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Towards 2000. by Raymond Williams (London, Chatto & Windus, 1983)

Writing of the situation of the writer in 1947 in **What is literature?** Jean Paul Sartre argued: "A clear-sighted view of the darkest possible situation is in itself already an optimistic act. It implies, in effect, that the situation can be thought about, that is, that we are not lost in a dark forest and that, on the contrary, we can break away from it, at least in spirit, and take up our resolutions in the face of it, even if these resolutions are hopeless." Some of this clearly informs Raymond Williams writing in the shadows of the late 1970s and 1980s - from the opening quotations: "Dyma ni yn awr ar daith ein gobaith (here we are now on the journey of our hope). Morgan John Rhys" Y Cylchgrawn Cymraeg, 1795

"... Who holds that if way to the Better there be, it exacts a full look at the worst. Thomas Hardy," in *Tenebris*, 1895 through to the closing part of the book. He concludes his first part, "**Towards 2000**": "My main hope is that there can be some sharing of this process of consideration, reconsideration and revision of outlook. This could be important beyond the book itself. I conclude it with an essay on 'Resources for a Journey of Hope': an examining but also a deliberately encouraging argument. From what began in 1959, as an idea of the long revolution, there is an intended and hopeful-movement towards 2000." (p. 21)

The reference to 1959 is to his book **The Long Revolution** (1961) which has as its third part his essay "Britain in the Sixties", the main sections of which are reprinted as Part Two of this book; Part Three is "The Analysis Reconsidered" and Part Four is "The Analysis Extended". Here, in Williams' own estimation: "The pivotal essay is on 'the culture of nations': in part a conscious revision of the perspective of the 1959 essay, in part a challenge to the controlling 'national' forms through which most of us still try to think." But, as he goes on, to argue the "damaging" "isolating perspective" of the "national" perspective "cannot be corrected by any simple move from 'national' to 'international' forms". Thus the next chapter examines the international features "East-West, North-South", and the part concludes with "War: The Last Enemy".

It is a typically honest, courageous action for Raymond Williams to republish a prospective analysis, on the edge of the decade it discusses, some 24 years later. It still reads well, as it did to me then. I have written elsewhere of how Raymond Williams *the historian* is an unacknowledged figure, favourably comparing "**Britain in the Sixties**" with the superficial, "easy simplicity" of the closing pages of E.J. Hobsbawm's **Industry and Empire**. The "reconsiderations" in Part Three are, in the main, consolidations of the strengths of Williams' earlier analysis; they are in and of themselves resources and strengths. I happened to be chairing a discussion - on peasants - in London, England,

the Friday after that dark, dark Thursday 13th May 1979 when the Thatcher government was elected. Two of the speakers were Raymond Williams and Eric Hobsbawm. The contrasts in their reactions to the previous day's events were striking: Williams, troubled, but not distraught; Hobsbawm speaking of "betrayal" by the working class. I mean to point here to the way that the resources of Williams' writing have been resources for a hope.

The strengths of the current writing relate in part to this *calm* (a keyword) hopefulness. A key passage, for me, is the following: "There are times, in the depth of the current crisis, when the image materialises of a cluttered room in which somebody is trying to think, while there is a fan-dance going on in one corner and a military band blasting away in the other. It is not the ordinary enjoyments of life that are diverting serious concern, as at times, in a natural human rhythm, they must and should, it is a systematic cacophony which may indeed not be bright enough to know that it is jamming and drowning the important signals, but which is nevertheless, and so far successfully, doing just that." Out of this book come crucial prescriptive suggestions with regard to the necessary and sufficient forms for socialist politics in our time - regarding production (pp. 98f), socialist democracy (pp. 164f), culture and technology (p. 151), the general interest (p. 164), the socialist movement (p. 174), a variable socialism regarding social identities and effective self-governing societies (p. 199), and more diffused recommendations regarding "internationalism" and "peace" in the concluding chapters of Part Four. I entirely endorse his points regarding the latter: "To build peace, now more than ever, it is necessary to build more than peace. To refuse nuclear weapons, we have to refuse much more than nuclear weapons. Unless the refusals can be connected with such building, unless protest can be connected with and surpassed by significant practical construction, our strength will be insufficient. It is then in making hope practical, rather than despair convincing, that the ways of peace can be entered." I would wager that the last sentence will be quoted in 2073 - if there is a 2073, in the way that I and others turn to that wondrous text of William Morris, **Communism** (1893).

In what ways, then, is hope made practical in **Towards 2000**? There is, first, the calmness (although I shall critically qualify this in a moment) which conveys also a *refusal* of trendiness, of expecting sudden triumphs and miraculous solutions; but this is, in the better sense, principled and serious. With one remarkable exception - to which I shall also return - it is a book which has marked the writing of other socialists and communists of Williams' generation. There is, second, the recognitions that have always been a feature of his writing - of hope and strength, yes, but also of pervasive, complex, obstinate difficulties too. More specifically - I want to say "theoretically" but check myself, these are historical experiences and understandings of millions of ordinary women and men after all - there are the twin emphases of much of Williams' other work: (1) relations of production (and, I would stress, social

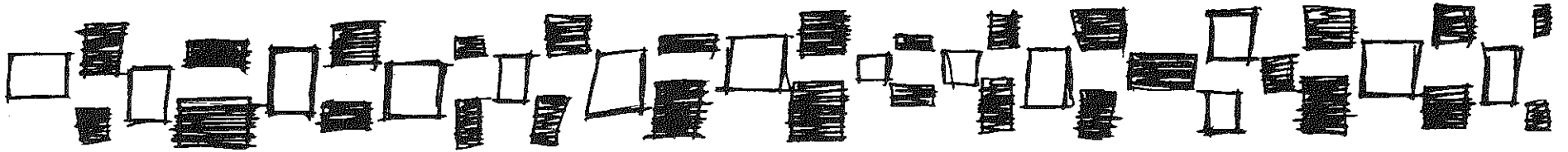
forms) are not to be thought as (a) secondary, (b) superstructural, (c) derivative from, or (d) caused by, forces of production (pp. 84f), and this entails rethinking the whole strategic theory involved in the Very Idea of The Mode of Production (pp. 226-227). (2): "There is only one good way out of all this. A practical and possible general interest, which really does include all reasonable particular interests, has to be inquired into, found, negotiated, agreed, constructed (p. 165). We have to begin again with people and build new political forms" and other passages which carry forward the energy of **The Long Revolution** through such staging posts as the excellent essay "Beyond actually existing socialism" in Williams' **Problems in materialism and culture**.

Third, there is the new questioning and examining in relation to actually existing capitalism (my term, not his), through the book, but especially in Part Four. Fourth - bringing to bear on an alienated politics, the detailed work on cultural production - is a major change which follows from seeing human social life not as "society as production" but as "society as a way of life", there cannot then be any "reasonable contrast between emotions and rational intelligence" (p. 266). In sum: "The central element is the shift from 'production to 'livelihood': from an alienated generality to direct and practical ways of life."

But the book does not "work" for me - for that person who described (and I stand by that judgement) **Politics and Letters** as *magnificent*; who has compared Williams with Barthes in terms of the significance of them both as intellectuals and resources for our struggles, as teachers, as writers, as socialists, as people. Why? The "edge" is not there - not the edge of rancour and bile, not the "cutting edge" of theory (more wounding than useful, quite often) but the edge where historical experience struggles within-and-against the forms that deny it (Williams himself is admirably clear on this, for example in **Modern Tragedy**. (Verso, revised edition, 1979, pages 15, 65, 74). I have to admit to this even though I thus find myself in company I do not like to keep (Denis Donoghue "Examples" **London Review of Books** 6(2), 2-15, February 1984, pp. 22-24).

For another review of **Towards 2000** and **Writing in Society**, see Maureen (no kin) Corrigan "Raymond Williams: Only Connect" **Village Voice** May 29, 1984, p. 47.

I find, amongst these negative features, first, a curious trope in the rhetoric of the text: there are sudden sentences or passages which register an exposure and irritation of comfortable, passive, neutralising dominant concepts. Thus, we are reminded, urgently, that industrialism entails capitalism (p. 84) or that existing representative political systems are bourgeois democracies (p. 120), but - in both cases - the preceding 20 or so pages had precisely not used these analytical terms that register important experiences. Second, there is the welcome (after such an extended absence) registration of some of the facts of gender. Whilst an advance on phrases used in 1959 ("Millions of wage-earners and their wives..." reprinted here p. 56), the renderings are ambiguous (contrast pages 85-91 and p. 170; and con-



sider the placing of feminism in relation to peace and ecological movements, p. 248f). Third, and this is an extraordinary charge, given at who it is directed, that a profound weakness of the book turns around the discussions of cultural production (pp. 128-152; 177-199), but it is true for me. It is within that discussion that the one moment of rancour occurs. What is being condensed in the following happens to include - as a kind of ill-tempered concordance - a refusal of a profound character: "There is also a pseudo-radical practice, in which the negative structures of post-modernist art are attached to a nominal revolutionary or liberationist radicalism, though all they can do in the end is undermine this, turning it back to the confusions of late-bourgeois subjectivism." The next page speaks of "the reduced and distorted shapes of the modernist and post-modernist representations." (This is not a new theme, see also *Politics and Letters*, passingly, and his brief mentions of "late bourgeois modernism" and "a deranged modernism", *New Society*, 5 January 1984 p. 18). This I cannot take to be either principled or serious. It slams the door on too much which I hold precious as political resources. All that work which has shown resoundingly how things and people could be different by exposing the signified, represented nature of the world against naturalisms, or religious and secular Doxa, from the montage of Eisenstein, through the staging of Brecht, to the dancing, musical, festive, humorous politics of popular cultural forms. Socialist modernism - a project always in the making - is a serious, principled negation and an exuberant, affirmatory "festival of the oppressed".

Do I make too much of a few sentences? Yes and no. No, because it was Raymond Williams who taught me (and thousands of others) that art, literature, criticism are terms of anti-socialist specialisation and bourgeois control. No, because the glaring absence of this book is education taken in its widest meaning, to which Williams again (and in the same *Long Revolution*) directed our attention. Yes, finally, and in the end I affirm clearly, because in times of massive distraction, pain, despair and worse, we need a calm consideration, a reminding and remembering that socialism requires *mutual and co-operative social practices* (as distinct from the dominant bourgeois idea of individual practice, p. 167).

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The Sexual Fix by Stephen Heath (New York, Schocken, 1984)

The Sexual Fix is a strange work which gets curiously and curiously you re-read it. Even though it is clearly, even to the only half-awake reader, an adaptation of Michel Foucault's mischievously inspired speculations about sexuality, the man himself is never once mentioned. He is the ghost at the banquet. But he is a ghost with a pervasive power, for the second withering thing about the book is its scepticism, not to say hostility, towards Freud and all his works, which is similar to Foucault's critique of psychoanalysis. Freud, it seems, was both the discoverer of the subversive workings of desire and its arch re-codifier.

Now Stephen Heath was one of those enthusiasts in the mid-1970s who in the pages of the theoretical journal *Screen* and elsewhere enjoined us to address ourselves to the insights of Lacan's 'recovery' of Freud. Lacan has since died, however, and so apparently has much of the enthusiasm for this cause. Since Heath's book first appeared Foucault has departed the scene, I doubt if we shall have to wait very long the likely crumbling of his legacy.

There is of course nothing wrong in people changing their mind, but what is strange is that Heath's apostasy is another silence in the book. So though patently *The Sexual Fix* offers us an excursion into sexual theory, the two thinkers who have been most central to our recent thinking about the sexual, Freud and Foucault, are either minimized in the book, or ignored. Is this how all great thinkers fall; not with an uproar but with silence and a yawn?

If you can forget all that, Heath's book does offer a lively account of the overhauling significance assigned to the sexual over the past two hundred years, a significance which fixes us into our sexuality, which sees the human and sexual as identical, and which searches for the truth of our being in sex. These themes are illustrated through wide-ranging and intelligent discussions of a variety of writers, from 19th century sexual writers, through Freud and Lawrence, to modern pornographers. No one could doubt Heath's liveliness of mind or sensitivity to cultural phenomena, but I for one was left with a deep sense of disappointment and dissatisfaction.

As I have suggested, Foucault said much of this some years ago, and a number of recent (especially feminist) historians have explored, sometimes substantiating, sometimes challenging, his arguments. Peter Gay's recent odyssey into the 'bourgeois experience'¹, despite its conceptual inadequacies, has at least exhaustively padded out our knowledge of the contradictions of our moral codes, simultaneously inciting sexuality and tightly regulating it. What we urgently need is a sharper debate on the implications, for theory and political practice, of the main argument and his supporters: that 'sexuality' is an historical apparatus that is deeply implicated in the play of power.

1. Peter Gay: *The bourgeois experience: Victoria to Freud*. Volume 1, Education of the senses. New York, London, Oxford U.P., 1984 (reviewed by J. Weeks, *The Body Politic*, No.104, July 1984).

Several issues immediately come to mind. Firstly, if sexuality is an historical construction, what weight are we to ascribe to its effects. Stephen Heath argues that: "Sexuality is without the importance ascribed to it in our contemporary society (Western capitalism); it is without that importance because it does not exist as such, because there is no such thing as sexuality." There is a strange non sequitur here. We may agree that sexuality should not have the importance assigned to it in Western culture, but the importance is that a contemporary construction of reality exists; it inflects our individual and collective responses, it shapes social policy, moral agitation and scientific intervention. There is such a thing as sexuality in our culture because the belief in its importance is inscribed in a vast array of social institutions. It cannot simply be wished away as a will o'the wisp. Sexuality is a material force. We may challenge its hegemony, rail against its power, opt out of its incessant claims. But we cannot forget it, ignore it, or pretend it does not exist.

Secondly, if sexuality is an apparatus of power, what are the best ways of challenging it? In particular, what is the place of the radical sexual movements and the call of sexual freedom against it? 'Sexual liberation' is complicit with the forms of power because it derives its term and form from it. We can all now readily concede that there was something profoundly authoritarian about the identification of quantitative sex with qualitative change in the 'era of permissiveness'. At the same time, as we all know, there is genuine sexual antagonism and female subordination, continuing oppression of minority sexual tastes and real personal misery. The New Right can pass over these in its pursuit of an apple pie authoritarianism. How can the Left oppose the appropriation of the sexual question by the Right if it denies the need for sexual freedom? To challenge the simple, essentialist alternatives of repression versus liberation is not the same as denying the need to find concrete steps towards achieving sexual change.

Thirdly, if sexuality is historically constructed, and not a good in itself, if it does not carry its own truth, what criteria are we to use in distinguishing between different manifestations of sexual desire; not only heterosexuality and homosexuality, but paedophilia, s-m, pornography . . . and incest, coprophilia, fetishism . . . and rape, necrophilia and so on. In a culture where there are genuine differences of value and political commitment, as well as cynical manipulation of prejudice, who is to decide what constitutes appropriate behaviour? Foucault's work radically breaks the connection between analysis and ethics, so that there can be no direct reading off of political positions from any history of sexuality. This makes it all the more incumbent on us to develop political positions which can cope with the diversity of desires and the pluralism of choice that face us as plural - and political - subjects.

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Heath's own solution, unfortunately, is to adopt what seems surprisingly like a conventional moralist attitude, with a touch of contemporary radical feminism thrown in for modernity. At one point in his concluding dialogue with himself he weighs in with a heavy moralistic tone to suggest that no socialist could possibly support pornography. Perhaps not, but I know many feminists and socialists who believe that blanket hysteria against pornography ignores the absolute necessity to make distinctions in discussing sexuality. The same point could be made with reference to the almost equally heated questions of the mid-80s concerning intergenerational sex and the sexual ritualization of power in s-m. Contemporary sexual politics is still dominated by a morality of acts. We need to move towards a politics concerned with the quality of relationships within which real, if subtle, distinctions can be properly made. These are crucial issues which a book on 'the sexual fix' should seek to deal with. Heath moves from theoretical deconstruction to sexual conservatism with scarcely a glancing look at the dilemmas confronting sexual radicalism today. The result, inevitably, is a disappointment.

Jeffrey Week's last book was *Sex, Politics and Society: The Regulation of Sexuality since 1800* (London, Longman, 1981)