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DOING CULTURAL STUDIES

The Story of the Sony Walkman

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READING B
Raymond Williams: 'Mobile privatization'

Most human beings adjust, because they must, to altered, even radically altered conditions. This is already marked in the first generations of such shifts. By the second and third generations the initially enforced conditions are likely to have become if not the new social norms – for at many levels of intensity the conditions may still be resented – *at least the new social perspective, its everyday common sense*. Moreover, because so many of the shifts are enforced by a willed exploitation of new means of production and new products, sometimes ending in failure but much more often increasing goods of every kind, there are major if always unequal material advantages in the new conditions. Capitalism as a system, just because of its inherent one-dimensional mobility, can move on very rapidly from its failures and worked-out areas, leaving only local peoples stuck with them. By its very single-mindedness it can direct new and advantageous production in at least the short-term interests of effective working majorities. In any of its periodic crises it can make from one in ten to one in three of a numbered people redundant, but while it still has the other nine or the other two it can usually gain sufficient support or tolerance to continue its operations. Moreover, identified almost inextricably with positive advantages in improved products and services, it not only claims but is acclaimed as progress.

Thus while on an historical or comparative scale its forced operations are bound to be seen as arbitrary and often brutal, on any local and temporarily settled scale it flies with the wings of the dove. It brings factories and supermarkets, employment and affluence, and everything else is a local and temporary difficulty – out of sight, out of time, out of mind – or is the evident fault, even the malign fault, of those who are suffering. In any general examination, the system is transparent, and ugly. But in many, and so far always enough, local perspectives it is not only the tolerated but the consciously preferred order of real majorities.

For now from the other side of its mouth it speaks of the consumer: the satisfied, even stuffed consumer; the sovereign consumer. Sovereign? That raises a problem, but while the production lines flow and the shopping trolleys are ready to carry the goods away, there is this new, powerful social identity, which is readily and even eagerly adopted. It is at best a radically reduced identity, at worst mean and greedy. But of course 'consumer' is only a general purpose word, on the lines of 'citizen' or 'subject'. It is accepted only as describing that level of life: the bustling level of the supermarket. When the goods from the trolley have been stowed in the car, and the car is back home, a fuller and more human identity is ready at the turn of a key: a family, a marriage, children, relatives, friends. The economic behaviour of the consumer is something you move out to, so as to bring the good things back.

There is then a unique modern condition, which I defined in an earlier book (*Television: technology and cultural form*, 1974) as 'mobile privatisation'. It is an ugly phrase for an unprecedented condition. What it means is that at most active social levels people are increasingly living as private small-family units, or, disrupting even that, as private and deliberately self-enclosed individuals, while at the same time there is a quite unprecedented mobility of such restricted privacies. In my novel *Second Generation* (1964) I developed the image of modern car traffic to describe this now dominant set of social relations in the old industrial societies. Looked at from right outside, the traffic flows and their regulation are clearly a social order of a determined kind, yet what is experienced inside them – in the conditioned atmosphere and internal music of this windowed shell – is movement, choice of direction, the pursuit of self-determined private purposes. All the other shells are moving, in comparable ways but for their own different private ends. They are not so much other people, in any full sense, but other units which signal and are signalled to, so that private mobilities can proceed safely and relatively unhindered. And if all this is seen from outside as in deep ways determined, or in some sweeping glance as dehumanised, that is not at all how it feels like inside the shell, with people you want to be with, going where you want to go.

Thus at a now dominant level of social relations, systems quite other than settlement, or in any of its older senses community, are both active and continually reproduced. The only disturbance is when movements from quite outside them – movements which are the real workings of the effective but taken-for-granted public system – slow the flow, change the prices, depreciate or disrupt the employee–consumer connection: forcing a truly public world back into a chosen and intensely valued privacy.

The international market in every kind of commodity receives its deep assent from this system of mobile-privatised social relations. From the shell, whether house or car or employment, the only relevant calculations are the terms of continuing or improving its own conditions. If buying what such calculations indicate, from another dominated nominal 'nation', leads directly or indirectly to the breaking or weakening of other people's shells, 'too bad' do we say? But the connections are not often as direct as that. They work their way through an immensely complicated and often unreadable market system. The results emerge as statistics, or as general remarks in television. Mainly what is wrong, we usually conclude, is what all those other shells are doing.

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