
LANGUAGE

“When I Hear the Word ‘Culture’ . . .”

From Arnold to Anthropology—By ROGER SANDALL

FOR MORE THAN a hundred years anthropology has been spreading sweetness and light. And now that the results are in—now that even the strangest customs from the remotest deserts and forests have been recognised and accepted as truly human and truly natural—it is plain that the popular verdict on anthropology’s first century has been an enthusiastic assent. Its ethical understandings are widely regarded as benign. Its politics have been found as congenial to the liberal imagination as they are to the radical mind. Its broader implications have been received with interest by a wide range of people who have gladly melded its doctrines with their own. And if there is any one thing which explains this widely accepted congeniality and appeal it is the persuasive conception of culture which anthropology has bestowed upon the world.

No other notion has proved so irresistible. It beguiled T. S. Eliot thirty years ago, while the tactical advantages it had to offer (and which Eliot inadvertently advertised) soon drew the attention of Raymond Williams. It made its most explosive literary impact in Sir Charles Snow’s declaration that “the scientific culture really is a culture, not only in an intellectual but also in an anthropological sense”, and it received its most subtle literary interpretation in Lionel Trilling’s essay warn-

ing against the excesses of “the cultural mode of thought.” It helped to provide a rationale for some of the arguments of Frantz Fanon, while the same cultural relativism which fortified Fanon now encourages Paul Feyerabend to claim that science and witchcraft are more similar than university men had previously dared suppose.¹ It has been reported that for 62 years after its introduction into English in Sir Edward Burnett Tylor’s book *Primitive Culture* (1871), and for 40 years after the first edition of the Oxford English Dictionary, the anthropological meaning of “culture” was not admitted to the *OED*, and the narrower and consciously exclusive use common in the humanities—the Arnoldian use which Raymond Williams finds “hostile” and “embarrassing” and which he is now pleased to see eclipsed—was much more popular. But all this is truly a thing of the past. There is now no longer any need for anthropologists to feel “humble in estimating the tempo of their influence.”

Today the anthropological conception of culture reigns supreme.

The evidence is abundant—as any regular reader of *ENCOUNTER* knows. Quite aside from the argument presented by C. P. Snow, the distinctively anthropological plural form in the very title of that celebrated piece twenty years ago, *The Two Cultures*, in itself announced a change, and since then both plurals and compounds have multiplied apace. Not long ago in these pages we saw what was once simply described as despotism appearing in a political discussion of *despotic cultures*, a phrasing which more adequately conveyed the enduring incorrigibility the author had in mind.² From a different source and a different quarter, blindness and inertia have been proposed as “cultural” features of our political life by Alasdair MacIntyre: there are some things, he said recently, which “our *political culture* cannot allow us to admit.”³ Again, what we had become inured to as a kind of treacherous waywardness endemic in intellectual life, “the alienation of the intelligentsia”, now receives, as *adversary culture*, a formulation at once more menacing, more systematic, and more fixed.⁴

¹ Lionel Trilling, “The Leavis-Snow Controversy”, in *Beyond Culture* (1966). Frantz Fanon, “Racism and Culture”, in *Toward the African Revolution* (1970). Paul Feyerabend, *Against Method* (1975). In the second of last year’s Herbert/Spencer Lectures, delivered at the University of Oxford on 2 November 1979, Hilary Putnam of Harvard, alluding to Feyerabend and to T. S. Kuhn, described the relativistic “cultural norms” approach derived ultimately from anthropology as one of the two most influential paradigms in contemporary philosophy of science.

² Robert Conquest, “The Role of the Intellectual in International Misunderstanding”, *ENCOUNTER*, August 1978.

³ Alasdair MacIntyre, “Alasdair MacIntyre claims that new dark ages are impending”, *The London Review of Books*, 20 December 1979.

⁴ Irving Kristol, “The Adversary Culture of the Intellectuals”, *ENCOUNTER*, October 1979.

These usages are generally pessimistic in tone and meaning. But the anthropological conception of culture easily lends itself to more happily optimistic interpretations too. *Business culture*, for example, attractively glosses the cash nexus. An editorial in *The Times* for 22 November 1979 concerning the intellectual ambience of the Cambridge Apostles tells us that “theirs was a largely *homosexual culture*, with necessary dependence on ties of friendship”, and one feels that in this case the word culture confers a fraternal benevolence and a sense of belonging which the depiction of mere sexual idiosyncrasy would lack. After the Bristol riot of April 1980 a 15-year-old girl offered the explanation that “the police don’t understand the way we live. They’ve got their culture, we’ve got ours.” In this analysis the “two cultures” of the police and the rioters are regarded as if they were on a par. Each is incompatible, irreducible, and is somehow envisaged as having a legitimacy which transcends mere national law. Or to take another example, while the man in the street probably regards drug addiction as just another unfortunate social ill, *drug culture* helps him to see matters in a much more sanguine light. Deserving neither excoriation nor even discouragement, drug culture is something which plainly requires a compassionate infrastructure of institutionalised concern.

ALL OF WHICH should make one thing fairly clear. And this is that what has now passed into public understanding and general use as the anthropological conception of culture is not quite the innocently “descriptive” term which its academic connections might suggest. If in even its most comical associations it can be used to legitimise and redeem (*punk culture*, a gift from sociology, comes to mind); if its ideological “holism” was as attrac-

tive to Eliot as it was useful to Raymond Williams; if a phrase like *despotic culture* can make despotism seem rather worse than it did before, and a revolution on behalf of culture can make revolution sound rather better (nobler, more deeply necessary than economic or political necessity itself)⁵; if it directly suggests a normative order which is self-sufficient, and which is proudly upheld by its members in terms of *Mein Kultur* right or wrong—then it’s fairly obvious that the anthropological conception of culture in general use is a lively verbal weapon which either blames or praises just as often as it neutrally describes.⁶

YET THIS IS WIDELY denied. In A. L. Kroeber and Clyde Kluckhohn’s *Culture*,⁷ the most authoritative professional survey of the term culture and its meanings carried out by anthropologists to date, it is implied throughout that whatever else it may be or do or mean (and some 130 possibilities are supplied) a characteristic which distinguishes the anthropological conception is that it is neutral, non-evaluative, and scientific. It is only the humanistic conception which commends, judges, and prescribes. And much the same distinction can be found in the most erudite and authoritative writings in both literature and the fine arts. Directly addressing this question in his *In Search of Cultural History* (1969), Sir Ernst Gombrich notes that

“the usage of anthropologists exemplified by Burnett Tylor. . . has spread to social scientists, especially on the other side of the Atlantic. In this *sterilised meaning* it has come into vogue again in such terms as ‘working-class culture’ or even C. P. Snow’s ‘two cultures’ of unhappy memory. These are *purely descriptive terms*, stripped, it is often claimed, of any so-called ‘value judgement’ . . .” (My italics)

⁵ “President Bani-Sadr of Iran yesterday proclaimed the start of a Cultural Revolution. He gave notice that he would mobilise the masses against anyone who threatened ‘the oneness and unity’ of the country after a night of violence between left-wing students and Muslim fundamentalists at Teheran University. . . . Inside the now heavily guarded university, the President said the meaning of the Cultural Revolution was that he was able to ask the 36 million people of Iran to defend the unity of their country.” *The Guardian*, 23 April 1980, p. 6.

⁶ A detailed sociological study of some of the matters mentioned here may be found in J. P. Merquior’s “Remarks on the Theory of Culture”, in his *The Veil and The Mask* (Routledge, 1979).

⁷ A. L. Kroeber and Clyde Kluckhohn, *Culture: a Critical Review of Concepts and Definitions*, Papers, Peabody Museum of American Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University, Vol. 47, 1952. OED’s Kroeber and Kluckhohn’s assertion regarding the delayed entry of the anthropological meaning is not strictly true, as one may find in definition number 5 of the entry under *culture* in Vol. 2, Part 2 of *The New English*

Dictionary (1893)—later and more familiarly “the OED”:

“5. The training, development, and refinement of mind, tastes, and manners . . .”

This is appropriately illustrated by Arnold’s “the acquainting ourselves with the best that has been known and said in the world”, and the other examples all fit the definition. At this point, however, serious trouble begins. Under 5b we have a definition closely related to (5) above for which the examples given are strikingly unsuited, and which are in fact anthropological:

“5b (with *a* and *pl.*) 1867 *Freeman Norm. Cong.* (1876) I. iv. 150 A language and culture which was wholly alien to them. 1891 *Spectator* 27 June, Speaking all languages, knowing all cultures, living among all races.”

It is surely clear that what both Freeman and the author of the piece in the *Spectator* meant had little or nothing to do with the refinement of mind, tastes, and manners, but instead denoted a *social form*. Somewhat surprisingly, this does not appear to have been recognised by those who wrote the original entry in the dictionary.

One detects a certain hesitation. The deliberate “it is claimed” in the last sentence suggests, perhaps, that Gombrich is not entirely convinced by such arguments—and may even feel somewhat ambivalent about the matter. If this is so, such ambivalence would be fully justified. After all, it is precisely because Snow’s use of the anthropological concept was anything but “sterilised”, was in fact correctly seen to be a claim on behalf of the Sciences to an equal legitimacy and prestige in the affairs of the nation as a whole, that it provoked such a fiery response from F. R. Leavis. Yet in setting down his opinion that this anthropological meaning of culture is somehow, despite all, *sterilised* and *value-free*, Gombrich is expressing a view which is regularly found in literature and the arts. In the case of Eliot, G. H. Bantock found a continual wavering between descriptive and prescriptive usages.⁸ And when, in 1972, Bernard Bergonzi discussed the *Notes towards the Definition of Culture*, he identified one of the main sources of confusion in similar terms.⁹ The troubles of Eliot’s arguments derived from his ambiguous use of two mutually exclusive meanings, the Anthropological-Descriptive and the Arnoldian-Evaluative:

“In principle, he is concerned with culture in the broad or anthropological sense, rather than the narrow or Arnoldian sense: that is to say, the



whole way of life of a society, all its inherited manners, customs, and styles of living; as opposed to ‘the best that has been thought and said’ and the cultivation of the fine arts. In practice, however, Eliot slides from one sense of culture to another in a quite disconcerting way. The anthropological use of the word is *descriptive and value-free*. . . .” (My italics)

Close inspection of the *Notes* suggests that more than merely this may be involved. Yet a sliding from sense to sense is certainly part of the problem, and in the very passage where T. S. Eliot’s commitment to anthropology is most explicit¹⁰ (the second half of the paragraph below, starting at *Now* . . .) there is a perfect example of what Bergonzi has in mind.

“By ‘culture’, then, I mean first of all what the anthropologists mean: the way of life of a particular people—living together in one place. That culture is made visible in their arts, in their social system, in their habits and customs, in their religion. But these things added together do not constitute the culture, though we often speak for convenience as if they did. These things are simply the parts into which a culture can be anatomised, as a human body can. But just as a man is something more than the assemblage of the various constituent parts of his body, so a culture is more than the assemblage of its arts, customs, and religious beliefs. These things all act upon each other, and fully to understand one you have to understand all. *Now there are of course higher cultures and lower cultures, and the higher cultures in general are distinguished by differentiation of function, so that you can speak of the less cultured and the more cultured strata of society, and finally, you can speak of individuals as being exceptionally cultured. The culture of an artist or a philosopher is distinct from that of a mine worker or field labourer. . . but in a healthy society these are all parts of this same culture; and the artist, the poet, the philosopher, the politician and the labourer will have a culture in common, which they do not share with other people of the same occupations in other countries.*” (My italics)

Where else have those little words *now* and *so* been used too ambitiously? Yet if one allows for the fact that no modern anthropologist sensitive to his students’ expectations (or to their moral stares) would be found speaking of “higher” or “lower” cultures in quite this way, the statement that “the higher cultures in general are distinguished by

⁸ G. H. Bantock, *T. S. Eliot and Education* (1970).

⁹ Bernard Bergonzi, *T. S. Eliot* (1972), p. 156.

¹⁰ T. S. Eliot, *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture* (1948), p. 124.

differentiation of function" is an unexceptionable sociological commonplace. Where the real trouble starts is with the *non sequitur* ominously heralded by "so":

"so that you can speak of the less cultured and the more cultured strata of society, and finally, you can speak of individuals as being exceptionally cultured."

No doubt you *can* speak of such things, but it makes little sense to do so. There is, alas, only a tenuous connection between "what the anthropologists mean" by their descriptive *higher cultures* and what the Arnoldians mean by varying degrees of prescriptive personal *cultivation*. The first is a necessary, but certainly not a sufficient condition, of the second. Indeed, the very suggestion that it could be anything more might have provoked from Ortega y Gasset a rather sinister laugh, for the differentiation which Eliot finds in the "higher cultures" is only specialisation under another name; and such specialisation, Ortega argued long ago, was precisely what made impossible the "exceptional cultivation" of individuals which Eliot admired.¹¹

ALL OF WHICH clearly illustrates Eliot's tendency to blur and to blend the descriptive and prescriptive meanings. Yet it is not the second half of the paragraph, where this occurs, which mainly interests Bernard Bergonzi. In his analysis he quotes only the first half, up until the turn of thought signalled by *now*. His chief concern is Eliot's endorsement of "what the anthropologists mean" as it continues through an anatomy of the parts of the social body, down to the suggestion that the chief virtue of a system of art, customs, and religion is that it live and operate as a self-sufficient organic whole.

What exactly is one to make of all this? Bergonzi rightly sees that a crudely binary either/or (*either* Eliot is talking about Anthropological description or he is talking about Arnoldian prescription) does little to explain "holistic or organicist" views of this kind. Is there, he wonders, a third and different sense of culture which Eliot has all-too-vaguely in mind?

This seems to be the only conclusion one can draw. In passages like the anatomical one quoted, leading directly to an endorsement of organic social wholes, Bergonzi tells us that Eliot appears to be "attempting to move toward a third sense of culture

which will go beyond the other two." Yet because it is "the other two" which must be used to explain this mysterious third sense, and because this is something they are clearly unable to do, it is Eliot who is said to be confused. He is, we are told, "aware of the ambiguity"—i.e., between description and prescription—"though the subtleties and circumlocutions of his prose do little to resolve it." These ambiguities then reach some sort of climax in "an extraordinarily tortured paragraph" on the subject of the unity of culture and religion, "a passage [which] illustrates the frequent tendency in Eliot's prose for meanings to collapse and merge into each other as a result of excessive qualification. . ." and which helps to demonstrate, for Bergonzi, that "Eliot's notion of culture as the incarnation of religion is not wholly intelligible."¹²

One must agree that it isn't intelligible—at least, not in the terms supplied. But if we firmly set aside the either/or of the more neutral usages of science on the one hand, and of Matthew Arnold on the other—if we concentrate instead upon the conception of culture which has come down so little changed from Johann Gottfried von Herder (and was so lucidly expounded by Isaiah Berlin¹³)—and if we bear in mind Herder's highly "evaluative" notion that each distinctive culture is to be prized and valued as a self-sufficient totality, a totality embodied in its language, its arts, and its religion, so that "in order to understand one you have to understand all"—then what Eliot is saying presents no difficulty. It may also help to listen to the voices of the mullahs in the Holy City of Qom, whose arguments on behalf of "Islamic culture" serve now to justify theocratic rule—not to mention examples from even further afield.

For instance, if one attends to the contemporary rhetoric of Black Ethnicity in places like Australia, then not only is "the notion of culture as the incarnation of religion" wholly intelligible, but it becomes very hard to distinguish from the notion of culture which has become one of the more persuasive political doctrines in the world today. Strange though it may seem, when the philo-European Eliot writes that "there is an aspect in which we can see a religion as *the whole way of life of a people*, from birth to grave, from morning to night and even in sleep, and that way of life is also its culture", his sentiments would be warmly applauded along Australia's Arnhem Land and Queensland coasts. What is more, the word often used by Aboriginal political leaders in these areas is the English word "culture", and it is used with the political meanings deriving from German Romanticism. It serves to defend the uniqueness of tribal life against the assaults of civilisation: culture is invoked against the mining engineers, the sacredness of rocks and lagoons is asserted against the jaws of the excavators and the bulldozer's steel blades, by a

¹¹ Not that Eliot failed to notice this problem in other contexts. He gives much attention to it when criticising "the departmentalisation of elites." T. S. Eliot, *Notes . . .*, p. 36.

¹² Bernard Bergonzi, *T. S. Eliot*, pp. 157–59.

¹³ Isaiah Berlin, *Vico and Herder* (1976).

people who have discovered both the terminology and the ideological force of the "cultural mode of thought."

THIS MAY SEEM surprising—but *Kulturgeschichte* is evidently full of surprises. And the juxtaposition of Eliot's thinking with the political language of Aboriginal leaders in Australia today will only seem strange to those who have never noticed a minor but significant element in his thought.

"What the anthropologists mean" by culture often led him to idealise the possibilities of tribal life. This is especially true of *The Idea of a Christian Society*, a book written in 1939 in direct response to what he saw as the totalitarian tribalism then threatening Europe. The answer which he proposed was a kind of Christian primitivism, a "positive culture" which would above all be *unitary*. "The unitary community should be religious-social . . . a state of affairs which is no longer wholly realised except in very primitive tribes indeed." Again,

"without sentimentalising the life of the savage, we might practise the humility to observe, in some of the societies upon which we look down as primitive and backward, the operation of a social-religious-artistic complex which we should emulate upon a higher plane."

To Eliot, in 1939, the alternatives facing England were dire—totalitarianism; or a pitiful, apathetic decline. And to those repelled by such a prospect he said:

"one can only assert that the only possibility of control and balance is a religious control and balance; that the only hopeful course for a society which could thrive and continue its creative activity in the arts of civilisation, is to become Christian. That prospect involves, at least, discipline, inconvenience and discomfort: but here as hereafter the alternative to hell is purgatory."¹⁴

Whether or not Herder himself would have endorsed this final analysis is uncertain. But there can be little doubt that if only the name of the religious faith were changed, few in the Holy City of Qom would disagree.

SUBTLE MINDS may well object to all this. It will be said that several clearly distinguishable

¹⁴ T. S. Eliot, *The Idea of a Christian Society* (1939), pp. 29–30, 62, 23–24.

¹⁵ There is a loose correspondence between these distinctions and those made by Quentin Skinner in his "The Idea of a Cultural Lexicon", *Essays in Criticism*, July 1979.

things are being hopelessly mixed: that the anthropological *concept* of culture is one thing, and the *term* which expresses it is quite another; that the varying *concrete reference* of the term must also be taken into account, and that whether or not anyone uses the term for this or that *ideological purpose* is an entirely separate matter yet again.¹⁵ To some extent I agree. The term culture is but a clue to the wider subject of the concept itself. Still, it's the best clue we have. And what does seem remarkable is the stability of the concept and its ideological use over the past 200 years, so that what Herder was talking about would be instantly understood by political leaders today (and in some cases would not even need translation) whether they lived in northern Australia or in Teheran.

Others may also object to the suggestion that the ideological mode of culture theory owes anything to anthropology. It is of course true that professional usage is ordinarily neutral. When Clifford Geertz tells us that "the concept of culture I espouse . . . is essentially a semiotic one", there is no reason to think that the attachment to his "spouse" involves more than the conditional loyalty owed to any explanatory scheme. And though it is also true that the minds of a whole generation of Americans who read anthropological popularisations were shaped and kneaded (or Benedict and Meaded) by relativistic theory, it might still be argued that this has nothing to do with culture as faith and doctrine. According to this view the real origin of the ideological use of the term in the West was in another time, another place, and another country.

It was in Germany around the time of World War I that *Kultur* was being loudly promoted as the German alternative to "civilisation"—*Kultur* being warm, populist, and creative, both the prime source of identity and a linguistically unique possession of the chosen *Volk*; civilisation (on which the French and the English seemed to have a hold) being cold, arrogant, and paralysing, a universal misfortune propagated by rootless polyglots.

No doubt there is something to this argument. Yet an inquiry into the ideological use of the term culture—of *culturism*, so to speak—besides leading back to German Romanticism, tends to strengthen rather than weaken the anthropological connection. And it is surprising how shy Kroeber and Kluckhohn were about discussing such matters. Their tone and manner when they dealt with *Kultur und Schrecklichkeit* was itself revealing. It was with an air almost of pained surprise that they found themselves having to admit that in the invectives of the dispute over *Kultur* and civilisation "the word culture had a popular meaning essentially identical to that with which anthropologists use it." What this points to is that the

“sterilised, purely descriptive” meaning which is so popularly regarded as *the* anthropological sense of the word is in fact a somewhat insecure latecomer. It is a latecomer, moreover, precariously derived from a very powerful and active ideological conception which social science has tried—rather somnambulistically, one feels—to pacify, to neutralise, and to disarm. The success of this manoeuvre is constantly threatened, and the actively ideological potential of the term culture is ever ready to revive, whenever the neutral mode of usage is not stiffened by the professional discipline of anthropology or sustained by the ideal of objectivity. It is arguable whether either of these restraints are today as strong as they were.

As for the sources of culture theory as ideology, and their relevance today, one could hardly do better than quote Alfred G. Meyer’s appendix to the Kroeber and Kluckhohn book, “Historical Notes on Ideological Aspects of the Concept of Culture in Germany and Russia.” Noting that “for Kant and other representatives of 18th-century enlightenment in Germany, the enlightenment itself, the growth of rationalist and utilitarian philosophy . . . represented *Kultur*” he went on to identify a second, opposing, and eventually dominating view of the matter:

“The other ideological strand tended to regard *Kultur* as a complex of qualities, achievements, and behaviour patterns which were local or national in origin and significance, unique, non-transferable, non-repetitive, and therefore irrelevant for the outsider. Herder’s relativism did much to pave the way for this conception of *Kultur*. The stress on such unique culture patterns as against the economic, political, scientific, or philosophical achievements of Western civilisation can be regarded as an attempt to compensate for a deep-seated feeling of inferiority on the part of German intellectuals once they had come in contact with the advanced nations. Similarly, Russian cultural nationalism can easily be traced to such a feeling of inferiority; quite fittingly, Russian cultural nationalism developed in the measure as Russian contacts with the West intensified. These *Kultur* theories, then, are a typical ideological expression—though by no means the only one—of the rise of backward societies against the encroachments of the West on their traditional culture. *They consist in asserting the reality of something which is just about to be destroyed.*” (Italics in original)

¹⁶ *Politics and Letters: Interviews with New Left Review*. By RAYMOND WILLIAMS. Interviews conducted by PERRY ANDERSON, ANTHONY BARNETT and FRANCIS MULHERN. New Left Books, £12.79.

IF CULTURE AS IDEOLOGY is found at its most sympathetic and understandable among Aboriginal political leaders in Australia today, and at its most paradoxical in the speculative proposals of T. S. Eliot, it is found at its least sympathetic and most destructive in Raymond Williams. As anyone who has sampled his prose will concede, it has not always been easy to see what he was driving at. But a new book¹⁶ helpfully makes a number of things more clear. Interrogated under a naked 200-watt ideological light-bulb, he was asked why, in *Keywords* (1976) and in *Marxism and Literature* (1977),

“the partisan aspect of what you are saying is largely concealed from the reader. . . . You remarked that you have always tried to keep the mainstream of bourgeois culture in your sights—a combativity we very much admire. In *Marxism and Literature* you know whom you are aiming at—but do you tell your readers?”

It’s a good question. To which might be added, “and if not, why not?” Certainly these are questions which come forcefully to mind when one looks at the way Williams has used the anthropological conception of culture down through the years. In *Keywords* (p. 82) he has this to say:

“It is interesting that the steadily extending social and anthropological use of *culture* and

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cultural ... [has] ... either by-passed or effectively diminished the hostility and [the] unease and embarrassment."

The hostility and unease which bother him are aroused by any conception of culture entailing claims to superior knowledge by superior people.

It is indeed "interesting", and one can see why Perry Anderson *et al.* wanted less obliquity, and mildly criticised their author's "impersonally objectivist" stance. When we hear about the anthropological use "steadily extending" we seem to see an irresistible semantic tide; and the uninformed would never imagine that Williams had had anything to do with the tide himself. It could be modesty—yet this decidedly uncandid way of putting things has marked his public relation to the Anthropological conception of Culture from the first. Twenty years ago we find the deliberate extension of meaning presented as a form of historical inevitability, as a force over which we have little control. F. R. Leavis's concept of culture was plainly too narrow. Musing on this, Williams wrote that

"the difficulty about the idea of culture is that we are continually forced to extend it, until it becomes almost identical with our whole common life."¹⁷

But this "difficulty" is his—not ours. The effect of the "we" is to compel the complicity of his readers in what is patently an uninvited extension of his own. When this practice of limitlessly pushing the holistic concept of culture as "a whole way of life" was pointed out by Ian Gregor in *Essays in Criticism*—where he drew attention to the oddity of regarding the Trades Union Congress as a form of creative art—Williams was quick to administer a rebuke.¹⁸ But now, in the Interrogation Transcript (p. 155) we find the following:

"Q. What specific advantages did you see in the term culture for socialist theory?"

¹⁷ Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society* (1958, Penguin Books, 1977), p. 229.

¹⁸ Ian Gregor, comments in *Essays in Criticism*, Vol. IX, No. 4, p. 425–430.

¹⁹ Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society*, p. 230.

²⁰ "This annihilating insight [that some day there will be no literature] is extraordinarily difficult for a literary critic, even a Marxist literary critic, to come to terms with." From a review by John Sutherland of *Marxism and Literature*, *New Statesman*, 19 August 1977, pp. 248–249. See also Terry Eagleton's similar insights as reported by Bernard Bergonzi:

"Given a profound enough historical shift there is no reason in principle why Shakespeare should not fall into the ranks of the unemployed."

This is a prospect, as Bergonzi notes, which Mr Eagleton evidently looks forward to with relish. See "Literature and Politics Now", *Critical Quarterly* (Vol. 20, No. 4) p. 53.

A. There are two answers to that. The single most shocking thesis to established liberal opinion in *Culture and Society*, including people who liked the book in other ways, was that I did not define working-class culture as a few proletarian novels ... but as the institutions of the labour movement. *That was the gain of talking about culture as a whole way of life.*"

What attracted Williams to the Anthropological conception was its sheer political scope. What could possibly be larger than a *whole way of life*? That's what the anthropologists said the term "culture" really meant, according to Williams. And if this strategic terminological weapon in the class war were to be wrested from those at Cambridge who had misappropriated it for their own effete and exclusive uses, then the extension proposed by social science should be pushed for all it was worth. If T. S. Eliot was going to define culture as eating Wensleydale cheese at Henley to the sound of Elgar, then Raymond Williams was free to add a few amendments of his own: why not "mixed farming, the Stock Exchange, coal-mining, the London Transport"?¹⁹ On anthropological grounds there could be no objection whatever. The Anthropological conception also suggested the possibility of a fruitful political marriage between cultural and historical relativism. As Williams saw it, the educational advantages of "The sense of 'culture' as 'a whole way of life' [which] has been most marked in twentieth-century anthropology and sociology" involved a most satisfactory merging of interests:

"There have been two main results in ordinary thinking. First, we have learned something new about change: not only that it need not terrify us, since alternative institutions and emphases of energy have been shown to be practicable and satisfying; but also that it cannot be piecemeal—one element of a complex system can hardly be changed without seriously affecting the whole."

Two lessons, both useful for historical relativism, could be learnt from this. One need not bother to defend existing institutions when they are threatened or attacked, because others (unspecified, as always in such prognoses) will prove just as "satisfying." At the same time the holistic conclusion suggests that piecemeal reform is largely a waste of time. *Ergo*, in any programme of social change, the entire institutional complex must go.

TODAY WILLIAMS TELLS US, in *Marxism and Literature*, that not only institutions will have to go. Literature must go too. With a zeal which makes even his most loyal sympathisers blench,²⁰ the now insatiable desire for "a whole way of

life" purged of the last remnants of exclusiveness, privilege, and superiority has led to the declared belief that literature itself may have to be "cleared away."

In retrospect, what is poignant about this development is that when T. S. Eliot gloomily foresaw an epoch so debased that it would be "possible to say that it will have *no culture*", Williams accused him of sliding away from the Anthropological conception. After all, "no culture", anthropologically speaking, would logically mean no life, no social forms, nothing at all! And this was clearly absurd and unthinkable. But what was yesterday treated as an absurdity in Eliot's social thought is perilously close to what Raymond Williams today proposes as the way ahead. Now far advanced, in *Marxism and Literature*, into what the Official Transcript refers to as his "ultra-left radical" phase, even the Interrogators can be seen drawing back in anxiety and alarm. As they tell him,

"one theme of the work is a frontal attack on the very idea of literature as such. In effect, you denounce it as an élitist elevation of certain forms of writing to a special status—the 'literary', a category which you say possesses the same kind of reactionary spell today as that of the 'divine' in feudal society... [You argue that] since all forms of writing are by definition creative, it is reactionary and exclusivist to privilege some as literary, thereby tacitly or explicitly devaluing others... Doesn't your current position, if it were strictly maintained, lead to a complete relativism in which it becomes effectively impossible to discriminate between different forms of writing or types of work at all?"

WILLIAMS: Well, this is difficult. What I would hope will happen is that after the ground has been cleared of the received idea of literature, it will be possible to find certain new concepts which would call for special emphases."²¹

SO THERE IT IS. When the ground has been cleared—the essential cleansing preliminary—certain new concepts (unspecified) will be found. Then we can make a fresh start. First the deluge—after that, we'll see.

What in fact we see, looking at the not inconsiderable range of societies which have been most systematically cleared in our time, is that when everything imaginable has been incorporated into the apparatus of the state, literature remains one of the only sources of independent opinions and ideas. Passed from hand to hand, often copied

²¹ Raymond Williams, *Politics and Letters*, p. 325.

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and circulated under the most trying conditions, steadfastly opposed to the single way of seeing required by the cultural mode of thought, it fulfils the critical destiny which the Arnoldian conception of culture once prescribed.

BUT THESE self-destructive literary manoeuvres are only a side issue. It is in a larger context than this that the ideologised conception of culture belongs. When the legitimacy of institutionalised authority is everywhere in question, the prospect of a social order depending largely on a "shared sense of identity" bestowed by a common culture has strong appeal. Since it assumes that social harmony arises fundamentally from like-mindedness, it projects a vision of corporate life magically freed from the arrogance of power, the insolence of office, and the perplexities of legislation and revenue.

Externally, it legitimates extra-territorial yearnings. Thus Mr Bani-Sadr, now President of Iran, could argue (against the Soviet view that mere "minorities" are involved) that Turks, Arabs, and Baluchis "have been living a common life for centuries and have a common culture" (*Guardian*, 18 January 1980). Internally, it legitimates secession. From the "counter-culture" (on the one hand) to the Basques (on the other), it rejects the claims of the state. Its libertarian rhetoric is attractive, since in contrast to the ideal of individual liberty, the claims of cultures cannot so easily be reduced to personal selfishness.

It may be that the doctrine of "My Culture, right or wrong" is to the morality of collective action what the doctrine of "Authenticity" tried to be in the morality of the private life—an ultimate legitimation turned to when the institutionalised sources of authority have lost their power to persuade.

August

And afterwards, shall I remember it—
the wettest of them all, the August
when the hay already scant and poor
lay limp and rotting in the fields?
Or will it merge into the rest:
ten years of Augusts distinguished only
by the heights of children in the photographs?

Already I've forgotten when we came
or when we're going. The days
are like the fungi on the chart I bought
to separate the poisonous ones from those
we could safely eat—so similarly shaped
I cannot tell them positively apart.

They are defined by wooden shutters:
a narrow slit of light that spreads
along their edge to signal morning;
the soft yellow squares of other
still unshuttered windows, seeming close
but shining across a mile of dark
before we close them for the night.

Only their colour changes: from green
to misty white. We have nothing to do
but stand and watch them passing:
the sheep grazing like shifting stones,
the shadows of the clouds feeling their way
across the land like blind men's hands.

Vicki Feaver