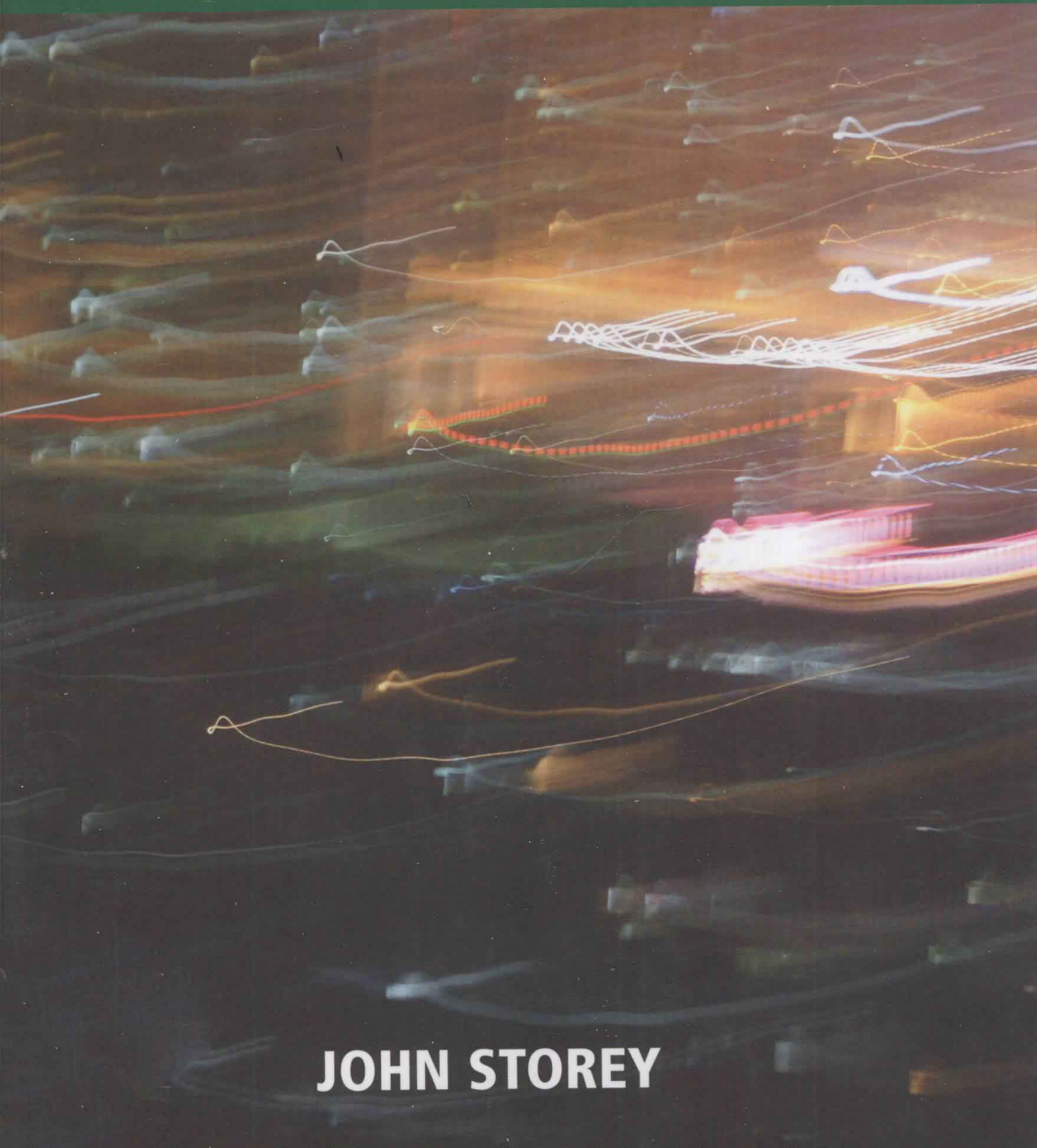
CULTURE AND POWER IN CULTURAL STUDIES

The Politics of Signification



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Edinburgh University Press

Edinburgh University Press Ltd
22 George Square, Edinburgh

Typeset in 11/13 Ehrhardt
by Servis Filmsetting Ltd, Stockport, Cheshire, and
printed and bound in Great Britain by
CPI Antony Rowe, Chippenham and Eastbourne

A CIP record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978 0 7486 4015 7 (hardback)

Acknowledgments

Although the chapters here have been revised updated, and rewritten throughout, I would like to take this opportunity to thank the journals and publishers, where earlier versions of these chapters appeared, for permission to re-use this material as the basis for the writing of this book. I would, therefore, like to thank the following journals and publishers: *Literature and History*, Open University Press, Leuven University Press, Routledge, Manchester University Press, *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, Edinburgh University Press and Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier.

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Preface

Culture and Power in Cultural Studies: The Politics of Signification is a collection of previously published book chapters and journal articles. The twelve essays collected here were originally written over a period of more than twenty years, and published between 1986 and 2009. They are presented here, with the exception of Chapter 1, in order of publication. Although they cover a variety of topics, what they all have in common is their focus on matters of culture and power and the politics of signification. Like most work in cultural studies, the chapters are all informed by history and organised by theory. I have revised and rewritten them (sometimes quite radically) to ensure that they flow together as a collection. I have also tried to correct lapses of clarity in the original published work and to update material where appropriate. I have, however, left some repetition between chapters in order to accommodate readers who decide to read selectively rather than the book as a whole.

Each chapter expands and elaborates themes and issues touched upon in my more popular books (*Cultural Theory and Popular Culture*, and *Cultural Studies and the Study of Popular Culture*). In this way, there is the possibility of a reciprocal relationship of support and elaboration between this book and the two books just mentioned. In other words, if you have found those books useful (or any of my other books), you will find here a further, more detailed, elaboration of certain key ideas and themes.

In different ways and with a different focus of attention, each chapter argues that signification, and the struggle over meaning, is fundamental to the processes of hegemony. In some of the chapters this is made explicit, while in others it is more implicit. But all the chapters focus on the politics of signification: the struggle to define social reality; to make the world (and the things in it) mean in particular ways and with particular effects of power. Rather than engage in a fruitless quest for the true or essential meaning of something, the twelve chapters fix their critical gaze on how

particular meanings acquire their authority and legitimacy, knowing that dominant modes of making the world meaningful are a fundamental aspect of the processes of hegemony.

Chapter 1 outlines the organising claim of this book. I argue that there are two significant moments in the situating of culture and power as the central object of study in cultural studies. The first begins with Raymond Williams's social definition of culture, especially when this concept is further elaborated to become culture as a realised signifying system. I chart the shift in Williams's position from seeing culture as a network of shared meanings, to seeing it as consisting of both shared and contested meanings. The latter position, and the second significant moment, is a result of the introduction in the 1970s of Antonio Gramsci's concept of hegemony into work in cultural studies. In other words, it is the coming together of Williams's concept of culture as a realised signifying system and Gramsci's concept of hegemony that situates culture and power as the central object of study in cultural studies.

Chapter 2 also uses Gramscian theory, this time to engage with Matthew Arnold's extremely influential cultural politics. I argue that Arnold is best understood as an 'organic intellectual' of the Victorian middle class, seeking to make this class hegemonic. According to Gramsci, intellectuals are distinguished by their social function. The organic intellectual functions as an organiser (in the broadest sense of the word): this can be in the field of culture, economics, political governance and so on. It is their task to 'determine and to organise the reform of moral and intellectual life' (1971: 453). For a class to be truly hegemonic it must have reached a certain level 'of homogeneity, self-awareness and organisation' (1971: 181). To achieve this it must go beyond the purely corporate interests of the class, to engage with the interests of subordinate groups and classes. Economic domination alone is not enough. As Arnold repeatedly warns the middle class, its economic power is on its own insufficient to guarantee it hegemony. A class must rise above its economic interests and attempt to saturate society with principles of morality, politics, religion, philosophy and so on, which place its own development on the 'universal plane' of society's general development. It is to this task, the securing and sustaining of hegemony that organic intellectuals must address themselves. Arnold, as I show in Chapter 2, is such an organiser.

In Chapter 3 I examine the music of the counterculture in terms of its opposition to America's war in Vietnam. Between 1965 and 1970 the counterculture attempted to establish a non-competitive, non-belligerent 'alternative' society. It was a movement constructed around three factors; all, in different ways, political: a particular type of drug use (especially

LSD), a new type of music (folk-rock, psychedelic rock, then just rock) and a vocal anti-war politics. Opposition to the war was the central organising principle of the counterculture. Beneath the banner 'Make Love, Not War' it engaged in a counter-hegemonic struggle over the meaning of the war. The music of the counterculture provided alternative explanations, helping to set limits on the ability of Johnson-Nixon America to sustain its war in Vietnam. However, eventually 'resistance' became 'incorporation', as the music and the wider practices of the counterculture were gradually drawn into the profit-making concerns of capitalist America. But for about five years the music of the counterculture acted as both a symbol and a focal point for opposition to America's war in Vietnam.

Chapter 4 investigates how a nineteenth-century stage melodrama might have been understood in a context of culture and power by a significant section of its contemporary working-class audience. Using Tony Bennett's concept of the reading formation, the chapter analyses the interaction between a historically situated text and its historically situated audience. It gathers together the various discourses that were in circulation and explores how these might have productively activated a particular way of understanding the politics of John Thomas Haines's *My Poll and My Partner Joe*, as the play was performed for three nights at the Queen's Theatre in Manchester in April 1841.

Early nineteenth-century melodrama always sides with the powerless. Its politics are formulated in terms of poor against the rich, weak against the strong, good against bad. What politically distinguishes one melodrama from another is the way the conflict is *articulated* to connect with social, economic and political conflicts outside the theatre. My argument is that for three nights in April 1841, *My Poll and My Partner Joe* may have been understood (contrary to mainstream theatre studies) by a significant section of its working-class audience as both giving expression to, and making connections with, political conflicts outside the theatre.

Chapter 5 presents a discussion of cultural studies both as an academic practice concerned to think culture politically (the politics of cultural studies as academic work), and as an academic practice that attempts to think of itself as a political movement (the academic work of cultural studies as politics). The first part of the chapter discusses the introduction of Gramsci's concept of hegemony into cultural studies in the 1970s and how this changed the study of popular culture. This is followed by an examination of the argument that cultural studies is 'politics by other means'. Against this position, I argue that cultural studies, although always concerned with matters of culture and power, has to resist this

political romance narrative and continue to organise itself as an academic discipline.

In Chapter 6 I explore an aspect of postmodernism I have called 'the sixties in the nineties'. There can be little doubt that the 1990s witnessed an explosion of interest in the texts and practices of the 1960s. There were, for example, a significant number of film versions of sixties television programmes. Similarly, television also began to recycle sixties programmes. Although this can be partly explained in terms of an economic need for cheap programming with the expansion of cable and satellite channels, it is also undoubtedly the case that such scheduling was driven by a desire to exploit a perceived wave of popular interest in the texts and practices of the 1960s. Like television and cinema, nineties pop music also recycled sounds and visual styles of the sixties. Similar things were also happening in advertising, fashion and in the different lived cultures of everyday life. The main focus of the chapter, however, is a critical consideration of how we might best understand this aspect of postmodernism. In particular, it compares the very influential arguments of American Marxist Fredric Jameson, made over the course of several essays, with an argument made by Jim Collins. As I explain, this can be reduced to a dispute between two explanatory concepts: pastiche and intertextual hyperconsciousness. But, as I also argue, if we are truly to understand the 'sixties in the nineties', we must not confuse or collapse together the repertoire of texts and practices recycled by the culture industries with what people actually take and make from this repertoire in the lived cultures of everyday life,

In Chapter 7 I examine, within a context of culture and power, the complex relations between memory and desire. More specifically, I connect 1980s Hollywood representations of America's war in Vietnam with George Bush senior's campaign, in late 1990 and early 1991, to win support for US involvement in the First Gulf War. My argument is that Hollywood produced a particular 'regime of truth' about America's war in Vietnam and that this body of 'knowledge' was articulated by Bush and others as an enabling 'memory' in the build-up to the First Gulf War. Put simply, Bush's claim that the war in the Gulf would not be 'another Vietnam . . . . Our troops will have the best possible support in the entire world. They will not be asked to fight with one hand tied behind their backs', was a claim that was supported by an influential strand of Hollywood's Vietnam. In other words, Hollywood's Vietnam produced an enabling memory and a regime of truth that allowed Bush to make this claim, a claim that does not make historical sense when we remember the massive destructive power of US military force during the course of its war in Vietnam.

For many people in the UK and USA opera represents (whether this is understood positively or negatively), the very embodiment of 'high culture'. In the 1990s there were signs that opera's status was changing, as it became more and more a feature of everyday cultural life. Chapter 8 examines the increasing social visibility of opera. This can be evidenced in the fairly extensive use of opera in advertising and film soundtracks. It is also evidenced in opera stars performing with pop stars, opera stars hosting variety shows, and opera stars performing at major sporting events. In particular, the chapter explores whether these and other changes (more are discussed in the chapter) make it possible to describe opera as an inclusive rather than an exclusive culture.

The focus of Chapter 9 is the culture of globalisation. The chapter seeks to challenge the view that globalisation is the same as Americanisation. It also challenges the claim, often underpinning the Americanisation thesis, that commodities are the same as culture. I argue that this is a very reductive concept of culture. I also argue that the Americanisation thesis operates with a reductive concept of the foreign, suggesting, as it does, that the 'local' and the national are the same. Similarly, it also presents national cultures as monolithic and essential, hermetically sealed from one another. Against the Americanisation thesis, but without losing sight of issues of culture and power, I argue that hegemony provides a better way to understand the interpenetration of the 'local' and the 'global'.

In Chapter 10 I focus on the cultural meanings and the shifting social significance of opera and opera-going in nineteenth-century Manchester. To explore these changes in the culture of opera, I track the development of a particular discourse on opera; a discourse that enabled, constrained and constituted the meaning of opera and opera-going in nineteenth-century Manchester. The establishment of this *new* network of meanings, through which opera was made to make sense, is probably still for most people the 'common sense' of opera and opera-going. As I point out in Chapter 8, by the nineteenth century opera had become established as a widely available form of popular entertainment consumed by people of all social classes. To turn opera into 'high culture' it had to be withdrawn from the everyday world of popular entertainment. Chapter 10 explores, with detailed reference to what happened in Manchester, how opera changed from being an inclusive form of commercial entertainment to become an exclusive aspect of 'high culture'. The important point to understand historically about opera and opera-going in Manchester, then, is that it did not become unpopular, rather it was actively *made* unpopular. In short, opera was transformed from *entertainment* enjoyed by the many, into *culture* to be appreciated by the few.

The focus of Chapter 11 is the invention of the 'traditional' English Christmas; invented, I argue, between the 1830s and 1880s. Its invention was directly connected to the processes of industrialisation and urbanisation and only indirectly connected to religion. In short, the invention of Christmas had more to do with hegemony than it ever had to do with the celebration of the Nativity. If a nativity was being celebrated, it was the birth of conspicuous consumption in a new industrial economy, articulated with a particular politics of charity and a nostalgia for the feudal social relations of the past. What was invented was a utopian version of industrial capitalism: a temporal and social space in which economic competition and exploitation is softened by the temporary articulation of feudal relations of power, in which exploitation and oppression can exist in harmony with deference and 'goodwill to all men'. Instead of social equality and the redistribution of wealth, it articulates the mutual obligations of rich and poor permanently bound together in the best of all possible worlds.

In the final chapter I use Louis Althusser's concept of 'the problematic', and the method of 'symptomatic reading', as developed by Althusser and Pierre Macherey, to present a critical analysis of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. My claim is that at its most fundamental level Conrad's novel is a political narrative about imperialism. However, the chapter does not seek to place the novel on one side of a divide between pro- and anti-imperialism. Contrary to this tradition, I argue that the novel is profoundly contradictory. In other words, the novel both attacks and supports imperialism. Although not the conscious intention of the novel to say such things about imperialism, it is nevertheless 'compelled' to say them in order to say what it wants to say. In short, when read symptomatically, *Heart of Darkness* says more about imperialism than Conrad, the spoiled adopted child of Great Britain and even of the Empire, might have wanted to say. But of course it is the text produced and not the text imagined that should be the object of a critical discourse.

I hope that taken together these twelve chapters present a sustained examination of the various ways in which culture and power are entangled together. Although my focus here is mostly on power, we should never lose sight of the many ways power is resisted. As Michel Foucault points out, although we may always be entangled in relations of culture and power, 'Where there is power there is resistance' (2009: 315). Any form of politics, even a politics of reading, concedes too much to the prevailing structures of power if it remains blind to the potential for agency.

Contents

CHAPTER 1

Culture and Power: The Politics of Signification

My intention in this opening chapter is to outline the claim that the central object of study in cultural studies is culture and power. I will first explore and elaborate the development of the idea of culture as a realised signifying system as developed in the work of Raymond Williams. I will then chart the shift in Williams's position from seeing culture as a network of shared meanings, to seeing it as consisting of both shared and contested meanings. The latter position, I will contend, is a result of the introduction in the 1970s of Antonio Gramsci's concept of hegemony into work in cultural studies. It is the coming together of Williams's concept of culture as a realised signifying system and Gramsci's concept of hegemony, I will argue, that situates culture and power as the central object of study in cultural studies.

In all his definitions of culture (see especially Williams 1961, 1981, 1983), Williams works with an inclusive definition. That is, rather than study only what Matthew Arnold famously called 'the best which has been thought and said' (2009: 6), Williams is committed to examining 'all forms of signification' (1984: 240). This is a rejection of the Arnoldian/Leavisite mapping of the cultural field into culture/minority culture and anarchy/mass civilisation.[1] The first, culture/minority culture, consisting of Great Art and, crucially, the ability to appreciate Great Art, demands serious consideration; while the second, anarchy/mass civilisation, supposedly consisting of the remaining degraded mass culture, requires little more than a fleeting sociological glance – remaining long enough to condemn either the culture made *for* the 'masses' or (as in most versions) the culture *of* the 'masses'. Against the Arnoldian/Leavisite division of the cultural field into the culture/minority culture of an elite and anarchy/mass civilisation of the masses, Williams, writing in 1961, proposed the social definition of culture, in which culture is defined as:

> a particular way of life, which expresses certain meanings and values not only in art and learning but also in institutions and ordinary behaviour. The analysis of culture, from such a definition, is the clarification of the meanings and values implicit in a particular way of life, a particular culture . . . the characteristic forms through which members of the society communicate. (2009: 32)

This definition is crucial to the development of cultural studies as an interdisciplinary project for three reasons. First, Williams's definition 'democratically' broadens the Arnoldian/Leavisite definition of culture, producing a more inclusive definition, in which instead of culture being defined as a body of only 'elite' texts and practices (ballet, opera, the novel, poetry, for example), it is redefined to include *as* culture television, cinema, pop music, advertising, for example. Second, culture as a particular way of life further broadens the definition of culture. So, for example, rather than culture being television as text, culture is embodied in the particular way of life that is involved in, say, the production, circulation and consumption of television.

These two aspects of Williams's definition are usually noted and the discussion ends there. However, there is a third element in Williams's definition; one I think that is far more important for the intellectual formation of cultural studies than the other two: the connection he makes between culture and signification. The importance of a particular way of life is that it 'expresses certain meanings and values'. Furthermore, cultural analysis from the perspective of this definition of culture 'is the clarification of the meanings and values implicit in a particular way of life'. The emphasis in discussions of this passage is always on a particular way of life, but in my view, the idea of cultures as networks of meanings that are performed and made concrete (that is, culture as a realised signifying system) makes a far more significant contribution to the intellectual project of cultural studies. Moreover, culture as a realised signifying system is not reducible to a particular way of life, rather it is fundamental to the shaping and holding together of *all ways of life*. This is not to reduce everything to culture as a realised signifying system, but it is to insist that culture defined in this way should be seen 'as essentially involved in *all* forms of social activity' (Williams 1981: 13). As Williams further explains, '[T]he social organisation of culture, as a realised signifying system, is embedded in a whole range of activities, relations and institutions, of which some are manifestly "cultural"' (1981: 209).

While there is more to life than signifying systems, it is nevertheless the case that 'it would . . . be wrong to suppose that we can ever usefully

discuss a social system without including, as a central part of its practice, its signifying systems, on which, as a system, it fundamentally depends' (1981: 207). In other words, signification is fundamental to all human activities. Nevertheless, while culture as a realised signifying system is 'deeply present' in all social activities, it remains the case that 'other quite different human needs and actions are substantially and irreducibly present'. Moreover, in certain social activities signification becomes dissolved into what he calls 'other needs and actions' (1981: 209). To dissolve can mean two quite different things: to disappear, or to become liquid and form part of a solution. For example, if a parliament is dissolved it ceases to exist. However, when we dissolve sugar in tea, the sugar does not disappear; rather it becomes an invisible but fundamental part of the drink. It is the second usage of dissolve that best captures Williams's intention. Nevertheless, the ambiguity of the term has allowed some critics to suggest that signification (that is, culture) is absent from certain human activities. This is a claim made by Terry Eagleton, for example: 'But if car-making falls outside this definition, so does sport, which like any human practice involves signification, but hardly in the same cultural category as Homeric epic and graffiti' (2000: 34).

Social activities do not have to signify in the same way to fall within Williams's definition of culture. Industrial manufacture and the works of Homer are not the same, do not signify in the same way, but they do both depend on signification. It may be true that car-making and sport do not signify in ways equivalent to, say, a sonnet by Shakespeare or a song by Lucinda Williams, but signification is still a fundamental part of both sport and the making of cars. We acknowledge as much when we use phrases like the culture of sport or the culture of the work place. In other words, signification exists in all aspects of human existence. Sometimes, it is the most important aspect of the activity, at other times it is overshadowed by more functional aspects. But it is never totally absent; culture always marks a human presence in the world. In my view, the logic of Williams's position is this: signification saturates the social, but at times it simply becomes less visible in certain human activities. Poetry is more obviously about signification in a way that, say, plumbing appears not to be. But we know that without signification plumbing would not be possible (there is a culture of plumbing). Moreover, we also know that plumbing, as a human activity, has a variable history of signifying different things: civilisation, modernity, westernisation, class difference, for example. Culture, therefore, as defined by Williams, is not something restricted to the arts or to different forms of intellectual production, it is an aspect of all human activities.

On the basis of Willliams's redefinition of culture, cultural studies has gradually come to define culture as the production, circulation and consumption of meanings. As Stuart Hall explains:

> Culture . . . is not so much a set of things – novels and paintings or TV programmes and comics – as a process, a set of practices. Primarily, culture is concerned with the production and exchange of meanings – the 'giving and taking of meaning' – between the members of a society or group. (1997: 2)

According to this definition, cultures do not so much consist of, say, books. Rather, cultures are the shifting networks of signification in which, say, books are *made* to exist as meaningful objects. For example, if I pass a name card to someone in China, the polite way to do it is with two hands. If I pass it with one hand I may cause offence. This is clearly a matter of culture. However, the *culture* is not really in the gesture, it is in the *meaning* of the gesture. In other words, there is not anything essentially polite about using two hands; using two hands has been made to signify politeness. Nevertheless, signification has become embodied in a material practice, which can, in turn, produce material effects. As Williams insists, 'Signification, the social creation of meanings . . . is . . . a practical material activity' (1977: 34). Similarly, as Karl Marx observes, '[O]ne man is king only because other men stand in the relation of subjects to him. They, on the contrary, imagine that they are subjects because he is king' (1976: 149). This relationship works because they share a culture in which such relations are meaningful. Outside such a culture, this relationship would have no meaning. Being a king, therefore, is not a gift of nature (or of God), but something constructed in culture; it is culture and not nature or God that gives these relations meaning; makes them signify, and, moreover, by signifying in a particular way they materially organise practice.

To share a culture, according to this preliminary definition, is to interpret the world, make it meaningful and experience it as meaningful in recognisably similar ways. So-called 'culture shock' happens when we encounter radically different networks of meaning; that is, when our 'natural' or 'common sense' is confronted by someone else's 'natural' or 'common sense'.

So far I have focused on culture as a system of shared meanings. This is more or less how culture tends to be presented in Williams's early work. Although I started with a quotation from *The Long Revolution* (1961), the idea of culture as a realised signifying system is in fact first suggested in his essay 'Culture is Ordinary' (1958). The formulation is quite similar to that found in *The Long Revolution*, 'A culture is common meanings, the

product of a whole people' (1989a: 8). Ten years later, in 'The Idea of a Common Culture' (1968), he is even more explicit about the ordinariness of the making of meanings, '[C]ulture is ordinary . . . there is not a special class, or group of men, who are involved in the creation of meanings and values, either in a general sense or in specific art and belief' (1989c: 34). This recalls Gramsci's point about intellectuals: 'All men are intellectuals . . . but not all men have in society the function of intellectuals' (2009: 77). But what is missing in Williams's formulation is Gramsci's insistence on relations of power – the many ways in which culture and power are entangled together.

When Williams (1989a) said that 'culture is ordinary', he was drawing attention to the fact that meaning-making is not the privileged activity of the few, but something in which we are all involved. However, this does not of course mean that we are all involved in it in the same way; meaning-making, like all other social activities, is always entangled in relations of power. While we may all be involved in the making of meanings, it is also the case that some meanings and the people who make them have more power than other people and other meanings. Having said this, Williams's early work is not totally unaware that power features in the circulation and embedding of meanings. For example, in 'The Idea of a Common Culture' (1968) he observes:

> If it is at all true that the creation of meanings is an activity which engages all men, then one is bound to be shocked by any society which, in its most explicit culture, either suppresses the meanings and values of whole groups, or which fails to extend to these groups the possibility of articulating and communicating those meanings. (1989c: 35)

In fact it would be very unfair to Williams to suggest that even in this early work he is simply unaware of power. The essay 'Communications and Community' (1961) makes this absolutely clear:

> For in fact all of us, as individuals, grow up within a society, within the rules of a society, and these rules cut very deep, and include certain ways of seeing the world, certain ways of talking about the world. All the time people are being born into a society, shown what to see, shown how to talk about it. (1989b: 21–2)[2]

What is the case, however, is that he had not yet found a fully adequate way of articulating the relations between signification and power. The problem with Williams's position in *The Long Revolution*, and in these other early texts, certainly from the perspective of the argument I am