FRANCIS MULHERN

CULTURE AND SOCIETY,

THEN AND NOW

ANY RETROSPECT OF Raymond Williams's *Culture and Society* should begin by acknowledging that the book comes to us through an already-long history of explicit retrospection.[1] It is a work much looked back upon. These acts of retrospection have occurred in every decade, and have differed in kind and relative salience, as of course in critical bearing. They form no consensus beyond the unchallenged assumption that the book was important and perhaps remains so. They do not substantiate a simple narrative of any kind, even if the inertial flow of textbook characterizations is noticeable—and probably inevitable, as derived acquaintance comes more and more to predominate over direct reading knowledge as the ground of Williams's currency and reputation.

The best-known retrospects are those of the nineteen-seventies: Terry Eagleton's, not only the best-known but also probably the most influential, and then the interviews that made up *Politics and Letters*.[2] With all qualifications made, it can be said that Eagleton and Williams's New Left Review interlocutors—I, at any rate—tended then to maximize the continuity between *Culture and Society* and the antecedent lineage of English cultural criticism and to minimize the continuity with a Marxism that Williams had first embraced, then seemingly abandoned, and was now rediscovering in new or unsuspected forms. The identifying term of this dialogic set was the phrase 'Left-Leavisism'.

The pattern of discussion in the nineteen-eighties was more complex. Williams's political engagements, in the domestic and international crises of the time, were now declaratively revolutionary, and Marxism

was the terrain on which he forwarded the theoretical programme he sometimes called cultural materialism. At the same time, his work was called into question on new grounds, as critical investigations of race and racism and the subordination of women claimed their places at the centre of cultural theory and politics.[3] Indeed, this might have been the decade that forgot *Culture and Society*, had it not been Williams's last: he died in 1988. Discourse on his work proliferated now, but in keeping with the protocols of the new situation. *Culture and Society* was widely recalled, of course: but this was retrospect as memorial.

Then, at the turn of the decade, came the final crisis of the Eastern bloc and, in much of the West, the refiguring or dissolution of the Communist parties. At home, this coincided with the ascent of social-liberalism in an exhausted Labour Party and a long season of perverse apologia for commodity culture. In this hopeless conjuncture, *Culture and Society* showed its most radical face (as in truth did the contemporaneous work with which it was often mistakenly twinned, Hoggart's *Uses of Literacy*).[4] The core thesis of Williams's conclusion—concerning the intrinsic historical creativity of socialized labour—had perhaps never seemed so coolly intransigent as it came to seem in the nineties. Here now, beyond memorial, from an earlier bad time, was 'a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger'.[5]

These evocations of the past forty-odd years are one way of saying, by illustration, that *Culture and Society* is a classic—classic in the sense

[1] This is the revised text of a lecture given to the Raymond Williams Society in London, November 2008, to mark the fiftieth anniversary of the publication of *Culture and Society*. A part of the argument was first aired in a lecture for the Cultural Theory Institute in the University of Manchester in 2005. References to *Culture and Society* are to the Pelican edition, London 1961; hereafter CS.

[2] Eagleton, *Criticism and Ideology*, London 1976, ch. 1; Williams, *Politics and Letters: Interviews with New Left Review*, London 1979.

[3] See, for example, Paul Gilroy, *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack: The Cultural Politics of Race and Nation* [1987], London 2002, pp. 50–51. Patrick Parrinder, '*Culture and Society* in the 1980s', in his *The Failure of Theory: Essays on Criticism and Contemporary Fiction*, Brighton 1987, p. 69, faulted Williams's 'common culture' as an idea foreclosed against 'the proliferation of cultures', characteristic of 'a multicultural society'. For critical reflections from feminist standpoints see Carolyn Steedman, *Landscape for a Good Woman: A Story of Two Lives*, London 1986; Jane Miller, *Seductions: Studies in Reading and Culture*, London 1990.

[4] Richard Hoggart, *Uses of Literacy*, London 1957.

[5] Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, London 1970, p. 257.

that Frank Kermode gives the term in his study of the category.[6] It is, notably, diversely readable. Or, to put the matter in another way, it is an elusive text, never quite where you suppose it to be, where, perhaps, you would prefer it to be, whether wishfully or in a spirit of resentment. And certainly the book has had a way of chastening confident hindsight with its own backward glance, as it goes on being read and re-read, and always slightly differently.

Beyond Romanticism

What kind of work is it? Williams's translators bring their own judge-ments. In some languages, such as Catalan and Spanish, the title retains its original form, 'culture and society'. In Italian, the histori-cal field and form of the book come to the fore: *Cultura e rivoluzione industriale: Inghilterra 1780–1950*. The German edition abandons the original title-form for something quite different: *Gesellschaftstheorie als Begriffsgeschichte*, or 'social theory as history of ideas', with a sub-title continuing 'studies in the historical semantics of culture'. This is an impressive miniature essay in critical specification, a contribution in itself—and it may be that we owe it in part to the circumstance that a literal translation had recently been pre-empted by another publica-tion. *Kultur und Gesellschaft* was the title under which, in 1965, Herbert Marcuse reissued his writings from the 1930s, including a classic work of Frankfurt Critical Theory, 'On the Affirmative Character of Culture'.[7] A few years later, there appeared a selective English version, called *Negations*, which Williams reviewed for his university's house magazine, the *Cambridge Review*. In doing so, he wrote the first, and probably the least influential, retrospect of his own *Culture and Society*.

Williams's title, 'On Reading Marcuse', fairly indicated the nature of his interest.[8] He was writing about Marcuse but also about his reader, this reader, himself. In its opening phase, the review is characteristically measured—respectful, emphatically mindful of shared political com-mitments, yet intellectually distant. 'I think he is more often wrong than right', Williams says, and the difficulties extend beyond concepts and

---

[6] *The Classic*, London 1975.
[7] Two volumes, Frankfurt 1965.
[8] *Cambridge Review* 90, 30 May 1969, pp. 366–68, reprinted in Eric Homberger, William Janeway and Simon Schama, eds, *The Cambridge Mind: Ninety Years of the Cambridge Review 1879–1969*, London 1970, pp. 162–66.

theses into matters of formation and mentality: 'we see the world quite differently, at a level of primary experience quite as much as in developed intellectual work . . .' But Williams reads on, and reports with 'interest and pleasure' a 'possible bridge' from Britain to this alien thought-world. It has been common to classify such moments as instances of an island empiricism saved from inanition by post-Hegelian theory. But the story Williams goes on to dramatize here, with mounting intensity, is different. The particular interest of the essay on affirmative culture, he says, is that 'its analysis corresponded so closely with a central theme of *Culture and Society*, and that both were historical treatments, of very much the same problem', while being 'continents of countries apart in method and in language'. Williams describes 'a marvellous moment of intellectual liberation' as he now reads across 'that gap'. He cites Marcuse's summary of affirmative culture and declares: 'This is exactly my own conclusion' about 'the essential origin and operation of the idea of culture, as it developed in England after the Industrial Revolution, at a time when we were very close, especially through Coleridge and Carlyle, to the German thought to which Marcuse's arguments relate.' And in this, he says, with an air of elation, there is 'a sense of meeting, after a long separation'.[9]

Great closeness, a long separation, but then the euphoria of meeting and recognition. The ill-assorted comrades turn out to be siblings, in a distinguished line. It is a moment of romance, in a writer in whom romance, perhaps surprisingly, exerts a steady pressure. And the central historical claim is none the less forceful on that account. For all the differences Williams registers, as hyperbolically as anyone could wish, there is a strict and consequential conceptual homology between his thought and Marcuse's at this point. Pressing forward through the free indirect mode that both writers favoured for the occasion—with debatable results—is a shared critique of what Williams called *the idea of culture* as a central discursive formation of bourgeois civilization.[10] Williams was more inclined to affirm the affirmative than Marcuse, who pursued his dialectic into a notorious formal equation of liberal and fascist culture. There is reason, then, to regret the loss of that phrase as the title of the book we know as *Culture and Society*, and the loss of the introduction, after its

[9] Homberger et al., *The Cambridge Mind*, pp. 164–65.
[10] Paul Jones advances a very similar thesis in his recent study *Raymond Williams's Sociology of Culture: A Critical Reconstruction*, London 2004, pp. 62–68, although in the context of a discussion of method—the practice of immanent critique.

part publication in 1953, also as 'The Idea of Culture', for it did much to make clear, in its cool, distant framing, that the purpose of this work too was destruction.[11]

This objective parallelism of early Williams and the Frankfurt critique of culture is historically specific, not merely an echo from one developed capitalist society to another, and not as chronologically strained as it may seem to be. Marcuse's study of affirmative culture dates from 1937. Adorno's brilliant continuation piece, 'Cultural Criticism and Society', was drafted in the early 1940s and first published late in that decade.[12] Seeded in the same post-war years, between 1949 and 1952 the essential critical-conceptual work of *Culture and Society* had been done, as the essay 'The Idea of Culture' makes plain.[13] The Frankfurt School's debt to the early Lukács is well known. Here, then, it is worth emphasizing how, among the various thinkers that Williams invokes in his *Marxism and Literature*, the one whose work most strongly resonates with the core theme of the book is Lukács—and not the Lukács of novelistic realism but precisely the author of *History and Class Consciousness*, a shared precursor in a distinctive post-romantic lineage of Marxist cultural thought.

Communism and English tradition

What, then, can be said about the political significations of the project? The book's most telling associations, its formative associations, were with the Communist Party. This was something already fading from wider recognition by the middle 1950s, as Atlanticism consolidated its hold. With the adoption and re-narration of *Culture and Society* by the early New Left, it became hard to imagine. The cultural vision corresponding to the Communist Party's new political programme, *The British Road to Socialism*, was a concerted rally of the national culture. In the literary journal *Arena*, which had been founded for the purpose, this took two related forms: a polemical rejection of 'the American threat to British culture' and, in direct continuity with the inter-war Popular Fronts, a systematic effort to define a legitimating national past for communism. Thus, Jack Lindsay's Coleridge, the subject of the longest study in the

---

[11] Williams, 'The Idea of Culture', *Essays in Criticism*, vol. 3, no. 3, 1953, pp. 239–66.
[12] Adorno, *Prisms* [1955], London 1967, pp. 19–34.
[13] See Dai Smith, *Raymond Williams: A Warrior's Tale*, Cardigan 2008, pp. 332–401, for the gestation of *Culture and Society*.

record of the journal, was presented emphatically as both an English thinker and—with conspicuous reference to Hegel—a dialectician.[14] Edward Thompson looked back to William Morris for illumination of 'the moral issues today'.[15] Here was one of the intertexts of *Culture and Society* and, oddly enough, a warrant for everything in the book that supports the familiar continuist reading of it. It is odd indeed that the Englishness of *Culture and Society,* so often mistaken as the trace of Leavisian discourse, should turn out to be the sign of rather more substantial Communist affinities.

However, the relationship was not so simple. For the gist of Williams's critical argument, like Marcuse's before him, was radically at variance with the servicing assumptions of popular frontism. Marcuse's assertion of the deep twinship of liberal and fascist culture was an outrage against the humanist pieties of official and fellow-travelling discourse in the middle 1930s. Similarly, if in an altogether less dramatic way, the British Communist narrative of English culture was not well served by Williams's opening declaration of purpose, which he stated as plainly as anyone could wish, in damning terms that no communist could mistake: 'I wish to show the emergence of *culture* as an abstraction and an absolute.'[16] The theoretical judgement of the chapter 'Marxism and Culture' is equally unmistakable: the English Marxist debt to English Romanticism has been significant and significantly damaging.[17] *Culture and Society* is, then, complex in its orientation and address. Immersed in a certain stream of English social thought, but finally sharing less with English cultural liberalism than with the Communist cultural orientation of the time; Communist, but in an intransigent critical spirit that recalls the theoretical leftism of the 1930s—including, it should be said, the writings of Christopher Caudwell, who had suffered, post mortem, the most withering of all Williams's particular judgements.[18]

Culture and Society appears to furnish all of us with some evidence for our discrepant, sometimes conflicting interpretations of what it

---

[14] Lindsay, 'Samuel Taylor Coleridge (I)', *Arena*, February–March 1951, vol. 2, no. 6, pp. 36–49; 'Coleridge (II)', *Arena,* April–May 1951, vol. 2, no. 7, pp. 29–43.
[15] Thompson, 'William Morris and the Moral Issues Today', *Arena*, June–July 1951, vol. 2, no. 8, pp. 25–30; also 'The Murder of William Morris', *Arena*, April–May 1951, vol. 2, no. 7, pp. 9–27.
[16] CS, p. 17.   [17] CS, p. 263ff.   [18] CS, pp. 268–69.

has to say, and does so, I think, in consequence of its central polemical purpose, which was not to develop the idea of culture as a position or vantage-point but to disclose it as the site of struggle it had historically been. This entailed asserting continuities where there was said to be rupture, and division, including self-division, where coherence was tacitly assumed. One example must suffice to illustrate this procedure and the ambiguities it nourished. Williams is discussing Morris's socialism, in an explicit contrast with Labour and Fabianism. He cites Morris's clairvoyant thoughts about the cooption of socialist measures for a modified order of capitalist rule, and, in doing so, claims them for what he calls 'the tradition', the line descending from Burke through Arnold. Here, I would say, is Williams at his most tendentious, but that is not where my emphasis falls. What is most striking about this passage and others like it is the perfect ambiguity of its gesture to a reader. The gesture is one of inclusion, of association, but in what spirit? For one kind of reader at least, the spirit is affirmative, constructive—and in that interpretation lies a whole tradition of reading *Culture and Society*. But for another kind of reader—the kind who may have been more vividly present to Williams in the chill of the early 1950s—the spirit may have seemed provocative, the claim a discordant intrusion in a composed selection of values anointed as 'culture'. The gesture of sharing, if indeed it is that, is a calculated embarrassment, a politically directed check on the presumptuous fluency of the idea of culture as it circulated in post-war Britain.

Culture and Society now

That gesture is as necessary now as it was then, we can say to begin with, although the terms of engagement have undergone crucial alteration. It is not that Williams's terms—which were those of basic class relations—have become obsolete. For all that has changed, the capitalist ordering of social life has not changed. (Even the bright claims that all has changed utterly have a faded fifties look about them.) Yet in important respects *Culture and Society* is now distant from contemporary perceptions of cultural interest and possibility—as successive waves of contemporaries have been saying for several decades. I confine myself here to just one kind of case, which has become inescapable, and which, as it happened, actually announced itself all those fifty years ago, but without entering the discursive space of the book.

There is a moment early on in *Culture and Society*, just a few pages into the first chapter, when Williams cites Edmund Burke on the true constitution of a nation. Here is Burke:

> A nation is not an idea only of local extent, and individual momentary aggregation; but it is an idea of continuity, which extends in time as well as in numbers and in space. And this is a choice not only of one day, or one set of people, not a tumultuary and giddy choice; it is a deliberate election of ages and of generations; it is a constitution made by what is ten thousand times better than choice, it is made by the peculiar circumstances, occasions, tempers, disposition, and moral, civil, and social habitudes of the people, which disclose themselves only in a long space of time.

Williams then returns to his discussion, reporting that 'immediately after Burke, this complex . . . was to be called "the spirit of the nation" [and] by the end of the nineteenth century, it was to be called a national "culture"'. He adds: 'examination of the influence and development of these ideas belongs to my later chapters.'[19] It is a poignant moment. 'These ideas': which ideas? Burke's head-word is *nation*, and Williams repeats it twice in the first sentence of his commentary. But it is clear from the context that his spontaneous conceptual translation of the term is 'society', specifically 'organic society'. He has good reason for doing so. That is a large part of Burke's meaning. But society conceived of in this way is already more than a collective order or system, the merely social. It is, precisely, *national* society, or society as nation. Burke's 'people' are above all fathers and mothers and daughters and sons, generations in the shaping of an extended family. Their social being is inherently ethnic—and emphatically so, for Burke's ethico-political preference is set in stone. This organic constitution, he says, is 'made by what is ten thousand times better than choice'.

Here is an idea of culture that Williams did not, in fact, pursue in his later chapters—or, for that matter, in *The Long Revolution*, notwithstanding the theoretical status he accorded 'the system of generation and nurture' there.[20] In this idea of culture, the family is the stake, the symbol and

---

[19] CS, pp. 30–31.
[20] Others did, in different ways. Richard Wollheim, in his pamphlet *Socialism and Culture*, warned against the cultural centring of family, arguing that this would inevitably favour 'conservatism and conformism' (Fabian Tract 331, London 1961, pp. 12–13). Just a few years later, Juliet Mitchell placed the family at the strategic centre of feminist thinking in her pioneering essay 'Women: the Longest Revolution', NLR I/40, November–December 1966, pp. 11–37.

the template of sociality. Its common collective mode is, as it was for Burke, the nation, in more or less marked association with ethnicity and race. In its most general character, it is the idea of culture as customary difference. This, rather than the meanings made familiar in literary criticism, sociology and cultural studies, is the politically charged sense of culture—its dominant—as it circulates in public controversy today, not least in Britain.

Culture as customary difference

Culture is always culture, of course. That is its opaque charm. This time, what is at stake in the tautology is *customary difference*. Both parameters are essential: custom, or anything understood as custom, takes precedence over other modes of social validation, and its currency is difference. Thus, culture is what differentiates a collectivity in the mode of self-validating direct inheritance—whose value, in return, is precisely that it binds the collectivity in *difference*. The main substance of culture in this sense—its privilege or its fate—is ethnicity. This is often more obviously so in the case of racialized populations, but certainly not only then. The great contemporary exception is the supra-ethnic *Ummah*, Islam—which, nevertheless, is spontaneously ethnicized in countries such as Britain and France, whose Muslim populations were effectively founded by large-scale, regionally compact post-colonial migrations. Culture today consists above all else in customs we do not share with the others.

Culture as customary difference is not, in any final respect, a third variety, to be listed along with the high, minoritarian reserves defended by cultural criticism, and the popular forms and practices valorized by Cultural Studies. It exhibits essential features of both. It is a form of assertion of the cultural principle that is normative, at least for the particular collective it identifies—how 'we' really, properly are—and in some cases makes universal claims, as in the spotlit instance of purist Islam. At the same time, it is popular, more or less, in its human resources and appeal, understood as a necessary defence against the encroachments of the encircling, overweening other, which takes many forms: racism and bigotry, but also liberalism, modernity, Godlessness, materialism, selfishness, immorality, Americanization and so on. And if the discourse of culture as customary difference thus combines features of the two, this is not because it embodies a kind of dialectical resolution. On the contrary, it is because culture in this sense is the first form, the matrix

from which the familiar varieties of cultural criticism (and, indirectly, cultural studies) emerged. Leavis's high humanism was energized by an eidetic imagery of native custom. In Thomas Mann, the continuity was still more pronounced. Culture—that is, a national sensibility—is what identifies us; the rest is civilization.

Culture in this sense found its first philosophical interpreter in Herder, in the late eighteenth century, and has had numberless learned advocates since. But no one quite authored it, in that reductive, bookish sense. Such cultures have been made and sustained with the active participation of many millions, and this way of putting the matter suggests something more than the inertial recurrence implied in the term *custom*. Herder spoke of *tradition*, meaning by that a process in which collectivities adapt their inheritance for changed conditions.[21] Tradition in this sense is inventive. However, the everyday meaning of the word tells its own story. Tradition is inventive, and much of what it invents is precisely 'tradition', a continuity symbolically assured by the observance of acknowledged custom. This, it has often been said, is a thoroughly modern phenomenon. As Marx perceived, it is the spontaneous counter-discourse of capitalist modernity itself, just as old and with at least as many years of life to come.[22] What he could hardly have imagined, however, is that one hundred and fifty years later, after the surge and ebbing of socialist labour movements in every continent, the flowering and decay of secular nationalism throughout the old colonial territories, culture would be so widely honoured as the touchstone of social well-being.

The multicultural fix

It is a dialectical irony of the idea of culture that it should have made its way to the centre of public discourse in Britain thanks in good part to the workings of official policies whose purpose has been, in a sense, to contain it: the cluster of policies and precepts called multiculturalism, which took shape from the nineteen-seventies onwards as part of a new strategy for managing race relations. The emphasis in what follows now about multiculturalism is critical, and, noting that, I start with two

---

[21] 'Ideas for a Philosophy of the History of Mankind' (Book IX), *J. G. Herder on Social and Political Culture*, translated and edited by F. M. Barnard, Cambridge 1969, p. 313.
[22] Marx, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy (Rough Draft)*, Harmondsworth 1973, p. 162.

equally emphatic acknowledgements. First, multiculturalist discourse—the more exact designation of my subject—has itself been a many-voiced phenomenon, and no set of generalizations such as these can hope to capture its many inflections.[23] My remarks are an attempt to register and evaluate some key characteristics and tendencies of its dominant liberal variants. Second, the irreducible positive value of multiculturalism is that it has embodied, in British public life, an unprecedented attempt to acknowledge and embrace the historical fact of a multi-racial society. It has been an important, if sometimes ambiguous, favouring condition of the struggle against racism. For now, we might say, some kind of multiculturalism is the horizon of all progressive thought and practice in its sphere. Nothing that needs to be said, from the left, in criticism of liberal multiculturalism can simply over-write that crucial development in policy and sentiment, the reach for a new civility that will be adequate to our real conditions of life in this respect.[24] But the criticisms have been made all along, and they bear recapitulation at a time when that discourse has entered a period of acute anxiety.

The idea of multiculturalism was always questionable as a line of solution to the crisis that prompted its adoption, that of racism and the struggles against it. Culture is an anodyne representation of race, which is a historically constituted relation of organized inequality, domination and subordination. To speak blandly of a plurality of cultures in coexistence is to obscure the historic dominance of one of them, that of Anglo-Britain, and an array of continuing social effects that are not mainly 'cultural'. Yet in the cultural multiplex as which liberal discourse pictures the UK's population, the leading theme has been 'diversity', as though that were a warrant of equality, and as though some kinds of diversity were not the effects of long-standing inequality. (Likewise, social exclusion is now deplored as an obvious evil, as though the goal of full inclusion in neo-liberal Britain were the outer limit of social aspiration for all of us, and as though 'exclusion' itself were not in truth a structural variety of its benign other, inclusion.) The promotion of culture as a defining social relation has tended to obscure the articulations of ethnic and class formation, which differ crucially from one part of

---

[23] For a searching account of the complex play of interests in multiculturalism, and an affirmation of social 'conviviality', see Paul Gilroy, *After Empire: Melancholia or Conviviality*, Abingdon 2004.

[24] The phrase 'a new civility' is Tom Paulin's: see his *Ireland and the English Crisis*, Newcastle 1984, p. 22.

the multicultural landscape to another. The resulting patterns of relative success or failure, adjustment or deadlock, inter-ethnic convergence or particularist assertion, may have at least as much to do with generic class situations or with historic changes in the division of labour as with the specificities of cultural inheritance.

This shortcoming is in part that of liberalism generally: once capitalist social relations are excused fundamental questioning, progress can only take the form of improved life-chances for selected individuals. But in this context individuals are specified as members of communities, and here the idea of culture plays its own contradictory part in the working out of multiculturalism. The idea, as I began by saying, valorizes difference at the expense of inter-cultural commonalities. Whatever the biographical reality (individual or collective) of our formation, what counts as culture is what distinguishes us from others with whom we may in reality share as much if not more. The kind of difference that counts is custom: confirmed, received difference. It is for this reason that the multiculturalist appeal to diversity has the paradoxical effect of promoting customary stereotypes even as it deplores their negative effects. For the commercial sector of the cultural multiplex there is an irresistible logic in this: niche markets in authenticities are potentially beyond counting, and without prejudice to the emerging market in hybridities, which has yet greater potential. The junk-word 'vibrant', without which no description of the metropolitan multiplex sounds quite right, belongs to the vocabulary of tourism and, even on the lips of the well-meaning, degrades the multiculturalist ideal of a shared home to a tainted image of exoticism for all.

Customary difference is most strongly confirmed in the plane of religion, whether as doctrine, as worship, as spiritual observance or as sanctioned behaviour. The culminating effect of this discursive logic, where the contingencies of inheritance and situation favour it, is to strengthen traditionalism, the systematic advocacy of customary relations and practices, and to confirm its beneficiaries as natural leaders of populations invariably called communities. The bonds of community are seldom merely confining, of course, even though they can tighten to the point of strangulation. Unforced affections sustain them, as, in a contrasting way, do fears of an indifferent or hostile world beyond. But there is normally a price to be paid for this kind of cohesion, and those least likely to pay it are heterosexual males of a certain age and standing. The

leading businessmen, the mouthy politicians, the clerics, all the father-figures who come forward again and again as the authoritative voices of 'their' communities are heard at the expense of dissident, resisting voices: those of feminists, very notably, and other independent community activists—and of others, not leaders or activists of any kind, who simply want to live and love unthreatened on something closer to their own preferred terms. This is the monocultural face of multiculturalism, of a politics through which, as Rahila Gupta puts it, 'the state more or less enters into an informal contract with the more powerful leaders in the minority community—disempowering women and trading women's autonomy for community autonomy.'[25] Proposals now circulating for a modified liberalism acknowledging group as well as individual rights would sanctify such bargaining at the level of political philosophy and constitutional precept.[26]

Beyond culture

Such, today, in Britain and elsewhere, is the dynamic of the idea of culture. The *idea*, not the complex realities it presumes to interpret and regulate, in Britain's black and brown and white minority communities. There is no relevant minority I know of in which this idea of culture, however it is formulated, is pervasively and effectively dominant. (On the other hand, its restless, fluctuating existence in the collective psyche of the majority population—and in official liberal discourse—textures the experience of anyone living in Britain.[27]) It hardly captures the

[25] 'Wake Up, Activists Are Pounding on the Doors of Ivory Towers', *Times Higher Education Supplement*, 28 May 2004. See Gupta, ed., *From Homebreakers to Jailbreakers: Southall Black Sisters*, London 2003.

[26] For an example, see Bikhu Parekh, *Rethinking Multiculturalism: Cultural Diversity and Political Theory*, Basingstoke 2000.

[27] It was David Goodhart, the editor of the monthly *Prospect* and a self-described 'sensitive member of the liberal elite', who reimagined the official multiculturalist dream as nightmare ('Discomfort of Strangers', *Guardian*, 24 February 2004, pp. 24–25, reprinted from *Prospect* for the same month), suggesting that social solidarity was being strained to snapping-point in the UK. In the ensuing controversy, against the background of a legislative ban on the wearing of religious tokens in state schools in France, suggestions that the proposed European constitution should formally honour the Christian heritage of its core region, civilizational resistance in high places—in France again, and elsewhere—to full EU membership for 'Muslim' Turkey, and all this in a sustaining conjuncture of US–British 'war on terror', the idea of culture became, and remains, a political force (and counter-force).

historical reality of multicultural, inter-cultural formation in Britain today—a reality for which, in truth, the idea of culture promotes a false description and a futile or damaging general prospectus. What I have been attempting to describe, with all due extremism, is the logic of a discourse whose public authority—credibility, at least—and impetus are far greater than its actual social reserves. And for an explanation in the most general terms of why this might be so, we may return to *Culture and Society*, and a famous passage from its Conclusion:

> The idea of culture is a general reaction to a general and major change in the condition 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 working-out of the idea of culture is a slow reach again for control.[28]

The first thing to note in this is that 'the idea of culture' recalled by Williams is in one basic respect different from the phenomenon outlined here. In the first, the effort of discovery is evident and sometimes dominant, but in the second it is the contrasting cultural mode—transmission—that prevails, commanding the rhetoric even where the practical realities are historically more complex. The reach for control is a reach for continuity, heritage, tradition, custom. But with that large and discouraging qualification made, we can see how Williams's distant generalities hold across the span of years from Burke to the present. What are the verities—religious, ethnic, national—sponsored under the idea of culture if not efforts at 'total qualitative assessment', with solutions to match?

Williams was committed to the position that literature could have early access to emerging realities, in the forms appropriate to its own kinds. On this occasion, he came close to concluding something apparently similar, though less clearly affirmative, about the idea of culture. It is, he said, 'a general reaction to a general and major change in the conditions of our common life.' That is its great historical significance, but also its insufficiency. A 'reaction' is something less deliberate than a 'response', and not at all an apt classifying category for the learning process of which he speaks as a later stage of the change. The idea of

---

[28] CS, p. 285.

culture is a revelation in the way that a psychic symptom is revealing: insistent in its registration of a real state of affairs yet not a simple, sufficient account of it.[29] The idea of culture is not so much what must be learnt as the warning that there is nevertheless something to learn. That is the most general argument of Williams's classic, and one that, fifty years on, still claims us.

---

[29] Elsewhere, in a notebook, he wrote: 'Theory of culture is a deep response to a deep disturbance of the common life of exceptional complexity, but this is its relevance.' (Cit. Smith, *Raymond Williams*, p. 443.) The choice of *but* over *and* makes the crucial suggestion.