently a statement from the Left, yet it was unclear what specific intellectual and political orientations it sponsored. The most influential interpretation, at first offered affirmatively and, since the early seventies, more often stated as a charge, was that the book proposed a moral refoundation of socialism in the tradition of English cultural humanism; that it was, in a phrase that became routine, a 'left-Leavisite' alternative to the ruin of Stalinized Marxism.²⁴ A less-well-known interpretation agreed that constructive continuity was Williams's deep theme, but argued that his intervention was for just that reason *communist* in character, paralleling, in its own idiom, the postwar reorientation of Party cultural analysis, which sought to trace a 'national' lineage for Marxist thought, in keeping with the new political strategy of a 'British road to socialism'.²⁵ There is, in the end, little difference between these readings, and both find support in textual and contextual evidence. The substantive concepts of Williams's title were those of the tradition he discussed, but they seemed often to exert reflexive control over his own discourse, inflecting his analytic and evaluative priorities towards a typically 'humanist' derogation of political reason, with correlative intimations of a finally 'common' moral interest. It is striking too that Williams conceived his

reevaluation of English cultural criticism in the same years that saw the Communist Party devote itself to recovering Coleridge, the Romantics, Carlyle, Ruskin and Morris as authentically national resources for the Left. Edward Thompson was prominent in this politico-cultural initiative, and cognate themes were sounded in *Politics and Letters* by another Communist historian, Christopher Hill.²⁶

However, neither line of interpretation leads to a secure historical estimate of *Culture and Society*. The Communist Party's cultural initiative was predominantly nationalist in thrust, an ill-judged attempt to resist the emerging North Atlantic culture of the Cold War by marshalling an essentially 'progressive' English tradition against the 'decadence' and 'barbarism' of New York and Hollywood. The result, as evidenced in the Party's cultural quarterly, *Arena*, was a crude national-populism, often mawkish or phobic, tendentious where not self-deluding or simply dishonest. There was nothing of this in *Culture and Society*, nor anything of *Arena*'s ready identification with the British Marxism of the thirties – from which, indeed, Williams took a clear, cool distance.²⁷ *Arena*'s repertoire included a serviceable pastiche of the *Scrutiny* manner, defining the 'function of a literary magazine', its 'lonely' function, as 'the maintenance ... of fundamental critical standards', the pursuit of 'critical vitality' as a condition of 'creative vitality'.²⁸ In such moments, as in its wholesale condemnation of (American) mass-cultural production, *Arena*'s greater affinity was with *The Uses of Literacy*. There, of course the use of that register signified a real discursive continuity. In Williams, the marks of continuity were not even, properly speaking, residual; they were rather the scars of a specific, unfinished engagement in alien country. It seems preferable, with all qualifications entered, to view *Culture and Society* as Williams himself saw it, as 'an oppositional work – not primarily designed to found a new position' but to undermine an existing one.²⁹

Three considerations support this self-description – and in fact enhance its claim. Williams's attempt 'to counter the appropriation' of cultural criticism for reactionary purposes was not, as continuist interpretations must assume, the prelude to a socialist reappropriation of it: on the contrary, his historical summary of the tradition was fundamentally critical, speaking of the idea of culture as 'an abstraction and an absolute'. Neither did he suggest that culture in this sense might be democratized by expansion, privilege redeeming itself in the gesture of welfare. On the contrary, he expressly rejected high-cultural diffusionism, and characterized the liberal-intellectual

tradition of 'service' as an adapted form of bourgeois individualism.³⁰ Against both forms of the dominant ideology, he set the alternative principle of 'solidarity' – and this not as an ethical abstraction and absolute, but as the historical achievement of capitalism's associated producers, the working class.³¹ With this plain affirmation of working-class creativity – positive cultural values made in and by, as well as against, the social relations of modern 'civilization' – Williams marked a position beyond the imaginative range of 'culture and society'.

Working-class welfare: from paternalism to democracy

Appearing in 1958, *Culture and Society* announced the possibility of 'a new general theory of culture' and looked forward to 'a full restatement of principles, taking the theory of culture as a theory of relations between elements in a whole way of life.'³² By then, the writing of *Essays and Principles* had already begun, leading to the book eventually published three years later as *The Long Revolution*. 'We live in an expanding culture,' Williams had written, 'yet we spend much of our energy regretting the fact, rather than seeking to understand its nature and conditions.'³³ *The Long Revolution* was, for the greater part, a sustained theoretical and historical effort towards that understanding, and, throughout, was governed by the ambition to clarify a politics adequate to that 'expanding culture'. *Culture and Society* had attacked the prevailing critical conception of the epoch as that of 'the masses ... low in taste and habit'; in a short, prospective essay also published in 1958, Williams proposed his counter-thesis: 'culture is ordinary'.

Implicit in this disarming adjective were a theoretical proposition, a corresponding social revaluation, and the germ of a cultural politics, all three brought into focus in a long opening shot:

The bus stop was outside the cathedral. I had been looking at the Mappa Mundi, with its rivers out of Paradise, and at the chained library, where a party of clergymen had got in easily, but where I had waited an hour and cajoled a verger before I even saw the chains. Now, across the street, a cinema advertised the *Six-Five Special* and a cartoon version of *Gulliver's Travels*. The bus arrived, with a driver and a conductress deeply absorbed in each other. We went out of the city, over the old bridge, and on through the orchards and the green meadows and the fields red under the plough. Ahead were the Black Mountains, and we climbed among them, watching the steep fields end at the

grey walls, beyond which the bracken and heather and whin had not yet been driven back. To the east, along the ridge, stood the line of grey Norman castles; to the west, the fortress wall of the mountains. Then, as we still climbed, the rock changed under us. Here, now, was limestone, and the line of the early iron workings along the scarp. The farming valleys, with their scattered white houses, fell away behind. Ahead of us were the narrower valleys: the steel-rolling mill, the gasworks, the grey terraces, the pitheads. The bus stopped, and the driver and conductress got out, still absorbed. They had done this journey so often, and seen all its stages.³⁴

There were reminders here of Eliot, and of Hoggart as of Leavis before him. But the framing and sequence of the narrative offered an alternative to their ways of seeing. The familiar, fatal oppositions between elite and popular, culture and commerce, town and country, past and present, continuity and change, sensibility and machinery, Arnold's 'best' and 'ordinary selves' – the entire conceptual repertoire of 'culture and society' – were disordered in this complex time-space of social meaning, the shared element of everyday existence.

Culture, as Williams now proposed to theorize it, was the mode in which all human existence defined and evaluated itself; strictly speaking, the very phrase 'culture *and* society' was confusionist. The two basic processes of culture were learning and discovery, the relay of established meanings and the probing of new ones, and neither, in a period of significant expansion, was adequately served by the prevailing dual order. The case against the capitalist market in culture was familiar (most recently, in Hoggart's version), and, although

intensified in Williams's theoretical perspective, was not altered by it: the inbuilt logic of market activity was philistine, interested in any kind of expansion that might show a profit, but indifferent or hostile to all else. Yet the alternative of public provision – 'common payment, for common services' – was hobbled not only by the usual complaint of ruinous expense but by the locked imagination of minority culture, to which Williams now posed a twofold challenge. It was a commonplace belief of liberal and conservative cultural criticism that the educational reforms of the later nineteenth century had engendered the trivializing mass journalism of the twentieth; and it was a commonplace of argument that, with money as with culture, the bad tended to drive out the good. Both propositions were demonstrably false, Williams retorted, and inadmissible as valid objections to enhanced educational provision. However, this counter-insistence was not offered as reassurance; for it was implicit in his theoretical concept of culture that 'growth' enjoined something other than simple 'extension':

We should not seek to extend a ready-made culture to the benighted masses. We should accept, frankly, that if we extend our culture, we shall change it: some that is offered will be radically criticized. ... I would not expect the working people of England to support works which, after proper and patient preparation, they could not accept. ... [If] we understand cultural growth, we shall know that it is a continued offering for common acceptance, that we should not, therefore, try to determine in advance what should be offered, but clear the channels and let all the offerings be made, taking care to give the difficult full space,

the original full time, so that it is a real growth, and not just a wider confirmation of old rules.³⁵

Fellow-socialists found much to question in a passage like this, then and in later years. 'Common', if offered as a description of existing cultural relations, appeared to deny the actual inequalities and antagonisms of capitalism as 'a whole way of life'. And, if offered as the keyword of a critical anthropology (for, as Williams believed, any culture must be in some sense common, in order to be a culture at all), it appeared to float



The Chained Library, Hereford Cathedral

into empty ethical space – as ‘an abstraction and an absolute’. The recourse to the first-person plural strengthened suspicions on these grounds, as also, in a strategic sense, did the irenic language of ‘offering’ and ‘growth’. It is true – whatever else may or may not be true – that Williams’s writing at this time inclined too much to emollience. But it is also true, and of greater historical importance then and now, that some of the best criticism of these ambiguities coexisted with them, in the same pages. There was much still to rethink and to discover, but by the turn of the 1960s Williams had established the irreducible distance between cultural liberalism in all its variants – reactionary or reforming – and an integrally socialist politics of culture. ‘Paternalism’, the high-minded format of cultural growth in welfare Britain, was not only inadequate as a counter to its far more vigorous ‘commercial’ other; it was itself mystified, and politically objectionable as a modified version of ‘authoritarian cultural organization’. The true alternative, Williams maintained, lay in *democratic* and *pluralist* participation in the institutions and practices of culture, a ‘common’ evaluation-in-process of an undecided future.³⁶

Views from the nineties

The general history evoked here is that of a paternalist cultural liberalism, received and now actualized as the canonical format of policy in new or expanding institutions, in a phase of legislated welfare provision and intensifying consumer-capitalist enterprise. The pattern of articulated response to postwar cultural conditions seemed itself to obey a benign logic. A reactionary intervention like Eliot’s was widely noticed but won little support, so manifestly reactionary did it appear, even to the later *Scrutiny* – whose epigoni were themselves a dissident rearguard within a largely sanguine or complacent intelligentsia. Although Hoggart condemned the new (ab)uses of literacy in terms that recalled Leavis’s, he did so in a spirit of fealty to the ideals of the liberal (now labourist) public educator. Williams’s historical review of those ideals was respectful in tone, yet radically destructive, inaugurating a distinctively socialist theory and politics of culture. Lending their impetus to the wider challenge of the New Left, in the approach to an open general election, the new critical ideas might become a material force – perhaps indeed, or so the *Sunday Times* announced after Labour’s victory in 1964, the doctrines of a ‘New Establishment’.³⁷

That is not how it turned out, of course. The new decade saw an accentuation of all the emergent tendencies of the later fifties. The culture was re-styled from top to bottom, in processes that modified every

variety of cultural politics, yet without settling the fortunes of any. By the end of another, far more convulsive decade, it began to be clear that the social settlement of 1945 had not been accepted by the Right, that everything remained in question.

In that sense, then, the issues of the later forties and fifties remain contemporary; and conversely, the prominent cultural cruxes of today (the marketization of public service television production, the advent of cable and satellite services, and of course the Internet), while they are usually announced, in sorrow or in ecstasy, as new, go on being defined in the terms of those years – when, also, they seemed new.³⁸ The distance of the past forty years, as we may gauge it from these early New Left writings, is evident not so much in the articulate contentions of the times but in what went more or less without saying. The society evoked by Hoggart and Williams was one of mostly settled sex-gender relations, in which the paradigmatic narratives were those of men.³⁹ Both writers made reference to the specific oppressions of working-class women, but these and other local qualifications were too slight to disturb the calm of a known (hence unexamined) world. In *The Long Revolution*, Williams actually posited ‘the system of generation and nurture’ as a specific historical structure, but his novels, the main site of his reflection on matters of gender and sexuality, reiterated a familiar discourse on moral order and disorder.⁴⁰

A second retrospective crux is the identity of Britain itself, which was neither taken wholly as given nor consistently focused in the terms of nationality and race. Hoggart noted in his working-class subjects an anachronistic confidence in the Empire. Williams discussed imperialism as a conventional trope in the nineteenth-century novel and as a central element of the contemporary political crisis; and his first published novel indexed the objective but unacknowledged cross-racial ‘community’ of post-imperial Britain (the ‘border country’ includes London, where Matthew Price’s first encounter on his journey back to Wales is with a black woman bus conductor, at once the fellow transport worker and the determinate other of his signalman father). However, there was no developed sense of the ‘national’ culture as an imperial formation, shaped and already disturbed by the ‘internal’ racist logic of an ‘external’ history.⁴¹ The unself-conscious citation of ‘England’ meaning (or not meaning?) Britain or the United Kingdom was a sign that in this as in matters of gender, the analysis of the culture as one of classes remained abstract, and in some ways misdirected.⁴²

In that analysis too, of course, contemporary readers will not fail to note anachronism. But here the


anachronism is not that of certain books that linger on in print and memory; it lies also in the facile self-accounting of present tendencies in radical cultural theory and politics as they remember their 'classics' today. This is not only a matter of the familiar critical distortion that Williams later identified in the first New Left, including himself: the unmeasured stress on the putative moment of the new in history and the misreading of what persists as delayed obsolescence. The temporal parochialism of today is more damaging than that of forty years ago. For what was evident in the left cultural analyses of the fifties, but is far less evident in the far more richly resourced cultural studies radicalism of the nineties, is committed, systematic theoretical and moral resistance to the dominant cultures of capital. The forms of this resistance were radically distinct and unequal, as I have emphasized here: there is no value in recirculating 'the myth of Raymond Hoggart'.⁴³ But the shared motivation of Hoggart and Williams was that the principles and forms of a cultural commonwealth would have to be thought out and imposed *against* the spontaneous logic of the capitalist market as a whole system; the quite discrepant kinds of cultural politics they envisaged converged at least in their shared reach for strategic clarification. Both were fully aware of the pseudo-democratic and populist modes of market address in contemporary conditions. What they could scarcely have foreseen is how these modes would come to be internalized and reiterated as emancipatory theory by a politico-intellectual formation that honoured them as inspirations. Hoggart thought to check the effects of the audio-visual phantasmagoria through countervailing practices of public education. Williams rejected the market but also the paternalism that thought to humanize its creatures, and argued instead for collective determination in cultural production, as part of a general socialist transformation. Where Hoggart's critical liberalism is repudiated and Williams's socialism is declined, few choices remain. The rising tendency in cultural studies gives itself to a certain *anarcho-reformism*, permanently giddy in the conviction that micro-subversion is everywhere, in a totality which, at the same time, it is theoretically *passé* to name, let alone seek to dismantle. It is of course true that overmastering historical forces have sapped confidence and imagination in every quarter of the Left; but this does not vindicate the spreading *amor fati* that rationalizes disappointment as enlightenment and reconstructs the problem as the solution. Set invocations of pervasive change and mock-heroic calls to renounce the past, whether uttered by modernizing Labour politicians or by new-wave intellectual formations that objectively converge with them, are the tropes of a self-punishing identification

with the aggressor; they merely confuse the necessary effort to think and act lucidly in the real, temporally complex conditions of capitalism today. In this situation, the politico-cultural ambitions of that old New Left are indeed anachronistic – no longer contemporary, in obvious ways, but in other ways, perhaps, on hold for a recoverable future.

Notes

1. See Paul Addison, *The Road to 1945*, Macmillan, London, 1975; Perry Anderson, 'The Figures of Descent', in his *English Questions*, Verso, London, 1992, pp. 121–92; Gregory Elliott, *Socialism and the English Genius*, Verso, London, 1993.
2. W.E. Morpurgo, *Allen Lane, King Penguin: A Biography*, Allen Lane, London, 1979.
3. Stephen Spender, 'Comment: On Literary Movements', *Encounter*, vol. 1, no. 2, 1953, pp. 66–8.
4. Malcolm Bradbury, 'The Rise of the Provincials', *Antioch Review*, vol. XVI, no. 4, 1956, pp. 469–77.
5. Piloted in essays for the *New English Weekly* in 1943 and then in public seminars, the book was published in 1948, the year in which Eliot won the Nobel Prize for Literature and was admitted to the Order of Merit.
6. Leavis's philippic against C.P. Snow's 1959 Rede Lecture *The Two Cultures* was one of the more lurid intellectual events of its time but hardly a significant one ('Two Cultures? The Significance of C.P. Snow', *Spectator*, 9 March 1962; C.P. Snow, *The Two Cultures and a Second Look*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1964, gives the original text, with a retrospect and details of the published reactions to the controversy).
7. Richard Hoggart, *An Imagined Life. Life and Times vol. III: 1959–91*, Chatto & Windus, London, 1991, p.10.
8. Idem, *A Sort of Clowning. Life and Times vol. II: 1940–1959*, Chatto & Windus, London, pp.141, 134–5.
9. Ibid., p.78. See also his 'One Man and his Dog'(rev. Mervyn Jones, *Michael Foot*), *The Observer*, 20 March 1994 – an elegiac reaffirmation of 'humane democratic socialism'.
10. *The Uses of Literacy* (1957), Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1958, p. 250.
11. Ibid., p. 344.
12. *An Imagined Life*, p. 5.
13. *Universities and Left Review*, vol. 1, nos. 1–7, Spring 1957 –Autumn 1959. The editors were Stuart Hall, Raphael Samuel, Gabriel Pearson and Charles Taylor.
14. *ULR*, vol. 1, no. 2, Summer 1957, p. 29.
15. 'Variant Readings', *ULR*, vol. 1, no. 2, p. 32.
16. 'Candy-flossing the Celtic Fringe', *ULR*, vol. 1, no. 2, p. 32.
17. 'Working Class Culture', *ULR*, vol. 1, no. 2, pp. 32, 31; Williams and Hoggart (in conversation), 'Working-class Attitudes', *New Left Review* 1, January–February 1960, pp. 26–30.
18. Raymond Williams, *Politics and Letters: Interviews with New Left Review*, NLB, London, 1979, pp. 61–77; idem, 'Notes on Marxism in Britain since 1945', in *Problems in Materialism and Culture*, Verso, London, 1980, pp. 240–41.
19. Anthony Barnett, 'Raymond Williams and Marxism: A Rejoinder to Terry Eagleton', *New Left Review* 99, September–October 1976, pp. 47–64.
20. *Politics and Letters: Interviews*, p. 97.

21. Beginning from work in adult education classes in 1949, *Culture and Society* was written between 1952 and 1956.
22. *Culture and Society 1780–1950* (1958), Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1961, p. 17.
23. *Culture and Society*, p. 285.
24. See Graham Martin, 'A Culture in Common', *ULR*, vol. 1, no. 5, Autumn 1958, pp. 70–79 – the moment, if there was one, when *Culture and Society* was canonized as a founding text for a New Left. The symbolic counterpoint was Terry Eagleton, *Criticism and Ideology*, NLB, London, 1976, ch. 1.
25. *Politics and Letters: Interviews*, p. 112. This was Edward Thompson's reading.
26. 'Comment', *Politics and Letters*, vol. I, no. 1, Summer 1947, pp. 32–9.
27. *Culture and Society*, pp. 258–75.
28. 'Editorial Note', *Arena*, vol. I, no. 4.
29. *Politics and Letters: Interviews*, p. 98. Graham Pechey ('Scrutiny, English Marxism, and the Work of Raymond Williams', *Literature and History*, vol. 11, no. 1, Spring 1985, pp. 65–76) has emphasized the radically disruptive strategy of the book.
30. *Culture and Society*, p. 312.
31. *Ibid.*, p. 313.
32. *Ibid.*, pp. 11–12.
33. *Ibid.*, p. 12.
34. *Resources of Hope: Culture, Democracy, Socialism*, edited by Robin Gable, Verso, London, 1989, p. 3.
35. *Ibid.*, p. 16.
36. 'Communications and Community' (1961), *ibid.*, pp. 23–31.
37. *Politics and Letters: Interviews*, p. 371.
38. Three examples, each involving a senior member of the liberal-labour intelligentsia, from late 1994. The first was the late Dennis Potter's widely discussed attack on the new regime at the BBC (*Occupying Powers*, The James MacTaggart Memorial Lecture, Edinburgh International Television Festival, 1993; broadcast on Channel 4, 23 August 1994) – a discourse in which all the themes, and more than one of the contending lines, of the later fifties were swept together in a surge of invective. There followed Melvin Bragg's defence of British television as 'a kind of national health service of the mind', whose 'general democratic availability' was now under threat from satellite and cable systems (*Independent*, 7 September 1994). A month later, John Mortimer expressed his sense of grief at 'the death of liberal England' and its traditions of public service – in his view, the work of the Conservative governments of the eighties (Laurence Marks, 'The Lost Professional', *Independent on Sunday*, 9 October 1994, p. 19).
39. See Carolyn Steedman, *Landscape for a Good Woman*, Virago, London, 1986, pp. 3–25; and Elizabeth Wilson, *Only Halfway to Paradise: Women in Postwar Britain 1945–1964*, Tavistock, London, 1980.
40. For a variety of feminist responses to Williams, see Jane Miller, *Seduction: Studies in Reading and Culture*, Virago, London, 1990, ch. 2, 'The One Great Silent Area'; Jenny Bourne Taylor, 'Raymond Williams: Gender and Generation', in Terry Lovell, ed., *British Feminist Thought: A Reader*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1990, pp. 296–308; Carol Watts, 'Reclaiming the Border Country: Feminism and the Work of Raymond Williams', *News From Nowhere* 6, 1989, pp. 89–108; Lisa Jardine and Julia Swindells, 'Homage to Orwell: The Dream of a Common Culture and Other Minefields', in Terry Eagleton, ed., *Raymond Williams: Critical Perspectives*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 1989, pp. 108–29.
41. *ULR* was very quick to respond to the rise of violent racism in the late fifties.
42. Williams attempted to deal with these issues, particularly the latter ones, in subsequent work, with results that have provoked as many as they have impressed. See my 'Towards 2000, or News From You Know Where', *New Left Review* 148, November–December 1984; Paul Gilroy, *'There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack': The Cultural Politics of Race and Nation* (1987), Routledge, London, 1992; Gauri Viswanathan, 'Raymond Williams and British Colonialism: The Limits of Metropolitan Cultural Theory', in Dennis L. Dworkin and Leslie G. Roman, eds., *Views Beyond the Border: Raymond Williams and Cultural Politics*, Routledge, London, 1993, pp. 217–30. See also Williams's sharply critical 'The Reasonable Englishman' (rev. Richard Hoggart, *An English Temper*, *Guardian*, 8 April 1982, p. 16).
43. See Paul Jones, 'The Myth of "Raymond Hoggart": On "Founding Fathers" and Cultural Policy', *Cultural Studies* 8, 1994, pp. 394–416, a valuable essay which, like this one, stresses the distance between Hoggart and Williams, and illuminates the role of tendentious misremembering in the recent 'policy' controversy in Australian cultural studies. (See Tony Bennett, 'Useful Culture', *Cultural Studies* 6, 1992, pp. 395–408, which devises a Foucauldian-reformist argument for the metamorphosis of the cultural 'critic' into the cultural policy 'technician'.)



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