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Raymond Williams from *Culture and Society* 1780-1950 (1958)

What is left, with what in the new conditions has been newly made, is small in quantity and narrow in range. It exacts respect, but it is in no sense an alternative culture.

This very point of an alternative is extremely difficult, in terms of theory. If the major part of our culture, in the sense of intellectual and imaginative work, is to be called, as the Marxists call it, bourgeois, it is natural to look for an alternative culture, and to call it proletarian. Yet it is very doubtful whether 'bourgeois culture' is a useful term. The body of intellectual and imaginative work which each generation receives as its traditional culture is always, and necessarily, something more than the product of a single class. It is not only that a considerable part of it will have survived from much earlier periods than the immediately pre-existing form of society; so that, for instance, literature, philosophy and other work surviving from before, say, 1600, cannot be taken as 'bourgeois'. It is also that, even within a society in which a particular class is dominant, it is evidently possible both for members of other classes to contribute to the common stock, and for such contributions to be unaffected by or in opposition to the ideas and values of the dominant class. The area of a culture, it would seem, is usually proportionate to the area of a language rather than to the area of a class. It is true that a dominant class can to a large extent control the transmission and distribution of the whole common inheritance; such control, where it exists, needs to be noted as a fact about that class. It is true also that a tradition is always selective, and that there will always be a tendency for this process of selection to be related to and even governed by the interests of the class that is dominant. These factors make it likely that there will be qualitative changes in the traditional culture when there is a shift of class power, even before a newly ascendant class makes its own contributions. Points of this kind need to be stressed, but the particular stress given by describing our existent culture as bourgeois culture is in several ways misleading. It can, for example, seriously mislead those who would now consider themselves as belonging to the dominant class. If they are encouraged, even by their opponents, to think of the existing culture (in the narrow sense) as their particular product and legacy, they will deceive themselves and others. For they will be encouraged to argue that, if their class position goes, the culture goes too; that standards depend on the restriction of a culture to the class which, since it has produced it, alone understands it. On the other hand, those who believe themselves to be representatives of a new rising class will, if they accept the proposition of 'bourgeois culture', either be tempted to neglect a common human inheritance, or, more intelligently, be perplexed as to how, and how much of, this bourgeois culture is to be taken over. The categories are crude and mechanical in either position. Men who share a common language share the inheritance of an intellectual and literary tradition which is necessarily and constantly revalued with every shift in experience. The manufacture of an artificial 'working-class culture', in opposition to this common tradition, is merely foolish. A society in which the working class had become dominant would, of course, produce new valuations and new contributions. But the process would be extremely complex, because of the complexity of the

Culture and which way of life?

We live in a transitional society, and the idea of culture, too often, has been identified with one or other of the forces which the transition contains. Culture is the product of the old leisured classes who seek now to defend it against new and destructive forces. Culture is the inheritance of the new rising class, which contains the humanity of the future; this class seeks, now, to free it from its restrictions. We say things like this to each other, and glow. The one good thing, it seems, is that all the contending parties are keen enough on culture to want to be identified with it. But then, we are none of us referees in this; we are all in the game, and playing in one or other direction.

I want to say something about the idea of 'working-class culture', because this seems to me to be a key issue in our own time, and one in which there is a considerable element of misunderstanding. I have indicated already that we cannot fairly or usefully describe the bulk of the material produced by the new means of communication as 'working-class culture'. For neither is it by any means produced exclusively for this class, nor, in any important degree, is it produced by them. To this negative definition we must add another: that 'working-class culture', in our society, is not to be understood as the small amount of 'proletarian' writing and art which exists. The appearance of such work has been useful, not only in its more self-conscious forms, but also in such material as the post-Industrial ballads, which were worth collecting. We need to be aware of this work, but it is to be seen as a valuable dissident element rather than as a culture. The traditional popular culture of England was, if not annihilated, at least fragmented and weakened by the dislocations of the Industrial Revolution.

inheritance, and nothing is now to be gained by diminishing this complexity to a crude diagram.

The contrast between a minority and a popular culture cannot be absolute. It is not even a matter of levels, for such a term implies distinct and discontinuous stages, and this is by no means always the case. In Russian society in the nineteenth century one finds perhaps the clearest example of a discontinuous culture within recent history; this is marked, it should be noted, by a substantial degree of rejection of even the common language by the ruling minority. But in English society there has never been this degree of separation, since English emerged as the common language. There has been marked unevenness of distribution, amounting at times to virtual exclusion of the majority, and there has been some unevenness of contribution, although in no period has this approached the restriction of contribution to members of any one class. Further, since the beginning of the nineteenth century it has been difficult for any observer to feel that the care of intellectual and imaginative work could be safely entrusted to, or identified with, any existing social or economic class. It was in relation to this situation that the very idea of culture was, as we have seen, developed.

The most difficult task confronting us, in any period where there is a marked shift of social power, is the complicated process of revaluation of the inherited tradition. The common language, because in itself it is so crucial to this matter, provides an excellent instance. It is clearly of vital importance to a culture that its common language should not decline in strength, richness, and flexibility; that it should, further, be adequate to express new experience, and to clarify change. But a language like English is still evolving, and great harm can be done to it by the imposition of crude categories of class. It is obvious that since the development, in the nineteenth century, of the new definition of 'standard English', particular uses of the common language have been taken and abused for the purposes of class distinction. Yet the dialect which is normally equated with standard English has no necessary superiority over other dialects. Certain of the grammatical clarifications have a common importance, but not all even of these. On the other hand, certain selected sounds have been given a cardinal authority which derives from no known law of language, but simply from the fact that they are habitually made by persons who, for other reasons, possess social and economic influence. The conversion of this kind of arbitrary selection into a criterion of 'good' or 'correct' or 'pure' English is merely a subterfuge. Modern communications make for the growth of uniformity, but the necessary selection and clarification have been conducted, on the whole, on grounds quite irrelevant to language. It is still thought, for instance, that a double negative ('I don't want none') is *incorrect* English, although millions of English-speaking persons use it regularly: not, indeed, as a misunderstanding of the rule, which they might be thought too ignorant to apprehend; but as the continuation of a habit which has been in the language continuously since Chaucer. The broad 'a', in such words as 'class', is now taken as the mark of an 'educated person', although till the eighteenth century it was mainly a rustic habit, and as such despised. Or 'ain't', which in the eighteenth century was often a mark of breeding, is now supposed to be a mark of

vulgarity: in both cases, the valuation is the merest chance. The extraordinary smugness about aspirates, vowel-sounds, the choice of this or that synonym ('couch' 'sofa'), which has for so long been a normal element of middle-class humour, is, after all, not a concern for good English, but parochialism. (The current controversy about what are called 'U' and 'non-U' speech habits clearly illustrates this; it is an aspect, not of major social differences, but of the long difficulty of drawing the lines between the upper and lower sections of the *middle* class.) Yet, while this is true, the matter is complicated by the fact that in a society where a particular class and hence a particular use of the common language is dominant a large part of the literature, carrying as it does a body of vital common experience, will be attracted to the dominant language mode. At the same time, a national literature, as English has never ceased to be, will, while containing this relation, contain also elements of the whole culture and language. If we are to understand the process of a selective tradition, we shall not think of exclusive areas of culture but of degrees of shifting attachment and interaction, which a crude theory either of class or of standards is incompetent to interpret.

A culture can never be reduced to its artifacts while it is being lived. Yet the temptation to attend only to external evidence is always strong. It is argued, for instance, that the working class is becoming 'bourgeois', because it is dressing like the middle class, living in semi-detached houses, acquiring cars and washing-machines and television sets. But it is not 'bourgeois' to possess objects of utility, nor to enjoy a high material standard of living. The working class does not become bourgeois by owning the new products, any more than the bourgeois ceases to be bourgeois as the objects he owns change in kind. Those who regret such a development among members of the working class are the victims of a prejudice. An admiration of the 'simple poor' is no new thing, but it has rarely been found, except as a desperate rationalization, among the poor themselves. It is the product either of satiety or of a judgement that the material advantages are purchased at too high a human cost. The first ground must be left to those who are sated; the second, which is more important, is capable of a false transference. If the advantages were 'bourgeois' because they rested on economic exploitation, they do not continue to be 'bourgeois' if they can be assured without such exploitation or by its diminution. The worker's envy of the middle-class man is not a desire to be that man, but to have the same kind of possessions. We all like to think of ourselves as a standard, and I can see that it is genuinely difficult for the English middle class to suppose that the working class is not desperately anxious to become just like itself. I am afraid this must be unlearned. The great majority of English working people want only the middle-class material standard and for the rest want to go on being themselves. One should not be too quick to call this vulgar materialism. It is wholly reasonable to want the means of life in such abundance as is possible. This is the materialism of material provision, to which we are all, quite rightly, attentive. The working people, who have felt themselves long deprived of such means in any adequacy, intend to get them and to keep them if they can. It would need more evidence than this to show that they are becoming vulgar materialists, or that they are becoming 'bourgeois'.

The question then, perhaps, is whether there is any meaning left in 'bourgeois'? Is there any point, indeed, in continuing to think in class terms at all? Is not industrialism, by its own momentum, producing a culture that is best described as classless? Such questions, today, command a significant measure of assent, but again, while drawing support from the crudities of certain kinds of class interpretation, they rest, essentially, on an external attitude alike to culture and to class. If we think of culture, as it is important to do, in terms of a body of intellectual and imaginative work, we can see that with the extension of education the distribution of this culture is becoming more even, and, at the same time, new work is being addressed to a public wider than a single class. Yet a culture is not only a body of intellectual and imaginative work; it is also and essentially a whole way of life. The basis of a distinction between bourgeois and working-class culture is only secondarily in the field of intellectual and imaginative work, and even here it is complicated, as we have seen, by the common elements resting on a common language. The primary distinction is to be sought in the whole way of life, and here, again, we must not confine ourselves to such evidence as housing, dress and modes of leisure. Industrial production tends to produce uniformity in such matters, but the vital distinction lies at a different level. The crucial distinguishing element in English life since the Industrial Revolution is not language, not dress, not leisure – for these indeed will tend to uniformity. The crucial distinction is between alternative ideas of the nature of social relationship.

'Bourgeois' is a significant term because it marks that version of social relationship which we usually call individualism: that is to say, an idea of society as a neutral area within which each individual is free to pursue his own development and his own advantage as a natural right. The course of recent history is marked by a long fighting retreat from this idea in its purest form, and the latest defenders would seem to the earliest to have lost almost the entire field. Yet the interpretation is still dominant: the exertion of social power is thought necessary only in so far as it will protect individuals in this basic right to set their own course. The classical formula of the retreat is that, in certain defined ways, no individual has a right to harm others. But, characteristically, this harm has been primarily interpreted in relation to the individual pursuit – no individual has a right to prevent others from doing *this kind of thing*.

The reforming bourgeois modification of this version of society is the idea of service, to which I shall return. But both this idea and the individualist idea can be sharply contrasted with the idea that we properly associate with the working class: an idea which, whether it is called communism, socialism or cooperation, regards society neither as neutral nor as protective, but as the positive means for all kinds of development, including individual development. Development and advantage are not individually but commonly interpreted. The provision of the means of life will, alike in production and distribution, be collective and mutual. Improvement is sought, not in the opportunity to escape from one's class, or to make a career, but in the general and controlled advance of all. The human fund is regarded as in all respects common, and freedom of access to it as a right constituted by one's

humanity; yet such access, in whatever kind, is common or it is nothing. Not the individual, but the whole society, will move.

The distinction between these versions of society has been blurred by two factors: the idea of service, which is the great achievement of the Victorian middle class, and is deeply inherited by its successors; and the complication of the working-class idea by the fact that England's position as an imperial power has tended to limit the sense of community to national (and, in the context, imperialist) lines. Further, the versions are blurred by a misunderstanding of the nature of class. The contending ideas, and the actions which follow from them, are the property of that part of a group of people, similarly circumstanced, which has become conscious of its position and of its own attitude to this position. Class feeling is a mode, rather than a uniform possession of all the individuals who might, objectively, be assigned to that class. When we speak, for instance, of a working-class idea, we do not mean that all working people possess it, or even approve of it. We mean, rather, that this is the essential idea embodied in the organizations and institutions which that class creates: the working-class movement as a tendency, rather than all working-class people as individuals. It is foolish to interpret individuals in rigid class terms, because class is a collective mode and not a person. At the same time, in the interpretation of ideas and institutions, we can speak properly in class terms. It depends, at any time, on which kind of fact we are considering. To dismiss an individual because of his class, or to judge a relationship with him solely in class terms, is to reduce humanity to an abstraction. But, also, to pretend that there are no collective modes is to deny the plain facts.

We may now see what is properly meant by 'working-class culture'. It is not proletarian art, or council houses, or a particular use of languages; it is, rather, the basic collective idea, and the institutions, manners, habits of thought and intentions which proceed from this. Bourgeois culture, similarly, is the basic individualist idea and the institutions, manners, habits of thought and intentions which proceed from that. In our culture as a whole, there is both a constant interaction between these ways of life and an area which can properly be described as common to or underlying both. The working class, because of its position, has not, since the Industrial Revolution, produced a culture in the narrower sense. The culture which it has produced, and which it is important to recognize, is the collective democratic institution, whether in the trade unions, the cooperative movement or a political party. Working-class culture, in the stage through which it has been passing, is primarily social (in that it has created institutions) rather than individual (in particular intellectual or imaginative work). When it is considered in context, it can be seen as a very remarkable creative achievement.

To those whose meaning of culture is intellectual or imaginative work, such an achievement may be meaningless. The values which are properly attached to such work can, at times, seem overriding. On this, I would only point out that while it may have seemed reasonable to Burke to anticipate the trampling down of learning by the irruption of the 'swinish multitude', this has not in fact happened, and the swinish multitude itself has done much to prevent it happening. The record of the working-class movement