

Postscript: Positive Criticism

The world of Williams's revolutionary conception of the working class and its cultural achievements has passed away. However, the aspirations that sustained his outlook, if not its precise purposes, survive intact in many radical reformist critiques of capitalism. These desires inspire movements for the democratisation of economic and social policy, and for the social determination of goals in opposition to those formed principally by the pursuit of profit. Indeed, many of Williams's ideas could be said to have anticipated not merely those of late-in-the-day Euro-Communists, but also those adopted by growing numbers of socialists during the years of stagnation that preceded the collapse of state-socialism.¹

Williams's criticism of socialist models based upon 'productivism' and the domination or 'conquest of nature' sit harmoniously with many contemporary ideas of sustainability, communitarianism, and democratic localism canvassed by modern anti-capitalists. Similarly, his opposition to monopolies and his specific hatred of American capitalism continue to have an up-to-date ring about them.

So, too does his explanation for the many crimes and failings of the Soviet dictatorship: its encirclement by implacable opponents and enemies systematically committed to its downfall. This kind of argument continues to have considerable force. Although, it is true that North Korea's embattled status has won it few allies, similar mitigations continue to be deployed by socialists throughout the world as justification for the nature of Fidel Castro's dictatorship. The US sanctions explain the inability of the planned economy to meet adequately the needs of the Cuban masses. Without the trade embargo, it is often argued, the planned economy would flourish and the dictatorship enforced by the Communist Party² would lose many of its unpleasant features.

¹ For an interesting discussion of socialism after the disintegration of state-socialism see Jürgen Habermas's article 'What Does Socialism Mean Today?' (Habermas 1990)

² Two years after the Cuban Revolution of 1959 the People's Socialist Party was amalgamated with the 26th July Movement, and the Revolutionary Directory March 13th, to form the Integrated Revolutionary Organizations (ORI). In March 1962 the ORI became the United Party of the Cuban Socialist Revolution (PURSC), which, in turn, became the Communist Party

Yet, capitalists, large and small, can be relied upon to do everything in their power to oppose the destruction of societies resting on profit-seeking and market relations — this is what the Marxist analysis of society (any version) assures us. And Williams, like many modern apologists for the regime in Havana, could not actually conceive of any model of socialism (or of *the transition to socialism*) that could function in the teeth of sustained and ferocious capitalist opposition without resort to one-party rule, unbridled police powers and the suppression of opposition or criticism in the trade unions, in politics, in literature, in the arts and popular entertainment.

Williams endorsed a form of political response to *actually existing socialism* in which the crimes and excesses of communist dictators were roundly denounced and yet the failings of their regimes were understood as *deformations* contingent upon their embattled circumstances. In a spirit of solidarity and constructive criticism, he defended communist dictatorships upon the grounds that not much more could be expected of them given their economic and military encirclement.

Consequently, while Williams's socialism may have become *manifestly* outmoded, its *latent* or *essential* content is seen by many socialists to be as sound as ever; it has not in any fundamental sense been discredited or rendered defunct. The corollary of this is that many of the problems exemplified by his criticism, or bequeathed to us by Williams's criticism, remain. They have assumed new guises, to be sure, but they remain within modes of criticism that frame their assessment of artworks with historical, social or political criteria derived in one way or another from socialist critiques of capitalism.

These modes of political criticism circle around an impenetrable aspirational core, imagined as the site of a dynamic process known as 'the struggle for emancipation'. It is the site of vast efforts of imagination, which have given form and coherence to equally vast material struggles for a better life waged under the aegis of socialist and egalitarian ideas for more than a century and a half by hundreds of millions of workers, peasants, students and intellectuals throughout the world.

of Cuba in October 1965. For a generally favourable account of the evolution of the Cuban communist dictatorship see Lievesley 2004: *passim*.

Within the critical process this struggle has assumed the form of meditation upon alienation, inequality, domination and subordination, giving rise almost automatically to contemplation of exploitation, colonialism, racism, gender, and sexism, which turn inevitably to historical consideration of the conditions of their production and reproduction within ‘the capitalist system’.

It is well known, of course, that much was wrong with the world before the inception of societies fashioned through generalised commodity production. However, capitalism is arraigned either for *producing*, *intensifying*, or *sustaining* these oppressive or exploitative contexts from which we all need emancipating. The analysis of these contexts, their identification and illustration, the determination of their nature and extent, forms the historical matrix within which political criticism seeks to engage with art works.

It is here, in the employment of history that much contemporary criticism, often of considerable sophistication, exhibits a striking similarity to that of Williams’s work. The deployment of historical assumptions and historical texts takes place in a manner in which critical reflection upon the formation of those historical assumptions and those historical texts does not play an active or dynamic part in the development of the criticism. The result of this procedure is the formation and hardening of critical contexts composed of aspirations, dissatisfactions, fore conceptions and histories, which take little account of the reading, speaking and writing that have brought them into existence.

History is often treated as a stable source from which evidence is sought without regard to the manner in which historical selection occurs and texts are produced. As we have seen Williams found a particular view of enclosure, rural impoverishment and depopulation, congenial — it fitted his view of landlords, their bailiffs, and their ‘house-trained’ poets. Matters would have become much more complicated if he had questioned the coherence and relevance of his *historical sources*. Poems and novels read would have assumed a different status, their formal qualities and their content would have assumed new and different relations as, for example, pastoral landscapes — landscapes without labour — reminded critics more of a lively interest in antiquity and yearning for prelapsarian harmony than a landed magnet’s desire to conceal the real source of nature’s bounty.

Consequently, a critical engagement with historiography, together with a critical engagement with the history of criticism is essential, before significant reflection can take place upon the way in which the text or artwork under discussion contributes to and alters our understanding of historical development. Literary critics engaged in political criticism are engaged in historical writing; consequently they must avoid imagining that history provides the critical context within which they can frame their readings.

If political critics do not reflect deeply upon both, their political fore conceptions, and their historical sources, subjecting both to thorough criticism, sound judgements cannot be produced. However, this injunction is far too general, far too broad to be of any practical assistance. What is surely more important, in every case, is the attempt which must be made to derive the political and historical problems from the text or artwork under consideration, to approach the individual artwork (or particular body of work) as a distinct production, one concealing within it the appropriate means by which it may be read. Critics must not impose a critical context upon a work *in advance* of their reading and evaluation of it as a unique work of art.

This means that the historical problems revealed or created by a text, its political register, its moral or philosophical implications, should be sought within the text — the critics' task is to determine during her encounter with a particular artwork the appropriate means of reading it. We should not measure and weigh works against ready-made critical contexts, offering a particular novel to post-colonial readings or another to a feminist account, and so on. In each case we should look *within the artwork* for the means by which it may be read most effectively.³

This does not mean dispensing with the use of political or historical resources in the course of criticism. On the contrary it means ensuring that where political criticism is thought appropriate, reflection upon politics and history must assume an active role in the encounter with an artwork or text in a manner which grasps that text as a unique contribution to the history of art and to the history of its criticism.

³ See Gary Banham's essay 'Kant and the ends of criticism', Banham 2003: pp193-207.