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Originals, Remakes, Assemblages: A Retrospect on *New Keywords*

Tony Bennett, Larry Grossberg and Meghan Morris

In his Introduction to *Keywords*, Raymond Williams is at some pains to place his project in relation to that of the *Oxford English Dictionary (OED)*, seeking to register both a distance from and an affiliation to it. On the one hand, he stresses the social and political values that can be detected beneath the *OED*'s appearance of impersonal authority in the selections of usage that are made and those that are avoided, and sees its strengths as being philological and etymological rather than – as a central concern of *Keywords* – with the connections and interactions that define current usage. On the other hand, Williams recognizes that his project is entirely dependent on the *OED*, which he prizes not just for the scholarship of its editors but as “the record of an extraordinary collaborative enterprise, from the original work of the Philological Society to the hundreds of later correspondents.”¹ He returns to this theme toward the end of the introduction, offering his work to the public as an open inquiry that can be taken forward only through collaborative work. His publishers, he tells us, “have been good enough to include some blank pages, not only for the convenience of making notes, but as a sign that the inquiry remains open, and that the author will welcome all amendments, corrections and additions as developments (which will be acknowledged) towards the revised edition which it is hoped will be necessary.”² Yet in an early review of *Keywords*, R. W. Birchfield – the managing editor of the *OED* at that time – was, to say the least, distinctly reluctant to grant Williams the affiliation he sought. Arguing – and, indeed, showing in some detail – that in some cases little reliance could be placed on Williams's accounts of changing usage, seeing these as somewhat homespun when compared with the systematic procedures of the *OED*, he contended that *Keywords* had been misleadingly classified as a work of original scholarship (he viewed it as little more than a crib of the *OED*), suggesting that it would be more accurately classified in the Dewey system as Education 374; that is, as Adult Education.³

It's useful to recall this expert but not, of course, disinterested assessment of Williams's work and its relationship to the *OED*, since the question of Williams's position vis-à-vis the *OED* is one that both Susan Hegeman and David Shumway comment on. Indeed, more than that, their positions on this question have a significant bearing on their contrasting assessments of *New Keywords*. Contrasting but not entirely different; to the contrary, both are agreed that if nothing else, *New Keywords* provides a useful register of some of the more evident changes in the keywords that now shape our understanding of, and engagement with, the relationships between culture and society in the attention it pays to the vocabularies of race, ethnicity, colonialism, sexuality, and gender – none of which made a significant showing in *Keywords*. They also both think that the book more or less accurately reflects the changing intellectual orientations of a vocabulary that has been shaped by the “discursive turn” of post-structuralist

¹ Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (London: Fontana/ Croom Helm, 1976), 16.

² *Ibid.*, 23–24. Williams later recorded that he received detailed notes on about two hundred words in response to this invitation. See Raymond Williams, *Politics and Letters: Interviews with New Left Review* (London: New Left Books, 1979), 176.

³ R. W. Birchfield, “A Case of Mistaken Identity: *Keywords*,” *Encounter* (June 1976).

tendencies and the weakened hold – in the academy as in public life – of Marxist-centered categories.

For Shumway, though, pretty well all of the other respects in which *New Keywords* differs from *Keywords* count against it. This is especially true of his sense that *New Keywords* lacks the anchorage of a shared tradition in which to limit the terms of debate. Williams, drawing on the *OED* but supplementing its resources “from his own extensive reading,” is, Shumway argues, able to bring a historical depth to his accounts of changing usage that *New Keywords* lacks. Also, by taking as his reference point the known horizons of political debate in postwar Britain, Williams, “in assuming a political landscape that had long existed . . . gave himself a frame in which the relativity of his terms could be limited.” It is possible, Shumway continues with more than a nod in the direction of Leavis, to disagree with Williams “but still find his discriminations useful because one knows whence they come.” But in *New Keywords*, words are cast free from their moorings in a known political tradition centered on class to become lost in the infinitely expanding horizons of a general leftism that, when combined with the relativizing tendencies of post-structuralism, generates “so many new shades of meaning that they defy definition.” Either that or they have become backed up on themselves, narrowly academic, reflecting the failure of the left to translate its theory into a public political vocabulary of the kind that Williams could assume when writing *Keywords*.

Hegeman’s perspective is different. Far from seeing Williams’s engagement with his keywords as being anchored in a long and stable political tradition, she sees it as being prompted by the “germinal sense of confusion, disjunction, and incommensurability between the recent past and present” that Williams himself reports as his experience of English on being demobilized from the army. It was the troublesome newness of usage that attracted Williams’s attention, and Hegeman sees the difference between this newness and the *OED*, which “fixed the English language in a late-Victorian sensibility,” as the source of a productive tension in *Keywords*, as Williams “both immersed himself in *OED*-style philology and pulled his words out into contemporary debates” resulting in an oddly dislocated sense of being “politically impassioned” and “a little stuffy” at the same time. But this also, Hegeman argues, accounts for some of the political limitations of *Keywords* as well as its virtues. This is especially clear in her comments on Williams’s discussion of *culture*. For having noted the largely American provenance of the concept of culture as a way of life, Hegeman argues that instead of following this aspect of its usage, Williams proceeds to “place the term back within British literary and popular traditions,” suggesting that this reflected “a desire to domesticate a word that was so happy to wander in foreign parts.”

This means that for both Hegeman and Shumway, considering the relationships between *Keywords* and *New Keywords* involves a broader assessment of Williams’s role as a “vanishing mediator” between a conception of cultural studies rooted in an engagement with British working-class cultural traditions and the more dispersed forms of its contemporary engagements. However, the way she opens up these questions is, at least for us, more productive than the terms proposed by Shumway, for whom *Keywords* functions too uncritically as an original ideal in relation to which *New Keywords* has necessarily to be found wanting. However, we were amply forewarned that this would be so. Before contracting the book, Blackwell commissioned reports from a number of readers, and these, once made anonymous, were passed on to us for our comments. Two reviewers in particular gave us food for thought by organizing their remarks in terms of the system of contrasts that informs Shumway’s essay: between the personal authority of a distinctive voice versus the necessarily less coordinated vocality of an edited collection; between the dedication of thirty

years to the patient accumulation of a card index versus the various kinds of division of labor on which our project depended; between writing for the general educated reader – a real public – and an overly academic approach addressed mainly to students; and between “that useful friend at the edge of the field of glow of study’s midnight candle” and a project that was too grandiose in conception for its own good.

While other reviewers were more positive, these two were the most helpful to us, first, in reconciling us in advance to the fact that *New Keywords* would inevitably attract commentaries of this kind, but, second, and more important, in convincing us of both the value and validity of proceeding. For the truth is that when you have worked as closely with *Keywords* as we did in order to decide which words to keep and which to jettison, its status as even a flawed masterpiece rapidly dissipates. This is not to gainsay its importance for us, when we first read it in the 1970s, or its later significance as a prompt and inspiration for *New Keywords*. But when read cover-to-cover, as opposed to dipping into it selectively from time to time, it is quite uneven, and certainly no *Casablanca!* Williams’s entries on *collective*, *commercialism*, *communication*, *dramatic*, *peasant*, and *welfare*, for example, are all pretty thin, amounting to little more than annotations from the *OED*. *New Keywords*, we believe, achieves a higher level of consistency in this regard. And there are many entries on which Williams’s range of reference – however formidable it might have been – does not match what a more specialized training can bring to bear on a particular topic. Perhaps some of the most instructive differences between *Keywords* and *New Keywords* in this regard are between entries on shared words where the virtues of more specialized knowledge are, we think, clear: *image*, *science*, and *unconscious*, for example.

All of which is to say that *New Keywords* and *Keywords* are best regarded as different assemblages – or, more accurately, as different assemblages of previous assemblages, including, in the case of *New Keywords*, that of *Keywords* itself. The two texts are different in the sense of being assembled by different means (editorial versus single authorship), over different time periods (thirty versus five years), with, as a consequence, different pluses and minuses. And here we would agree with many of Shumway’s particular criticisms when these are disconnected from the generally lapsarian terms in which he casts his remarks. He is right, for example, when he suggests that some entries do not deal with the history of usage as well as others and that, on the whole, *Keywords* is more consistent in this regard. He is also right in suggesting that this reflects the disciplinary trainings of our contributors, biased more toward cultural and communication studies and sociology with the consequent loss of the literary-critical eye that Williams was able to bring to all of his entries. And perhaps a more important difference, but one that Shumway does not note, is the extent to which, as an exercise in historical semantics, Williams’s approach in *Keywords* reflects the influence of Valentin Volosinov’s work, which provided him with a historical perspective on the mechanisms of language change that served as an alternative to the abstracted formalism of structuralism. *New Keywords* doesn’t have that kind of theoretical consistency in its approach to usage.

These, however, are differences between our project and Williams’s that we were fully aware of, recognizing that ours would be an assemblage constructed by different means while at the same time registering a valid affiliation with *Keywords*. For the most important concern for us – and the reason why, in the end, we decided the project was worthwhile – is that *New Keywords* retains enough of the distinctiveness of *Keywords* to continue what we took to be its greatest value: providing within the confines of a single cover a critical reflection on the key terms constituting our contemporary vocabulary of culture and society. Shumway sees

Keywords as having been an invaluable reference book and textbook since its publication, and estimates that it will remain an invaluable resource for some time to come. For left intellectuals who cut their theoretical and political teeth in the 1970s, yes, this is probably true; and for scholars interested in *Keywords* as a record of usage indicating the preoccupations of a historical moment, yes again. But as a widely available resource capable of contributing either to contemporary education or to public debate: we doubt it. The book has been out of print for more than twenty years, and it is difficult to see how its republication now would be commercially viable. It speaks far too little to the radically changed political and cultural circumstances of the present. Short of knowing anyone who had been patiently accumulating a card index on both the old and the new keywords in our changing vocabularies of culture and society over the thirty years since *Keywords* was first published, we were and remain convinced that approaching the project editorially was the only way of keeping alive a legacy that we value while also contributing usefully to both contemporary public debates and to academic and pedagogic practice.⁴

Yet the question of why that legacy should be valued, and of how best to do so, is one that Hegeman raises – productively at first in questioning Williams’s relevance to a now internationalized set of debates in which class, and especially the distinctively British preoccupations with class, have lost a good deal of their force. But when, in concluding, she seconds Said’s claims that except for the narrowness of his more or less exclusively national terms of reference, Williams was “in general dead right,” she ends up canonizing him. While he was right often enough, and more often than most, he was also often quite mistaken; much of what he said about the common culture is about as wrong as it could be, and the terms of his assessment of the “culture and society” tradition are now crying out for revision. In our view, the best way to treat his legacy is to disagree with him where needed, and where the models he provided cannot be directly emulated, to be creatively adaptive in approximating them as closely as one can within given constraints.

⁴ Shumway sees *Keywords* as a key text in a shared culture of debate in 1970s Britain, seeing *New Keywords*, by contrast, as doomed to the college circuit. However, this may reflect an idealized view of 1970s Britain in contrast to the notorious lack of critical public space in contemporary America. While it is true that Williams’s book was discussed in the broadsheet press and in the journals of the New Left, its primary readership was composed of academics and students. This will undoubtedly be true for *New Keywords*, but it, too, has been reviewed in the broadsheet press and prompted a radio discussion on BBC 4.