

Towards Cultural Materialism: Criticism and Hegemony in Raymond Williams

Roberto del VALLE ALCALÁ

Universidad Autónoma de Madrid
roberto.delvalle@uam.es

Recibido. 27/05/2010

Aceptado 20/06/2010

ABSTRACT

This article analyses Raymond Williams' concept of "cultural materialism" through the theoretical and political contexts which framed his thought in the 1970s. His dialogue with the continental Marxist tradition – Lucien Goldmann, Georg Lukács and Antonio Gramsci, principally – marks a significant shift from the organicist and broadly reformist ideas articulated in earlier works such as *Culture and Society* (1958) and *The Long Revolution* (1961). Williams' development of the Gramscian theory of hegemony in particular offers both a fresh start for critical practice beyond the narrow disciplinary margins of "the literary", and a sharp tool of analysis for new social antagonisms and problem-spaces.

Keywords: culture, materialism, Marxism, hegemony

Hacia el materialismo cultural: crítica y hegemonía en Raymond Williams

RESUMEN

Este artículo analiza el concepto de "materialismo cultural" en Raymond Williams a través de los contextos teóricos y políticos que enmarcan su pensamiento en los años 70. Su diálogo con la tradición marxista continental – Lucien Goldmann, Georg Lukács y Antonio Gramsci, principalmente – marca un importante punto de inflexión con respecto a las ideas organicistas y reformistas articuladas en obras anteriores como *Culture and Society* (1958) y *The Long Revolution* (1961). El desarrollo que hace Williams de la teoría gramsciana de la hegemonía ofrece un nuevo punto de partida para la praxis crítica, superando los estrechos márgenes disciplinares de "lo literario", así como una herramienta fundamental para el análisis de nuevos antagonismos y problemáticas sociales.

Palabras clave: cultura, materialismo, Marxismo, hegemonía

The process of radicalisation that is observable in Raymond Williams' writings of the late Sixties and Seventies, and which contrasts with the early "reformism" of his seminal works of the late Fifties and early Sixties, *Culture and Society* and *The Long Revolution*, runs parallel, and can be causally related, to his critical confrontation, after a prolonged period of isolation from the specific formulas and analyses of the socialist tradition, with a certain brand of continental Marxism. Of this encounter, it is perhaps the "discovery" of an adaptable (and in that sense, not

entirely discontinuous with his earlier work) “Western” tradition of Marxist thought that marks the trend of his subsequent development after 1970.

In an initial mapping of the theoretical groundwork laid down by 1930s Marxism, Williams points to the “crushing defeat” endured by this standard interpretation of culture at the hands of practical criticism and the *Scrutiny* group. A careful consideration of this defeat, he claims, must serve as the preliminary condition from which any fresh confrontation of “the original questions” may be countenanced in the Seventies. The avowed inferiority of the Old Leftist analysis stemmed, according to Williams, from the reductionism of the base and superstructure formula which invariably informed every cultural analysis. In this simplistic rendition, current works were denied “precise and detailed... accounts of actual consciousness” and were instead dismissed in a mechanistic isolation of superstructures as mere reflections or spurious ideological by-products of “real” historical dynamics whose sources were to be found in the economy (Williams 2005a: 19). As Williams explained from the vantage point of 1971, it was a determination to re-chart the sources of a critical reconstruction of cultural formations which would not rely on the abstract and utilitarian categories of the model which impelled the quite different totalising efforts of *Culture and Society* and *The Long Revolution*: “to see the study of culture as the study of relations between elements in a whole way of life...to replace the formula of base and superstructure with the more active idea of a field of mutually if also unevenly determining forces.” (Williams 2005a: 20)

What the encounter with the Marxism of Lukàcs and Goldmann represented was an outlet for this impulse, and what the theory itself propounded was an undogmatic resolution of the vulgar-Marxist quandary. In particular, its promise of totalisation revealed a historical understanding which made sense of the basic tenet of economic preponderance. Lukàcsian reification suggested a specific “deformation”, in capitalism, of the complex of relations within a given society: and thus, that this apparent dominance of the economy preached by Marxism was in fact a historical effect of the specific mode of production. Whilst acknowledging methodological limitations in the general idea of totalisation (such as the fact “that most of the work we had to look at [as well as “our own consciousness, our work, our methods”] was the product of just this epoch of reified consciousness” (Williams 2005a: 21)), Williams credited Goldmann, in particular, with significant advances in this field.

Goldmann’s development and application of the concept of structure suggested a specific *genetic* relationship between particular literary and social facts (see Goldmann 1964). This was not to be understood as a correlation of contents but, crucially, as a co-development of mental structures: “A relation of content may be mere reflection, but a relation of structure, often occurring where there is no apparent relation of content, can show us the organizing principle by which a particular view of the world, and from that the coherence of the social group which maintains it, really operates in consciousness.” (Williams 2005a: 23).

This theoretical point was supplemented by the distinction between “actual” and “possible” consciousness, that is, between the multiform and often incoherent

worldview *actually* found in the historical experience of a particular social group/class and the more formalised and in that sense, advanced, projection of the group (see Goldmann 1977). In this perspective, a genetic-structural sociology of literature would be concerned with analysing “the organizing categories, the essential structures, which give such works their unity, their specific aesthetic character... and which at the same time reveal to us the maximum possible consciousness of the social group” (Williams 2005a: 24). Williams nevertheless recognises that his own concept of the structure of feeling – despite the obvious parallel with Goldmann’s concerns – was a way of circumventing what he interpreted as the real distance between either formation of consciousness and “the real structures and processes of literature” (Williams 2005a: 24).

His search for a resilient alternative to the dead-ends of Leavisite practical criticism, on the one hand, and vulgar Marxist reductionism, on the other, set Williams on a journey through the meandering complexities of a theoretical revisionism – after the idiosyncratic engagements of *Culture and Society* and *The Long Revolution* – whose first significant port of call had been, precisely, the work of Lukàcs and Goldmann. This encounter involved, first of all, a restatement of the basic conceptual tools of the Marxist stock, beginning with the much-abused formula of base and superstructure.

Williams is particularly critical of the abstract manoeuvring implicit in the scholastic differentiation between these two terms. In his opinion, the “force of Marx’s original criticism had been mainly directed against the *separation* of ‘areas’ of thought and activity... and against the related evacuation of specific content – real human activities – by the imposition of abstract categories” (Williams 1977: 78). The deterministic character of the traditional model (in which the economic base of a given society is said to *determine* its superstructures) revealed a fundamental set of problems regarding, first, the precise nature (and semantic scope) of this “determination” and second, the specific range of definition included in the terms base and superstructure.

The notion of determination was soon associated, in a certain stock of Marxist thought, with a sense of absolute conditioning rooted in an external system of economic relations. According to this “economistic” reading, the abstract determination exerted by the economic base upon the cultural superstructure was, in the manner of a full prefiguration disconnected from any real sense of lived human process. An alternative characterisation was that which restored the idea of direct human agency to the workings of historical development and therefore challenged the monolithic abstraction of economic forces from a measurable historical objectivity. The standard justification for this challenge to economism was found in Engels’ classic disclaimer in his 1890 letter to Bloch: “we make our history ourselves, but, in the first place, under very definite assumptions and conditions” (Engels 1978: 641). This qualifying statement provided a different angle on the idea of determination: history was effectively the province of human agency, and not the disembodied resultant of pre-figured “iron laws”. In this sense, stating that “the *ultimately* determining element in history is the production and reproduction of

human life” consigns man-made history to a precise set of objective conditions but it does not revoke its relative autonomy in favour of an empty teleology: “Any abstraction of determinism, based on the isolation of autonomous categories, which are seen as controlling or which can be used for prediction, is then a mystification of the specific and always related determinants which are the real social process – an active and conscious as well as, by default, a passive and objectified historical experience” (Williams 2005a: 87-88).

The notion of economic base, for its part, was severely impaired in the more vulgar characterisations of the model by a narrow range of definition. Its strict identification with economic activity – that is, the mechanistic reduction of that primary point of reference, “the production and reproduction of real life”, to a “fixed economic or technological abstraction” – represented a disabling conceptual limitation which made economism well-nigh ineluctable (Williams 2005b: 34). This resulted, crucially, from the narrow description of productive forces in the context – and the terms – of historical capitalism. The danger was often real, in Marxism, of “slip[ping] into describing them as if they were universal and general, and as if certain ‘laws’ of their relations to other activities were fundamental truths. Marxism thus often took the colouring of a specifically bourgeois and capitalist kind of materialism” (Williams 1977: 92).

This essentialisation of the particular dynamics of commodity production within a capitalist economy evicted every other area of (re-)production from the axis of social life. And yet, as Williams observes, “[t]he social and political order which maintains a capitalist market, like the social and political struggles which created it, is necessarily a material production” (Williams 1977: 93). Its real derivation cannot be labeled “superstructural” and left at that. Analogously, the brand of materialism which discarded political and social structures from the effective matrix of production could not but disregard cultural practices as equally inessential. In that precise sense, “the concept of the ‘superstructure’ was ... not a reduction, but an evasion” (Williams 1977: 93).

The kind of aesthetic theory to which the vulgar model of base and superstructure typically gave rise was tied to a limiting conception of the “real world” as a series of discrete objects – “including human actions as objects”. This mechanistic version of materialism contrasted with a more flexible conception of real social relations as processes. In this perspective, then, “art could be seen as reflecting not separated objects and superficial events but the essential forces and movements underlying them” (Williams 1977: 96). Williams’ criticism of reflection theories is directed against the paralysing impulse which their version of aesthetic production propounded. The radical division introduced between a reified conception of social activity and the sphere of culture understood as a passive reflection of the former resulted in a negation of the very materiality and processual character of the art work and its domain of intervention. It was precisely against this fossilisation of a complex material dynamic that the notion of “mediation” was introduced to account for the peculiarity of cultural activity. However, as Williams acknowledges:

It is difficult to be sure how much is gained by substituting the metaphor of 'mediation' for the metaphor of 'reflection'. On the one hand it goes beyond the passivity of reflection theory; it indicates an active process, of some kind. On the other hand, in almost all cases, it perpetuates a basic dualism. Art does not reflect social reality, the superstructure does not reflect the base, *directly*; culture is a mediation of society. But it is virtually impossible to sustain the metaphor of 'mediation' (*Vermittlung*) without some sense of separate and pre-existent areas or orders of reality, between which the mediating process occurs whether independently or as determined by their prior natures. (Williams 1977: 99)

Subsequent theoretical innovations, whilst addressing the evident limitations of the reflection model, still adhered to the dualistic logic consecrated by the base-superstructure binomial. Both the idea of typification and homology (even in the more "advanced" theorisations of Lukács and Goldmann, respectively) suggested a static analysis of known structures which ruled out the possibility of active process and real intervention: "[n]one of the dualist theories, expressed as reflection or mediation, and none of the formalist and superstructuralist theories, expressed in variants of correspondence or homology, can be fully carried through to contemporary practice, since in different ways they all depend on a *known* history, a known structure, known *products*. Analytic relations can be handled in this way; practical relations hardly at all." (Williams 1977: 106-107)

Williams' enthusiastic invocation of the Gramscian concept of hegemony is offered as an apt alternative to this theoretical universe of objectification and stasis. The comparative advantage represented by the notion of hegemony over, for example, the notion of totality was that the former did not overlook the specific class intentionality of a given social formation. As a conceptual means of dispelling the blatant inadequacy of a mechanical materialism premised on base and superstructure, the notion of totality had provided the foundations of a complex interpretation of social practices without abstract prefigurations or determinism. Yet the sometimes overhasty acceptance of models of totality ran the risk of ignoring precisely the one aspect which the theory of base and superstructure had isolated best; that is, "the facts of social intention, the class character of a particular society" and hence the materialist specification of any subsequent historical analysis. For "[i]f totality is simply concrete, if it is simply the recognition of a large variety of miscellaneous and contemporaneous practices, then it is essentially empty of any content that could be called Marxist. Intention, the notion of intention, restores the key question, or rather the key emphasis" (Williams 2005b: 36).

The logic of hegemony presupposes a totality in which the facts of class domination are asserted not in a specialized, abstracted sense (as suggested by the notion of superstructure and a certain Marxist inflection of the term "ideology"), but in a complex and multi-modal fashion even to the point of "constitut[ing] the substance and the limit of common sense for most people under its sway" (Williams 2005b: 37). In its Gramscian derivation, hegemony was distinguished from *dominio*, that is, explicit political control in a given social formation. The term

suggested an effective penetration of class rule and a specific distribution of power throughout the social tissue which was not restricted to any single sphere of specialisation: “[i]t is in just this recognition of the *wholeness* of the process that the concept of ‘hegemony’ goes beyond ‘ideology’. What is decisive is not only the conscious system of ideas and beliefs, but the whole lived social process as practically organized by specific and dominant meanings and values” (Williams 1977: 108-109).

The notion of hegemony was also distinct from the earlier concept of culture as a whole social process or a “whole way of life”: whilst retaining the same emphasis on inclusion, the facts of actual power gave the totality a particular orientation and historical identity. In Gramsci, the concept was very closely connected to that of “civil society”, understood as the operative domain of a ruling worldview beyond the “political society” of positive institutions. What singles out a hegemonic ideology (what marks its implantation as a “hegemonic bloc”) is precisely its homogenous and porous distribution across the totality of a social formation, often acquiring a naturalized existence – as “common sense”, for example – beyond the external exertions of a state apparatus. The role of “organic” intellectuals is central to the maintenance of hegemony and to the preservation of structural domination by the ruling class (see Portelli 1972 and Simon 1982). Gramsci stresses the importance of intellectual monopoly within civil society – the strategic position accorded to those intellectuals who are *organically* linked to the empowered class (see Martin 2002 and Entwistle 1979). The solid position of these intellectuals within civil society (their identification with “progress” within the historic bloc) facilitates the advancement of a particular ideology which consolidates the hegemonic claims of its class subject. It is the task of these intellectuals, first, to “assimilate and conquer” the representatives of “traditional” groups (Simon 1982: 93), and to obtain, from all other sections of the social structure, a fundamental endorsement of their hegemonic bloc – and consequently, of the social and economic interests of the class which it seeks to uphold.

Williams is unambiguous about the need to flexibilise the Gramscian concept and, crucially, to avoid excluding oppositional possibilities from the hegemonic matrix:

A static hegemony, of the kind which is indicated by abstract totalizing definitions of a dominant ‘ideology’ or ‘world-view’, can ignore or isolate such alternatives and opposition, but to the extent that they are significant the decisive hegemonic function is to control or transform or even incorporate them. In this active process the hegemonic has to be seen as more than the simple transmission of an (unchanging) dominance. On the contrary, any hegemonic process must be especially alert and responsive to the alternatives and opposition which question or threaten its dominance. The reality of cultural process must always include the efforts and contributions of those who are in one way or another outside or at the edge of the terms of the specific hegemony. (Williams 1977: 113)

The historical analysis of a particular culture thus requires a detailed account of those tendencies which operate within but which also surpass or exceed the actual

conditions of “a specific and effective dominance” (Williams 1977: 121). The hegemonic perspective must therefore discriminate between the various trends or forces which make up a given totality.

Williams’ taxonomical contribution to this hegemonic model specifically distinguishes between *dominant*, *residual* and *emergent* aspects of a culture. Thus, while dominant expressions are clearly placed at the core of the hegemonic formation, underpinning those elements in the specific practices of the ruling class which give it pre-eminence over other classes, alternative and even oppositional components of the culture must also be included in any general description of the social whole. A description of residual practices cannot be conflated or univocally identified with “archaic” expressions within the culture (that is, with those elements which are fully inscribed within a past articulation):

What I mean by the ‘residual’ is very different. The residual, by definition, has been effectively formed in the past, but is still active in the cultural process, not only and often not at all as an element of the past, but as an effective element of the present. Thus certain experiences, meanings, and values which cannot be expressed or substantially verified in terms of the dominant culture, are nevertheless lived and practised on the basis of the residue – cultural as well as social – of some previous social and cultural institution or formation. It is crucial to distinguish this aspect of the residual, which may have an alternative or even oppositional relation to the dominant culture, from that active manifestation of the residual (this being its distinction from the archaic) which has been wholly or largely incorporated into the dominant culture. (Williams 1977: 122)

Williams offers three characteristic examples in contemporary English culture to illustrate this double aspect of the residual: “organized religion”, for one, expresses an evidently residual dimension of advanced bourgeois culture, inherited from a past social formation and yet accommodated within dominant structures. However, its ambivalence rests on the combination of effectively counter-hegemonic – that is, alternative and sometimes even frankly oppositional – meanings and values (“absolute brotherhood, service to others without reward”) and those incorporated aspects (“official morality, or the social order of which the other-worldly is a separated neutralising or ratifying component” (Williams 1977: 122)) which reinforce the dominant set of meanings and values. Similarly, the idea and imagery of rural life can sometimes counterpose a logic of resistance to the forms of urban/industrial capitalism whilst simultaneously purveying a fanciful or escapist complementarity to the ruling order. The eminently archaic instance of the monarchy is finally given as an example of the controlling function which even such a scarcely oppositional expression can have (“marking the limits as well as the methods”) in a capitalist democracy. It is therefore the distinctive role of the residual to articulate whole areas of meaning rooted in some past totality as part of the present one “if the effective dominant culture is to make sense in these areas” (Williams 1977: 122-123).

On the other hand, the logic of emergence must attempt, for all the practical difficulties of doing so, to distinguish between those elements which, within a given culture, effectively signal the rise of a new social reality (i.e. those elements which, on account of their actual oppositionality, can be rigorously described as “emergent”), and those which merely indicate “some new phase of the dominant culture” (Williams 1977: 123). In that sense, a “new class is always a source of emergent cultural practice, but while it is still, as a class, relatively subordinate, this is always likely to be uneven and is certain to be incomplete” (Williams 1977: 124). Williams here hints at the classic Gramscian description of the proletariat (the emergent class in a capitalist society) as continuously forestalled in its revolutionary mission by the workings of hegemony. Thus, what characterises this class in Western societies (where civil society is strong, in contradistinction to, for example, pre-revolutionary Russian society) is its “corporate” character, that is, its effective subordination to the hegemonic articulation of reality promoted by the ruling class. The transformation of this class into a real agent of change necessarily requires, as its preliminary step, the conversion of its position in the hegemonic structure as a truly dominant force beyond the pitfalls of incorporation. By this last term, Williams means that operation which, as it were, defuses the transformative potential of any emergent social practice, re-inscribing it under the sign of dominance and closure:

Straight incorporation is most directly attempted against the visibly alternative and oppositional class elements: trade unions, working-class political parties, working-class life styles (as incorporated into ‘popular’ journalism, advertising, and commercial entertainment). The process of emergence, in such conditions, is then a constantly repeated, an always renewable, move beyond a phase of practical incorporation: usually made much more difficult by the fact that much incorporation looks like recognition, acknowledgement, and thus a form of *acceptance*. (Williams 1977: 125)

Cultural emergence therefore rests on the creation of real, systemic conditions of transformation: any truly emergent form must, in this sense, break through the inherited limitations of the hegemony beyond which it seeks to move. However, the emergent is not necessarily found in ready-made or directly accessible expressions – these are for the most part still subject to the logic of incorporation and thus tend to signpost novelty within the dominant set. On the contrary, effective emergent culture “is never only a matter of immediate practice”:

[I]t depends crucially on finding new forms or adaptations of form. Again and again what we have to observe is in effect a *pre-emergence*, active and pressing but not yet fully articulated, rather than the evident emergence which could be more confidently named. It is to understand more closely the condition of pre-emergence, as well as the more evident forms of the emergent, the residual, and the dominant, that we need to explore the concept of structures of feeling.” (Williams 1977: 126-127)

Williams' great theoretical innovation, the notion of *structure of feeling*, addresses the problematical tendency in cultural thinking to transmogrify the facts of social experience into the reified products of an impersonal observation. This self-defeating gesture typically engenders an analytical paralysis whereby "relationships, institutions and formations in which we are still actively involved are converted, by this procedural mode, into formed wholes rather than forming and formative processes." (Williams 1977: 128)

By contrast, an accurate description of cultural change within a given social totality and its hegemonic organisation must be attentive to the processual quality expressed in its practical consciousness: for it is here, in "what is actually being lived, and not only what it is thought is being lived" that the observable facts of social existence are found (Williams 1977: 131). The term "structure of feeling" aims, precisely, at a totalising and experiential – that is, non-reified – reconstruction of lived meanings and values as a particular historical reality organises them. Yet these are not reducible to formalised systems of belief or consciousness; on the contrary, the distribution is characteristically affective, and manifested in lived (and therefore fluctuating) forms of individual and trans-individual experience. As Williams points out, this cultural hypothesis is particularly relevant to descriptions concerning art and literature, for in these, social content is distributed in the peculiar mode of an affective, indirect and informal manner. As a result, structures of feeling "can be defined as social experiences *in solution*, as distinct from other social semantic formations which have been *precipitated* and are more evidently and more immediately available" (Williams 1977: 133-134).

One of the central contentions of *Marxism and Literature* was the need to interrogate, problematise and finally revoke the concepts of literature and criticism as they were hegemonically constituted in specialised discourse. As Williams put it in *Politics and Letters*: "[t]here would be absolutely no need to reject the concept of literature... if it still meant what it did in the Eighteenth century: a group of written works of a certain level of seriousness, capable of sustaining an attention that others could not." However, the real effects of specialisation, since the Nineteenth century, had generated a compartmentalised area of writing "secluded from the kinds of correlation with social reality which in principle were always there" (Williams 1979: 326). An associated consequence of this specialisation had been the obscuring of processes and modes of production and composition in other kinds of writing which were not procedurally dissimilar from those customarily acknowledged in the "reserved area" of literature.

Similarly, the established practice of criticism courts the danger of the dissolution of the real conditions of production of a particular text, making judgment of a specialised, so-called literary, kind a direct threat to any significant engagement with the actual historicity – the structure of feeling – of which the text partakes. Williams describes this argument as "a clearing operation" which is taking aim, beyond the kind of individualist-elitist criticism of a Leavis, at the "pseudo-impersonal attempt to judge works without any sense of the presence of the individual making a critical judgement" (Williams 1979: 335). The polemical target

is here primarily the New Criticism (“the immediate predecessor of structuralism”) and its claims on objectivity and exteriority from the judging process. However, Williams is adamant not to confine this general conceit of the critical operation to a particular school or tendency, but rather to situate it at the core of criticism proper qua specialized function of literature. His materialist counter-proposal calls for a re-connection or reinscription of judgment of this kind within its specific conditions of production. It is only by extending the analytical focus to the totality of relations which, in the first place, accommodate the critical function that an effective material account of the whole process (of production and reception) can be achieved:

Our response to writing does then become a much more extended practice than this quite extraordinarily privileged area in which the reader is put in the position of a judge, which I don’t think anybody can assume without damage. Criticism leads to the hypostatization of the critic *above* the process: making judgments *inside* the process, in the way people do in everyday contemporary argument, is a very different matter. (Williams 1979: 336)

This proposed inclusion of critical judgment of a non-specialised kind within the very process of textual production is central to a solid understanding of the cultural materialist project or, in other words, of Raymond Williams’ “mature” critical conjuncture in the 1970s.

REFERENCES

- ENTWISTLE, Harold (1979). *Antonio Gramsci: Conservative Schooling for Radical Politics*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- GOLDMANN, Lucien (1964). *Pour une Sociologie du Roman*. Paris: Gallimard.
- GOLDMANN, Lucien (1977). *Cultural Creation in Modern Society*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- MARTIN, James ed. (2002). *Intellectuals, Culture and the Party. Antonio Gramsci: Critical Assessments of Leading Political Philosophers*. London: Routledge.
- PORTELLI, Hugues (1972). *Gramsci et le bloc historique*. Paris: P.U.F.
- SIMON, Roger (1982). *Gramsci’s Political Thought: An Introduction*. London: Lawrence and Wishart.
- TUCKER, Robert C., ed. (1978). *The Marx-Engels Reader*. New York: W.W. Norton.
- WILLIAMS, Raymond (1977). *Marxism and Literature*. Oxford: O.U.P.
- WILLIAMS, Raymond (1979). *Politics and Letters*. London: New Left Books.
- WILLIAMS, Raymond (2005). *Culture and Materialism*. London and New York: Verso.
- WILLIAMS, Raymond (2005a). Literature and Sociology: In Memory of Lucien Goldmann. In WILLIAMS, Raymond, 11-30.
- WILLIAMS, Raymond (2005b). Base and Superstructure in Marxist Cultural Theory. In Williams, Raymond, 31-49.