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Why are Raymond Williams' discussions around culture relevant to the area of media theory?

Raymond Williams (1921-1988) was a Marxist theorist who concentrated on setting up cultural frameworks in order to investigate his theories.

His discussions broke away from the Marxist's focus on economics, believing that it inadequately accounted for contemporary culture, which he said was categorised by cultural exchanges.

Williams developed the idea of 'cultural materialism' in a series of books including – "*Culture and Society*" (1958), "*The Long Revolution*" (1961), and "*Marxism and Literature*" (1977).

Cultural Materialism relates to the 'Infrastructure', also known as the 'base structure', which according to Williams contained figures of authority such as the government and people at the heart of the economy, and the 'Superstructure', containing the more cultural aspects of life such as the arts, entertainment, and education.

According to Williams the superstructure was determined by the infrastructure, or in other words the things that people do outside of work are determined by the base structure. This causes conflict and according to Williams this is what drives society on. Communication is fundamental and everybody is born with the desire to communicate, Williams believed. He placed more emphasis on the way that the infrastructure determines the way that we communicate, rather than the traditional views of Marxist writers who concentrated on economic factors.

Williams also developed a 'dual approach', which claims that culture is either anthropological or artistic. The anthropological approach stated that culture is located in specific places, and that culture is different in different places.

An example of anthropological culture would be the things that we do in our spare time and the way that people speak will vary in different areas. To a certain extent, the things we do in our spare time are also affected by geography. For example in Cornwall many people spend spare time surfing, but it is not as easy to do this in London because the sea is some distance away. But Williams claims that the restraints placed on people in certain areas, from certain classes, and from different backgrounds prevent them from doing certain things. An example of this would be the government in England, who are essentially planning to price members of the 'lower' classes out of going to university – therefore restricting their progression in life. By introducing top-up-fees, the labour party in the United Kingdom are planning to restrict the level of education that individuals can achieve.

This will guarantee that the 'top brass' positions in all major corporations and political groups will always be filled by the bourgeoisie. Aspects of 'high culture', such as art, opera, literature etc. are usually connected with 'educated' people – the people that can truly understand and appreciate it because of their level of intelligence. This has created a certain level of acceptance whereby only people with a certain level of education will be accepted. Therefore, the base structure is dictating the entertainment that people seek in their spare time. He also called these people 'cultural elites'.

The second approach is artistic culture. This is based on the aesthetic values of life, such as the search for human affection through high culture. He believed that people were forever in search of the 'perfect moment', something that can be achieved by being able to appreciate these forms of entertainment. The perfect moment is the essence of culture.

*"culture is a state or process of human perfection....."*¹

Based on the above theories, Williams suggested a programme designed at getting more people involved in high culture, by bringing them up to level of intelligence whereby they can understand and appreciate it. He revealed this in the book 'The Long Revolution'. In this book he attempts to *"reinterpret and extend"*² the ideas put forward in his previous work, "Culture and Society", from his own experience in a society that was still changing. In "The long Revolution" Williams explains the world as he sees it, essentially suggesting a series of mechanical changes in peoples views, by proposing a programme of specific recommendations:

- Access to education

*"There are clear and obvious connections between the quality of a culture and the quality of a culture and the quality of it's system of education. In our own time we have settled to saying that the improvement of our culture is a matter of improving and extending our national education....."*³

- Dedicated programme concentrating on reading.

*"It is only in our own century that the regular reading even of newspapers has reached a majority of our people, and only in our own generation that the regular reading of books has reached a bare majority"*⁴

- Promote the use of standard English. Williams was irritated at the fact that as groups expand across islands, countries, continents, they develop different forms of language. For Williams believed that communication is fundamental and that everybody is born with the desire to communicate.

*"The very factor which gives the group its social cohesion can become the factor cutting it off, to an important extent from similar groups elsewhere"*⁵.

Williams said that if people were follow these three practices, the world would change. For example, people who didn't normally go to university would, and would get involved in organisations such as political groups and the media, areas that are traditionally dominated by the 'cultural elites'. This would mean that people from 'lesser' classes and backgrounds would get involved in politics, government and media groups, bringing different opinions and their own view of the world – increasing understanding of different cultures. This is why Williams refers to the revolution as a demographic one – bringing distanced groups together through cultural

¹ Williams, R, "The Long Revolution", Chatto & Windus, 1961, pg41

² Williams, R, "The Long Revolution", Chatto & Windus, 1961, pg 9

³ Williams, R, "The Long Revolution", Chatto & Windus, 1961, pg125

⁴ Williams, R, "The Long Revolution", Chatto & Windus, 1961, pg 156

⁵ Williams, R, "The Long Revolution", Chatto & Windus, 1961, pg 214

understanding. Their 'social being' would change, allowing people to become more involved in other forms of high culture. *"social being determines consciousness"*⁶

*"it is a genuine revolution, transforming men and institutions, continually extended and deepened by the acts of millions, continually and variously opposed by explicit reaction and by the pressure of habitual forms and ideas"*⁷

Williams designed four models that he believed were the possible types of state. Here I have related them to the media, showing for each model how the media would be run.

- Authoritarian - The media totally controlled by the political regime, all newspapers state approved. Television state controlled.
- Paternal - Media is designed to 'guide people to educate country'. This is based on Williams' opinion of the BBC, who's role is to inform, educate and entertain. It should expose people to art, literature, classical music etc, elevating people to certain level of standards.
- Commercial - Plurality of operators, media a 'booming' industry, 'free press'. In this case the BBC in the UK would have to change their role in educating the nation in order to compete with the sheer number of television operators, such is the case today.
- Democratic - William's proposal, there would be plurality in media operators but legislation would exist through the cultural and political elite, forcing media institutions to behave acceptably, and continue to educate. Creating a freedom of speech scenario to a certain extent, where more or less anyone can get involved and have their say.

The importance of communication in Williams theories mean that the media plays a huge role. A large amount of communication in today's society is through newspapers, television, film, the internet etc. As you can see from the four models above which are related to the media industry, the type of government, which can be affected by the long revolution that Williams proposes, will dictate the types of communication we can be part of, and the way in which we are communicated to.

For example if the base structure continues to determine the superstructure, the media industry would be controlled by the bourgeoisie who would continue to develop their 'own' people, with the lower classes not being educated enough to be able to appreciate what is being shown on television, played on the radio, or printed in the newspapers.

However, if the long revolution came into effect Williams' suggestion would mean that more education would be more widely accessible, people would be encouraged to read, and with the

⁶ Williams, R, "Problems in materialism and culture, a series of essays", pg31, "Base and Superstructure in Marxist Cultural theory"

⁷ Williams, R, "The Long Revolution", Chatto & Windus, 1961, pg 10

promotion of 'proper' English, communication to people within the higher classes, whom have developed a separate version of English to the lower classes, would become less complicated. With these processes put into practice, people from lower classes will go to university and be able to gain positions in authority and the media. These people, from different backgrounds would then go on to produce their own forms of communication which will be influenced by their own experiences, in turn developing a more plural media industry, allowing more people to continue their search for that 'perfect moment'.

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