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Résumé de l'article

Cet article propose un retour à l’exemple de Raymond Williams et à son essai « The Culture of Nations », en tentant de souligner l’intérêt — toujours actuel — de son intervention dans le cadre des débats sur la nation et sur la post-colonialité. En tissant des liens entre ces notions de nation, de « *natio* » et de lieu, Williams tente de montrer que — dans un contexte britannique à tout le moins — les identités en question sont produites à partir d’histoires de longues durées, complexes et multi-ethniques, irréductibles aux discours superficiels sur le patriotisme ethnique. Son propos le conduit à affronter les questions du racisme et — de façon beaucoup plus controversée — du libéralisme, ou du moins cette version du libéralisme qui entendrait invalider le racisme au nom de « droits » juridiques purement abstraits.

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Nation/*Natio*:

Raymond Williams and "The Culture of Nations"

CHRISTOPHER PRENDERGAST

Nation, nationalism, and then that curious invention "nationess", have been high on the agenda in discussion of questions of political and cultural identity in terms that have importantly highlighted (and celebrated) the phenomenon of the "diasporic". There have of course been huge gains in this emphasis, but also arguably certain losses, in the making of new *doxa* (intimately associated with what now goes under the name of "postcoloniality"). In this intervention I want to invite us to listen to the voice, doubtless deeply unfashionable in present circumstances, of Raymond Williams, principally in terms of his essay "The Culture of Nations" (which appeared as a chapter in his book, *Towards 2000*). In many ways, it is not an easy text to negotiate (although it is certainly very easy to traduce it), and, in issuing this invitation, I do not mean simply to counter the new *doxa*. I do maintain, however, that there are some good reasons for wishing Raymond Williams still to be around, giving us the benefit of his quietly skeptical view of certain hyper inflated and increasingly commodified discourses.

Raymond Williams is best known for his sustained reflection, over the course of a whole working life, on the meanings, formations and politics of that tricky term "culture" (such that, in Britain at least, he is plausibly seen as the founding father of what is now called "cultural studies", from the point of view of both its theoretical articulation and its practical analyses). How that reflection relates to issues of nation and identity I shall come to in a moment, though in a somewhat oblique manner. I begin however with a reductively caricatural snapshot of the main contours of current debate around these terms and questions. These are now familiar, even routinized: namely, the arguments which turn, roughly, on the opposition between the notion of identity dispersed in a postcolonial diaspora through the late modern global system and, on the other hand, a nativist natio-

nalism as the site for the construction of collective political identities. The arguments pro and con around this opposition variously emphasize nativism as regressive and essentialist (as in some of the writings of Edward Said, most especially *Culture and Imperialism*) or as progressive in the context of the struggle against imperialism (the national independence movements), with a correspondingly jaundiced view of diaspora as a light-weight and self-deceiving celebration of cosmopolitan exile (as, for example, in the writings of Aijaz Ahmed[1]).

It is against that background that Williams's work has been discussed, if only briefly, in relation to the question of nationalism. Broadly he has been read as uncongenial to the new ways of thinking associated with "globalization". The principal claim has been that the explorations of "culture" remain disablingly bounded by the parameters of "nation" (national history, experience, etc.), with a variety of consequences, the most glaring of which, on this view (it is for example the view of the Indian scholar Gauri Viswanathan[2]), is a relative neglect of the dimension of empire. There is of course an obvious sense in which this charge fails to make sense of the relevant range of facts. To refute the claim that Williams was insensitive to the dimension of empire, we have only to read the last chapter of *The Country and the City*, which is precisely about the construction of the modern Western metropolitan centre in relation to the colonialist adventure. And of course he had no truck whatsoever with the visibly regressive forms of *English* nationalism, as well as laying bare some of the cultural mechanisms by which that form of nationalism is socially produced and reproduced. Here for example is Williams in an interview on the cultural and political uses of the mass media, specifically television, for the purpose of creating fictive national identity, or what he calls the sense of "false nation":

> In thinking about [television] audiences, I keep coming back to this notion of the constitution of a false nation... I would welcome anything that would break up this false sense because this idea of the nation...of people whom we "recognize", excludes the majority of the people of the world whom we don't recognize and watch on television[3].

1. See Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, New York, Random House, 1993; Aijaz Ahmed, *Theory, Classes, Nations, Literatures*, London, Verso, 1992.

2. Gauri Viswanathan, "Raymond Williams and British Colonialism", in *Cultural Materialism. On Raymond Williams*, Christopher Prendergast (ed.), Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1995, p. 188-210.

3. Stephen Heath and Gillian Skirrow, "Interview with Raymond Williams", in *Cultural Materialism. On Raymond Williams*, p. 368.

The internationalist commitments of that statement about nationalism seem clear enough, and perhaps never more apposite than at this moment of the intensification of the manufacture of "false nation" by the media. Yet, at another level, the question of nation in Williams's thought is more complex. For example, does the use of the expression "false nation" imply that there is such a thing as "true nation"? Here let us turn to Williams's most extended discussion of the question of nation and nationalism, the essay "The Culture of Nations[4]". It begins with the following lively scenario:

> There was this Englishman who worked in the London office of a multinational corporation based in the United States. He drove home one evening in his Japanese car. His wife, who worked in a firm that imported German kitchen equipment, was already at home. Her small Italian car was often quicker through the traffic. After a meal, which included New Zealand lamb, Californian carrots, Mexican honey, French cheese and Spanish wine, they settled down to watch a programme on their television set, which had been made in Finland. The programme was a retrospective celebration of the war to recapture the Falkland Islands. As they watched it they felt warmly patriotic, and very proud to be British[5].

This of course is a mini-fable or allegory of what, in the same essay, Williams calls certain "contradictions in what is meant by nationality, and even more by patriotism". But, though the passage is a funny one, the contradictions are not offered as simply a laughing matter. For Williams is quick to register the all-too easy way in which they are made a laughing matter by those who, in a very lightly coded language, he refers to as the diaspora-orientated metropolitan intellectuals of the late twentieth century: "The artificialities of many forms of modern 'nationality' and 'patriotism' have often been noticed. Some relatively detached or mobile people see them as merely 'backward' or 'primitive', and have a good laugh about them, until some war makes them weep[6]."

This already hints at both complexity and instability in Williams's thinking about the "national", and pulls the relevant argument in a direction that is visibly against the grain of many of our currently fashionable orthodoxies. Take, for example, the distinctions, both stated and implied, by the following passage from the same essay:

4. Raymond Williams, "The Culture of Nations", in *Towards 2000*, London, Chatto & Windus, 1982, p. 177-199.

5. Raymond Williams, *Towards 2000*, p. 177.

6. Raymond Williams, *Towards 2000*, p. 180.

> It is as if a really secure nationalism, already in possession of its nation-state, can fail to see itself as "nationalism". Its own distinctive bonding is perceived as natural and obvious by contrast with the mere projections of any nationalism which is still in active progress and thus incomplete[7].

There is thus a nationalism so thickly embedded in the taken-for-granted that it is unseen as "nationalism" by its adherents; it is naturalized to the point of no longer being visible (in contrast to an emergent nationalism in process of articulation, presumably of the "national-liberationist" type). On the other hand, consider the interesting move in Williams's book *Keywords:* there we are invited to cross-reference the entry on "nation" and "nationalism" with the entry on "native", where one of the definitions of the latter reads: "innate, natural, or of a place in which one is born (natio)[8]". This sense or dimension of the question is one that Williams's doesn't simply *define*, as an exercise in formal semantics laced with etymology; it also designates something that is *valued*. For all his intellectual border-crossing, Williams's basic existential preferences were for settled forms of life and tightly knit communities as defenses against the huge disruptions of modernity. The word "natural", for example, is one that we shall encounter again in this connection. We should note only at this stage that the valued use of the term in this passage from *Keywords* sits rather uneasily with the devalued or devaluing use of "natural" in the passage about "secure nationalism" from *Towards 2000*. For, as term of value, "natural" is also of course a troubling word, as is the implied relation between "nation" and *natio*, the place where one is born. Eric Hobsbawm, for instance, has discussed this relation in terms of the theme of proto-nationalism and ethnicity in a manner that shows the far more troubled face of that association[9].

Williams is of course alert to this, as evidenced in the following, again from "The Culture of Nations":

7. Raymond Williams, *Towards 2000*, p. 183.

8. Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, London, Fontana, 1983, p. 215.

9. Eric Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1870*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1990. In *Politiques de l'amitié*, Jacques Derrida also discusses extensively the relation of nation to *natio*, from a very different perspective to that of Williams: in a sustained deconstructive reading of the Western tradition of commentary (from Aristotle to Nietzsche and Blanchot) on the friend/enemy polarity seen as underlying our conceptions of the "political". In this account, the radically problematical categories of place (especially national territories), birth and "nature" are approached almost exclusively in terms of their biological "rooting" in structures of family kinship, from which issue, genealogically,

> "Nation" as a term is radically connected with "native". We are born into relationships which are typically settled in a place. This form of primary and "placeable" bonding is of quite fundamental human and natural importance. Yet the jump from that to anything like the modern-nation state is entirely artificial[10].

The "jump" from one to the other is then explicitly stated. On the other hand, there may be *other* jumps in Williams's own arguments and position, problematical and under-addressed implications. And it is these that I want to talk about with a view not to giving fixed answers but to opening a discussion. I want to do so around the very general topic of Williams's attitude to what is called "modernity", and by way of two themes indirectly but powerfully related to the question of "nation" (which is why I said earlier that I would approach these matters obliquely): namely, the theme of modern*ism* in literature; and the theme or category of "community". How these terms converge, in one way or another, on the question of nation and identity will become clear, or I hope will become clear as I go along[11].

First some observations of a very general sort concerning Williams's relation to what we call "modernity". In so far as, following Weber, modernity is to be understood as the rationalized order of the systematic "differentiation of the spheres" producing, again in Weber's terms, "specialists without spirit and sensualists without heart", Williams mobilized what remained of his Leavisite-Lawrentian sympathies in support of a position of resolute opposition. This however comes through in a variety of not necessarily equivalent guises, and perhaps nowhere at once more strongly and more problematically than in the late inquiries into the related concept of "modernism" (as a series of essays published posthumously under the title *The Politics of Modernism. Against the New Conformists*). This, a vexed area for all of us, and especially—in a line of conti-

the idea and the ideal of "fraternity". "Le concept du politique", writes Derrida, "s'annonce rarement sans quelque adhérence de l'État avec la famille, sans ce que nous appellerons une schématique de la filiation: la souche, le genre ou l'espèce, le sexe (*Geschlecht*), le sang, la naissance, la nature, la nation" (Jacques Derrida, *Politiques de l'amitié*, Paris, Éditions Galilée, 1994, p. 12-13). Williams, by contrast, shows little interest in the biological (perhaps turning something of a blind eye to the more murderous discourses that flow from the notion of "community"), in favour of a sense of "place" ("relationships which are typically settled in a place") as social through and through.

10. Raymond Williams, *Towards 2000*, p. 180.

11. Here I recycle some remarks in my "Introduction" to *Cultural Materialism. On Raymond Williams*.

nuity joining what are otherwise distinguished as the modern and the postmodern—for the thinkers and writers today modeling cultural identity on the experience of the migratory, the diasporic and the exilic. The "new conformists" are those initiating and completing the process whereby the phenomenon of the twentieth-century deracinated, cosmopolitan writer, characteristically migrating or exiled to the great metropolitan centers of the capitalist and imperialist West, is packaged as a selective and marketable ideology of modern*ism*. It is significant that "modernity" gets addressed here primarily *via* the question of "literature", as another point of resistance in Williams's thought to the pressure to specialize generated by and within the modern itself. This in turn gives a context for Williams's long engagement with literature as both critic and writer. Just as Williams refuses the specializing movement which restricts culture to the arts, so he is root-and-branch opposed to the specialization of literature to a separable and autonomous function (as distinct—radically distinct—from posing "literature" as a set of *specific* practices). From *The Long Revolution* through to *Keywords* and other works, Williams returns again and again to the fact, and its demonstration, that the concept of "literature" is not a given or a constant, but that it has a history, precisely a history of increasing specialization from writing in general to printed texts to fiction and works of imagination (the latter definition being essentially a nineteenth-century invention).

What I want to take here from this alignment of modernity, modernism and literature is a convergence of historical separations, the late separation of the concept of "literature" from a wider formation, and the separation of the (avant-garde) writer from rooted location and community. Against those late specializations and separations, Williams's position is an argument for seeing or making things whole, and, in the conduct of the argument, an embedding of analysis in a value-language; what seems to count most for Williams is, relatedly, an aesthetic of integration and a culture of (relative) settlement, as modes of life and practice in which "connections" are to be found or can be made. This is one reason why Williams returns time and again in his writings on literature to the idea of "realism" and a certain tradition of the novel. Here he is very close to Lukács[12], preferring to the art of dispersal and fragmentation promoted by the sanctioned versions of modernism, an art that connects, especially forms which join, as

12. See especially Raymond Williams, *The English Novel from Dickens to Lawrence*, London, Chatto and Windus, 1970.

mutually necessary for the intelligibility of each other, individual experience and social formation. His own novels are themselves—sometimes in a perhaps excessively demonstrative mode—geared to just this aesthetic, in their very plots and structures always relating consciousness and experience back to origins in community and change in collectively lived history. In the case of the book *The English Novel from Dickens to Lawrence*, the collectively lived history in question is of course circumscribed by nation; the *English* novel, which might already alert us to potential difficulties and problems, though in response to a question in the *Politics and Letters* interviews about the restrictively English frame of reference here, Williams gave a fairly relaxed and open answer, as well as a largely circumstantial one; whatever the explanation, it had nothing to do with an a priori commitment to some ideological notion of "Englishness[13]".

Yet while there is no reason whatsoever to doubt Williams's sincerity here, there is something slightly disingenuous or evasive in the answers he gives, in the sense of evading the question as to whether framing the book as an inquiry into the English novel did carry an implication of something special and distinctive about the English tradition, namely that it displays in peculiarly intense and achieved form that aesthetic of formal integration, the cultural soil of which is furnished by some national version of common life, knowable community and so forth. This would then start of course to resemble the structure of Leavis's "Great Tradition", however much Williams deliberately re-arranges its membership. Furthermore, in the case of his own novels, it is now impossible for us to overlook the limitations and blind spots of the insistence on "connection" as both social and aesthetic category. Consider, for example, the obvious patriarchal sense of the formula in the novel *Volunteers*: "changed but connecting, father to son". We might find ourselves correspondingly suspicious of any attack on cosmopolitan modernism in the name of rootedness against the rootless, especially when the former starts to attract disturbing appeals to the category of the "natural" (the ratified version of the avant-garde, writes Williams in *The Politics of Modernism*, derives from the loss of a "naturalized continuity with a persistent social settlement" and, in an extremely puzzling formulation, works "to naturalize the thesis of the *non*-natural status of language[14]"). To my mind, there is an uncomfortably

13. Raymond Williams, *Politics and Letters. Interviews with the New Left Review*, London, NLB, 1979, p. 270.

14. Raymond Williams, *The Politics of Modernism. Against the New Conformists*, London, Verso, 1989, p. 34.

strained quality in much of the writing of *The Politics of Modernism*, above all in the closing pages of the essay, "When was Modernism?". Here we see Williams deep in the characteristic effort of making difficult discriminations, but the difficulty often shifts from tension to tenseness, a barely concealed hostility, informed by what, at its worst, we have to call prejudice. Thus when modern literary cosmopolitanism is represented in terms of the experience of "endless border-crossing", we suddenly feel the sharp edge of scarcely contained aggression surface in the writing: "The whole commotion is finally and crucially interpreted and ratified by the City of Émigrés and Exiles itself, New York[15]" (this from the man who wrote the novel *Border Country* and described his own life as an endless re-negotiation of borders).

Here frankly alarm bells start to ring, and we are perforce obliged to think of other, deeply uncongenial forms of the attack on the "cosmopolitan", especially from within a certain valuing of the "national" (notoriously, Heidegger's hostility to the cosmopolitan and the metropolitan in the name of national community rooted in soil and land). Nevertheless, it would of course be fatuous to see Williams as an anti-technological pastoralist or agrarian anti-modernist, a kind of Heidegger of the left. In the critique of a certain modernism, we have to remember the guiding political perspective, above all the argued claim that the marketed selective tradition of modernism Williams is anxious to contest rests on the centrality of Western metropolitan culture to the consolidation of empire and the globalization of capital (in this connection it would be important to re-emphasize the last chapters of *The Country and the City*). It is above all in these terms, with their reach, however incomplete, into the history of empire and modern capitalism, that the negative picture of the project of modernity is sketched, rather than as a recipe for taking refuge in fantasy constructions of the pre-modern. As the demolition-job on the sentimental fictions of "knowable community" in *The Country and the City* shows, whatever Williams meant by "settlement", it had nothing to do with the imaginary social orders discussed in relation to some of the novels of George Eliot or with the connoted class narrative behind the denotative opening sentence of Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility* ("The family of Dashwood had been long settled in Sussex"), and still less of course with what Arnold called, in pages expressly written to denounce working class militancy (the

15. Raymond Williams, *The Politics of Modernism*, p. 35.

"Hyde Park rough"), "that profound sense of settled order and security, without which a society like ours cannot grow and live at all[16]".

If then Williams gives short shrift to reactionary forms of pre-modern nostalgia, could we usefully situate him in relation to any of the recognized terms of the postmodern? Williams himself hardly uses the word "postmodern". Where, in its left versions, postmodernism means the politics of new social movements, Williams gave his strong support, on the tacit assumption however that postmodern also meant post-capitalist. In *Towards 2000*, he wrote of the need for "a new kind of socialist movement 'based on' a wide range of needs and interests". But he was also quick to add, as part of that account, a claim for the gathering of these diverse needs and interests in "a new definition of the general interest". The idea of the general interest, like its neighbor, the idea of a "common culture", is the political correlative of the analytic-ethical stress on the virtues of "wholeness" (a constant stress in Williams's theoretical account of "culture" as whole and part of a whole); it engages principles of solidarity and community and seeks, in the formulation from *Resources of Hope*, the "creation of a condition in which the people as a whole participate in the articulation of meanings and values[17]".

The reference here to the "people", the "people as a whole" also of course echoes and resonates across the historical discourses of nationhood and nationalism (Hobsbawm again shows us how this connection works in the formation of modern national consciousness, particularly that form of it that comes out of the French Revolution and republican theories of citizenship and the state). Williams in fact has little to say about citizenship and the state; they seem to have been for him more juridical than genuinely social categories). He does however have a lot to say about the notions of the general interest and the common good. Reference to the general interest has tended to disappear from left discourse, partly from the pressure of the multiculturalist case, partly, and relatedly, because of the hijacking of the idea by the political right, especially in the United States. Yet if it is true that the left has ceded the terrain in question in part because the right has been so adept at commandeering it, this could well be a mistake. Williams almost certainly thought it was a mistake, and much of his lesson is that, beyond short-term considerations of tactical moves and positions, in the longer-range view it is essential to reclaim it. Similarly he had little interest in a pluralized postmodernity that

16. See Raymond Williams, "A Hundred Years of Culture and Anarchy", in *Problems in Materialism and Culture*, London, Verso, 1980, p. 3-10.

17. Raymond Williams, *Resources of Hope*, London, Verso, 1989, p. 36.

comes out as multicultural consumer spectacle. The argument in Williams is always that a cultural politics cannot be just a politics of cultural difference and cultural rights (though the latter are of course, for Williams, crucial in contexts of social inequality, discrimination, blockage of access to resource and all the other impediments to the creation of a truly democratic culture). There still remains, however, the difficult question of cultural clash (as notoriously in the Rushdie affair). Here there are not many plausible choices. We can opt for fashionable adaptations of Lyotard's incommensurability thesis as one version of the postmodern (but this idea is ultimately a "liberal" idea in the sense of posing the social order on the model of the *agon*, akin to the competitive relations of the marketplace). Or, as Williams encourages us to do, we can try to think the politics of culture in terms of the idea of the fully human culture, where the emergent in cultural theory would be the attempt to think the conditions, the "grounds" of the emergence of a common culture, but without—as Williams always stressed—losing sight of the relations of power and subordination that at once block, and so imperatively require, that very project.

How these notions of the general interest, the common culture and community might be reclaimed, and what might be count as genuinely new in a "new definition", are issues that Williams's work, understood as a cultural politics, compels us to address. In particular it asks us to think about where we stand once we have disembarrassed ourselves of the older, universalist and metaphysical view of the common good built on a shared human essence (for example, Arnold's "best self" which it is the task of culture to form in order that the subject recognize the "higher reason" of the state, the latter having almost invariably of course the specific form of the nation-state[18]). Williams's principal point here is that a consequence of abandoning the Universal in this sense should not then be a simple frittering away in a certain language of the postmodern of the notions of social solidarity and collective project. "Community" is a prime example. Other than as sentimental flourish in the direction of lost *Gemeinschaft* or as synonym for special interest group, "community" does not in fact get a very good press these days, or indeed any press at all. Taking Williams seriously is amongst other things squirming uncomfortably in that silence, though there is of course the difficulty that Williams's own writings can also occasionally leave us squirming, especially when

18. Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society*, London, Chatto and Windus, 1959, p. 238.

the word "natural" reappears, in talk of something called "natural communities"; it is surely right to see here a disabling movement in Williams thought from the complex to the simple. On the other hand, we should also remember here Williams warning (in *Culture and Society*) against the "projection of simple communities[19]" and above all perhaps the severance of the valued senses of community from certain versions of the "national", as, for example, in the observations in the interview to which I alluded earlier on the uses of television to create *via* its audience the sense of "false nation".

In this connection, we should also note the rejection, in the same interview, of the idea of national community on the grounds of its exclusiveness ("this idea of the nation, [...] of people whom we 'recopie', excludes the majority of the people of the world whom we don't recognize and watch on television"). This not only counters a familiar view of Williams's thought as beset by a "nativist" view of the national, it also rejoins an important general emphasis in contemporary critique of the idea of "community". The interesting feature of Williams's thinking on these matters is that it both absorbs this emphasis while insisting on moving beyond it, in one of many enactments of the category of necessary complexity. There is, for example, the important point—more or less lost these days—that, while a narrow view of the "national" is entirely alien to the spirit of Williams's work, his thinking about popular culture, especially in the early texts, derives a great deal of its force and continuing relevance from what he found in Gramsci's reflection on the progressive resources within the national tradition.

For it is not at all clear that, once we have passed the idea of single community through the filter of rigorous skeptical analysis, we are left with anything particularly useful beyond the moment of critical negativity itself. What we are typically left with—in, say, the work of deconstruction on the category of the "political" (for example, Jean-Luc Nancy's *La communauté désœuvrée*[20]), or in certain versions of the theory of radical democracy—is little more than an account of community understood as resting on an exclusionary act, whereby a "we" is constituted by reference to a "them". Community, on this account, is thus critically dissolved into communitarian fantasies (often around some metaphor of a "body") of bonding and binding that both menaces difference within the group

19. Matthew Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1993.

20. See Jean-Luc Nancy, *La communauté désœuvrée*, Paris, Éditions Christian Bourgois, 1986.

and constitutes it as alien "other" outside the group. This is especially true of "national community", above all in the biologism and communalism of racist and fascist models of national community. But this sort of account also entails a reduction from the complex to the simple, starting out as necessary critique of a certain model of "imagining" community (in Benedict Anderson's term), but then, in its own generalization as Model *tout court,* becoming a polemical man of straw, where the positive (but complexified and non-nostalgic) senses of community are entirely lost or severely curtailed. They either disappear from the argument, or they are retained in a form which leaves them stranded on an impossible horizon of utopian desire—a view which, beyond a self-evident truism or two, is just about useless for anything resembling a practical cultural politics that would involve both the affirmation of solidarities and the negotiation of priorities within those solidarities. In addition, it also effectively leaves the way open for colonization of the term "community", along with its neighbour "culture", by practices of everyday language that, especially in the United States, empty it entirely of meaningful content (prize specimens must include "the defense community", "the culture of poverty", the "money culture").

Once again, turning to Williams in connection with these losses and perversions can seem to be going backwards rather than forwards, back into the terms of an old-fashioned humanism. But then what precisely would this now mean? Williams himself speaks of the "humanist error". In Williams's text the phrase is not in quotation marks but it is ambiguous as to whether the word "error" is implicitly in or out of such marks, cited in an irony with a nice imprecision as to what is actually being ironized. Naturally, Williams repudiated humanist-voluntarist notions of agency that abstracted an atomized "individual" from the social. On the other hand, he completely shared E. P. Thompson's rejection of the reduction of active subjectivity to the notion of passive interpellation sponsored by a certain reading (though some would claim it is a mis-reading) of Althusser. It is in this respect that we can speak of Williams's "humanism" as, in the words of Cornel West, a "subtle humanism", constantly attentive to historical contextualisation and determination while unmovably grounded in an ethics of agency. One reason Williams found Gramsci's notion of hegemony so attractive is that it appeared to allow for that particular combination of historical boundedness and active agency. West's implicit point about Williams's humanism is that Williams is ultimately unthinkable without the ethical, in the sense not of a prescriptive moralism, but as the ethical grounding of political and social action in a set of lived human relations. It is here that Williams's complicated thinking about

nation and nationality finds its proper force as the social negotiation of identities within the bounds of the forms in which we live.

The complication or complexity in question can be adequately represented only by quoting Williams at some considerable length; so I would like to conclude by attending to a long passage from the essay "The Culture of Nations", a passage that requires careful reading because parts of it touch very sensitive and difficult spots indeed:

> All the varied peoples who have lived on this island are in a substantial physical sense still here. What is from time to time projected as an "island race" is in reality a long process of successive conquests and repressions but also of successive supersessions and relative integrations. All the real processes have been cultural and historical, and all the artificial processes have been political, in one after another dominative proclamation of a state and an identity... I do not know how far any real knowledge of the physical and cultural history of the peoples of this island might prevail against the stupidities of this narrow orthodox perspective. I cannot believe that it would make *no* difference, and I am encouraged by the growing positive interest in these misrepresented and obscured pasts. But at any time what has also to be faced is the effective stage of their current integration. It is here that there is a major problem in the most recent immigrations of more visibly different peoples. When these interact with the most recent selective forms of identity... the angry confusions and prejudices are obvious.
>
> At the same time many generations of formerly diverse peoples have experienced and adapted to a differently rooted though overlapping social identity, and as at all earlier stages of relative integration are at best deeply uncertain of, at worst openly hostile to, newcoming other peoples. This is the phenomenon now crudely interpreted as "racism". It is not that there is no actual racism: it flows without difficulty from the other most recent selective forms, as it flowed also, in modern times, against the Irish and the Jews. But it is a profound misunderstanding to refer all the social and cultural tensions of the arrival of new peoples to these ideological forms. The real working of ideology, both ways, can be seen in that most significant of current exchanges, when an English working man (English in the terms of the sustained modern integration) protests at the arrival or presence of "foreigners" or "aliens", and now goes on to specify them as "blacks", to be met by the standard liberal reply that "they are as British as you are". Many people notice the ideological components of the protest: the rapid movement, where no other terms are available, from resentment of unfamiliar neighbours to the ideological specifications of "race" and "superiority".
>
> But what of the ideology of the reply? It is employing, very plainly, a merely legal definition of what it is to be "British". At this strict level, it is necessary and important, cor-

> rectly asserting the need for equality and protection within the laws. Similarly, the most active legal (and communal) defense of dislocated and exposed groups and minorities is essential. But it is a serious misunderstanding, when full social relations are in question, to suppose that the problems of social identity are resolved by formal definitions. For unevenly and at times precariously, but always through long experience substantially, an effective awareness of social identity depends on actual and sustained social relationships. To reduce social identity to formal legal definitions, at the level of the state, is to collude with the alienated superficialities of the nation which are the limited functional terms of the modern ruling class[21].

This is sticky stuff and liable to a range of misreadings. Some people have found it disturbing. It is therefore of the utmost importance to ensure that it is not misread. Whatever else it is about, this long passage is not about "race" (other than as a category in the ideology of *racism*). "Race" does not interest Williams, let alone the color of a person's skin. What does interest him is the social and the historical, social mentalities, recognitions and shared experiences grounded in a common history. Thus, the critical objections to the middle class liberal's "reply" in no way entails endorsement of that to which the reply is offered. For it is not of course the liberal's rejection of racism that bothers Williams (to entertain the contrary for a second would be ludicrous), but rather the class situation and ideological perspective within which both utterance and reply are negotiated.

The issue here is not race (how could it be, since Williams's version of "Britishness" as a historical construction over the *longue durée* explicitly emphasizes the multi-ethnic character of the long-haul formation, as against, precisely against, the racist stereotypes of the narrower, quasi-official version?). The ground of Williams's objection to the liberal reply is that of a suspicion of appeals based on the discourse of "rights". It is not that he sees rights as unimportant, as essentially protective devices, especially in that "wild zone of power" that Susan Buck-Morss has identified as a systematic property of the modern state[22]. But he is not at all drawn to the abstract, impersonal, quasi-juridical model of society as resting on a contractual relation between citizen and state articulated *via* constitutional-

21. Raymond Williams, *Towards 2000*, p. 193-195.

22. Susan Buck-Morss, *Dreamworld and Catastrophe. The Passing of Mass Utopia in East and West*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, MIT Press, 2000.

ly defined individual rights[23]. He is far more interested in the inter-personal values and principles of solidarity and community.

The claim here is that, because they are born of long-haul histories (histories that Williams stresses are themselves histories of ethnic mixtures), solidarity and community cannot be juridically fabricated. This is of course also the most sensitive point in Williams's text, since it is precisely the point that is so readily and rapidly appropriated and exploited by covert racism, the racism that dare not speak its name. But it is just *because* it is so easily appropriated that the point is important, that is, it is important not to cede the point to racist discourse. For if we do, we are perforce also obliged to surrender or mask what Williams here foregrounds: that social solidarities do not come cheap; generally speaking, they are historically and not juridically created (although the "project" of the European Union provides a possible, if controversial counter-example), from the deployment of skills and resources in learning to live with one another (as distinct from the ghetto-like co-existence that is so often the actual reality of the so-called multicultural society). Reading Williams on the "national" is, I think, one salutary way of reminding ourselves of what has become congealed, in both discourse and social practice, in that version of multiculturalism.

23. In the above passage, we seem to be light years away from the approach of Jacques Derrida. Many of Williams's terms ("identity", "full", "substantial", "presence", etc.) are anathema to Derrida, the very terms ripe for systematic deconstruction. On the other hand, it is striking that what Williams and Derrida have in common is a refusal to think the social or the political by reference to law ("merely legal definitions"). In Derrida's writings, this refusal (of the regime of the juridical, the passport, the contract, etc.) is linked to the attempt to re-think "justice" by re-thinking the logic of the gift. See Jacques Derrida, *Donner le temps, 1. La fausse monnaie*, Paris, Éditions Galilée, 1991, and Jacques Derrida, *Spectres de Marx*, Paris, Éditions Galilée, 1993.

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