

**CULTURE  
AND SOCIETY**

1780-1950

**Raymond Williams**



**Columbia University Press / New York**

For  
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and  
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Printed in the United States of America

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Williams, Raymond.  
Culture and society, 1780-1950.

1. Great Britain—Intellectual life—19th century.
2. Great Britain—Intellectual life—20th century.

I. Title.

DA533.W6 1983 306'.4'0941 83-5195

ISBN 0-231-02287-5

ISBN 0-231-05701-6 (pbk.)

Columbia University Press  
New York

p 20 19 18 17 16 15 14 13 12  
c 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

## CONTENTS

An Outline of Dates	page v
Foreword	vii
Introduction to the Morningside Edition	ix
Introduction	xiii
The Key Words—'Industry', 'Democracy', 'Class', 'Art', 'Culture'.	

### Part I

#### A NINETEENTH-CENTURY TRADITION

I. Contrasts	3
i. Edmund Burke and William Cobbett	3
ii. Robert Southey and Robert Owen	20
2 The Romantic Artist	30
3 Mill on Bentham and Coleridge	49
4 Thomas Carlyle	71
5 The Industrial Novels	87
<i>Mary Barton and North and South, Mrs Gaskell;</i> <i>Hard Times, Dickens; Sybil, Disraeli; Alton Locke,</i> <i>Kingsley; Felix Holt, George Eliot</i>	
6 J. H. Newman and Matthew Arnold	110
7 Art and Society	130
A. W. Pugin, John Ruskin, William Morris	

### Part II

#### INTERREGNUM

i. W. H. Mallock	162
ii. The 'New Aesthetics'	166
iii. George Gissing	172
iv. Shaw and Fabianism	179
v. Critics of the State	185
vi. T. E. Hulme	190

still, with them, looking for answers, having returned, by the sheer weight of events, to many of the same questions. I now often find it ironic that some of the newest and most important thinking of our own time, seeing the crises of the social order and of the natural order as inseparably linked, can be found in embryo or indeed in significant development in these earlier writers. But then it is finally encouraging rather than ironic, for new knowledge, new experience, new forms of hope, new groups and institutions, are taking the whole inquiry into dimensions which are much more than repetitive, and instead of being drawn back are pushed forward by these remarkable predecessors.

It is for this central reason that I can allow myself to hope that *Culture and Society* is still relevant to new contemporary readers. It is in any case widely used as a history of the thought and writing of this English tradition, and perhaps that is still enough. But I did not write it only as a history, as the Conclusion sufficiently shows. I began it in the post-1945 crisis of belief and affiliation. I used all the work for it as a way of finding a position from which I could hope to understand and act in contemporary society, necessarily through its history, which had delivered this strange, unsettling and exciting world to us. It may not work in that way for others, but that is why it was written and how, by many more readers than I had hoped for, it has often been read.

Raymond Williams

Cambridge, 1982.

\*NOTE: The paper on *Changes in English during the Industrial Revolution*, originally intended as an appendix to *Culture and Society*, developed much later into my book *Keywords* (1976), which contains my most recent research on the decisive new words and meanings.

## INTRODUCTION

IN the last decades of the eighteenth century, and in the first half of the nineteenth century, a number of words, which are now of capital importance, came for the first time into common English use, or, where they had already been generally used in the language, acquired new and important meanings. There is in fact a general pattern of change in these words, and this can be used as a special kind of map by which it is possible to look again at those wider changes in life and thought to which the changes in language evidently refer.

Five words are the key points from which this map can be drawn. They are *industry*, *democracy*, *class*, *art* and *culture*. The importance of these words, in our modern structure of meanings, is obvious. The changes in their use, at this critical period, bear witness to a general change in our characteristic ways of thinking about our common life: about our social, political and economic institutions; about the purposes which these institutions are designed to embody; and about the relations to these institutions and purposes of our activities in learning, education and the arts.

The first important word is *industry*, and the period in which its use changes is the period which we now call the Industrial Revolution. *Industry*, before this period, was a name for a particular human attribute, which could be paraphrased as 'skill, assiduity, perseverance, diligence'. This use of *industry* of course survives. But, in the last decades of the eighteenth century, *industry* came also to mean something else; it became a collective word for our manufacturing and productive institutions, and for their general activities. Adam Smith, in *The Wealth of Nations* (1776), is one of the first writers to use the word in this way, and from his time the development of this use is assured. *Industry*, with a capital letter, is thought of as a thing in itself—an institution, a body of activities—rather than simply a human attribute. *Industrious*, which described persons, is joined, in the nineteenth century, by *industrial*, which describes the institutions. The rapid growth in importance of these institu-

tions is seen as creating a new system, which in the 1830s is first called *Industrialism*. In part, this is the acknowledgement of a series of very important technical changes, and of their transforming effect on methods of production. It is also, however, an acknowledgement of the effect of these changes on society as a whole, which is similarly transformed. The phrase *Industrial Revolution* amply confirms this, for the phrase, first used by French writers in the 1820s, and gradually adopted, in the course of the century, by English writers, is modelled explicitly on an analogy with the French Revolution of 1789. As that had transformed France, so this has transformed England; the means of change are different, but the change is comparable in kind: it has produced, by a pattern of change, a new society.

The second important word is *democracy*, which had been known, from the Greek, as a term for 'government by the people', but which only came into common English use at the time of the American and French Revolutions. Weekley, in *Words Ancient and Modern*, writes:

It was not until the French Revolution that *democracy* ceased to be a mere literary word, and became part of the political vocabulary.<sup>1</sup>

In this he is substantially right. Certainly, it is in reference to America and France that the examples begin to multiply, at the end of the eighteenth century, and it is worth noting that the great majority of these examples show the word being used unfavourably: in close relation with the hated *Jacobinism*, or with the familiar *mob-rule*. England may have been (the word has so many modern definitions) a democracy since Magna Carta, or since the Commonwealth, or since 1688, but it certainly did not call itself one. *Democrats*, at the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth centuries, were seen, commonly, as dangerous and subversive mob agitators. Just as *industry* and its derived words record what we now call the Industrial Revolution, so *democracy* and *democrat*, in their entry into ordinary speech, record the effects, in England, of the American and French Revolutions, and a crucial phase of the struggle, at home, for what we would now call democratic representation.

*Industry*, to indicate an institution, begins in about 1776; *democracy*, as a practical word, can be dated from about the same time. The third word, *class*, can be dated, in its most important modern sense, from about 1772. Before this, the ordinary use of *class*, in English, was to refer to a division or group in schools and colleges: 'the usual Classes in Logick and Philosophy'. It is only at the end of the eighteenth century that the modern structure of *class*, in its social sense, begins to be built up. First comes *lower classes*, to join *lower orders*, which appears earlier in the eighteenth century. Then, in the 1790s, we get *higher classes*; *middle classes* and *middling classes* follow at once; *working classes* in about 1815; *upper classes* in the 1820s. *Class prejudice*, *class legislation*, *class consciousness*, *class conflict* and *class war* follow in the course of the nineteenth century. The *upper middle classes* are first heard of in the 1890s; the *lower middle class* in our own century.

It is obvious, of course, that this spectacular history of the new use of *class* does not indicate the *beginning* of social divisions in England. But it indicates, quite clearly, a change in the character of these divisions, and it records, equally clearly, a change in attitudes towards them. *Class* is a more indefinite word than *rank*, and this was probably one of the reasons for its introduction. The structure then built on it is in nineteenth-century terms: in terms, that is to say, of the changed social structure, and the changed social feelings, of an England which was passing through the Industrial Revolution, and which was at a crucial phase in the development of political democracy.

The fourth word, *art*, is remarkably similar, in its pattern of change, to *industry*. From its original sense of a human attribute, a 'skill', it had come, by the period with which we are concerned, to be a kind of institution, a set body of activities of a certain kind. An *art* had formerly been any human skill; but *Art*, now, signified a particular group of skills, the 'imaginative' or 'creative' arts. *Artist* had meant a skilled person, as had *artisan*; but *artist* now referred to these selected skills alone. Further, and most significantly, *Art* came to stand for a special kind of truth, 'imaginative truth', and *artist* for a special kind of person, as the words

## CULTURE AND SOCIETY 1780-1950

*artistic* and *artistical*, to describe human beings, new in the 1840s, show. A new name, *aesthetics*, was found to describe the judgement of art, and this, in its turn, produced a name for a special kind of person—*aesthete*. *The arts*—literature, music, painting, sculpture, theatre—were grouped together, in this new phrase, as having something essentially in common which distinguished them from other human skills. The same separation as had grown up between *artist* and *artisan* grew up between *artist* and *craftsman*. *Genius*, from meaning 'a characteristic disposition', came to mean 'exalted ability', and a distinction was made between it and *talent*. As *art* had produced *artist* in the new sense, and *aesthetics* *aesthete*, so this produced a *genius*, to indicate a special kind of person. These changes, which belong in time to the period of the other changes discussed, form a record of a remarkable change in ideas of the nature and purpose of art, and of its relations to other human activities and to society as a whole.

The fifth word, *culture*, similarly changes, in the same critical period. Before this period, it had meant, primarily, the 'tending of natural growth', and then, by analogy, a process of human training. But this latter use, which had usually been a culture of something, was changed, in the nineteenth century, to *culture* as such, a thing in itself. It came to mean, first, 'a general state or habit of the mind', having close relations with the idea of human perfection. Second, it came to mean 'the general state of intellectual development, in a society as a whole'. Third, it came to mean 'the general body of the arts'. Fourth, later in the century, it came to mean 'a whole way of life, material, intellectual and spiritual'. It came also, as we know, to be a word which often provoked either hostility or embarrassment.

The development of *culture* is perhaps the most striking among all the words named. It might be said, indeed, that the questions now concentrated in the meanings of the word *culture* are questions directly raised by the great historical changes which the changes in *industry*, *democracy* and *class*, in their own way, represent, and to which the changes in *art* are a closely related response. The development of the word

## INTRODUCTION

*culture* is a record of a number of important and continuing reactions to these changes in our social, economic and political life, and may be seen, in itself, as a special kind of map by means of which the nature of the changes can be explored.

I have stated, briefly, the fact of the changes in these important words. As a background to them I must also draw attention to a number of other words which are either new, or acquired new meanings, in this decisive period. Among the new words, for example, there are *ideology*, *intellectual*, *rationalism*, *scientist*, *humanitarian*, *utilitarian*, *romanticism*, *atomistic*, *bureaucracy*, *capitalism*, *collectivism*, *commercialism*, *communism*, *doctrinaire*, *equalitarian*, *liberalism*, *masses*, *mediaeval* and *mediaevalism*, *operative* (noun), *primitivism*, *proletariat* (a new word for 'mob'), *socialism*, *unemployment*, *cranks*, *highbrow*, *isms* and *pretentious*. Among words which then acquired their now normal modern meanings are *business* (= trade), *common* (= vulgar), *earnest* (derisive), *Education* and *educational*, *getting-on*, *handmade*, *idealist* (= visionary), *Progress*, *rank-and-file* (other than military), *reformer* and *reformism*, *revolutionary* and *revolutionize*, *salary* (as opposed to 'wages'), *Science* (= natural and physical sciences), *speculator* (financial), *solidarity*, *strike* and *suburban* (as a description of attitudes). The field which these changes cover is again a field of general change, introducing many elements which we now point to as distinctively modern in situation and feeling. It is the relations within this general pattern of change which it will be my particular task to describe.

The word which more than any other comprises these relations is *culture*, with all its complexity of idea and reference. My overall purpose in the book is to describe and analyse this complex, and to give an account of its historical formation. Because of its very range of reference, it is necessary, however, to set the enquiry from the beginning on a wide basis. I had originally intended to keep very closely to *culture* itself, but, the more closely I examined it, the more widely my terms of reference had to be set. For what I see in the history of this word, in its structure of meanings, is a wide and general movement in thought and

feeling. I shall hope to show this movement in detail. In summary, I wish to show the emergence of *culture* as an abstraction and an absolute: an emergence which, in a very complex way, merges two general responses—first, the recognition of the practical separation of certain moral and intellectual activities from the driven impetus of a new kind of society; second, the emphasis of these activities, as a court of human appeal, to be set over the processes of practical social judgement and yet to offer itself as a mitigating and rallying alternative. But, in both these senses, culture was not a response to the new methods of production, the new *Industry*, alone. It was concerned, beyond these, with the new kinds of personal and social relationship: again, both as a recognition of practical separation and as an emphasis of alternatives. The idea of *culture* would be simpler if it had been a response to industrialism alone, but it was also, quite evidently, a response to the new political and social developments, to *Democracy*. Again, in relation to this, it is a complex and radical response to the new problems of social class. Further, while these responses define bearings, in a given external area that was surveyed, there is also, in the formation of the meanings of *culture*, an evident reference back to an area of personal and apparently private experience, which was notably to affect the meaning and practice of art. These are the first stages of the formulation of the idea of culture, but its historical development is at least as important. For the recognition of a separate body of moral and intellectual activities, and the offering of a court of human appeal, which comprise the early meanings of the word, are joined, and in themselves changed, by the growing assertion of a whole way of life, not only as a scale of integrity, but as a mode of interpreting all our common experience, and, in this new interpretation, changing it. Where *culture* meant a state or habit of the mind, or the body of intellectual and moral activities, it means now, also, a whole way of life. This development, like each of the original meanings and the relations between them, is not accidental, but general and deeply significant.

My terms of reference then are not only to distinguish the meanings, but to relate them to their sources and effects.

I shall try to do this by examining, not a series of abstracted problems, but a series of statements by individuals. It is not only that, by temperament and training, I find more meaning in this kind of personally verified statement than in a system of significant abstractions. It is also that, in a theme of this kind, I feel myself committed to the study of actual language: that is to say, to the words and sequences of words which particular men and women have used in trying to give meaning to their experience. It is true that I shall be particularly interested in the general developments of meaning in language, and these, always, are more than personal. But, as a method of enquiry, I have not chosen to list certain topics, and to assemble summaries of particular statements on them. I have, rather, with only occasional exceptions, concentrated on particular thinkers and their actual statements, and tried to understand and value them. The framework of the enquiry is general, but the method, in detail, is the study of actual individual statements and contributions.

In my First Part, I consider a number of nineteenth-century thinkers, of whom many if not all will be familiar to the informed reader, but whose relations, and even whose individual meanings, may be seen from this standpoint in a somewhat different light. I consider next, and more briefly, certain writers at the turn of the nineteenth into the twentieth century, who form, as I see them, a particular kind of interregnum. Then, in my Third Part, I consider some writers and thinkers of our own century, in an attempt to make the structure of meanings, and the common language in these matters, fully contemporary. Finally, in my Conclusion, I offer my own statement on an aspect of this common experience: not indeed as a verdict on the tradition, but as an attempt to extend it in the direction of certain meanings and values.

The area of experience to which the book refers has produced its own difficulties in terms of method. These, however, will be better appreciated, and judged, in the actual course of the enquiry. I ought perhaps to say that I expect the book to be controversial: not that I have written it for the sake of controversy as such, but because any such enquiry involves the discussion and the proposition of values,

## CULTURE AND SOCIETY 1780-1950

which are quite properly the subject of difference, and which affect even what we are in the habit of calling the known facts. I shall, at any rate, be glad to be answered, in whatever terms, for I am enquiring into our common language, on matters of common interest, and when we consider how matters now stand, our continuing interest and language could hardly be too lively.

## PART I

# A NINETEENTH-CENTURY TRADITION