The Importance of Raymond Williams

THIS ARTICLE selects Williams’ theoretical preceptions from The Long Revolution and his main theme of culture and social criticism from Culture and Society. It is not implied that these aspects are Williams’ only or most important views; but that in the following ways they are of importance. Williams develops a method of treating social man that does not run the risks involved in quantification when quantification becomes an end in itself. He stresses the importance of communications, in particular, along with politics, and economics. He considers the relation between “high” culture and social criticism in the works of a wide range of writers from 1780 to 1950. His analysis of the role of the artist in the Romantic period is viewed as an example of his interdisciplinary interests which challenge the highly specialized and educationally crippling nature of most of Australian academic life, particularly its English Departments. Williams’ own interests extend far beyond English Departments but are, nevertheless, based in them.

Raymond Williams said in the Introduction to The Long Revolution (1961) that his study went beyond academic prudence because there was, at that time, no academic subject in Britain...
where he could follow through the questions that interested him. It is not surprising, then, that in his work the reader finds an acute awareness of changes in society over time and a developed consciousness of the different kinds of society in existence at any one time. These views are based on a wide reading in Philosophy, Literature, Literary Criticism and especially in the twentieth century sciences of Psychology, Anthropology and Sociology. If Williams has a primary aim it is to understand in what way the development of these new areas of study can assist any attempt to discover the meaning of "culture" in British society since the start of the ongoing Industrial, Democratic and Educative revolutions.

Before trying to understand what "culture" means to Williams, it should prove profitable to look at what he includes in his first chapter of *The Long Revolution*. Firstly, he surveys different theories about art and reality in Western philosophy and literary criticism held over the last two thousand years. Secondly, he introduces the biological fact that the brain of each one of us literally creates its own world. Thirdly, in terms of the area he has been surveying, Williams translates this biological evidence into the following comparison of world views or ways of being in the world:

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Fourthly, it follows, in Williams' view, from this sort of comparison, that unless the reader or viewer shares with the artist many of the complex details of a learned communications system, he cannot, in fact, see the artist's work. It follows, then, that there is a necessary social basis for any art because without communication there is no art. (As a parenthesis Williams mentions that aesthetic theory excludes communication as a social fact.) Fifthly, while it is true that all art is a process of communication according to Williams, he remains aware, nevertheless, that the function of art is often different: in some societies its function is to embody common shared meaning; in others, in rapidly changing societies, art's aim is to explore the frontiers of knowledge. What Williams has done in his first chapter, then, is provide a preview of his interdisciplinary methodology: his capacity to apply the implications of one area of knowledge to others.
He addresses this methodology to “culture” which can be any of the following: an ideal, a state of human perfection; a documentary body of intellectual and imaginative work; or the description of a particular way of life — an anthropological use of the term. This latter must include family structure and communication forms as well as political, economic and other social aspects. (Williams was to stress communications as a part of society rather than as a “reflection” of society even more strongly in the first pages of Communications.) With careful application these three usages of “culture” are valuable, particularly in relation to each other. It is important, however, not to scale off art against a particular society for the whole reality of that society cannot be understood until the art — a part of it — is also understood. It is an inadequate educational procedure to focus on a particular discipline and then claim to be filling in the “background”. It is clear, then, that Williams regards the study of the relationships among elements in the whole as the most comprehensive study of “culture”.

It is here that he uses anthropologist Ruth Benedict’s book Patterns of Culture. For her a “pattern of culture” is a selection and configuration of interests and activities and a particular valuation of them that produces a distinct social organization, a “way of life”. Williams sees this notion as means to arrive at “... the actual experience through which these (pattern and characteristics) were lived”. He calls this “structure of feeling”. It is structure because institutions give it structure; it is feeling because it is not a perception of how the society operates but a perception of what it feels like to be in that society and for the structures of that society to be in each person. Moreover, Williams says that we are most aware of this in the arts of the period.

As an example of “structure of feeling” Williams claims, after analysing both “high” and “popular” literature of the 1840s in Britain, that the following characteristics emerge: value placed on hard work; success based on individual effort; class stratification based on status rather than on birth; poor people seen as victims of their own failings with the accompanying notion that the best will struggle and achieve socio-economic upward mobility; suffering as noble because it teaches humility, courage and dedication to duty; the family revered as the central institution of society; adultery and fornication as unpardonable sins, etc. Unlike Levi-Strauss (Totemism), Karl Mannheim (Essays on the Sociology of Knowledge) or R. D. Laing (The Divided Self), Williams does not want the reader to feel these as the people of the period did; rather
he wants to reader to understand their feelings. Williams claims that while there were other works embodying other “structures of feeling”, this structure was the predominant one, that of the prominent productive group — the morality of the industrial and commercial middle class. Williams’ position is not one of predictive sociological determinism: expecting to discover a certain “structure of feeling” because the social structure or economic conditions determine it. Williams reads the “high” and “popular” literature and finds it there.

Williams extends his inquiry to the following:

We are seeking to define and consider one central principle: that of the essential relation, the true interaction, between patterns learned and created in the mind and patterns communicated and made active in relationships, conventions and institutions. (The Long Revolution, p. 89).

Undoubtedly influenced by Ruth Benedict, Williams finds “individual and society” a sterile way of coping with the above problem for Benedict writes:

One of the most misleading misconceptions due to this nineteenth century dualism was the idea that what was subtracted from society was added to the individual and what was subtracted from the individual was added to society. Philosophies of freedom, political creeds of laissez-faire, revolutions that have unseated dynasties, have built on this dualism. (Patterns of Culture, p. 181).

She further claims that modern Western society tends to identify society with restrictions that law imposes on us.

Williams analyses the term “individual” in historical contexts. In the Medieval period it meant “inseparable”; contemporary Western usage looks on “individual” as a kind of absolute without immediate reference to the group or groups of which one is a member. The change in meaning of the word occurred in the late sixteenth century or early seventeenth. Whereas Medieval “individual” destiny was connected with the total order of all aspects of life, Protestant “individualism” related only to God. As Erich Fromm points out, in Medieval society a person was identical with his role in the society; he was not an individual first who also happened to have a certain occupation. The growth of Capitalism encouraged men to see the individual as a source of economic activity. Williams claims that “the major tradition” of English social thinkers from Hobbes to the Utilitarians saw man as a bare human being whereas Hegel and Rousseau had seen the value of communities and forms of association mediating between the individual and society.* It was true that Locke saw the

* Adam Ferguson, Adam Smith’s sociological writing, John Millar and Robert Owen are not in “the major tradition”: they are not mentioned at all.
rational and co-operative elements of men as natural but he also postulated separate individuals who created the overall contract for mutual protection. The Liberal tradition argues for minimum government to protect the rights of the individual. And Freud too, while introducing the mediation of the family,** assumed a conflict between individual and society. Recognition of groups within a society, then, was a major criticism of Existentialism’s identification of the social self as the inauthentic self and the philosophy’s neglect for social man.

It was necessary historically, therefore, according to Williams, in order to eliminate human identification with functions of institutions, to postulate the bare human being. People found and find meaning in themselves because they are a manageable area when compared with say, political and economic institutions. In turning away from society, however, they turned and turn away from other people so that each is just a mass in the other’s eyes. Williams understands the process that he considers to be a deluded way of viewing the world. He seeks, however, to change this delusion. He proposes the terms “organism” and “organization”, the former being the person and the latter being the social structure that becomes internalized. Each organism is an embodiment of relationships, the lived and living history of responses to and from other organizations. The concept “organism” and “organization” advances on both Benedict and Fromm in the sense that Williams argues that, despite a common “culture pattern” or “social character”, each person’s social history, his actual network of relationships is unique. This is caused by influence from varying systems or groups within a society. Thus Williams maintains that the new terms are not a new way of stating the old notion of individual and society but a way of describing a continuous process within which both are contained. And if the above is true, then participatory democracy is the best form of government.

By Chapter Four of Part One of The Long Revolution it is clear that Williams conceives of himself as a Socialist for his definition of society is related to a series of points about what he thinks is wrong with British Socialism. He defines society as “... a human organization for common needs. . .” The main fault of Socialism has been to propose a political and economic order rather than a human order. Another fault (mentioned briefly out of a Socialist context) is stress on these political and economic aspects of society to the exclusion of family and communications

** Williams is apparently unaware of Adam Ferguson’s stress on the family.

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areas of societal interaction. In Williams' ideal society there would be that strong sense of community that was lacking in British thought from the late sixteenth century to Freud. Life and work should be integrated and the main claim to relevance of art should be a concern for our general humanity or to nothing. Williams combines the full impact of the meaning of his methodology and of his Socialism in the passage:

The long revolution, which is now at the centre of our history, is not for democracy as a political system alone, nor for the equitable distribution of more products, nor for general access to the means of communication. Such changes, difficult enough in themselves, derive meaning and direction, finally, from new conceptions of man and society which many have worked to describe and interpret. (p. 141).

Malcolm Bradbury finds a conflict between the kind of argument outlined above which he regards as passive, predictive sociological determinism and the argument in Culture and Society (1958) which emphasizes the value of culture as an active force in society, standing against the narrowness of materialism and the injustices and poverty of vision of Industrial Capitalism. Several replies may be made to Bradbury's claim. Firstly, there is nothing in The Long Revolution that smacks of crude predictive determinism, as should be already clear. Secondly, the study of art in the way outlined by Williams is far from a "passive" activity, even if the art were viewed as "passive" under the weight of determinism. Thirdly, Williams' analysis of the culture versus society conflict where it occurred in British literature and thought in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries fits his second category of "culture". In the light of The Long Revolution it is clear that this kind of "culture" can be studied by explication mainly and that degree of sociological study that Williams finds valuable for purposes of illumination, this latter method occurring particularly in Chapter Two. It would be quite possible to study the intellectual history in Culture and Society sociologically, or at least more sociologically than Williams does, to see how far the writers he chose are representative of society generally. Williams' very point, however, is that they are unrepresentative and that is what makes them valuable because so much about their society can be gleaned from their social criticism.

Williams says that with the Industrial Revolution the meanings of five important words changed: industry no longer just meant a human attribute associated with hard work but a collective word for manufacturing and productive institutions; democracy ceased to be just a literary term and with the French Revolution became a part of political terminology in practice; class ceased to be a division or group in schools and colleges and referred to broad social
divisions; art ceased to mean skill and became the imaginative and creative arts; culture changed in the following way:

Before this period, it had meant, primarily the “tending of natural growth,” and then, by analogy, a process of human training. But this latter use, which had usually been a culture of something, was changed, in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century, to culture as such, a thing in itself. It came to mean, first, “a general state or habit of the mind,” having close relations with the idea of human perfection. Second, it came to mean “the general state of intellectual development, in a society as a whole.” Third, it came to mean “the general body of the arts.” Fourth, later in the century, it came to mean “a whole way of life, material, intellectual, and spiritual.” (Culture and Society, pp. 13-18).

Williams’ aim is to show the emergence of “culture” as an abstraction and an absolute. Firstly, there was the recognition of the practical separation of certain moral and intellectual activities from the driven impetus of the new kind of society; secondly, emphasis on the activities, as a court of human appeal, to be set over the process of practical social judgment and yet to offer itself as a mitigating and rallying alternative. Williams goes on to say that the idea of “culture” would be simpler if it were a response to industrialism alone but it is also a response to democracy.

The contents of Culture and Society reveal the wide range of political philosophers, journalists, poets, philosophers, men of letters, novelists, politicians, theologians, art historians, literary critics, essayists and historians whom Williams explicates. And there is implicit, and sometimes explicit, evaluation in his explanations. Although the writers vary and would often disagree with each other, certain similar trends emerge; they all criticize their society and all regard art or “culture” as a repository of humane values. They condemn industrialization, Capitalism, urbanization, laissez-faire economics, materialism, ugliness, pollution and division of labor. They advocate many solutions such as Hero-worship, God, the State, nature, handicrafts, Medievalism, Socialism, Communism, urban planning, beauty, Fascist authoritarianism, sex, doing nothing, English Departments but above all, they advocate art — the writing, the reading, the reverencing and the study of art. For art is seen as the opposite of all those complex and often interlocking features that characterized and characterize in large part a society they hated or hate.

Because it traces a particular tradition the book is repetitive but, since it refers to 170 years, this repetition serves only to demonstrate its significance. Some reservations, however, must be entertained in the name of perspective. Culture and Society has at least the following faults. It uses extremely small aspects of the total output of a particular writer often without mentioning
his other concerns in such a way that a reader coming to the
writer only in terms of Williams’ view of him may take a part
of his output as his major concern. This applies particularly to
J. S. Mill. So long as it is realized that that Williams is selecting
only the writer’s view on “culture” and society, this delimited
area of selection is not a problem. Williams’ selectivity becomes
dishonest, however, when he ignores those passages of Carlyle where
the latter condemns art and “culture” as a waste of time.* Williams
selects only those passages where Carlyle considers “culture” as
the repository of human values. Finally, Williams virtually omits
Oscar Wilde who both wrote and enacted the most extreme
dichotomy between “culture” and society, between art and life,
of any writer in Britain in the nineteenth century. Williams failed
to see, then, that the sociological basis of the art for art’s sake
theory was a violent, if hilarious, attack on British society.

If what has been noted above shows Williams as intellectual
historian, Chapter Two, “The Romantic Artist”, reveals penetrating
insights into one aspect of Romanticism — that part of it that was
a reaction against late eighteenth and early nineteenth century
British society. This reveals a sociological, inter-disciplinary
methodology; it demonstrates the theory of The Long Revolution.

The milieu of the Romantic artist contained several important
changes. Firstly, while the rise of the middle class brought a
bigger reading public, this mass audience was a “market” for the
writer, his relationship with it being impersonal compared with
individual patronage that had existed previously. (Williams does
not claim that the artist’s relationship with his audience is worse;
only that, in important ways, it is different.) Several of the
Romantics spoke disparagingly of their “Public”. Secondly, there
was a new notion in the air that art was the production of a
specialist which followed the institution of commercial publishing.
Art became a commodity like bottles, produced by the artist who
might be viewed, or view himself like a bottle manufacturer. (This
view differs not at all from Marcuse’s in One Dimensional Man.)
Thirdly, at the same time as these changes there developed also a
system of thinking about the arts of which the most important
elements were emphasis on the special nature of the art-activity
as a means to “imaginative” truth and a stress on the artist as a
special and superior sensibility. Williams said that it was tempting
to view these latter two points as direct response to the actual
change in relations between artist and society. This would be to

* Carlyle, Thomas Latter-Day Pamphlets, London, Chapman and Hall, 1905,
pp. 143, 272-3; and Critical and Miscellaneous Essays, London, Chapman and
simplify, however, for these latter two developments were part of the embodiment in art of humane values which the changes of society to Industrial Capitalism and towards democracy were felt to threaten or to destroy. The consequences of this for the English Romantics were that art became a symbolic abstraction because a general social activity was forced into the status of a department or aspect and the works of art were nothing but self-pleading, self-pitying ideology:

The last pages of Shelley's *Defence of Poetry* are painful to read. The bearers of a high imaginative skill became suddenly the "legislators", at the very moment when they were being forced into practical exile... (Culture and Society, p. 63).

Williams' achievements in the books and chapters stressed in this article are as follows. He has developed a sophisticated way of coping with dehumanized quantification in the social sciences with his notion "structure of feeling". He has explained the socio-historic genesis of the false dichotomy "individual versus society", thus facilitating an alternative way of viewing men in society — his organism and organization. He has highlighted the lack of attention given to the communications area of social existence, assisting the development of the study of mass media and "popular" culture. Conversely, he has charted the "high" culture versus society argument from late eighteenth century to mid-twentieth century Britain. He looked at and analysed the way in which the role of the artist in the Romantic period could be profitably viewed as interacting with broad social changes. All these notions he views as important for universities, general education and Socialism. He is a living challenge to timid academics caught in their specialities, terrified to respond to questions about the meaning of comprehensive education. And he has proved that inter-disciplinary methodology need not be superficial. There are writers in several fields of the Social Sciences and Humanities who have moved to interdisciplinary perspectives from different starting points. Williams has done this better than anyone else in Britain who has started with the basis of Literary Criticism.