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## Raymond Williams, Communities and Universities

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Raymond Williams writes in the 'community' entry in *Keywords* that 'unlike all other terms of social organisation — state, nation, society, etc. — *it seems never to be used unfavourably*'. This, of course, was before the days of US communitarianism, which seems to mean, among some other finer things, that if you smoke on the street or commit adultery down in South Carolina your neighbours come round in a gang and beat you up. But one sees what Williams means: 'community' is one of those buzz-words, like 'dynamic' or 'open-minded' or 'empowering', which everyone perfunctorily tips their hat to and wouldn't think of challenging (put up your hands all those who see themselves as static, narrow-minded and disempowering). And of course any political term which is automatically acceptable to everyone is, by that same token, pretty useless, it doesn't earn its keep — witness Blair's mindlessly bland rewriting of Clause 4. The problem is that hardly anyone to the left of Ghengis Khan or Alan Clark would think of disagreeing with it, which means it's bought on the cheap. Try the negation test: 'We believe in a society committed to injustice, unfreedom and inequality, where human rights are far from guaranteed, human divisions assiduously fostered and a state of permanent warfare ensured for everyone.' Words which can mean everything or anything mean little or nothing; if everything is 'political' or 'ideological' then the terms are stretched to the point of uselessness (meaning being a differential force), and 'community', Williams suggests, is one of these, in an interesting qualification of one of his central terms.

But actually 'community', as a word, is *not* so much in favour these days, quite apart from right-wing communitarians; it has an ineluctably quaint, archaic, homespun ring to it, suggestive of Morris dancing and village fêtes, a word nobody dares quite sneer at but fewer people take seriously as a political term. Indeed, it almost suggests the *reverse* of the political: the intimate face-to-face group as opposed to anonymous bureaucracy, the affective as against the instrumental, *Gemeinschaft* rather than *Gesellschaft*, the organic as against the institutional. It has a resonance of *piety* about it, not to speak of outright nostalgia, an embarrassing word like 'love' or 'beauty', which it's hard to pronounce in the same breath as 'constitutional nationalism', 'socio-economic structures' or 'semantic materialism'.

Williams, however, was given to embarrassing in this way, in a mutedly provocative spirit, developing a discourse of society in which the affective and the institutional forged strange alliances, and this long before the slogan 'the personal is political' became fashionable. Think of his key concept 'structure of feeling', which is a kind of oxymoron deliberately holding in tension the necessary impersonality and objectivity of 'structure' with the more elusive,

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impalpable stress of 'feeling'. Or think of the way his writing continually transgresses the border ('Borders are meant for crossing', he once wrote) between criticism and sociology, the novel and autobiography; and that strange ponderous poetry, conjuring texture and density from abstraction and littered with far too many commas, which is his idiosyncratic prose style, with the sense of a speaking voice, but one formal and somewhat Olympian rather than buttonholingly colloquial. And indeed he spoke much as he wrote, weighing his phrases rhetorically rather than slinging them, like the rest of us, provisionally together. Williams's style is engaged in some project of transforming the received relations between thought and feeling, mind and body, abstraction and concretion, a kind of political enterprise all in itself. He didn't think like conventional critics and he didn't write like them (as Leavis didn't either). And the term 'community', which can suggest at once the face-to-face, but also a wider, even global grouping (e.g. 'the international community') is then one nexus in his work of this constant transgression of the frontier between the subjective and the structural, for which another name is of course 'Literature'. For what is literature but the publicly objectivated expression of the subjective? Williams knew that the personal was always a social definition; that being a person is something you have to become — as opposed to being a human being, which is a matter of having a certain sort of material body — and that if one of those faces round the cradle doesn't actually speak to the baby then it will never learn to become a person at all. He knew that subjectivity is always intersubjectivity, or as they might say these days 'the human subject is that which receives itself back from the place of the Other', which sounds a little more imposing.

But 'community' isn't just a hurrah word, since clearly it can be a negative term, as Williams (despite what some of his critics asserted) was himself well aware. For one thing, it hovers indecisively between fact and value, description and prescription — I mean it can just neutrally describe a certain social segment, as with the American term 'neighbourhood', or as in the 'arms community' (which isn't particularly intimate, affectionate and face-to-face unless you happen to be enamoured of Mark Thatcher); or it can swerve into being a value-term, meaning not just an assemblage of related individuals, but ones related in a particular and positive way, namely through reciprocity and solidarity, 'active mutual responsibility', to steal a phrase from the conclusion of *Culture and Society*. This hesitating between fact and value is one thing the term shares in common with the early Karl Marx's 'species being', his materialist equivalent of human nature, another nexus of fact/value, which seem at once to describe the kind of animals we are anyway — cooperative, social, linguistic, labouring, etc. — but also the sort of creatures we should *aspire* to be. Marx puzzlingly, excitingly seems to think that we can get to the value terms of socialism and communism by starting with what we anyway

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factually and materially are, which would certainly violate the distinction of fact and value beloved of post-Humean philosophy. And of course the word 'human' faces both ways in this way too, dispassionately descriptive ('it's human to go to sleep occasionally'), but also normative or evaluative, as in the word 'inhuman'; and indeed evaluative in positive and negative ways, since 'human' can suggest moral weakness ('all too human') as well as compassionate fellow-feeling.

Anyway, one has to be wary of some conceptual sleight-of-hand here, since it's clear that the fact that we are social beings, in the sense of not being able to survive outside society, doesn't entail that we're social beings in the sense of dedicating our energies and passions to one another, seeing our deepest self-fulfilment as lying in the service of others, which is certainly the ethics Williams both espoused and lived. It isn't clear by what slide we can get from one to the other, since someone can of course always concede that we're social beings in the sense of needing each other to survive, without acknowledging that we're social beings in the sense that we are or should be the medium of one another's free self-development, as the *Communist Manifesto* has it. What differentiates a communist ethics from a liberal one is that the communist or socialist believes that if we should all develop our individual energies and capacities, which I think is the moral absolute of Karl Marx, then in a situation where everyone is doing so, this can only be done in and through each other. But one can't just read this off from a factual or anthropological account of the kind of beings we are.

Another term which veers between fact and value in this way is Williams's key word 'culture', which is at once descriptive and evaluative, which denotes on the one hand that without which we literally couldn't survive — human nature is born with a great hole in it where culture has to be or we'll quickly die; we are all born 'prematurely', hence we need culture, unlike badgers — but also that which makes life worth living, that which surpasses what we need for sheer survival. Thus the playwright Edward Bond can actually deny that what we have at the moment *is* a culture because it doesn't, he thinks, welcome the newcomer and give him or her what they need to thrive. 'Culture' swings between a narrow, evaluative aesthetic meaning and a broader descriptive anthropological, and much of the force of Williams's work was devoted towards exploring the relations between them.

'Community' isn't, of course, incompatible with hierarchy. The great conservative communitarian lineage of thought from Coleridge to Heidegger, Yeats and Eliot, envisages an organic community which is nonetheless internally stratified and differentiated. Community and equality don't, in other words, go spontaneously together: you can have a society of equals whose relations are non-reciprocal, or you can have a mutuality of beings which is

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graded and ranked. Here lies a vital distinction between Williams's own idea of what he calls early on a 'common culture' and that of, say, T.S.Eliot — for Eliot, like many a radical conservative, believes in a common culture too, as against some liberal atomistic individualism, but one in which what Williams liked to call 'meanings and values' will be defined by an elite and then transmitted downwards (a Fabian model too), so that everyone shares the same culture but at different levels of creation and consciousness. Williams, by contrast, means by a 'common culture' not just one commonly *shared* but one commonly *made*, and this then involves for him democratic socialist institutions of full active participation. Moreover, if everyone is in on the act, if everyone takes part in the conversation, then the culture which results from this is likely to be a great deal more varied and uneven than one forged by an elite and passed downwards, as Williams makes explicit in *Culture and Society*: 'A good community, a living culture, will not only make room for, but actively encourage, all and any who can contribute to the advance in consciousness which is the common need ... Only in the acknowledgment of human individuality and variation can the reality of common government be comprised.' This isn't just a moral imperative, some kind of ethical urging of pluralism, but rather follows *logically* from Williams's redefinition of a common culture in terms of active communal fashioning rather than just common sharing. Any such culture will be vastly more complex, involving a constant negotiation between different interests, than one dominated by a particular predefined set of social values.

Interestingly, then, what for so much postmodern thought is a rigid binary opposition — community, consensus or solidarity on the one hand, heterogeneity, multiplicity, plurality on the other — for Williams went together from the outset; it's an antithesis his work deconstructs. He was always politically partisan and always a pluralist, and the two emphases evolve side-by-side in his work, so that by the time of the *Politics and Letters* interviews he's actively rejecting any *homogeneous* notion of community and stressing instead the inevitable complexity and specialisation of a socialist society. Williams has been rightly criticised for sometimes overlooking ethnic diversity, oddly for a Celt, and indeed he argues unguardedly in *Culture and Society* that 'the area of a culture is usually proportionate to the area of a language', which isn't far from saying that aliens begin at Calais. But even as early as this book he is insisting, as I say, on complexity and specialisation — what has to be secured are the means of community, the appropriate institutions, the material and social conditions of it, but then what individuals and groups will live out within that commonality can't, for him, be predrafted. 'A culture in common in our own day', he writes there, 'will not be the simple all in all society of old dream. It will be a very complex organisation, requiring continual adjustment and redrawing'. So much, then, for the celebrated backward-looking organicist nostalgia of a critic one of whose major works was actually entitled *Towards*

2000.

The postmodern claim that community is inevitably overhomogenising won't, I think, stick with Williams, and neither will the accusation, made by some liberal commentators, that he overlooks the negative aspects of community as a mere defensive solidarity or hanging together. He doesn't at all, not even as early as *Culture and Society*, where he writes of the 'conversion of the defensive elements of solidarity into the wider and more positive practice of neighbourhood'. The idea of community has certainly belonged, among other places, to a radical conservative lineage which aestheticises social life and wants to imbue it with the unity of a work of art — fascism is one of its historical terminuses, where society is seen as an *organic artefact*. But there's a radical as well as a reactionary kind of aestheticising, and as far as the idea of community goes this can be seen in the fact that community, like the work of art in a certain definition of it, is radically an end in itself. There can be no *instrumental* or utilitarian answer to the question, 'Why enter into mutual relations of responsibility with one another?' It is just, as Karl Marx would say, part of our 'species being' to do so, and no more rationally answerable than why we should sing or smile, or why a watch should tell the time: that's its nature and function. The function of human beings, as the radical romantics realised, is to be functionless, to realise their powers and capacities as ends in themselves and to resist a remorseless instrumentalisation of them. It is not to have to justify their activity at the tribunal of utility, or to have to appeal to some metaphysical or transcendental ground to explain that perpetual process of self-fashioning and self-transformation we know as history. And if the work of art is important it's because it provides us with a kind of utopian paradigm or ghostly glimmer of what this way of life might just look like, which is to say that aestheticism in its richest meaning is politically radical (witness Oscar Wilde), and not just some sterile cult of 'art for art's sake'. Williams would, I think, have thoroughly endorsed this, though he had a typical leftist suspicion of the term 'aesthetic', in my view quite misplacedly.

What, then, of the place of the university in all this? I think one of the great differences between Raymond Williams and F.R. Leavis, who otherwise manifest some interesting similarities, is that whereas Leavis was passionately concerned with the university, which in his work assumes the status of some kind of Platonic entity, Williams on the whole was not. He was of course passionately interested in *education*, but his educational ideas were shaped in the so-called 'extra-mural' world (he was, in a sense, extra-mural all his life) and he kept a wary distance from the university proper (though in one of his more cynical moments he once said to me that the difference between adult education and university was that in the first one taught doctor's daughters and

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in the other doctor's sons). I think that the formative moment in Williams's ideas of education came decisively in the immediate post-war period, with what he saw as the catastrophic failure of the Attlee government to seize the opportunity to create what he calls in *Politics and Letters* 'new popular institutions of culture and education'. This, for him, was one of the Labour government's most central betrayals; that such an opportunity existed was real to him, but was cynically passed up. Instead, the image of the educational ladder was preserved — a ladder, he reminds us, can only hold one at a time — even if more people, and from different backgrounds, were allowed to pass up it to become card-carrying members of the middle class.

Williams wasn't himself terribly interested in contributing to this process, once the moment of potential transformation had passed, and never, I think, saw teaching in the academic sense as his primary activity. In fact, he didn't consider himself a particularly good tutor, which he wasn't, although he was a superb lecturer. He always operated better with 30 people than with 3, and better still with 300. What he deeply resisted was the Leavisian *displacement* of a desirable society into the university; I mean the way in which Leavis rightly saw that a public sphere of common discourse was vanishing from society, but thought poignantly and fantastically that this could be recreated by the universities, and especially, of all things, by their English departments. These would now have increasingly to play the role of the civilised, intersubjective, discursive, critical consensus which was less and less available in political society as a whole. Williams himself never subscribed to this academicist idealism — for him the structural separation and idealisation of the university was part of the problem, rather than part of the solution, and he never thought, as did the Scrutineers, that you could somehow relaunch a political or critical public sphere from inside one of the very institutions whose sequestration from society as a whole was precisely a result of the disintegration of that sphere. Criticism in the Victorian period could still fulfil certain more general cultural, pedagogical, popularising, broadly political functions — think of Arnold, whom the left love to hate — but from then on, with the increasing professionalisation and specialisation of academic life, it was driven back into the very institutions — universities — which Leavis wanly hoped might become the power-bases for a new kind of cultural critique. Ironically enough, in the late sixties the universities *did* become, ephemerally, the arena or seed-bed of more general social conflict, but this is surely unusual and untypical — revolutions don't characteristically start in universities, and even if they do can't be completed there.

There remains the question of what Williams's own community was. You could say, perhaps, the Black Mountains, but then to say this is instantly to talk about ambiguity and conflict rather than cosy homogeneity. Williams was born on a border between Wales and England, country and city, popular and

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educated, working-class and middle-class, manual and mental, and in some sense inhabited this border region all his life. He had to learn to keep his sanity and equipoise in the continual tension between these polarities, knowing as he did that the social reality lay in the *tension*, not either pole taken in isolation, that this was the formative and typical historical experience, not something which lay safely on one side of the border or the other. The border is anyway porous, permeable, since for him 'culture' was never just across it in Cambridge or London. It was already a way of describing the unusually close and supportive community he sprang from, a community which was however by no means, from what one hears of life in Pandy, a pacific place to live. One sense of culture — forms of life — lay on one side of the border, while another sense of it — educated consciousness — lay on the other, and Williams's attempt to interrelate these two meanings of culture is thus among other things a way of trying to make some narrative coherence out of his own life. Anyway, the point is that for him any rigorous inside/outside polarity was deconstructible, a point nowhere more graphically illustrated than in the fact that his father earned his living *within* the community from an industry (the railways) which took men and women outside it. This is surely the meaning of that moment in *Border Country* when Matthew Price, travelling on a train from his Welsh village into the wider culture of England, finds that it is his own father who gives the signal for the train to move onwards and outwards.

Williams moved onwards and outwards, but his ultimate destination was not Cambridge or London, but Europe — Welsh Europe — because from his perspective the nation-state of Great Britain was *both* too big *and* too small. In the present era, Williams saw the valorisation of community in a regional sense as the desire only for a defensive alternative to an 'internationalism' which means little more than the unfettered availability of world markets, labour and resources for transnational corporations (the 'global village' with carefully selected, Net-ready, credit-worthy, faxable citizens, the 'global marketplace' in which all are at stake), quite at odds with socialist internationalism. 'Community' thus becomes distorted into mere defensive tribalism or parochialism, and we end up with the worst of all possible worlds, a bad internationalism and a false, exclusive communitarianism. A 'Welsh Europe' suggests a different way of regarding and describing the 'cosmopolitan', a different order and structure of institutions (overtly political and cultural), as well as a plurality of identities and allegiances, nonetheless forming multiple overlapping *communities*. It was this which Williams, strongly opposed both to the parochial and the all-in-all, always argued for.

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