

RAYMOND WILLIAMS
 "BASE AND SUPERSTRUCTURE IN MARXIST CULTURAL THEORY" (1973)

Williams, Raymond. "Base and Superstructure in Marxist Cultural Theory." Problems in Materialism and Culture. London: Verso, 1980. Rpt. as Culture and Materialism. London: Verso, 2005. 31-49.

Here, in a seminal essay which was later expanded into Marxism and Literature (1977), Williams attempts to clarify some of the key concepts central to Marxism. Pursuing the etymological approach which he would practice in particular in his Keywords: a Vocabulary of Culture and Society (1976), he attempts to redefine the most important categories of Marxist analysis in the light of the subtle variations in the meaning of the German terms actually used by Marx in order to answer the most important criticisms directed against Marxist theory.

As indicated by the title of this piece, Williams' particular focus here is on the widespread use made of the infamous Base/superstructure model in Marxist cultural analysis. Any "modern approach to a Marxist theory of culture must begin by considering the proposition of a determining base and a determined superstructure" (31), he acknowledges. However, Williams would prefer to start from the proposition that "social being determines consciousness" (31) because the "proposition of base and superstructure, with its figurative element, with its suggestion of a fixed and definite spatial relationship, constitutes, at least in certain hands, a very specialized and at times unacceptable version of the other proposition" (31).

Turning his attention to what he later calls the "term of relationship" (32) linking base and superstructure, Williams focuses, firstly, on the concept of 'determination.' The German term *bestimmen*, he argues, often translated as 'determines,' is the term used to denote the "relationship" (31) between base and superstructure and is one of "great linguistic and theoretical complexity" (31). The "language of determination and even more of determinism was inherited from idealist and especially theological accounts of the world and man" (31). Williams stresses that Marx was opposed to an "ideology that had been insistent on the power of certain forces outside man, or, in its secular version, on an abstract determining consciousness" (31). He puts, rather, the "origin of determination in men's own activities" (31). Williams argues that there are at least two possible senses to the term 'determines.' On the one hand, it implies the dominant "notion of an external cause which totally predicts or prefigures, indeed totally controls a subsequent activity" (32) while, on the other hand, there is also the less widespread "notion of determination as setting limits, exerting pressures" (32) whether, in each case, "by some external force or by the internal laws of a particular development" (32).

Superstructure: Qualifications and Amendments

Williams then turns his attention, ostensibly at least, to the "related terms themselves" (32). He focuses, firstly, on the superstructure (*Überbau*) which has "acquired a main sense of a unitary area within which all cultural and ideological activities could be placed" (32). He points out that there certain qualifications have long been made concerning the "determined character of certain superstructural activities" (32). The "simplest notion of if a superstructure" (32) is the "reflection, imitation, or the reproduction, in a more or less direct way, of the reality of the base in the superstructure" (32). Since this kind of relationship cannot be discerned in many kinds of cultural activity, or at last not without considerable effort, notions of "lags in time" (33), "technical complications" (33), and "indirectness" (32) (e.g. some spheres of cultural activity such as philosophy were said to be "situated at a greater distance from the primary economic activities" [33]) introduced to qualify any notion of a simple relationship of reflection. Later, notions of 'reflection' and 'reproduction' were replaced

by notions of "mediation" (33). Also, notions of "homologous structure" (33), that is, the view that there is an "essential homology or correspondence of structures, which can be discovered by analysis" (33) were suggested "where there may be no direct or easily apparent similarity, and certainly nothing like reflection or reproduction" (33) between base and superstructure.

Williams then turns his attention to the Economic Base, the English translation of the German term *grundlage* which, in his view, it is crucial to grasp "if we are to understand the realities of cultural process" (33). The base is most often considered as an "object" (33), that is, "in essentially uniform and usually static ways" (33). It is normally defined as the "real social existence of man" (33), the "real relations of production corresponding to a stage of development of the material productive forces" (33), and as a "mode of production at a particular stage of its development" (33). This is very different, however, from Marx's own emphasis on "productive activities . . . constituting the foundation of all other activities" (33). The Base is, in short, "never in practice either uniform or static" (33) not least because "there are deep contradictions in the relationships of production and in the consequent social relationships" (33). Above all, Williams points out, Marx always considers these forces as the "specific activities and relationships of real men" (34) and, thus, "something very much more active, more complicated and more contradictory than the developed metaphorical notion of 'the base'" (34).

The Base and the Productive Forces

All in all, Williams contends, the Base is more a "process and not a state" (34). Moreover, he argues, "we cannot ascribe to that process certain fixed properties for subsequent translation to the variable processes of the superstructure" (34). He contends that "each term of the proposition must be revalued in a particular direction" (34): it is necessary to

revalue 'determination' towards the setting of limits and the exertion of pressure, and away from a predicted, prefigured and controlled content. We have to revalue 'superstructure' towards a related range of cultural practices, and away from a reflected, reproduced or specifically dependent content. And, crucially, we have to revalue 'the base' away from the notion of a fixed economic or technological abstraction, and towards the specific activities of men in real social and economic relationships, containing fundamental contradictions and variations and therefore always in a state of dynamic process. (34)

Williams adds that the term 'Base' has come to be synonymous with "basic industry" (34). He alludes to Marx's view that while the person who produces a piano is a "productive worker" (34) as is also, perhaps, the person who distributes the piano, the pianist himself is not. That is, where the piano-maker and the distributor are thought to be part of the Base, the pianist is deemed part of the Superstructure. Marx makes this claim because, Williams argues, he was considering a "particular kind of production" (35) – "capitalist commodity production" – (35) in Western Europe in the nineteenth century. This is not true of today because economic conditions have changed, he contends. Marx was giving the "notion of 'productive labour' and 'productive forces' a specialised sense of primary work on materials" (35) argues that Marx, in analysing capitalist production, "had to give to the notion of 'productive labour' and 'productive forces' a specialized sense of primary work on materials in a form which produced commodities" (35). However, Williams argues that Marx also simultaneously held the view (expressed especially in the Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844) that the "most important thing that a worker ever produces is himself, himself in the fact of that kind of labour, or the broader historical emphasis of men producing themselves and their history" (35). This latter definition is especially important for Williams in that, he argues, if "we have the broad sense of productive forces, we look at the whole question of the base differently, and we are then less tempted to dismiss as

superstructural, and in that sense as merely secondary, certain vital productive social forces, which are in the broad sense, from the beginning, basic" (35).

Uses of Totality

Williams evidently finds conventional uses of Base and Superstructure and the conception of causality linking these two components more than a little unsatisfactory. At this point, he turns his attention to another key concept which has gained great popularity: he has in mind in particular the notion of the 'totality' associated with Georg Lukacs in particular and which, he implies, also informs the work of unnamed later Marxist thinkers (though he does not name him, he evidently has in mind the work of the Structuralist Marxist Louis Althusser who also speaks of the social formation forming a comprehensive whole or totality, though from a slightly different angle from that of Lukacs). The "totality of social practices was opposed to this layered notion of base and a consequent superstructure" (35). Both models seek to capture the process of "social being determining consciousness" (35), albeit in different ways. The problem, though, with the notion of totality is that it is very easy for it "to empty of its essential content" (35). For, he says, alluding to Althusser in particular,

if we come to say that society is composed of a large number of social practices which form a concrete social whole, and if we give to each practice a certain specific recognition, adding only that they interact, relate and combine in very complicated ways . . . we are . . . withdrawing from the claim that there is any process of determination. . . . If totality is simply concrete, if it is simply the recognition of a large variety of miscellaneous and contemporaneous practice, then it is essentially empty of any content that could be called Marxist. (36)

He continues:

while it is true that any society is a complex whole of such practices, it is also true that any society has a specific organisation, a specific structure, and that the principles of this organisation and structure can be seen as directly related to certain social intentions, . . . intentions which in all our experience have been the rule of a particular class. (36)

Just because the Base/Superstructure model is crude and unsatisfactory in some ways does not mean that one should opt for another that downplays the "class character of a particular society" (36). Williams confesses to have "great difficulty in seeing processes of art and thought as superstructural" (36) in the simplistic regular sense in which these terms are used, but we must see, he argues, some sort of "superstructural element" (36) in them if one is to grasp the fact that the "laws, constitutions, theories, ideologies, which are so often claimed as natural, or as having universal validity or significance" (36) should be, rather, "seen as expressing and ratifying the domination of a particular class" (37). Such a perspective is very important for militant activists.

The Complexity of Hegemony

Williams then argues that the concept of totality should be combined with Gramsci's notion of 'hegemony' so that the asymmetrical and exploitative dimensions of society are not overlooked. Hegemony, rather,

supposes the existence of something which is truly total, which is not merely secondary or superstructural, like the weak sense of ideology, but which is lived at such a depth, which saturates the society to such an extent, and which, as Gramsci puts it, even constitutes the substance and limit of common sense for most people under its sway, that it corresponds to the reality of social experience very much more clearly than any notions derived from the formula of base and superstructure. (37)

If

ideology were merely some abstract, imposed set of notions, if our social and political and cultural ideas and assumptions and habits were merely the result of specific manipulation, of a kind of overt training which might be simply ended or withdrawn, then the society would be very much easier to change than in practice it has ever been or is. (37)

The "notion of hegemony as deeply saturating" (37) Williams finds much more satisfactory, not least because it emphasises the "facts of domination" (37).

However, Williams fears that the notion of hegemony is in danger of being "dragged back to the relatively simple, uniform and static notion" (37) of superstructure which Williams also finds so unsatisfactory. To do justice to the complexity of hegemony, he suggests, we have to "give an account which allows for its elements of real and constant change" (37-38). We have to emphasise that hegemony is "not singular; indeed that its own internal structures are highly complex, and have continually to be renewed, recreated and defended; and by the same token, that they can be continually challenged and in certain respects modified" (38). Williams wants to "propose a model which allows for this kind of variation and contradiction, its sets of alternatives and its processes of change" (38).

Arguing that Marxist cultural analysis has long been better by and large at "distinguishing the large features of different epochs of society, as commonly between feudal and bourgeois, than at distinguishing between different phases of bourgeois society, and different moments within these phases" (38), Williams contends that "in any society, in any particular period, there is a central system of practices, meanings and values, which we can properly call dominant and effective" (38). Williams toys with call it a "corporate system" (38) but hesitates given that this is a term used by Gramsci to "mean the subordinate as opposed to the general and dominant elements of hegemony" (38). Williams has in mind the "central, effective and dominant systems of meanings and values, which are not merely abstract but which are organised and lived" (38). For this reason, hegemony is not to be

understood at the level of mere opinion or mere manipulation. It is a whole body of practices and expectations; our assignments, our ordinary understanding of the nature of man and of his world. It is a set of meanings and values which as they are experienced as practices appear as reciprocally confirming. It thus constitutes a sense of reality for most people in the society, a sense of absolute because experienced reality beyond which it is very difficult for most members of the society to move, in most areas of their lives. (38)

But it should be borne in mind that such an "effective and dominant culture" (38) is not a "static system" (38) but is dependent, rather, on a "real social process" (38), one of "incorporation" (38).

Williams has in mind, in this regard, the educational institutions of a given society which are the "main agencies of the transmission of an effective dominant culture" (39). What Williams terms the "*selective tradition*" (39) is "that which, within the terms of an effective dominant culture, is always passed off as '*the tradition, 'the significant past,'*" (39). Williams stresses that it the "selectivity" (39) which is the crucial point, that is, the "way in which from a whole possible area of past and present, certain meanings and practices are chosen for emphasis, certain other meanings and practices are neglected and excluded" (39). Some of these meanings and practices are "reinterpreted, diluted, or put into forms which support or at least do not contradict other elements within the effective dominant culture" (39). All in all, the processes of education; the processes of a much wider social training within institutions like the family; the practical definitions and organisation of work; the selective tradition at an intellectual and theoretical level: all these forces are involved in a continual making and remaking of an effective dominant culture, and on them, as experienced,

as built into our living, its reality depends. (39)
 If ideology were merely "imposed" (39), if it were only the "isolable meanings and practices of the ruling class, or of a section of the ruling class, which gets imposed on others, occupying merely the top of our minds, it would be . . . a very much easier thing to overthrow" (39).

Moreover, Williams argues that it is "not only the depths to which this process reaches, selecting and organising and interpreting our experience" (39), it is also that it is "continually active and adjusting; it isn't just the past, the dry husks of ideology which we can more easily discard" (39). Hegemony is something "more substantial and more flexible than any abstract imposed ideology" (39). We have to recognise the alternative meanings and values, the alternative opinions and attitudes, even some alternative senses of the world, which can be accommodated and tolerated within a particular effective and dominant culture. (39)

This is something that, in Williams' view, has been insufficiently grasped. The dominant, hegemonic culture will incorporate, though never entirely successfully a range of alternative positions. However, such examples of "internal conflict or internal variation . . . do not in practice go beyond the limits of the central effective and dominant definitions" (40). For example, there may be differences of opinion in parliamentary politics but, "whatever the degree of internal controversy and variation, they do not in the end exceed the limits of the central corporate definitions" (40). There are, in short, "practices, experiences, meanings, values which are not part of the effective dominant culture" (40). There is "clearly something which we can call alternative to the effective dominant culture, and there is something else that we can call oppositional" (40). The precise configuration of these forces varies from place to place, time to time.

Residual and Emergent Cultures

At this point, Williams introduces a "further distinction, between *residual* and *emergent* forms . . . of alternative and oppositional culture" (40). The 'residual' refers to those "experiences, meanings and values . . . lived and practised on the basis of the residue – cultural as well as social – of some previous social formation" (40). Some of the sources of residual meanings and practices . . . [are] the results of earlier social formations, in which certain real meanings and values were generated. In the subsequent default of a particular phase of a dominant culture, there is then a reaching back to those meanings and values which were created in real societies in the past, and which still seem to have some significance because they represent areas of human experience, aspiration and achievement, which the dominant culture under-values or opposes, or even cannot recognise. (42)

This is true of "certain religious values" (40), for example, or, in Britain, of "certain notions derived from a rural past" (40-41) that differ from those incorporated into the dominant system. By contrast, the 'emergent,' for Williams, refers to "new meanings and values, new practices, new significances and experiences" (41) that are "continually being created" (41). It is very difficult, he confesses, to "find a non-metaphysical and non-subjectivist explanation of emergent cultural practice" (42).

Williams stresses that the dominant culture is very alert to anything which can be seen as new and different. The effort is immediately made to incorporate it. Capitalist society is especially vigilant in this regard. The relationship of the dominant culture to the residual and emergent elements of a culture is, clearly, a "temporal relationship" (41). Williams then argues that we have to be careful to distinguish between those residual elements which are incorporated and those which are not, as well as those emergent elements which are incorporated and those which are not. Williams also distinguishes between a merely 'alternative' point of view (e.g. "Someone who simply finds a different way to live and wishes to be left alone" [42]) and one that

is oppositional ("someone who finds a different way to live and wants to change the society in its light" (42). The former is usually an individualistic or "small-group" (42) affair, while the latter properly belongs to "political and ultimately revolutionary practice" (42). Of course, what today is tolerated as merely deviant, is tomorrow crushed because of the challenge it poses.

Class and Human Practice

Williams argues that one of the best crucibles in which the emergent can be glimpsed: the "formation of a new class, the coming to consciousness of a new class" (42). No mode of production, and therefore no dominant society or order of society, and therefore no dominant culture, in reality exhausts the full range of human practice, human energy, human intention (this range is not the inventory of some original 'human nature' but, on the contrary, is that extraordinary range of variations, both practised and imagined, of which human beings are and have shown themselves to be capable). (43)

It is a fact, Williams contends, "about the modes of domination that they select from and consequently exclude the full range of actual and possible human practice" (43). The "difficulties of human practice outside or against the dominant mode" (43) are dependent, he argues, on whether this is an "area in which the dominant class and the dominant culture have an interest and a stake" (43). In the latter are "explicit, many new practices will be reached for, and if possible incorporated, or else extirpated with extraordinary vigour" (43). But certain areas, he stresses, will not be "reached for" (43) by the dominant order because there will always be areas of practices and meaning which, almost by definition from its own limited character, or in its profound deformation, the dominant culture is unable in any real terms to recognise. (43)

For example, many forms of literature in a capitalist state are tolerated as long as a profit is being made and nothing too subversive is being articulated, but in the Soviet Union, where there is a greater emphasis on literature, there is a correspondingly greater vigilance vis-a-vis the emergence of literary practices that challenge the authority of the state.

At this point, Williams asks what then are the "relations between art and society, or literature and society?" (44). He denies that there exist "relations between literature and society" (44) in some sort of "abstracted way" (44). Literature is an integral part of society, not something that can be extracted from it. One "cannot separate literature and art from other kinds of social practice" (44) in such a way that they are "subject to quite special and distinct laws" (44). Though they may "have quite specific features" (44), they "cannot be separated from the general social process" (44). Literature is not restricted to any one area of social practice, not limited, for example, to the "emergent cultural sector" (44) where it may be thought to represent the "new feelings, the new meanings, the new values" (44). In fact, he contends, a "great deal of writing is of a residual kind" (44), some of its "fundamental meanings and values" (44) belonging to the "cultural achievements of long-past stages of society" (44) to the point where, for many persons, "'literature' and 'the past' acquire a certain identity" (44-45), for which reason it is thought that "there is now no literature: all that glory is over" (45).

However, Williams contends that most "writing in any period, including our own, is a form of contribution to the effective dominant culture" (45). Its capacity to embody and enact and perform certain meanings and values, or to create in single particular ways what would be otherwise merely general truths . . . enable it to fulfil this effective function with great power. (45)

Literature is supplemented, of course, by the visual arts, music, film and broadcasting. But Williams' point is that the arts in general and literature in particular something of a

hybrid creature, ideologically-speaking. Literature simultaneously contribute to the dominant culture and are a central articulation of it. They embody residual meanings and values, not all of which are incorporated, though many are. They express also and significantly some emergent practices and meanings, yet some of them may eventually be incorporated, as they reach people and being to move them. (45)

Critical Theory as Consumption

What then, Williams asks, are the "implications of this general analysis for the analysis of particular works of art?" (45). Much critical theory is directed towards the "discovery of a method . . . through which particular works of art can be understood and described" (45). Williams observes that "nearly all forms of contemporary theory are theories of *consumption*" (45-46), that is, concerned with "understanding an object in such a way that it can be profitable or correctly be consumed" (46). The earliest such theory was that of 'taste' in the eighteenth century, followed a little later by that of 'sensibility.' In the first half of the twentieth century, I. A. Richards emphasised the "effects of consumption" (46): "'What effect does this work . . . have on me?'" (46). A little later, the New Critics emphasised the "work of art as *object*, as *text*, as an isolated artefact" (46). In each case, what was overlooked were the "practices of *production*" (46). The "real social conditions of production" (46) were most often ignored by critics outside the pale of Marxist thought. Marxist critics, though, did seek to read these conditions into the work of art by means of the Base-Superstructure metaphor: the "components of a work of art were the real activities of the base, and you could study the object to discover these components" (46). Even here, the relationship sought is that "between an object and its component" (46). This view was also true of psychological (including archetypal), biographical and even Structuralist approaches to criticism.

Objects and Practices

Williams prefers another view of art: "art as a practice" (47). He argues that no literary or musical work of art should be thought of as an object per se in the way that a sculpture or a painting is an object. Literary works, like musical ones, are recreated each time that they are interpreted. This is why he says that we should think of literary works as "*notations*" (47) that "have then to be interpreted in an active way, according to the particular conventions" (47). The

relationship between the making of a work of art and its reception is always active, and subject to conventions, which in themselves are forms of (changing) social organisation and relationship, and this is radically different from the production and consumption of an object. It is indeed an activity and a practice, and . . . it is still only accessible through active perception and interpretation. . . . What this can show us here about the practice of analysis is that we have to break free from the common procedure of isolating the object and then discovering its components. On the contrary we have to discover the nature of a practice and its conditions. (47)

These are two very different procedures, notwithstanding certain similarities. Traditional Marxist cultural analysis, predicated on the Base-Superstructure model, is not very different from other forms of analysis which emphasise the text as an object and reading as a form of passive consumption. In this schema, if we

suppose that what is produced in cultural practice is a series of objects, we shall, as in most forms of sociological-critical procedure, set about discovering their components. Within a Marxist emphasis these components will be from what we have been in the habit of calling the base. We then isolate certain features which we can . . . recognise *in*

component form, or we ask what processes of transformation or mediation these components have gone through before they arrived in this accessible state. (48)

However, Williams argues that “we should look not for the components of a product but for the conditions of a practice” (48) as part of an “active and self-renewing Marxist cultural tradition” (49). Williams, to this end, uses the example of ‘genre’ to differentiate between the “orthodox” (48) and the reformed Marxist approach which he is recommending. Traditionally, we

identify it by certain leading features, we then assign it to a larger category, the genre, and then we may find the components of the genre in a particular social history (although in some variants of criticism . . . the genre is supposed to be some permanent category of the mind). (48)

Williams proposes another procedure in stead of this one: the recognition of the relation of a collective mode and an individual project . . . of related practices. That is to say, the irreducibly individual projects that particular works are, may come in experience and in analysis to show resemblances which allow us to group them into collective modes. These are by no means always genres. They may exist as resemblances within and across genres. They may be the practice of a group in a period, rather than the practice of a phase in a genre. But as we discover the nature of a particular practice, and the nature of the relation between an individual project and a collective mode, we find that we are analysing, as two forms of the same process, both its active composition and its conditions of composition, and in either direction this is a complex of extending active relationships. This means that we have no built-in procedure of the kind which is indicated by the fixed character of an object. We have the principles of the relations of practices, within a discoverably intentional organisation, and we have the available hypotheses of dominant, residual and emergent. But what we are actively seeking is the true practice which has been alienated to an object, and the true conditions of practice – whether as literary conventions or as social relationships – which have been alienated to components or to mere background. (48-49)