

conditioned them and bore ultimate responsibility for their history of hurt.” (18) Likewise, he clarifies the political meanings of dissentient culture (notably in chapters on jazz and blues, and “Bohemia and Beats”), but without romanticizing or flattening their contradictions.

The question at the end of this remarkable book is the one its author leaves intentionally open. What strategic sense can we make of these eloquently presented counter-histories? How do the histories of the marginal and the excluded, the hidden and the disavowed, emerge from the darkness Palmer describes? How does “transgression” turn into “social transformation,” to use his own words? (19) His answer – “the dialogues and detours of its makings, often forged in the possibilities of the night, had to undergo the difficult translation into languages that could restructure the day” – remains necessarily abstract. Moreover, the book’s trajectory (despite all its complex unevenness), from the political optimisms of the age of revolution and the rise of labour movements, down through the discrete cultural dissidence of the twentieth century to the racialized ravages of the late capitalist city, is profoundly pessimistic. And of course, the generative context for contemporary interest in marginality has been partly the exhaustion of class-political optimism, which remains the silent referent of the book. Palmer’s eloquent and moving conclusion meditates on all of this indeterminacy. His book is a rare achievement, a triumph of engaged left scholarship, truly a book of our times. In puzzling through the terms of our contemporary dilemmas, it’s hard to imagine a better resource.

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Gregory Elliot, *Perry Anderson: The Merciless Laboratory of History* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998).

John Higgins, *Raymond Williams: Literature, Marxism and Cultural Materialism* (London: Routledge, 1999).

Late twentieth-century British Marxist historians and cultural theorists have had a world-wide influence. In the context of Western Marxism, their work has been as important as French existentialist and structuralist Marxism or the German Frankfurt School. British Marxism is not a school of thought so much as an intellectual milieu. It grew out of an effort to create a socialist understanding of postwar capitalist transformations, to understand changes that seemed to undermine traditional Marxist assumptions about the working class, and to question the traditional Left’s exclusive reliance on political and eco-

conomic categories. At the heart of this project was a privileging of “culture.” It signified both the terrain on which such a politics was to be reconceived and the recognition that this terrain was a site of political struggle. In this, British Marxism distanced itself from orthodox Marxist thought in its Stalinist, mechanistic, and economistic guises.

The glue that held together the disparate voices of British Marxism was the “new left.” The new lefts of the 1960s are so varied that they are difficult to generalize about. Yet the new left in Britain – where the term seems to have first appeared in the English language – originally had a relatively specific meaning and continued to over the years, albeit with less precision. The new left originally refers to a heterogeneous group of ex-Communists, disaffected Labour supporters, and socialist students who came together as a result of the Suez and Hungary crises in 1956. They were consolidated by a shared commitment to the nuclear disarmament movement of the late fifties and early sixties. They coalesced around the journal *New Left Review* (NLR) for the purpose of creating a socialist third way or “new” left. The two intellectual figures who comprise the subject of this review exemplify the power of the journal to bring together under one banner very different intellectual sensibilities.

Among the British Marxists associated with the new left, Raymond Williams ranks as one of the most influential post-World War II cultural and literary theorists in the English-speaking world. A prolific writer, he made significant contributions to intellectual history, literary criticism, and historical linguistics. His work includes the critical and historical examination of the novel, the popular press, drama, television, and the cinema; he also wrote novels, short stories, and plays. But Williams is perhaps best remembered as one of the creators of cultural studies, a discipline that has profoundly reshaped scholarship in the humanities since the mid-1970s.

Williams developed his ideas in reaction to the theories that dominated literary discussions during his formative years at Cambridge in the 1930s and 40s. On the basis of his critiques of the elitist view of culture held by the literary scholar F. R. Leavis and the poet and critic T. S. Eliot and of his rejection of the deterministic view of class consciousness promoted by Marxist dialectical materialism, he produced “cultural materialism.” Rejecting the distinction between “high” and “popular culture,” he saw cultural representations, whether epic poetry or workers’ cooperatives, as “ordinary” – not in the sense of being banal but as giving meaning to everyday life. Though Williams developed many of his key ideas during the early years of the Cold War, his two early masterpieces – *Cultural and Society* (1958) and the *Long Revolution* (1960) – are in key respects new-left texts. The former’s appropriation of the conservative tradition of romantic social criticism for democratic-socialist politics played a pivotal role in shaping the new left’s preoccupation with culture. The latter, itself informed by new-left political discussions, created a mode of cultural pol-

itics and theory, which like the new left itself resisted the sterile choices of Communism and Labour.

Despite the great outpourings of admiration and acknowledgments of indebtedness that surfaced after Williams's death in 1988, his intellectual reputation has not worn well in the academy. In an age of cultural pluralism and identity politics, Williams's life-long commitment to socialism, privileging of working-class culture, ongoing dialogue with historical materialism, and belief in the power of a common culture have not proved attractive to intellectuals steeped in poststructuralist, postmodern, and postcolonial modes of thought. Cornel West perhaps best summed up this view when he stated that "Raymond Williams was the last of the great European male revolutionary socialist intellectuals born before the end of the age of Europe (1492-1945)."<sup>1</sup> John Higgins's full-length study, *Raymond Williams: Literature, Marxism and Cultural Materialism*, sets out to refute such judgements. He achieves this by placing Williams's thought within its historical context, arguing that such an approach allows for the recovery of Williams's intellectual and academic achievement and guards against the retrospective reading of his work of which many of his critics are guilty.

As one of those critics that is lumped in this category, perhaps I am entitled to a short response. I am entirely in agreement with Higgins that criticism of Williams for failing to anticipate, say, postcolonialism is deeply problematic. Yet it is entirely appropriate to think about Williams's relevance to the political and theoretical challenges of our time. Higgins so much as agrees, as he admits that Williams has been rightly critiqued for insufficient attention to race and gender. In my own case, when I stated that "though he [Williams] has only been dead for less than five years, he is already part of a different political age," I was arguing that as a result of the traditional underpinnings of radical transformation being undermined the political challenges faced by Williams had been transformed.<sup>2</sup> (I was writing in the aftermath of the end of Communism and after a decade of New Right dominance.) I was not chastising Williams for failing to anticipate them, since I explicitly stated that "we might respect how much Raymond Williams has helped us to grapple with this new situation."<sup>3</sup>

Having said that, I think that Higgins's account of Williams's thought has no parallel in the literature. It is likely to be the authoritative study for some time to come. In contrast to say Fred Inglis's quirky, anecdotal and unsatisfying biography, Alan O'Connor's lucid but thematic study, or my own treatment of Williams in the context of the new left and the development of cultural studies, Higgins's book represents the most thoroughly researched, most comprehensive, and the most well-balanced account that now exists.<sup>4</sup> What makes the book uniquely valuable – and where I as a historian learned the most from – is Higgins's unrivaled treatment of Williams's literary criticism, which, given its preponderance in his overall work, is long overdue. Taking seriously Williams's

observation that he was an oppositional intellectual engaged in a full-scale critique of official English culture, Higgins traces Williams's efforts at transforming literary criticism from being narrow, elitist, and insular to being historically-informed, interdisciplinary, and wide-ranging. While such texts as *Culture and Society* are given their due, Higgins's attention to lesser known, early texts on drama – notably *Drama from Ibsen to Eliot* (1952), *Drama and Performance* (1954), and the co-authored *Preface to Film* (1954) – makes it possible to see the continuities in Williams's intellectual project. Others have pointed out, for instance, that Williams first introduced the idea of the “structure of feeling” – his reworking of crude versions of the Marxist idea of ideology – in *Preface to Film*. Higgins is the first writer to demonstrate its importance to his early thought. However, there is a cost to emphasizing such texts. Higgins makes no claims to comprehensiveness. Yet by his own admission, he privileges *Culture and Society*, a work in the literary-critical genre, over *The Long Revolution*, a more adventurous theoretical text. The latter points beyond conventional criticism, sketching out the beginnings of the interdisciplinary study of culture or cultural studies, including pathbreaking instances of what such studies might look like.

Williams was from a Welsh working-class background and part of the generation of the Popular Front. His understanding of what it meant to be a radical intellectual was derived from such ventures as the prewar Left Book Club. He spent most of his academic career at Cambridge, but his early academic work – including *Culture and Society* – was produced in the context of adult education, notably the Oxford branch of the Workers' Educational Association. Perry Anderson's intellectual and political formation was of a very different type. From an upper crust Anglo-Irish background, the long-time editor of *NLR*, was a product of the new left itself. He was first active in the early new-left, Oxford student journal, *New University*. By the time he became editor of *NLR* he had written on the Cuban Revolution (the first sustained analysis to appear in the British left-wing press) and had published articles on Swedish social democracy, the Common Market, and Portugal. Where Williams's thought was steeped in English literary criticism, Anderson was fluent in Continental philosophy and political theory. His thought was shaped by his encounters with the unorthodox Trotskyist intellectuals, notably Isaac Deutscher and Ernest Mandel, and the Western Marxist tradition, especially Jean-Paul Sartre, Louis Althusser, and Antonio Gramsci. Anderson distanced himself from the English-rooted socialist humanism of the early new left and saw himself as reviving the classical tradition. His idea of a radical journal was not *Left Review* but *Les Temps Modernes*. Anderson is a theorist and a historian. But unlike E. P. Thompson, whose magisterial recovery of early English working-class experience was written from the bottom up, Anderson's work was global in its perspective, macro in its outlook, and a synthesis of the work of others.

Gregory Elliot's *Perry Anderson: The Merciless Laboratory of History* is the first full-length study of Anderson's thought. Based on interviews with many of Anderson's colleagues and access to *NLR*'s unpublished documents, it traces Anderson's thought from the late 1950s to the mid-1990s. Like Higgins' book, Elliot's is sure to be the benchmark by which others are compared. It impresses by the near exhaustiveness of its coverage and the intelligence of its critical judgments. At the same time, there is something remarkably narrow about it. If the reader is interested in learning about the relationship between the man and his thought, this is not the place. Nor is it the place to get a sense of its subject's intellectual development in the context of the broader sweep of political and cultural change. The book, as the author admits, represents an unfashionable approach to the history of ideas, "articulating 'internal' and 'external' histories of his texts in their contexts, here defined as 'the wider contours of Anglo-Marxism since 1956.'" (xvi) Whether readers will be drawn to such an approach, will depend on their previous investment in the subject. I myself was fascinated by much of Elliot's account, while at the same time admit that at times it is pretty arcane. If I was more curious than committed, I would start elsewhere, notably with the more general histories of the British new left.<sup>5</sup>

Elliot describes himself as an independent Marxist who is not exposing Anderson's errors and limitations from a politically authoritative position of his own. I would add that the style and substance of the book reads as if it is an independent critique that is remarkably close to Anderson's, including a lucid prose style that makes a virtue of remoteness and distance. The result is that Elliot has produced a study that is critical, but suggests an insider's point of view. What he is best at is showing in compelling detail that Anderson's hopes for world revolution were shaped by the promise of the Cuban Revolution and reinforced by the student revolts of the late 1960s. He goes on to show that Anderson's faith in the eventual merging of theory and practice in the form of a viable revolutionary worker's movement tenaciously resisted evidence to the contrary, only crumbling with the fall of Communism. He concludes by wondering whether Anderson has recovered from the experience and what form his intellectual work will take. The fact that Anderson has recently resumed being editor of *NLR* after a prolonged absence might be the beginnings of an answer. For the creation of a radical oppositional culture under circumstances where the Left is a besieged minority was the point from which he began.

Anderson's political project was a rejection of the deeply social-democratic impulse embedded in Williams's vision of a "long revolution." Yet this did not deter them from having an ongoing political and intellectual relationship over the years. Williams wrote for *NLR* on numerous occasions and gave a book-length interview to an *NLR* team headed by Anderson.<sup>6</sup> Williams's engagement with continental Marxism, the result being the still challenging

*Marxism and Literature* (1977), could have never taken place without the numerous English translations of Western-Marxist texts spearheaded by Anderson and *NLR*. By the same token, Anderson always accorded great respect for Williams's work, especially after French intellectuals began moving to the Right *en masse*, following the disappointments of the May events. The connections between these two men were made possible by a shared commitment to the new left. Taken together, the work of John Higgins and Gregory Elliot demonstrate how rich a terrain it was.

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<sup>1</sup> Cornel West, "In Memoriam: The Legacy of Raymond Williams" in C. Pendergast, ed., *Cultural Materialism: Essays on Raymond Williams* (Minneapolis 1995), ix.

<sup>2</sup> Dennis Dworkin, "Cultural Studies and the Crisis of British Radical Thought" in Dennis Dworkin and Leslie Roman, eds., *Views Beyond the Border Country: Raymond Williams and Cultural Politics* (London, 1993), 54.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> Alan O'Connor, *Raymond Williams, Writing, Culture, Politics* (Oxford, 1989); Fred Inglis, *Raymond Williams* (London, 1995); and Dennis Dworkin, *Cultural Marxism in Postwar Britain: History, the New Left and the Origins of Cultural Studies* (Durham, 1997).

<sup>5</sup> For instance, Linn Chun, *The British New Left* (Edinburgh, 1993).

<sup>6</sup> Raymond Williams, *Politics and Letters: Interviews with New Left Review* (London, 1979).

Hans Turley, *Rum, Sodomy and the Lash. Piracy, Sexuality and Masculine Identity* (New York: New York University Press, 1999).

There is not much rum, little lash and hardly any sodomy in Hans Turley's *Rum, Sodomy and the Lash: Piracy, Sexuality and the Masculine Identity*. Turley is not into "reality," he protests many times. He is interested in the way pirates were depicted as "the common enemy of humanity," why they were so disturbing and why they could be both criminals and romanticized antiheroes. He doesn't know how many pirates were sodomites, and doesn't really care. He leaves the history of piracy to the Marcus Redikers, Christopher Hills and, less confidently, the B. R. (*Sodomy and the Pirate Tradition*) Burgs.

True, Chapter One, "Life on Board an Early-Eighteenth Century Ship"