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## Keywords: an invitation

In the previous issue of *Transformation* we indicated that we would revisit the ‘keywords’ approach to discussing changes in discourse, ideology, and common sense. This approach has long been employed towards developing social theory. For this issue, therefore, we asked John Higgins to introduce the unfolding notion of ‘keywords’ to a contemporary readership, a full 13 years after the previous contribution of the technique to South African society (Shepherd and Robins 2008). Higgins was specifically asked because he has had a long interest in Raymond Williams, and has written about the issue and debates raised by that theorist since his ground-breaking work, *Keywords*, appeared in 1976. The essay which follows provides a clear guide to the history of the term and the approach it signifies (itself a changing keyword as is clear from his essay). But, as a close reading of the essay suggests, it explains why, when and how Raymond Williams’ exploration of keywords is of direct relevance to **Platform: in theory**, appearing in a society in great flux, South Africa:

[A]s with theory, there is something in *Keywords* which is deliberately unsettling, something which actively challenges the consensus, and the apparently secure ground of common sense on which we stand in the world. *Keywords* threatens precisely the structure of meaning that Williams saw at work in Gramsci’s famous notion of hegemony as something ‘which is lived at such a depth, which

saturates the society to such an extent, and which... even constitutes the substance and limits of common sense for most people under its sway'. (Williams, cited by Higgins, in this issue)

Williams employed 'theory' as a keyword in his own book (1976:266-8). One of us still has the 1976 Fontana paperback (loose pages, and all) which was used in teaching sociological theory in the 1980s – later to be updated by the welcome production of Emile Boonzaier and John Sharp's *South African Keywords* (1988). And Williams, as will become clear in reading the Higgins essay, is central to what will always be an on-going project, reflecting on keywords in a post-1994 South Africa, and during a pandemic of tragic proportions.

The essay demands and rewards a close and careful read, as much theoretical exploration does. In relation to our motivation, which now follows, we wish to alert the reader specifically to some aspects that struck us as crucial. Higgins notes that (emphases added):

Keywords are best understood as both the stake and the site of conflicts over meaning in, and the consequent *possibilities for the understanding of a social order*.

He also draws attention to dimensions of employing the keywords approach, namely that

... the first step in a keywords-style analysis is to *provide a historical survey of the uses of the term*, in order to better understand both how we have come to that contemporary usage, and what exactly is taken up or marginalised in and through this usage. The aim of keywords analysis is to resist – by becoming aware of them – the active forgettings and marginalisations often at work in the pinning down of meaning;

and later that

the critical study of language and its use can show us not just what a dominant world view is, but how that worldview can come to feel like 'normal reality'.

Further points to note, especially for the South African context, is the attention given to comparing not only terms across time, but as used in different contexts, and as terms appear in different languages; and the relevance to the educational context:

Williams' recommendation, ..., for *comparative research*, and [the] emphasis that 'key developments...*can only be understood when other languages are brought consistently into comparison*'.

Higgins motivates for 'rereading' and 'reactivating' *Keywords* and what it illustrates:

There are two broad sets of reasons ... in the present moment. The first set lie in the theoretical insights that *Keywords* embodies, and the lessons these have for contemporary social, cultural and political activists, particularly in the academy. The second resides in the occasion any such active rereading gives for a better understanding of the ways in which theory is always generated from and within the pressures of specific social and historical circumstances.

## A call

Through exploring 'keywords/key-words' in sense-making in society our hope is to extend discussion. This is, of course, one of the prime purposes of any platform for ideas and debate. In commissioning this essay, we hope that our readers, especially new voices concerned with understanding, rather than simple describing the everyday, to become collaborators in a **Platform** project on keywords.

In essence the following questions underpin this project: what are the current terms employed by those who have the power to describe the social world? What is the intention, and the effect on individuals as citizens? Do the meanings that these keywords carry enable us to identify, understand and act on essential problems and the catastrophic conditions within which the large majority of people find themselves?

So, this is an invitation for readers to select a *keyword* and write on it for publication in these pages. In not more than 5,000 words (preferably far fewer) explain its importance – in the past and the present.

**Contributions and queries to:** [submissions@transformationjournal.org.za](mailto:submissions@transformationjournal.org.za) with **Keywords** in the subject line.

Over the next year, we will engage your contributions for inclusion on **Platform: in Theory**, and begin work towards a possible future edited collection in book form.

## References

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