

Richard Hoggart's rich and disturbing work "The Uses of Literacy" states the thesis "that a traditional 'working-class culture,' based upon the collective influence of the neighbourhood, is under disastrous threat of erosion from the 'mass culture' of the commercial media." Hoggart's fears are based primarily upon his individual observation (which has been fruitfully confined within his own Yorkshire locality), as well as upon assorted literary evidence. In our view, Hoggart's book raises a number of fascinating questions: are his conclusions true only for a particular regional stereotype? would a direct account in terms of readership reaction differ from Hoggart's content-analysis of the publications themselves? (The real man may not after all be at one with his press-presented image.) What are the most effective barriers to the encroachment of "the candy-floss world"? is Hoggart right in emphasising so much such "nameless" factors as the cyclic renewal of family ties? In the following section, Raymond Williams discusses some general issues raised by Hoggart's work; other contributors deal with its application to particular problems or regions. We invite our readers to send in their own ideas and experiences for publication in the next issue.

## *The uses of Literacy*

# Working Class Culture

## Raymond Williams

OLD questions seem often as dead as old answers: either can be hidden by the indelible scrawl of error. The question, "what is working-class culture?" brings to mind, for many of us, a particular kind of old sectarian argument, or else the worn phrases of a political programme for the arts. Yet, in contemporary Britain, many of the questions which most radically affect the working-class movement are quite clearly cultural questions. We should be grateful to Richard Hoggart, who describes his book *The Uses of Literacy* as being "about changes in working-class culture during the last thirty or forty years," for giving us the opportunity to look again at this general question in our own immediate terms.

The idea of "culture" is, in any context, notoriously difficult to use, and I must begin by making clear some of the historical changes through which it has passed, and its consequent complexity of contemporary meaning. Until the Industrial devolution, the word "culture" served to indicate a *process* of training, first of plants and animals, then, by analogy, of human beings and the human mind. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, this idea of a process was extended to, and became dominated by, the idea of culture as a *product*: an achieved state or habit. The first of the new meanings of "culture", in this absolute sense, was "a state or habit of the mind", an embodiment, in idealist terms (Coleridge, Newman) of man's effort towards spiritual and normal perfection. This meaning, which is obviously related to the earlier idea of process, was then quickly joined by a more practical descriptive sense (Carlyle), in which "culture" was taken to mean the records of this human effort, in art, science, and learning. "Culture" became the body of such work, and did not suffer its specialization to equivalence with the arts alone until the second half of the century (Ruskin and the "New Aesthetics"). Yet, while this specialization was in progress, the relation of art, science and learning to the common human effort towards civilization was laying the basis of a new and very important sense (Taylor), in which "culture" came to mean "a whole way of life". These major senses have all survived into our own period, and it is not a matter of choosing or defining some correct sense, but simply of recognizing this historical complexity. We have, unfortunately, also to recognize the emotive deposits on the word. On the one hand, since Arnold, there has been a widespread association of the word "culture" with such words as "precious" and "pretentious", so that to speak of "working-class culture" seems to some absurd: the working-class, being tough and practical, can have nothing to do with such a thing. On the other hand, "culture" has been taken by the middle class to describe its own state and activities: again "working-class culture" seems absurd: the commonness of the

working-class is precisely what culture is against. In this confused field, then, the enquiry must be begun: men cannot choose the history they are born into.

If we take first the sense of culture as "arts and learning" we find that "working-class culture" has often been defined. It has been taken to mean, first, such survivals of folk-culture as, say, industrial ballads, trade-union banners, the music-hall; and, second, individual contributions, by isolated working men, to the general tradition. I respect the enthusiasm which has been brought to these two kinds of work, and certainly they need to be better known and appreciated. But the former, while not exactly dead, is, in the mid-twentieth century, fragmentary and meagre. To value it where it has survived is reasonable, but to put a major, idealizing emphasis on it is foolish. The individual contributions, again, are to be respected, but almost without exception they bear the inevitable marks of men excluded from the mainstream by the pressures of a class society. To idealize such work, to pretend it is better than it is, does little service to the working-class tradition. For this definition of "working-class culture" carries, by implication, as its opposite, the classification of all work in the mainstream of art and learning as "bourgeois". Such classification used regularly to be made, for political reasons, and on the basis of an inadequate general theory of culture. Yet one can see now that the classification is both false and dangerous. It is dangerous because it allows the bourgeoisie to claim as its pride and product a great cultural tradition which it can then easily contrast with the meagreness of what we offer as "working-class culture". Many people concerned with the arts have been misled, politically, by the consequences of this. Their social allegiances and judgments have been over-ridden, often, by this feeling that what they value, in art and learning, has in some way to be set against the claims of the working-class movement. The opposition is, of course, unnecessary, because there is in fact no simple equation between the dominance of an economic class and the production of art and literature. There is a relation, evidently, but a more complicated one than we had supposed. In such work in the nineteenth-century mainstream, for example, there is a great deal of conscious opposition to the bourgeoisie and its ideas, as well as some unconscious opposition. At the same time there is of course much conscious adherence to bourgeois society as well as much unconscious adherence, even in works of social criticism that we are accustomed to value. What is necessary is particular analysis, and when we have done this we shall see that, all faults noted, the mainstream was, in varying degrees, humane and liberating, in ways that the bourgeoisie, as an economic class, could not possibly be.

## Raymond Williams

Moreover, a cultural tradition is not only complex but continually selective. What survives, from a period of bourgeois dominance, into societies where the working-class is reaching towards power, is a different entity from the original culture of that period. The culture taken over by one class from another is, at the point of taking-over, as much the possession of the new class as of that class under whose dominance it was produced. The processes of historical change, and of a selective cultural tradition, ensure that the cultural mainstream is always general in character, if not in distribution, and this is the point to remember. To set up, against this, an artificial "working-class culture" is harmful in every way. Further, when it is a question of the attitudes of an economic class towards this mainstream, we must note that the record of the working-class movement, while not perfect, is at least good. The "swinish multitude" whose irruption Burke prophesied has not trampled down art and learning, but, as a political movement, has fought hard to clear the channels along which these can flow. The emphasis on clearing the channels is right, and is a more relevant activity, now and in the future, than the artificial programmes of socialist culture of which we still sometimes hear. Art that can be defined in advance is unlikely to be worth having. The attempt at such definition springs from a conception of history and culture as matters divisible into simple and rigid periods, determined by mechanical inter-relations, rather than as processes of continual change and response. What a socialist society needs to do is not to define its culture in advance, but to clear the channels, so that instead of guesses at a formula there is opportunity for a full response of the human spirit to a life continually unfolding, in all its concrete richness and variety.

### Commercial Culture

I find little meaning, therefore, in the definitions of working-class culture, past, present, or future, which have hitherto been popular in this field. But at the same time I must reject an extremely damaging version of "working-class culture" which has become significantly popular in the last thirty or forty years. This is the equation of "working-class culture" with the mass commercial culture which has increasingly dominated our century. Richard Hoggart's book has been read in this way, and not altogether without justification. The characteristic of the media of such culture is that the techniques which make mass distribution possible require considerable concentration of capital. When, in England, these techniques became available, they passed naturally into the hands of the commercial bourgeoisie, so that their use became, and has remained, characteristically capitalist in methods of production and distribution. There is some evidence of a conscious attempt to exploit the extension of literacy among the working class, particularly by the new imperialist newspapers of the nineties. But in any case the arrival of these techniques in a capitalist society would have led to the exploitation that has in fact occurred. The working-class, by its very exposure in such a society, was of course destined for a consumer's role. But it is the exposure to which we must attend, not the fact of consumption. In practice, these media have penetrated all classes: the reading and entertainments of the ordinary bourgeoisie (as distinct from its professional section) are indistinguishable, generally, from ordinary working-class reading and entertainments. To equate commercial culture with working-class culture is, then, wrong on both counts.

The problem remains, but we need not add to its difficulties by a misleading formula. There is the problem of democratic control of these media, for here it is a straight choice, because of the capital involved, between existing types of ownership and some kind of social ownership. There is the further problem of a really adequate educational system, which will make people more free to use these media critically. To go into either of these problems in more detail is beyond my present subject, but we must not be prevented from seeing the problems as they are by making a section of the consumers of such material responsible, directly or indirectly, for the production of the whole.

I turn now to culture in its other major sense, "a whole way of life". It would indeed be surprising if an exposed and struggling class had made much articulate contribution to culture in its more specialized sense, but here, in this more general field, the contribution has been distinctive and important. There is of course some danger in talking, in general terms, about the "working-class way of life". The elements one finds there are partly the result of direct experience *as a working-class*, but partly also the continuation of regional and traditional habits. There is always the risk of taking a part for the whole, and of taking a regional characteristic for a class characteristic. A good example of this is the way people, including Richard Hoggart, refer to "working-class speech". There is of course no such thing: the only class speech in Britain is that of the middle and upper classes; the remaining variations are regional. It is a pity when working-class people regard their regional speech as inferior, and accept as "good English" a standardized class dialect. On the other hand, there is little point in idealizing regional speech, and the growth of communications is inevitably producing new kinds of norm. While the assumption is made that an existing class-dialect is a finished ideal towards which all must move, unnecessary tensions are created in what would otherwise be a more natural selective process. The same is true of other regional habits which have survived in the working-class while rejected by a middle-class anxious, for political and economic reasons, to achieve an evident uniformity. The inevitable movement is towards a more closely-knit community, and the only danger is the attempt to define the standards of such a community in existing class terms, rather than clearing the channels and allowing a general contribution to the common way of life.

### Semi-Detached Proletariat

The point is confused by another formula that has become popular: that of the "semi-detached proletariat". It is supposed that as working people move into new types of house, acquire new products such as cars, television sets, and washing-machines, they are, in this process, becoming less proletarian and more bourgeois. But few who have ever been poor and badly housed and lacking in personal property have wanted to retain the simplicity which others have assigned to them and, from a distance, admired. These changes are changes in the use of personal things, and have nothing to do with becoming "bourgeois", in any real sense. The nineteenth-century bourgeois was no less a bourgeois because he had none of these things that are now taken as bourgeois symbols, and indeed this way of looking at class differences is wholly external and mechanical. The "working-class way of life" is not the slum, not the back-kitchen and the copper, not the cap and the collarless shirt, though these

have been, and to some extent remain, the external characteristics of working-class life, shot through by certain regional variations, and certain period effects.

But is there, then, any significant difference between working-class and bourgeois ways of life? Will not the differences disappear as the semi-detached world extends, and certain kinds of consumer goods become cheaper? One can see the advantage of this point of view, to certain contemporary politicians and commentators. But a culture, a whole way of life, is never reducible to its artifacts. A way of life is a use of resources for particular human purposes. In the case of ordinary personal property these purposes overlap and even become identical, despite differences of class. But, in the wider field, purposes in the use of resources can differ significantly and vitally. Here in fact is the present distinction between working-class and bourgeoisie. As classes, these are quite distinctly committed to different and alternative versions of the nature and purposes of society, and consequently to different versions of human relationship. This remains the most important cultural distinction of our time.

The major cultural contribution of the working-class in this country has been the collective democratic institution, formed to achieve a general social benefit. It is true that the liberalizing middle class is capable of setting up institutions which function democratically within themselves, but it is always a characteristic of these institutions that they are ultimately, exclusive: they cannot, of themselves, be extended to cover society as a whole. Many working-class organizations of course begin as interest groups of a similar kind, but the characteristic of these is their further association, not only with other similar groups, but to the point where they cover or seek to cover the interests of a whole society. The growth of the Labour movement as a whole is the primary instance of this. It is indeed characteristic of working-class culture that the emphasis it has chosen is the emphasis of extending relationships. The primary affections and allegiances, first to family, then to neighbourhood, can in fact be directly extended into social relationships as a whole, so that the idea of a collective democratic society is at once based on direct experience, and is available, as an idea, to others who wish to subscribe to it. The working class has indeed no monopoly of these primary virtues, in particular close family allegiance. But the bourgeois idea of social relationships—a society of free men with equal opportunities to compete—is not only a cause of tension in itself, leading to open and covert attempts to limit such opportunities; it is also a cause of immediate tension, in that the values of the family cannot be extended into society as a whole—a man works for his family, but competes against other men to do so. Much of the real sickness and disillusion of our century has come from this practical tension, in men of goodwill.

### Family, neighbourhood, society

But the liberal middle class was capable of one minor reform within its idea of society: the substitution of the idea of service for the practice of competition. Sometimes, of course, the idea of service is an evident rationalization of self-interest, but equally, it has been the charter of many dedicated lives. The fact is, however, that the idea of service is not (though it may appear to be) an extension of primary loyalties comparable to that which the working-class idea of society has achieved. For service is commonly to an existing authority or institution,

which sets limits on its capacity for extension to society as a whole, and, further, it is often in practice a denial of the primary affections and allegiances, over which the claims of service must take priority. The extraordinary assent given to separation, by such characteristic bourgeois institutions as the English boarding school, is an excellent instance of this. The immediate family is to some extent broken up in order to prepare certain of its members for service to something which is thought of as larger and more important. The deep distrust of such procedures, by working-class people in this country, is understandable. To them family, neighbourhood and society must, to be satisfactory, be continuous and co-extensive: none can be good if it involves a sacrifice or weakening of the others. The authoritarian element inherent in the idea of service is also perceived.

### Majority values-minority ideals

It is important to stress these basic cultural differences now, when we have in fact three offered versions of society: the "opportunity state" (bourgeois competition); welfare capitalism (bourgeois service—the pattern of thinking of many leaders of the Labour Party); socialism (the working-class idea of society as a collective democratic totality). Much of our political argument is confused, much of our controversy caused by, the energy which flows into one or other of these versions from basic cultural dispositions. The political argument can be greatly deepened in quality if these things are understood. It is of course a corollary that working-class life is not primarily political, although it may often be seen as such from the outside or by abstraction. The political effect of working-class life is the product of the primary affections and allegiances, in family and neighbourhood, which make up the immediate substance of this life, and which Richard Hoggart has so intelligently and eloquently described. Hoggart is wrong, however, in supposing that these are to be set on one side of a line, while on the other is set the wider social product—the Labour Movement—which he describes as the work of a minority. Of course only a minority is really active, politically, but we must not be confused by bourgeois ideas of the nature of a minority. There, a minority is normally thought of as isolated, self-defensive, opposed to the majority's values. The political and industrial leadership of the working-class is, quite evidently, a minority of a different kind. It is not isolated, but is the articulate representation of an extension of primary values into the social fields. It is not self-defensive, for it seeks consistently to operate in the majority's behalf and interest. It is not opposed to majority values, but seeks to define them in wider terms and in a different context: the proof of its general success in this, against the detail of local disillusion and disappointment, is the existence of the great majority institutions which have in these ways been built up. It is objected, by Hoggart and others, that these institutions have become predominantly materialist in tone. But working-class materialism—the collective improvement of the common life—is objectively, in our circumstances, a humane ideal. The primary affections run all the way through, for the working-class sees no reason, in experience (where others, under the tensions described, see many reasons) why these primary values should not be made the values of society as a whole.

I have of course been describing class characteristics. Within them, almost every kind of individual variation of

response is possible, and the experience of our present society encourages certain of these, with a consequent weakening of the class as a whole. Again and again, opportunities of a bourgeois kind have been offered to selected working-class people, and many of these have been taken, sometimes as the explicit betrayal of the class. Even where betrayal is impossible, as in a man of Hoggart's deep loyalty to his own people, the separation caused by the taking of opportunities within a bourgeois framework can create its own deep tensions and difficulties. These are real issues, yet when all the opportunities have been taken, and the few have gone away, the mainstream of working-class life continues, in its own directions, offering, as we have seen, an idea of society under which all can again unite.

## **Masses and mainstream**

Looking back on life in a working-class family and neighbourhood, what most of us see is a compulsive conformity, which we both value and fear. We value it as a source of strength to the class: the real solidarity that has preserved and enriched. We value it, if also questioning it, for its morality. The narrow "respectability" of much working-class life is easily seen, and some may chafe at it. But this is the morality of a people with no capital but themselves, and Hoggart is right to value it so highly. Socialist intellectuals have too often stressed, in practice as well as theory, a criticism of "respectability" which is

both easy and damaging. An isolated intellectual, or a rebel from his own class, too easily constructs, as his type of virtue, either the exile (the self-principled, proud opponent of a false society) or, worse, the vagrant (the despised and rejected nonconformist, who is seen as moral within a larger immorality). In fact, while these positions are always personally explicable, and may, at a given stage, be the only available points of settlement, the thinking and feeling which follow from them are and have been very damaging. The virtues are at best negative, and are at a disadvantage against even the narrowest social morality. For the morality will change and deepen as the security of the group grows, and this, rather than the courses of exile or vagrant, is the pattern of living growth.

Yet there is, finally, a danger in this otherwise positive habit of conformity. In periods of transition especially, the existence of this sentiment is a standing invitation to exploitation by individuals or a caucus. In these late fifties, we are conscious of this danger above all, but, while we fight the caucuses, let us remember that it is only in terms of working-class culture as a whole that we have the opportunity for any valuable transformation of society. There are no masses to capture, but only this mainstream to join. May it be here that the two major senses of culture—on the one hand the arts, the sciences, and learning, on the other hand the whole way of life—are valuably drawn together, in a common effort at maturity.

The working-class home underwent a transformation during the decades mid-twentieth century and this revolution of space, objects and culture and was most evident in the "living room" (or the parlour, kitchen, front or back room as it was more. The working-class home underwent a transformation during the decades mid-twentieth century and this revolution of space, objects and culture and was most evident in the "living room" (or the parlour, kitchen, front or back room as it was also known). Working-class culture is a range of cultures created by or popular among working-class people. The cultures can be contrasted with high culture and folk culture, and are sometimes equated with popular culture and low culture . Working-class culture developed during the Industrial Revolution. Because most of the newly created working-class were former peasants, the cultures took on much of the localised folk culture.