

REVIEW ESSAY

Review Essay: Nation and Nationalism in the Work of Raymond Williams

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Despite his death in 1988, Raymond Williams's influence continues to grow as scholars in a range of disciplines draw upon the vast body of work he produced. Among Williams's most well-known contributions are the theoretical and political writings that helped found the journal the *New Left Review*, begun in 1959-1960, as well as those writings that form a basis for what has become known as the discipline of Cultural Studies.¹ Of primary importance in his writings was the elucidation of the historical and material formations of the very concepts and categories that organize society, as well as how these concepts and categories are lived and changed. This was always done for the purpose of making clear the possible avenues of progressive social cooperation and social change. Williams sought to show how people make and build their culture and their world, and at the same time how class society and the institutions of capitalism work against the creation of a common and emancipated society. Importantly, Williams rejected rigid separations of the social world and instead took the "indissoluble whole" of society as both the basis of his empirical work and the appropriate target for change. Thus, the society he sought to create was a "common culture", which is composed of people participating in a full democracy of politics, the economy, the arts; indeed, a full range of life activities.²

- 1 For a biography of Williams, see Inglis (1995). The journal *Social Text* (1992, volume 30) devotes an issue to a discussion of Williams's work. Also, see Mitchell and Breitbach (forthcoming) on Williams's biography and contributions to geography.
- 2 On common culture, see Williams (1989 [1958, 1968]); on Williams's understanding of the indissoluble whole of society, see Williams 1977. Williams's stance on the indissolubility of the world was in part a political position against rigid separations of structuralist Marxism as well as against the very idealism that structural Marxism

Williams took the nation and nationalism as among the meaningful structures and relationships with discernable histories in the nonetheless indissoluble whole of the world. He sought to chart the way people have used concepts of nationalism in conjunction with various historical events, social forms, and political agendas.³ At the same time that Williams recognized the importance of linguistic categories that give record of and form to the ways people think about, and so help to mobilize, nationalism, he was also a staunch materialist who never separated the cultural forms he studied from their production in society. Williams's materialism gave his arguments about the significance of the nation and nationalism an acute geographic sensibility, in that he understood the processes of a people acting as a nation to be a physical sharing of the land as well as the creation of shared meanings. "A *nation*," Williams (1989 [1977]: 111) argued,

[O]nce was unproblematic, with its strong connections with the fact of birth, the fact that a nation was a group of people who shared a *native* land. This meaning was overridden but never destroyed, by the development of the *nation-state*, in which what really matters is not common birth or the sharing of native land, but a specific independent kind of political organization.

Thus Williams understood a nation – the physical terrain, the social processes at work, and the people who have the right to share in the creation of the common nation – as contested and as historically having changed.

Essential to Williams's thinking about the way nations, national culture and nationalist struggles change as part of broader social production and reproduction are the concepts of *dominant*, *residual* and *emergent*, which he used in order to talk about the interrelations of material and discursive forms as they change over time.⁴ The importance for Williams of these concepts is that they allowed a greater understanding of the simultaneity of various forms that, although they may have divergent histories, create the current relationships of power. A dominant national cultural form, such as the modern nation-state, is that which is hegemonic at a particular time. Though dominant now, this form does not stand alone but rather exists in relation to forms that have been dominant before (the residual), such as the "unproblematic" nation mentioned

opposed. Also, his insistence on indissolubility is in keeping with his commitment to understanding and working to change the totality of society that people face and must negotiate on a regular basis.

3 See especially *Keywords* (Williams, 1976) and *The Country and the City* (Williams, 1973).

4 These are best explained in *Marxism and Literature* (Williams, 1977).

above, and forms that arise anew and may subsequently challenge the dominant forms (the emergent). The multiplicity of society exists, then, not only in the complexity of *spheres* of the cultural, the political, etc., but also in a complexity of *history* that is not mutually exclusive in its linearity.

In keeping with the overall purpose of his work towards making clear potentially emancipatory forms of social change, Williams would argue that if a nation, as a geographic form of truly democratic shared community and common culture, is something to be fought for, it should be progressively and actively negotiated, rather than preserved or retreated back to. The common culture Williams sought is multiple, diverse and continually renegotiated. It is decidedly not singular and it is specifically based in the real actions and involvement of all people. This common culture, when fully expanded in its political, economic, and material dimensions, would allow for a “move from a *merely retrospective* nationalist politics to a *truly prospective* politics” (Williams, 1989 [1977]: 118). Some of Williams’s remarks about British nationalism further illustrate what he took to be among the central issues of nationalism.

In commenting in a 1984 interview with Philip Cooke on whether “national movements are essentially progressive forces”, Williams (1989 [1984]: 238) illustrated his understanding of “two kinds of nationalism” at work in the then-current British state, one “reactionary” and one “progressive”. The reactionary nationalism “reinforces the idea of the traditional nation-state”, while the progressive form “questions the whole basis of the unitary British state” by asking: “What are the genuine alternative units capable of developing a politics speaking to the interests of the people rather than the unjustified units of a presumed nation-state?” (Williams, 1989 [1984]: 238-239). What is progressive, Williams argued here, is to shape nationalist movements around where “there is already a measure of self-definition” of a group of people, such as those that already exist, he suggests, in cities or in “a national entity such as Wales or Scotland”. The point here is not that Wales, Scotland or London are functioning perfectly as nations, but rather that existing within these entities are bases of social forms that allow for some measure of the self-definition and democracy required for a group of people to act as a nation of common culture. Williams argued (1989 [1984]: 239) that “places like London are having their attempts to satisfy real popular needs stopped by the central machine. This of course reproduces the case that has been made in Wales and Scotland”. The work of those mobilizing for progressive nationalism, then, is to define and promote the existing social forms, be they residual, emergent or dominant, that meet the real needs of people. This work is based on a thoroughly materialist and complex understanding of the way the indissoluble whole of society (that

which all people deserve equal access to participate in within a common culture) functions.

In conclusion, Williams offered an understanding of nations and nationalism that refused to envision these as processes divorced from the material production and real social structures of peoples' lives. To understand these social forms, Williams turned to a cultural, historical, material investigation of their development.⁵ He insisted that progressive nationalism could be developed out of continual democratic negotiation, and so could be a part of an emancipatory common culture.

References

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5 Williams also explored the formations and problems of nationalism, especially as they are lived and experienced by average people, through his novels. These provide a rich resource for examining nationalism, beyond the scope of this paper.