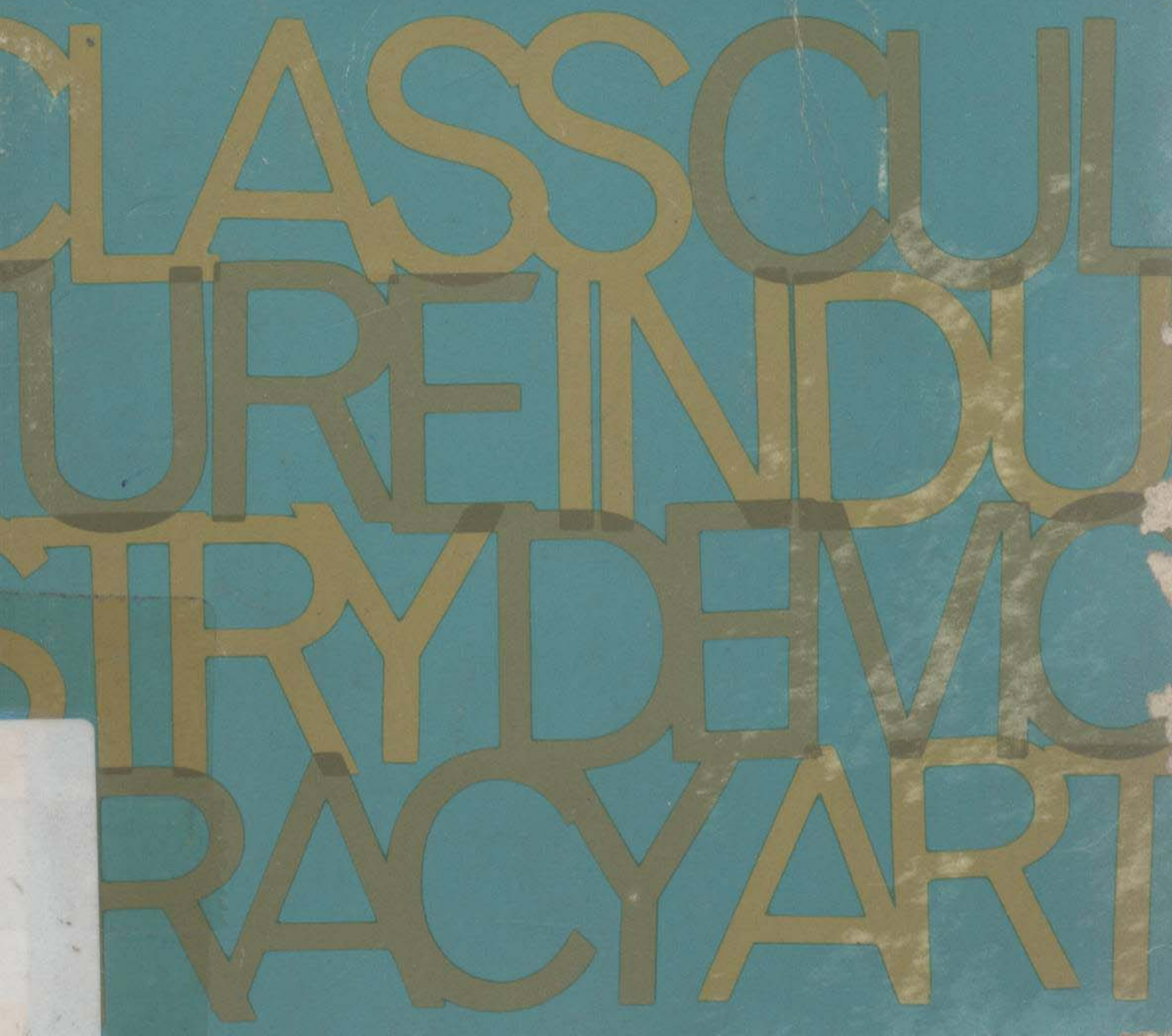
a Pelican Book

Culture and Society 1780-1950

Raymond Williams



PELICAN BOOKS

CULTURE AND SOCIETY 1780–1950

Raymond Williams was born in 1921 at the Welsh border village of Pandy. His father was a railway signalman. He was educated at the village school, at Abergavenny Grammar School, and at Trinity College, Cambridge. After the war, in which he served as an anti-tank captain in the Guards Armoured Division, he became an adult education tutor in the Oxford University Delegacy for Extra-Mural Studies until 1961, when he was elected Fellow of Jesus College, Cambridge, where he is now University Reader in drama. In 1947 he edited *Politics and Letters*, and is now General Editor of the *New Thinker's Library*. He has published a number of essays in literary journals and is well known as a book-reviewer for the *Guardian*. His books include *Drama from Ibsen to Eliot* (1952), *Drama in Performance* (1954), *Border Country* (1960), *The Long Revolution* (1961), *Communications* (1962), *Modern Tragedy* (1966), *May Day Manifesto 1968* and *Drama from Ibsen to Brecht* (1968). He has also edited the second *Pelican Book of English Prose* (*From 1780 to the present day*). Raymond Williams is married and has three children.

RAYMOND WILLIAMS

CULTURE AND SOCIETY 1780–1950

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FOREWORD

THE organizing principle of this book is the discovery that the idea of culture, and the word itself in its general modern uses, came into English thinking in the period which we commonly describe as that of the Industrial Revolution. The book is an attempt to show how and why this happened, and to follow the idea through to our own day. It thus becomes an account and an interpretation of our responses in thought and feeling to the changes in English society since the late eighteenth century. Only in such a context can our use of the word 'culture', and the issues to which the word refers, be adequately understood.

The book continues the inquiry which began with the founding of the review *Politics and Letters*, which I edited, with Mr Clifford Collins and Mr Wolf Mankowitz, between 1946 and 1948. Our object then was to inquire into and where possible reinterpret this tradition which the word 'culture' describes in terms of the experience of our own generation. I am permanently indebted to my former co-editors for what I learned with them in that first attempt. During the actual writing of the book, since 1950, I have again been particularly indebted to Mr Collins, and also to my colleague Mr Anthony McLean. I gained much benefit from discussing the work in progress with Humphry House and Francis Klingender, whose valuable work survives their early deaths. Others, among many who have helped me, whom I ought particularly to mention are Mr F. W. Bateson, Mr E. F. Bellchambers, Mr Henry Collins, Mr S. J. Colman, and Mr H. P. Smith. My wife has argued the manuscript with me, line by line, to an extent which, in certain chapters, makes her virtually the joint author. But I cannot finally involve anyone but myself, either in my judgements or in my errors.

While this book has been in the press I have been considering the directions in which further work in its field might profitably move, and it may be useful to note these. It seems to me, first, that we are arriving, from various directions, at a point where a new general theory of culture might in fact be achieved. In this book I have sought to clarify the tradition, but it may be possible to go on from this to a full restatement of principles, taking the theory of culture as a theory of

relations between elements in a whole way of life. We need also, in these terms, to examine the idea of an expanding culture, and its detailed processes. For we live in an expanding culture, yet we spend much of our energy regretting the fact, rather than seeking to understand its nature and conditions. I think a good deal of factual revision of our received cultural history is necessary and urgent, in such matters as literacy, educational levels, and the press. We also need detailed studies of the social and economic problems of current cultural expansion, as means towards an adequate common policy. Finally, in the special field of criticism, we may be able to extend our methods of analysis, in relation to the re-definitions of creative activity and communication which various kinds of investigation are making possible. All this work will be difficult, but it may be helped by an understanding of the context of our present vocabulary in these matters, to which this book is offered as a contribution.

Parts of the book have previously appeared in other forms, in *Essays in Criticism* and *Universities and Left Review*.

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For this Penguin edition I have made three local amendments, based on facts realized since the book was originally written.

R. W.

For this 1963 reprint of the Penguin edition I have added a Postscript.

R. W.

INTRODUCTION

In the last decades of the eighteenth century, and in the first half of the nineteenth century, a number of words, which are now of capital importance, came for the first time into common English use, or, where they had already been generally used in the language, acquired new and important meanings. There is in fact a general pattern of change in these words, and this can be used as a special kind of map by which it is possible to look again at those wider changes in life and thought to which the changes in language evidently refer.

Five words are the key points from which this map can be drawn. They are *industry*, *democracy*, *class*, *art*, and *culture*. The importance of these words, in our modern structure of meanings, is obvious. The changes in their use, at this critical period, bear witness to a general change in our characteristic ways of thinking about our common life: about our social, political, and economic institutions; about the purposes which these institutions are designed to embody; and about the relations to these institutions and purposes of our activities in learning, education, and the arts.

The first important word is *industry*, and the period in which its use changes is the period which we now call the Industrial Revolution. *Industry*, before this period, was a name for a particular human attribute, which could be paraphrased as 'skill, assiduity, perseverance, diligence'. This use of *industry* of course survives. But, in the last decades of the eighteenth century, *industry* came also to mean something else; it became a collective word for our manufacturing and productive institutions, and for their general activities. Adam Smith, in *The Wealth of Nations* (1776), is one of the first writers to use the word in this way, and from his time the development of this use is assured. *Industry*, with a capital letter, is thought of as a thing in itself – an institution, a body of activities – rather than simply a human attribute. *Industrious*, which described persons, is joined, in the nineteenth century, by *industrial*, which describes the institutions. The rapid growth in importance of these institutions is seen as creating a new system, which in the 1830s is first called *Industrialism*. In part, this is the acknowledgement of a series of very important technical changes, and of their transforming effect on methods of production. It is also, how-

ever, an acknowledgement of the effect of these changes on society as a whole, which is similarly transformed. The phrase *Industrial Revolution* amply confirms this, for the phrase, first used by French writers in the 1820s, and gradually adopted, in the course of the century, by English writers, is modelled explicitly on an analogy with the French Revolution of 1789. As that had transformed France, so this has transformed England; the means of change are different, but the change is comparable in kind: it has produced, by a pattern of change, a new society.

The second important word is *democracy*, which had been known, from the Greek, as a term for 'government by the people', but which only came into common English use at the time of the American and French Revolutions. Weekley, in *Words Ancient and Modern*, writes:

> It was not until the French Revolution that *democracy* ceased to be a mere literary word, and became part of the political vocabulary.[1]

In this he is substantially right. Certainly, it is in reference to America and France that the examples begin to multiply, at the end of the eighteenth century, and it is worth noting that the great majority of these examples show the word being used unfavourably: in close relation with the hated *Jacobinism*, or with the familiar *mob-rule*. England may have been (the word has so many modern definitions) a democracy since Magna Carta, or since the Commonwealth, or since 1688, but it certainly did not call itself one. *Democrats*, at the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth centuries, were seen, commonly, as dangerous and subversive mob agitators. Just as *industry* and its derived words record what we now call the Industrial Revolution, so *democracy* and *democrat*, in their entry into ordinary speech, record the effects, in England, of the American and French Revolutions, and a crucial phase of the struggle, at home, for what we would now call democratic representation.

Industry, to indicate an institution, begins in about 1776; *democracy*, as a practical word, can be dated from about the same time. The third word, *class*, can be dated, in its most important modern sense, from about 1740. Before this, the ordinary use of *class*, in English, was to refer to a division or group in schools and colleges: 'the usual Classes in Logick and Philosophy'. It is only at the end of the eighteenth century that the modern structure of *class*, in its social sense, begins to be built up. First comes *lower classes*, to join *lower orders*, which appears earlier

in the eighteenth century. Then, in the 1790s, we get *higher classes*; *middle classes* and *middling classes* follow at once; *working classes* in about 1815; *upper classes* in the 1820s. *Class prejudice, class legislation, class consciousness, class conflict*, and *class war* follow in the course of the nineteenth century. The *upper middle classes* are first heard of in the 1890s; the *lower middle class* in our own century.

It is obvious, of course, that this spectacular history of the new use of *class* does not indicate the *beginning* of social divisions in England. But it indicates, quite clearly, a change in the character of these divisions, and it records, equally clearly, a change in attitudes towards them. *Class* is a more indefinite word than *rank*, and this was probably one of the reasons for its introduction. The structure then built on it is in nineteenth-century terms: in terms, that is to say, of the changed social structure, and the changed social feelings, of an England which was passing through the Industrial Revolution, and which was at a crucial phase in the development of political democracy.

The fourth word, *art*, is remarkably similar, in its pattern of change, to *industry*. From its original sense of a human attribute, a 'skill', it had come, by the period with which we are concerned, to be a kind of institution, a set body of activities of a certain kind. An *art* had formerly been any human skill; but *Art*, now, signified a particular group of skills, the 'imaginative' or 'creative' arts. *Artist* had meant a skilled person, as had *artisan*; but artist now referred to these selected skills alone. Further, and most significantly, *Art* came to stand for a special kind of truth, 'imaginative truth', and *artist* for a special kind of person, as the words *artistic* and *artistical*, to describe human beings, new in the 1840s, show. A new name, *aesthetics*, was found to describe the judgement of art, and this, in its turn, produced a name for a special kind of person – *aesthete*. *The arts* – literature, music, painting, sculpture, theatre – were grouped together, in this new phrase, as having something essentially in common which distinguished them from other human skills. The same separation as had grown up between *artist* and *artisan* grew up between *artist* and *craftsman*. *Genius*, from meaning 'a characteristic disposition', came to mean 'exalted ability', and a distinction was made between it and *talent*. As *art* had produced *artist* in the new sense, and *aesthetics aesthete*, so this produced *a genius*, to indicate a special kind of person. These changes, which belong in time to the period of the other changes discussed, form a record of a remarkable change in ideas of the nature and purpose of art,

and of its relations to other human activities and to society as a whole.

The fifth word, *culture*, similarly changes, in the same critical period. Before this period, it had meant, primarily, the 'tending of natural growth', and then, by analogy, a process of human training. But this latter use, which had usually been a culture *of* something, was changed, in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century, to *culture* as such, a thing in itself. It came to mean, first, 'a general state or habit of the mind', having close relations with the idea of human perfection. Second, it came to mean 'the general state of intellectual development, in a society as a whole'. Third, it came to mean 'the general body of the arts'. Fourth, later in the century, it came to mean 'a whole way of life, material, intellectual, and spiritual'. It came also, as we know, to be a word which often provoked, either hostility or embarrassment.

The development of *culture* is perhaps the most striking among all the words named. It might be said, indeed, that the questions now concentrated in the meanings of the word *culture* are questions directly raised by the great historical changes which the changes in *industry*, *democracy*, and *class*, in their own way, represent, and to which the changes in *art* are a closely related response. The development of the word *culture* is a record of a number of important and continuing reactions to these changes in our social, economic, and political life, and may be seen, in itself, as a special kind of map by means of which the nature of the changes can be explored.

I have stated, briefly, the fact of the changes in these important words. As a background to them I must also draw attention to a number of other words which were either new, or acquired new meanings, in this decisive period. Among the new words, for example, there are *ideology*, *intellectual*, *rationalism*, *scientist*, *humanitarian*, *utilitarian*, *romanticism*, *atomistic*; *bureaucracy*, *capitalism*, *collectivism*, *commercialism*, *communism*, *doctrinaire*, *equalitarian*, *liberalism*, *masses*, *medieval* and *medievalism*, *operative* (noun), *primitivism*, *proletariat* (a new word for 'mob'), *socialism*, *unemployment*; *cranks*, *highbrow*, *isms*, and *pretentious*. Among words which then acquired their now normal modern meanings are *business* (=trade), *common* (=vulgar), *earnest* (derisive), *Education* and *educational*, *getting-on*, *handmade*, *idealist* (=visionary), *Progress*, *rank-and-file* (other than military), *reformer* and *reformism*, *revolutionary* and *revolutionize*, *salary* (as opposed to 'wages'), *Science* (=natural and physical sciences), *speculator* (financial), *solidarity*, *strike*,