education review
a journal of book reviews

Volume 11 Number 6 **September 17, 2008**

Raymond Williams and the Roots of Critical Cultural Studies in Education: An Essay Review

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Smith, Dai. (2008). ***Raymond Williams: A Warrior's Tale.*** **Cardigan, Wales: Parthian Books.**

Pp. 514 **ISBN 978-1-905762-56-9**

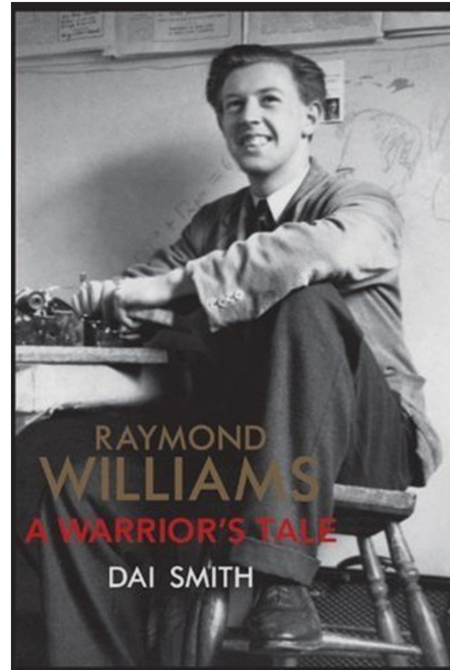
Citation: Apple, Michael. (2008, September 17).Raymond Williams and the roots of critical cultural studies in education: An essay review. *Education Review, 11*(6). Retrieved [date] from http://edrev.asu.edu/essays/v11n6index.html

The growth of critical analyses of the relationship between knowledge and power in education over the last three-four decades has its roots not only in the United States, with the centuries' long struggles by oppressed groups to have their cultures, histories, and knowledge represented in "official knowledge." It also owes a debt to specific people outside our borders. This is not an insignificant point. In a time of nativist impulses and a "go it alone" set of national and international policies, it actually is rather salutary for educators in the United States to recognize their intellectual debts to the efforts of people outside our borders.

In critical education, there are clear examples of this in the ways the work of Paulo Freire is drawn upon—although unfortunately he is often used by the wielders of Paulo's name for legitimacy and as a set of political slogans that sometimes masks the lack of overt organic connections both with the realities of education on the ground and

with the cultural struggles of oppressed people. This issue of political disconnect is something to which I shall have occasion to mention again later on in this essay.

But there are others besides Freire to whom critical educators have looked, especially those for whom the intricate connections between culture and power are a guiding set of issues. Among the most significant scholar/activists in this regard was the British (actually Welsh) cultural analyst and critic Raymond Williams. In books such as *Culture and Society* (1958), *The Long Revolution* (1961), *The Country and the City* (1973), *Keywords* (1976), *Marxism and Literature* (1977), and many more, he provided a powerful re-reading of the historical and contemporary politics of what he called "the selective tradition." In the process, he gave critical work in and on cultural institutions such as schools, museums, and the media essential tools to engage in the uncovering of some the most complex inter-connections among cultural form and content, differential power and access, and the class realities of our societies. While Williams's focus was consistently on class relations, his work had a major impact on issues surrounding race and gender as well. Indeed, a good deal of what we now call cultural studies in general can be partly traced to his initial efforts.



To anyone who has read some of my own work, especially the earlier efforts in, say, *Ideology and Curriculum* (Apple 1979/2004) and *Education and Power* (1982/1995), the influence of Williams is clear. When I first read his work while still a graduate student in the late 1960s, it was transformative. *The Long Revolution* in particular had a profound impact on me and many others. Its analysis of the ways in which the struggles of "ordinary people" to win schooling that was respectful, to democratize the media, to redefine literacy and to challenge hegemonic apparatuses in general—all of this provided a much more subtle and less reductive picture of the nature and power of agency and cultural and social movements. It also gave many of us reasons for least partial optimism in a time when particular quasi-Marist understandings told us that cultural struggles inside and outside of schools were basically epiphenomenal and had little lasting power and effects. One can trace the more nuanced understandings of social movements, of "ordinary actors," of the importance of the ideological and the cultural in the formation of movements and identities to work by Williams and others during that period of time.

Understanding this history is significant for a number of reasons. First, there has been something of a loss of collective memory, even among those of us who call ourselves "radical, "critical," and/or "progressive." The gains that were made in countering the reductive and essentializing tendencies within critical scholarship in education are weakening or even being lost, often substituted for by rhetorical slogans and a supposed return to political and ideological "purity" (or by language systems that seem –if you will forgive the use of a somewhat masculinist metaphor—needlessly impenetrable). Second, not only is this a fundamental misreading of, for example, the Marxist and neo-Marxist *traditions* (the plural is absolutely essential); but it can too often lead to the weakest kind of tactical and strategic understanding of what is possible and necessary in a time of rightist hegemonic power. It misrecognizes the significance of social and cultural movements and struggles inside and outside of schools and other similar institutions (Anyon, 2005). Also, the rhetorical call for a "return" to political and ideological purity is often exactly that—rhetorical. It substitutes a set of slogans for the difficult task of building what I have elsewhere called a "decentered unity" among progressive groups, something that is so necessary in a time when the Right has organized across its differences in ways that demonstrate how cultural, economic, and political movements and tendencies can compromise and work together (Apple, 2006; 2000).

This is one of the reasons for instance that Nancy Fraser's efforts to show the importance of *both* a politics of redistribution and a politics of recognition—and to try to ensure that they do not contradict each other--are seen as important (Fraser, 1997). Though somewhat taxonomic, her analysis does point to a way out of the debate between, for example, structural and poststructural positions that have become all too common within the multiple critical traditions in educational theory and politics. And it is one of the reasons why Wayne Au, Luis Gandin, and I, for example, have tried as hard as we could to give a more respectful and clearer picture of the range of the theoretical/methodological/political movements and tendencies within the critical traditions (and once again the plural is crucial) in our recent volume, *Routledge International Handbook of Critical Education* (Apple, Au, and Gandin, 2009).

This need to recognize the contributions of a politics of both redistribution and recognition—and how both can be employed to understand the growth of rightist policies and practices in education and the larger society and how these movements can be interrupted--is something about which I have talked at greater length in *Educating the "Right" Way*, and especially in the recent and much enlarged second edition (Apple, 2006). As I have argued, those of us who are within the critical education communities are not in a church, so we should not be worried about heresy. Given this, one of my major points again is that there is great risk in forgetting the gains that were made in our

understanding of the inter-relationships among what have been called the economic, political, and cultural spheres.

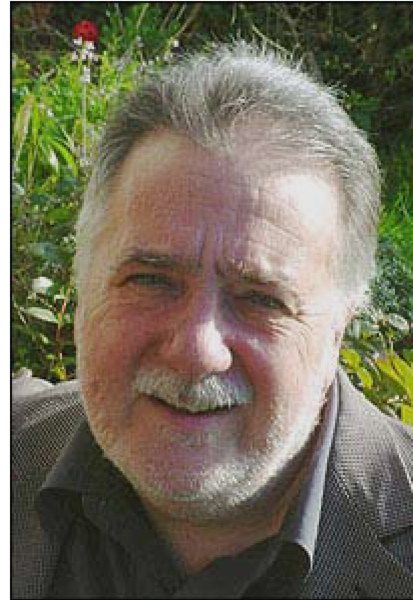
Concepts such as "hegemony" and "counter-hegemony," "relative autonomy," "good sense and bad sense," "identity," "official knowledge," "cultural politics," and many, many others were developed to be used to solve particular problems in our attempt to understand what was and was not possible in education and in the larger society. In essence, they are reflections of the decades-long larger debates over what the status of culture and consciousness is, over whether educational and cultural struggles can make a difference in society in lasting and powerful ways, over whether the only thing educators can do is wait for economic transformations before we can have a real impact. These concepts have too often now been stripped of their genesis in these larger debates and at times seem to be employed in relatively sloppy ways. This is a distinct pity not only because it has a limiting effect on their analytic usefulness, but also because it makes it even easier for the Right to say that they engage in "neutral" research, while the left simply confirms its own ideology. The former claim is wildly inaccurate of course. The latter claim is also certainly overstated in the extreme, but it may need to be taken a bit more seriously than we are apt to do I fear (Apple, et al. 2003; Apple and Buras, 2006).

All of what I have just said points to one of the major reasons that I think that returning to Raymond Williams's work is more than a little useful. He spent a good deal of his life trying to answer questions about the relations between culture and economy, about the lives of "ordinary people" and what counts as high status culture, about how the distinctions between "worthy" people and "worthy" knowledge solidified class relations, and how cultural distinctions that (some) people accept as commonsense mask the tense and antagonistic struggles that organize and disorganize a society. Along with others such as Pierre Bourdieu (1984), Basil Bernstein (1977), Lucian Goldman (1976), and the list could go on to include many others, he set the stage for a radical and insightful interrogation of the form and content of the cultural assemblage of unequal societies like our own. And he was compelling as a writer in doing this in ways that influenced entire generations of critical work in education, literature, cultural theory, and many other areas.

Williams was from Wales—a center of working class and socialist political and cultural activism. His roots in working class life and in the struggles over what Nancy Fraser (1997) has so nicely called a politics of redistribution and a politics of recognition that I mentioned earlier are evident in the entire corpus of work that he completed. Perhaps because I too come from similar roots and from an often impoverished but deeply political family, this may partly explain why he had such an impact on me. The fact that I am also from a family of printers and worked my way through night school as an undergraduate while working as a printer during the day may also provide other reasons for my very positive reactions to Williams's writings. Printing was among the

most radical crafts and was a center of working class radical literacy practices. Thus, both Williams's biography and writing made sense to me in particular ways. But this cannot be a full explanation. Many people all over the world who came from very different backgrounds found in his writing and in his life compelling critical analyses and political and cultural strength.

As Dai Smith shows, Raymond Williams was a "scholarship boy," ultimately winning entrance to one of the more elite universities in England where he studied English literature, became a film critic, and was active in political mobilizations. Interestingly enough, much of his career was devoted to adult education, especially the education of working class men and women, and he was never totally comfortable with an "academic life." This undoubtedly resonated as well with many critical educators, and critical cultural scholars in general, who have deeply ambivalent relations with being at institutions that are filled with contradictions about whose knowledge is valued, who is admitted to study it, and how "minorities," women, and working class groups have historically been treated (or often marginalized).



Dai Smith

Although there are a number of critical analyses of Williams's analytic corpus of work and of the relationship between his life and this work (see for example, O'Connor, 1989; Dworkin & Roman, 1993; and especially Inglis, 1995. See also, Eagleton, 1976), Smith's biography has devoted much more of its attention to the personal. It traces out Williams's early family and childhood experiences well. He follows Williams through elementary and secondary school and then on to university life, where the political and academic worlds he inhabited had both complementary and contradictory relations to each other. Smith had access to a large amount of personal and archival material and unpublished writing that were made accessible to him. This enables him to paint a much more nuanced picture of Williams as a person and as a writer.

While I found the detailed nature of Smith's account more than a little useful, the book may be too detailed for some United States readers who may be less interested in such biographical information and more concerned with Williams's specific arguments about culture and power.

Yet, for me, these details provide a sense of the roots, continuities, and conceptual/historical/political breaks and contradictions that led to the positions that made his work so influential. While not everything in an author's production can be reduced to the workings out of her or his biography, knowing these details makes an

author's claims—and why they resonated with so many people—more understandable. The book's portrait of the personal, financial, intellectual, and political tensions that Williams experienced not only humanizes him, but makes him a recognizable figure. This may not have been Smith's conscious intention, but he has succeeded in showing Williams as someone who went through very similar kinds of things as many committed scholar/activists may be experiencing today when they too try to live their values at the same time as they deal with family, with institutional and writing demands, with the depredations of neoliberal and neoconservative attacks on education and on the entire public sphere, with tensions with friends and colleagues, and with the compelling nature of political commitments and mobilizations. Williams was not always perfect in this regard. But though we all try, who is?

The author has made a choice to include significant sections of Williams's published and unpublished work. Large chunks of the novels Williams wrote are present, linked to his background in Wales, to his family history, and to his political and cultural commitments. The fact that Smith has excerpted from a number of Williams's unpublished work—many of his novels never saw the light of day—gives us a glimpse of the frustrated artist, poet, and screen writer that may not be visible to those of us who know Raymond Williams only through his powerful critical analyses of cultural politics. At times, the excerpts seem too much, too long. But by sticking to Williams's texts and giving us detailed descriptions and explanations of what may have lay behind them, the connections between Williams's biography and history in working class Wales, in school, in Cambridge, as an adult educator, and in political movements are made considerably clearer than were visible before.

The book stops mid-point in his career. Thus, crucial volumes such as *Marxism and Literature* and the reasons behind their writing are not present. Williams's more overtly political and "popular" writings on hope and possibilities that he wrote later in his career are not included. Yet, Williams was among the very best in pointing out not only the dangers that we faced (and still face), but also the ways in which we might organize and act. In books such as *The Year 2000* (1983) and *Resources of Hope* (1989), he argued against quiescence and cynicism, saw the potential in ecological movements and in new social movements that were growing in importance throughout the world, and challenged us to eschew the mantra of T.I.N.A. ("There is no alternative") in the environment, in the economy, in the control of culture and the media, and in so much else. Reading these later books in particular is to encounter once again someone whose voice was—and remains today—a powerful reminder of how to write as an engaged scholar.

Raymond Williams: A Warrior's Tale provides a rich sense of the experiences of William's life and environments. It nicely captures his frustrations over novels published and unpublished and over the task of writing and publishing in general. With these

strengths, however, there were elements that could have been given greater attention. The specifics and elegance of Williams's *theoretical and political* interventions are treated, but not in a manner that demonstrates the radical break that he was constantly moving toward. The works are described; the steady movement away from more traditional understandings of and grounding in "great literature" are pointed to, as is his lifelong commitment to the cause of working class literacy and to the uses of literature to assist "ordinary" men and women in a more profound understanding of their own lives. (And here, his similarities to Gramsci's position on the role of "elite knowledge" are worth more attention; see, for example, my discussion of this in Apple, 1996.) But the ways in which this began to contribute to a world-wide critical debate over the relationship among culture, class relations and antagonisms, economic reductionism, and political/educational possibilities is somewhat muted.

In some ways, saying this may be unfair to Dai Smith. This was not his central task. What he has given us is a personal life, richly portrayed. But Williams's interventions into debates that had been raging for decades made him a commanding international figure. Reading later works such as *Marxism and Literature* is to enter into the contested terrain of the relationship between base and superstructure, how we think about ideology and hegemony, the role of struggles over culture as transformative social elements, and much more. It is to enter into a terrain populated not only by Williams but by such crucial figures as Gramsci, Althusser, and E. P. Thompson. People such as E. P. Thompson, Eric Hobsbawm, Stuart Hall, and others are mentioned. Their personal relations with Raymond Williams are noted and this is indeed interesting. But the intensity of the analytic and political debates and the relation to their contributions to the formation of this contested terrain are never developed quite enough.

All of these figures, even when they were not always in agreement on politics and on how power worked, forced us to take account of complexity, of cultural form and content, of identity, of lived experience and how it is formed out of the material and ideological contexts of daily life. All of them were strongly opposed, in their own ways, to the reductive and essentializing tendencies that have weakened critical traditions in the past. How Williams began to move toward intervening in these larger debates in his later life and the impact these interventions so clearly had would have been worth pointing to. This is of particular importance if Dai Smith continues his efforts and works toward writing a second volume on Williams's later life and work, as I very much hope he will. I am looking forward to that volume—and to what I hope will be a return to some of the foundational volumes that helped set us on a path that continues to this day by members of the critical educational studies community who are justifiably concerned with the complex connections between knowledge and power. Williams can help us think through our responsibilities as researchers and activists. He remains a truly valuable resource as a scholar and as a person.

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