

New Keywords

A Revised Vocabulary of Culture
and Society

Edited by

**Tony Bennett, Lawrence Grossberg,
and Meaghan Morris**

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New Keywords

Acknowledgments

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Our greatest debt, however, is to Raymond Williams, whose original *Keywords* was, for us, along with most of our contemporaries, a text that was as inspirational as it was indispensable. For us as for many of our fellow contributors, the challenge of writing entries for this volume is one that has both renewed and greatly deepened our appreciation of both the extraordinary range of Williams's knowledge and the depth and durability of his accomplishments. We know, because they told us so, that many contributors were attracted to this project as an opportunity to pay tribute to Williams and his legacy. It is, then, on their behalf, as well as our own, that we dedicate this book to his memory.

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Further details can be found on pp. 417–27.

Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used in the text:

BCE	Before Common Era (before the period dating from the birth of Christ)
C	Followed by numeral, century (C16: sixteenth century)
CE	Common Era (the period dating from the birth of Christ)
Ch	Chinese
eC	First period (third) of a century (eC16: early sixteenth century)
F	French
fw	Immediate forerunner of a word, in the same or another language
G	German
Gk	Classical Greek
It	Italian
L	Latin
IC	Last period (third) of a century (IC16: late sixteenth century)
IL	Late Latin
mC	Middle period (third) of a century (mC16: mid-sixteenth century)
mE	Middle English (c.1100–1500)
mF	Medieval French
mL	Medieval Latin
oE	Old English (to c.1100)
OED	<i>Oxford English dictionary: New dictionary on historical principles</i> , 2nd edn. Eds. J. A. Simpson and E. S. C. Weiner. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
oF	Old French
rw	Ultimate traceable word, from which “root” meanings are derived
Sp	Spanish

Abbreviations

Definitions of usage are from the OED unless otherwise indicated. Quotations followed by a name and date only, or a date only, are from examples cited in the OED or in website collections of usage. Other quotations are followed by specific sources.

Dates in square brackets are those of original publication. These have been given for works published before World War I where these are by major figures who have had an important influence on subsequent debates.

We have, for each entry, bolded the first use of the keyword in question and subsequent uses of related words or phrases in which the keyword also occurs. Our purpose in doing so has been to highlight examples of the keywords in use. In the entry for "Culture," for example, **culture** is bolded when it is first used, as is its use in such phrases as **high culture**, **folk culture**, **mass culture**, and **popular culture**.

Introduction

Tony Bennett, Lawrence Grossberg, and Meaghan Morris

Raymond Williams's *Keywords: A vocabulary of culture and society* is justly renowned for providing a whole generation of readers with an effective, reliable distillation of the variety of meanings – past and present – attached to a range of terms that played a pivotal role in discussions of culture and society, and of the relations between them. First published in 1976, however, it is now showing signs of its age in ways that Williams regarded as inevitable in a project that was always more concerned with exploring the complex uses of problem-laden words than it was with fixing their definition (striking though Williams's definitions were for their succinctness, learning, and clarity). For Williams the point was not merely that the meanings of words change over time but that they change in relationship to changing political, social, and economic situations and needs. While rejecting the idea that you could describe that relationship in any simple or universal way, he was convinced that it did exist – and that people do struggle in their *use* of language to give expression to new experiences of reality.

Revising *Keywords* himself for a second edition which included a further 21 words, Williams (1983: 27) reaffirmed his “sense of the work as necessarily unfinished and incomplete.” It is in the spirit of his project, then, to observe that its entries for many words cannot take account of what have often been, over the past 30 years, crucial shifts in meaning associated with both their general and more specialist uses (consider **ideology**, **liberalism**, or **media**), and that some words of interest to Williams in 1976 (**career**, for example) or indeed in 1983 (**folk**, **genius**) have lost the special quality of “significance and difficulty” that attracted his attention. Equally, there is no mention in *Keywords* of other words (such as **citizenship**, **gender**, or **sign**) which, today, play a major role in both public discourse and a broad spectrum of academic disciplines. Accordingly, in conceiving of this volume we set out to update Williams's *Keywords* in three basic ways: first, by providing a revised vocabulary of culture and society that includes many terms from Williams's list but

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offers new discussions of their history and use, taking account of developments over the last 30 years; second, by adding discussions of "new keywords" that have emerged as the vocabulary of culture and society has responded to new social movements, changing political concerns, and new horizons of public debate; third, by deleting those of Williams's keywords that we feel have not sustained their importance in terms of the ways people represent their experiences and give meaning to their perceptions of a changing world.

Given the many encyclopedias, dictionaries, and "bluffer's guides" to academic topics crowding bookshops today, it is important to stress another sense in which this volume was undertaken in the distinctive spirit of Williams's initial inquiry: *New Keywords* is *not* a glossary of contemporary cultural and social **theory** (one of Williams's keywords re-examined in this volume), although many entries draw on theoretical resources to varying degrees. Despite the perhaps overly academic reception of *Keywords* in recent years, its intention was always to provide a useful, intellectually and historically grounded guide to *public* questions and struggles for meaning shared by many people in the field of culture and society. Williams (1976: 13) was careful to define his project in terms that would distinguish it clearly from conventional scholarly dictionaries:

It is not a dictionary or glossary of a particular academic subject. It is not a series of footnotes to dictionary histories or definitions of a number of words. It is, rather, the record of an inquiry into a *vocabulary*: a shared body of words and meanings in our most general discussions, in English, of the practices and institutions which we group as *culture* and *society*.

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The general discussions that interested Williams were not located in specific academic disciplines, but neither did they exclude the fields of scholarly and intellectual debate; instead, the sense of "general" significance that marked a keyword took shape in an encounter or an overlap between two or more social domains of usage. For Williams (1976: 12), a word in general usage was a word with variable uses. Some were "strong, difficult and persuasive words" already in everyday use (**work**, for example), while others might spread from a specialized context to wider discussions; **deconstruction** and **commodity**, both philosophical terms now used in fashion magazines, are examples of this today. Whatever the origins of a word and however erratic the paths it took to enter common usage, it was the fact that it mattered in "two areas...often thought of as separate" that drew Williams to trace its travels. **Culture**, he pointed out, was the "original difficult word" in this respect, posing new questions and suggesting new connections as it gained importance in the area of **art** on the one hand, and **society** on the other. The sharing of a word across differing domains of thought and experience was often imperfect, he noted, but this very roughness and partiality indicated that the word brought something significant to discussions of "the central processes of our common life."

The "wish," as Williams put it, to recognize and understand these processes across habitually separated areas of activity could suddenly invest ordinary words such as "culture"

with a strangeness that unsettled their seemingly transparent meaning, and it could also endow apparently technical, forbidding words with a new and mysterious popularity (**alienation** 30 years ago, **postmodernism** today). In both cases, however, it was a shared desire to articulate something of general importance that forged what Williams called a "vocabulary" of culture and society. From this followed his interest in exploring not only the meanings of words but also the ways people group or "bond" them together, making explicit or often implicit connections that help to initiate new ways of seeing their world. *Keywords* was organized to highlight "clusters" of words, indicated in bold in the text, so that readers might follow and reflect on the interactions, discontinuities, and uncertainties of association that shaped what Williams (1976: 13) called "particular formations of meaning." These formations, too, change over time, dissolving in some cases and reforming in a different way in others as the links we make between words, the importance they have, and the contexts in which they matter are subject to alteration.

Necessarily, then, a revised vocabulary of culture and society should not only update the selection and discussion of individual words but also respond to the changed contexts of "general" discussion which people inhabit today. While we have insisted on retaining Williams's emphasis on the public intellectual uses of the terms selected for inclusion, *New Keywords* must achieve this focus in a different manner which takes account of the ways in which both our sense of "common life" and our understanding of history have changed since 1976. First, there has been a marked change in the conduct and circulation of intellectual work over the past 30 years: the expansion of higher education, the growth of a research culture linking universities more closely to a wide range of industries and to other public and private institutions, and the proliferation of new media-based modes of pedagogy and discussion have all combined to disperse and multiply the "areas" of thought and experience in and across which people wish to make common sense and formations of meaning take shape. These changes have also opened universities and the kinds of knowledge they foster to increased scrutiny and criticism ("culture wars" in one expression), widening the social field of debate about such issues as the growth of interdisciplinarity and the social role of intellectuals. In accordance with these developments, the inquiry recorded by *New Keywords* is a collective rather than an individual one. This expansion of resources, and the plurality of perspectives it introduces to the project, are necessary today if proper account is to be taken of the now much greater diversity of the fields of both public and academic debate in which a vocabulary of culture and society is implicated and across which it is no less imperfectly shared.

Second, where Williams largely equated the "English" language with British usage, our inquiry is an international one – again, necessarily so to take account of the extent to which discussions of culture and society now increasingly flow across national boundaries, with English holding an often oppressively privileged status in limiting as well as enabling much of that flow. However, for practical reasons we focus mainly on usage in Western Anglophone countries, although in some entries (**civilization** and **modern**, for example) the

contributors explain that recognizing the complexities occasioned by the entry of particular keywords into the vocabularies of culture and society in other countries is essential to grasping their import. This recognition was also a feature of Williams's *Keywords*: pointing out that many of his most important terms had developed key meanings in languages other than English or "went through a complicated and interactive development in a number of major languages" (1976: 17), he noted that he found it indispensable to trace some of this interaction in such cases as "alienation," and "culture" itself. We, too, would have liked to do more translinguistic as well as transnational tracing – the changing formations of meaning linking such concepts as "liberalism," **market, consumption,** "ideology," and **socialism** in China today is a consequential case in point – and we would have liked to follow the often radically divergent uses of English keywords in parts of the world where English is at most a lingua franca or a second language that may be nobody's mother tongue. An "extraordinary international collaborative enterprise" on the scale that Williams thought essential for an adequate comparative study quickly proved to be beyond us, too, for all the enlarged resources and technical means at our disposal.

Collaborating with writers in Australia, Britain, Canada, and the United States was extraordinary labor enough; this volume was five years in the making and could not have been produced at all without the Internet. Yet to explain our project's insufficiencies wholly in terms of the limits of time and technology – real as these are – would be to dodge the "deliberately social and historical" emphasis on *problems* of meaning that Williams (1983: 21) clarified as his own in the revised introduction to his book. The most active problems of meaning are always, he stressed, primarily embedded in actual relationships, and the difficulty of producing a widely usable volume that could offer anything like a genuinely global study of keywords in English is no exception to this; the desire to do so is active, but the relationships needed to achieve it and the level of "generality" in discussion that its realization would presuppose may not yet be sufficiently actual (at least for the editors of this volume) for the project to be feasible in practice: the entries on **globalization** and **the West** included here may help to suggest some reasons why.

Once again, though, this sense of an "unfinished and incomplete" labor that others will need to take up is a vital part of Williams's legacy. He traced the genesis of *Keywords* (1976: 9) to the end of World War II and the sense of entering a "new and strange world" that he shared with other soldiers returning to a transformed Britain in 1945. Recalling an occasion when he and another man just out of the army simultaneously said of their countrymen, "they just don't speak the same language," he goes on with customary deftness to link this spontaneous expression with the vocabulary of inter-generational incomprehension and conflict within families, and with what we might now call the "culture shocks" of class and ethnicity as he experienced them coming from a working-class family in Wales to Cambridge in the late 1930s. Today, in a world increasingly polarized by "culture wars" that are violently real as well as symbolic, there is no doubt that the same expression is still widely used to express "strong feelings" and important

differences about ideas that not only create strangeness and unease between speakers of different varieties of English – whether around the world, across the same city, or in a shared workplace or classroom – but also between adjacent departments of knowledge, and practitioners of the same profession or discipline. It was from such “critical encounters,” however, that Williams drew inspiration, seeing in them the workings of a central and often very slow process of social and historical as well as linguistic change.

Other modifications we have made to the *Keywords* model are minor compared with the shift to a collective and more international mode of production. While varying in size, Williams’s entries in *Keywords* are reasonably consistent in their format, and ours are rather less so. Williams usually begins with a history of the usage of the word in question – and of various subordinate terms – derived mainly from the OED and classic sources in historical semantics. This is then followed by a discussion of contemporary public and scholarly uses of both the keyword and selected subordinate terms, with cross-references throughout to related keywords. This format is broadly followed in this volume with the exception that the explanations of etymological roots are often less detailed and lengthy than in Williams, putting more emphasis on how particular terms are lodged today in crucial sites of debate or mark new kinds of experience: how, for example, does one discuss the etymology of **virtual**? Within any collective work a standardized “format” would be difficult to enforce and, given a general editorial brief requiring emphasis on public intellectual usage, authors have largely followed their own inclinations in deciding what that means, and how to handle both sources and subordinate terms.

Another issue facing a collective work is posed by the balance Williams achieved between, on the one hand, a reliable scholarly account of a keyword’s meanings that could be of use to a general reader to whom some or all of the material might be new, and, on the other, his distinctive interpretation of the word’s significance and value. We asked contributors to address the concepts in ways that would reflect their own perspectives rather than aiming to write a “correct,” wholly standardized, dictionary-style entry. Yet we did not want to go to the other extreme and have a collection of entirely individualized or partisan approaches to the concepts involved. Looking again at what Williams does it is clear, first, that his entries are all described and (usually) function as essays and, second, that they are generally organized to review some aspects of the history of the concept in question with a view to then commenting on the range of contemporary meanings and the public/political issues these involve – without at all moving on to a prescriptive definition, a glossary-type summary, or a concluding “correct line.” Following Williams, then, this volume consists of signed essays (rather than anonymous entries) of varied lengths, all written by engaged intellectuals who are alert to the political issues at stake in the *translation* of key terms across different fields of use – public, everyday, literary, technical, and scholarly – and therefore willing to give a scrupulous account of those differences.

Williams wrote some of his most eloquent critical pages about the uses of dictionaries, in particular of the “extraordinary collaborative enterprise” (1976: 16) of the Oxford

Dictionary. He noted that the OED offered an incomparably rich source of historical information, and it remains unrivalled in this respect today; we supplied all contributors to *New Keywords* with copies of the OED entries relevant to the essays they had agreed to write, and encouraged them (not always successfully) to explore that material. However, Williams observed that the OED had serious limitations in documenting twentieth-century usage and was far less free of active social and political values than its "massive impersonality" might suggest. Today, the cultural biases of the OED are perhaps even more apparent: its extensive entries on "modern," for example, are remarkable for the tone of patronizing mockery or disapproval that accumulates over dozens of citations, muffling any sense that there might be worlds of English in which the word could speak directly of revolutionary passion, of torment, violent displacement, utopian desire, and joy. At the same time, Williams also pointed out that the OED excels more at showing the "range and variation" of meanings than it does in suggesting "connection and interaction." As *Keywords* developed out of notes taken over more than 20 years, Williams was able to supplement the OED's resources from his own extensive reading. We could not ask our contributors to do this, given the ruthless time constraints imposed on academics today, and so along with the OED material we tried to supply, where possible, related entries from other national dictionaries of English as well as from specialized social science, humanities, or cultural studies dictionaries. We also provided copies of appropriate web searches and, where relevant, Williams's entry or entries relating to the same keyword.

In many cases, it proved difficult to go around those entries or to find examples of usage that Williams had not already addressed, and numerous essays included here discuss his interpretations. His accounts of such complex terms as, for example, **empirical**, **experience** (1983), **nature**, and, of course, the famous entry on "culture" itself posed particular difficulties for authors trying to catch the new shadings of significance and value these terms had acquired in public usage by the early years of the twenty-first century. In other cases, the effort to "update" Williams's 1976 entry proved redundant. In the case of **realism**, for example, the currency of the term in the rhetoric of the neo-liberal governments that swept to power in developed countries from the late 1970s is dealt with in his account of the word's corporate and political use to discredit **idealism** by substituting an appeal to "limits" ("limits meaning *hard facts*, often of power or money in their existing and established forms") for the orientation toward "truth" that guides those philosophical uses which he also explains with remarkable concision. In this and other instances where Williams's entry remains as pertinent as it was 30 years ago, we have chosen not to revise it merely for the sake of doing so: *Keywords* is and should long remain available as a primary text.

It follows that by no means all of Williams's terms omitted here have lost (in our judgment) their social force as keywords. Among those that we did exclude on those grounds, some still invoke difficult social and political as well as intellectual issues, but as *words* no longer seem to have that edge of energy and uncertainty that marks a keyword

in public usage – **sociology** and **anthropology**, for example, are no longer especially contentious as the names of academic disciplines. At the same time, some of Williams's words that we may seem to have ignored are in fact taken up by entries on other terms that may have a broader scope or a sharper significance today: thus we chose **therapy** as more pointed now than **psychological**, substituted **political correctness** for **doctrinaire** and (more debatably) **jargon**, settled on **space** and **place** as more encompassing than **regional**, and on **everyday** as having a wider currency than Williams's **ordinary**. **Under-privilege** is subsumed here by **poverty** (which Williams does not feature) and the issues it raises are also dealt with – along with those of **exploitation** – across a cluster of entries such as **capitalism**, **class**, **development**, and **economy**.

In any collective project, however, many decisions are forced by practical necessity rather than adopted as a matter of principle. Chief among the constraints we faced were those of space in an already substantial book, and time to meet our publisher's deadline, both of which led eventually to the dropping of some proposed terms (**exhibition**, **terrorism**, **waste**) that would have enhanced the book. Other "omissions" were beyond our control as life intervened and authors encountering unexpected difficulties, whether of their own or with our editorial brief, could not be replaced in time, or we did not know how to replace them: entries on **boundaries**, **criticism**, **leisure**, **pleasure**, **pluralism**, **romantic**, and **violence** fell out of the book in this haphazard and mundane way.

This is to say that our exclusions and our additions are, of course, at once as selective and as "arbitrary" as Williams's lists avowedly were in relation to a much wider range of terms that could have been included, but for various reasons were not. To call a selection arbitrary does not mean that it is unmotivated, and our own strong biases in editing this volume will be as evident as – but are, we hope, more explicit than – those that shaped the OED. However, the very nature of the project means that while our choices are contestable they were not capriciously made. Working from different disciplinary backgrounds, political temperaments, and national-linguistic locations, the three editors had long discussions and lively disagreements – sometimes resolved only by the brute force of two to one – about both the individual words to be included and the clusters we would use, following Williams, to shape the volume's social and historical emphases. We ended up with 12 groupings or lines of connection which we felt "bonded" particular keywords into the kind of wish-driven general discussion across different areas that Williams identified: roughly defined, our initial clusters were "art," "communication and the popular," "political economics," "politics and community," "race, ethnicity, colonialism," "sexuality and gender," "politics and the state," "borders of the human," "science," "space and time," "intellectual politics," and "modes of power and society."

Overlapping and entirely subject to criticism, these clusters at least proved their working value in culture and society today by attracting to the project a large number of distinguished contributors who proceeded to blur, ignore, write over, or recast the groupings we had devised. Nevertheless there is no doubt that our way of initially putting the volume