

Cornel West, “The Legacy of Raymond Williams,” *Social Text* 30 (1992), 6-8

Raymond Williams was the last of the great European male revolutionary socialist intellectuals born before the end of the age of Europe (1492- 1945). I use this long string of adjectives not to pigeonhole the complex and multiple identities of Williams, but rather to examine and evaluate his grand achievements and incomplete efforts in light of the social crises and political travails of his time. To do honor to him is to keep the legacy of his work and life alive. And to keep this legacy alive is, in part, to keep in view how he made and remade himself—cast and recast his ways of life and ways of struggle—under circumstances (usually adverse circumstances) not of his choosing.

In my brief comments, I shall suggest that the major contribution of Williams to our present-day challenges is not simply that he taught us how to think historically about cultural practices or how to approach political matters with a subtle cultural materialist orientation in a manner that stands head and shoulders above any of his generation. Rather Williams speaks to us today primarily because he best exemplifies what it means for a contemporary intellectual leftist to carve out and sustain, with quiet strength and relentless reflection, a sense of prophetic vocation in a period of pervasive demoralization and marginalization of progressive thinkers and activists. His career can be seen as a dynamic series of critical self-inventories in which he attempts to come to terms with the traditions and communities that permit him to exercise his agency and lay bare the structural and personal constraints that limit the growth of those traditions and communities.

These critical self-inventories take the form of powerful cultural histories and fictions and often persuasive cultural critiques of the European past and present, in order to create new

possibilities for left thinkers and activities. In this sense, Williams's deep historical sensibilities were grounded in a *prospective* outlook that never loses sight of human struggle against transient yet formidable limits. Whatever the intellectual fashion of the day—from F. R. Leavis to Louis Althusser, Jacques Lacan to Michel Foucault—Williams remained wedded to subtle humanist notions of struggle and hope found in traditions and communities. In fact, one of his distinctive contributions to Marxist theory was to revise the understanding of class conflict—inseparable from but not identical with class struggle—by highlighting how, in relatively cold moments in human societies, class conflict is mediated through social, cultural or educational changes that insure the muting of class struggle. Like Gramsci, Williams injects notions of contestation and incorporation into the understanding of class conflict while reserving class struggle for that hot moment in societies in which structural change becomes a conscious and overt engagement of forces. Again his aim is to tease out the concrete and credible lines of action for progressive thinkers and activists.

Williams's creative attempts to make and remake himself by means of critical self-inventories occurred on three major terrains. On the *ideological* terrain he had to navigate between the deformation of communism in the name of stalinism and the degeneration of socialism in the name of fabianism. The former was a vicious autocratic statism that repressed civil society and regimented its citizens—an undeniable affront to Williams's socialist democratic values; the latter—a naive gradualism which assumed that the enemy was a mere party rather than “a hostile and organized social formation”—an unacceptable conclusion given Williams's historical materialist analysis.

On the *academic* terrain, Williams sought to counter conservative traditions of thinking about culture represented by T.S. Eliot and F.R. Leavis by refining crude left reflections about the

relation of culture and democracy, art and socialism. And on the political terrain, Williams sought to reconceive the notion of revolution such that cultural practices were neither overlooked nor viewed in a simplistic manner. The point was not only that culture - including popular culture - was to be viewed as a crucial site of struggle, but also that the very ways in which culture was understood in capitalist societies had to be demystified and transformed. In reading Williams's masterpieces, *Culture and Society* (1958); *The Long Revolution* (1961); *The Country and the City* (1973); and *Marxism and Literature* (1977) we get a sense of the evolution of his own democratic socialism, cultural materialism and revolutionary activism.

Yet, in all honesty, what also attracted me to Williams's work was his refusal to sidestep the existential issues of what it means to be a left intellectual and activist - issues like death, despair, disillusionment and disempowerment in the face of defeats and setbacks. He understood on a deep level that revolutionary activity was as much a matter of feelings as facts, of imagination as organization, of agency as analysis. Therefore he highlighted what most left thinkers tend to ignore: the need for vision and the necessity of linking vision to visceral forms of human connectedness. His preoccupation with vital traditions and vibrant communities, sustaining neighborhoods and supportive networks, reflected his sensitivity to how ordinary people in their everyday lives are empowered and equipped to deal with defeats and setbacks. In his six novels as well as his often overlooked gem *Modern Tragedy* (1966), Williams explores the highly mediated links between human struggle, bonding and place. This exploration is neither an extraneous affair of nostalgic yearning for the Welsh *Gemeinschaft* of his youth, nor an escapist inclination to displace the political for the personal. Rather he is grappling with one of the central problematics of our moment: how to

articulate visions, analyses and forms of praxis that anchor socialist politics to the contingent constructions of identities of degraded and downtrodden peoples. These new identities - often associated with the “new” social movements of women, people of color, formerly colonized persons, gays, lesbians and greens - emerge from various cultural politics of difference that put a premium on bonding and place, common experiences in time and similar situations in space. In the late sixties, Williams began to visibly struggle with his Welsh European identity - as manifest in his novel *The Fight for Manod* (1979). Yet it is precisely at this point where Williams's grand example falls short; that is, where he appears more a creature of his time than a creator who links us to the coming epoch. Edward Said has made this point in terms of Williams's “relative neglect of the affiliation between imperialism and English culture” (*Nation*, March 5, 1988). I would add that though Williams provides indispensable analytical tools and historical sensibilities for reflections on empire, race, color, gender and sexual orientation, the relative silences in his work on these issues bear the stamp of his own intellectual and existential formation and his later attempts to accent a Welsh nationalist identity within his socialist project bear this out.

Those of us born and shaped after the end of the age of Europe must begin with the legacies of the European empire—legacies of deeply inscribed white supremacist and male capitalist metropolises—as well as with the declining U. S. and Soviet empires. And as expanding cultures of consumption slowly erode traditions, communities, neighborhoods and networks, new cultural configurations must be created if any substantive sources of struggle and hope for fundamental societal change can be preserved and sustained. In this regard, the last problematic Williams gallantly

yet inadequately confronted becomes our major challenge. And if we plan to meet it, we must do so by, in part, standing on his shoulders, and hope we meet it as well as he did others.