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Theory as keyword / keyword as theory

In Memory of Anthony Morphet 1940 – 2021[1]

Theory is, like many other (but not all) words, a keyword: that is to say, it is a word in common but significantly differential usage, meaning different things to different people and carrying different associations and connotations for different social, political and academic groups, both across time but also at any given moment in time. 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. As previously indicated in this journal,[2] the idea of theory – and especially in the social sciences and humanities – is under particular pressure for a whole variety of reasons, to the point that it is often difficult to get a clear sense of what is being referred to by theory at the very moment it is being rejected or supported, and often with considerable vehemence.

The aim of this essay is to suggest that while theory is undoubtedly a keyword, we can get a better grip on the practical work of Theory (yes, with a capital T, as I shall explain further below) by understanding more about the peculiar nature of keywords themselves, and hence it is the idea of a keyword which is primarily under scrutiny here. More specifically, it is the idea or concept of a keyword as first construed in the work of the socialist critic,

1 Tony Morphet, a professor in Adult Education at the University of Cape Town, shared 'the desire to make education a part of the process of social change itself', as Raymond Williams wrote. For an appreciation of Morphet's life and work, see Higgins 2021a.

2 See **Platform: in Theory**, *Transformation* 104 (available at www.transformationjournal.org.za).

Raymond Williams (1921 - 1988) which will form the main object of our attention. Let us begin, in other words, with a keywords-style analysis of the term keyword in order to bring out how and why the complex specificity of Williams's term and practice may still provide a powerful resource for the work of Theory in the current moment. In so doing we shall see how – somewhat paradoxically – Williams's rich and complex idea of a keyword is itself obscured or entirely neglected in standard definitions of the term.

The dominant sense of keyword today is that construed from the world of big data where it is used in relation to the practice of information search and identification protocols on the web; but much is lost (and notably the idea of keywords for the actual practice of critical thinking) if this apparently dominant sense is left unexamined. As always, 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.

First, then, a survey of some of the dictionary or dictionary-style definitions, reviewed here in part to show the ways in which keywords analysis differs in significant ways from the usual idea of dictionary definitions.

Defining keywords

Keyword is a compound noun, found in the three main forms: hyphenated (key-word), open (key word), and closed (keyword). Its first recorded uses (according to the Oxford English Dictionary (OED)) occur in the hyphenated form and date from the eighteenth century. Here, the use of the hyphen to make a particular connection between two nouns (key + word) represents the original act of imaginative appropriation through which a particular word is understood to act as the key or cipher in a closed or coded system of communication.[3] As the use of the compound term increases in frequency, the hyphen is eventually dropped, while, at the same time, the original meaning of the term begins to shift as more and more people begin to use it, and to twist it to their needs. We can observe – in

3 Thus, in a standard cipher, if the word cipher is used as the cipher, a message is coded and transcribed in the following way.
Alphabet: ABCDEFGHIJKLMNOPQRSTUVWXYZ
Cipher: CIPHERABCDEFGHIJKLMONPQRSTUVWXYZ
Message: Dinner tonight
Coded: HCHHELNIHCABN

the recorded history of its use – the gradual emergence of a second, and more figurative sense coming through in the nineteenth century and continuing into the twentieth.

As this second sense of the term becomes dominant, a key word (or, as it increasingly becomes, keyword) is no longer understood as an actual cipher, but is understood more generally as a word or idea that serves much more broadly (as the OED puts it) as 'the solution or explanation for something, or as a word, expression, or concept which is of particular importance or significance'. One example that the OED gives of this is taken from the 1926 edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, citing 'As to [work]shop detail, the keyword to mass production is simplicity'. Here 'keyword' is understood as the key to mass production, but no longer in the literal sense of a key, but now more figuratively as meaning that which is essential to mass production, the essence of mass production (simplicity), that which makes mass production work.

In contemporary usage, this sense continues with the general understanding of a key word or keyword, often used to refer to a word or expression of particular importance in an extended argument, and hence as something to underline, and pay particular attention to, in the work of paraphrase or comprehension. Thus, as a standard part of teaching the skills of paraphrase and analysis, schoolchildren and students are often guided to identify (and perhaps literally underline) the key words of an argument and either to make sure to include these or translate them into other terms for the purposes of comprehension and summary.

In its turn, this usage gradually shades into what is the current predominant sense of the term. Here, a keyword is understood as 'a word' (usually one of several) 'chosen to indicate or represent the content of a larger document, text, record, etc, in an index, catalogue, or database', and, with the exponential growth of the world wide web and its data-accessing as 'any word entered as a search term in a database or search engine'. By 1997, the OED cites the journal *Business Age* for this now dominant sense: 'Most web users seeking specific information... will rely on typing a few key words and letting a search engine do the rest'.

For academics world-wide, this particular sense of the word is familiar through the increasingly standard request by journals to list the keywords of the argument of any article alongside its abstract. Indeed, any internet search for the meaning of keyword now confidently returns this new and selective sense as the primary one, alongside ads and recommendations for all manner of advisory texts on how to better game your web presence through the deliberate manipulation of

keywords and keyword clusters (how many university research offices now run courses offering advice on this in an era of increasing monitoring?).[4]

And so it is that, in exemplary fashion and very likely by 'ranking meanings by their current frequency of occurrence' (Cameron 1998: 40), the Wikipedia entry on keyword lists the four main senses of the term it sees as active and primary in contemporary usage. These all refer to information retrieval on the world-wide web. First, a keyword is 'a word or phrase typically used by bloggers or online content creator to rank a web page on a particular topic'; second, it is used as an index term for use in a catalogue or search engine; third, it is used in the new compound term, keyword advertising, for improving your online sales (or, in the academy, citations); and fourth – also related to this quest for priority and dominance in terms of mentions, in another important compound, 'keyword clustering'.

These entries are very likely foregrounded in terms of their sheer frequency of occurrence on the web in synchronic terms (the current moment), with less interest in the alternative diachronic or historical meanings of the term. Nonetheless, despite the excluding force of this presentist and quantitative focus, the entry does acknowledge (though little more than that) what it describes and separates out as a range of 'other' senses of the term. Listed are the idea of keyword in linguistics as a 'word which occurs in a text more often than we would expect to occur by chance alone'; and apparently as a term in rhetoric, as 'a word that academics use to reveal the internal structure of an author's reasoning'. The third and final item in the list of 'other' meanings is simply '*Keywords: A vocabulary of culture and society*, 1973 non-fiction book by Raymond Williams'.

In this particular entry, it's fascinating to see just how the active work of marginalisation and closure takes place in practice. In order to foreground the contemporary web-based use of keyword, the entry has to 'background' (if I may invent a term) competing senses of the term. It does this in three ways: first by literally relegating these uses to the secondary category of 'Other'; second, by offering only the haziest information about them; and third, doing all of this in such a way as to inhibit the understanding of the ways in which the final 'non-fiction book by Raymond Williams' is in fact central to both the preceding 'other' uses, and so would best figure as the first in this list, enjoying a fuller analysis and exposition.

In point of fact, the various ideas of keywords put forwards here are all related, directly or indirectly, with the work mentioned last, and mentioned in what amounts somehow to a mentioning which conceals or a way of describing

4 See, for instance, *Learn to Make Money with Keywords* (Spencer 2021).

which avoids the specificity of description, for by describing *Keywords* as a 'non-fiction book' it avoids and displaces any more precise description as, for instance, 'an engaged work of scholarship in historical semantics'.

For the reality is that the academic study of the idea of keywords in linguistics has been taken up with considerable success in the past decades in what is known as corpus-based lexicography. Here, advances in information processing have made possible the storage and manipulation of huge amounts of linguistic data as the basis for dictionary-making and with keywords playing a central organising role, but with keywords here acknowledged as a term consciously adopted and adapted from Raymond Williams. Scott, one of the innovators of the new keywords search engine acknowledges Williams's Keywords directly (Scott 1997: 233), as do Jonathan Culpeper and Jane Demmen put it, in their chapter on Keywords in the authoritative *Cambridge Handbook of English Corpus Linguistics*. There they write that in corpus linguistics, 'a keyword has a quantitative basis: it is a term for a word that is statistically characteristic of a text or set of texts' (Culpeper and Demmen 2015: 90). But in placing this emphasis on the 'quantitative', they consciously assert their distance from Williams's idea of keywords as (as they put it) words 'deemed key on the basis of "readings" of their role in representing and shaping culturally important discourses' (their effective summary of his *Keywords* book), but 'subject to the vagaries of subjective judgements' – their effective summary, acknowledgement and dismissal of Williams's text and project (2015: 90).

I will return to the terms of this professional dismissal of Williams's project later in the essay. For now, it is enough to have shown some of the pushing aside of Williams's 'non-fiction book' in the Wikipedia entry. Such a pushing aside is also evident in the OED entry if one considers the simple fact of the continued usage of and reference to Williams's particular sense of keywords in a significant accumulating body of related work in addition to that of corpus linguistics. In this work, far from being qualified or rejected (as it is in corpus lexicography), Williams's idea and particular sense of keywords is endorsed and extended in ways which suggest that the specificity of the usage should be recognised and recorded by the OED as a distinctive sense, as distinctive as the 'keyword-in-context' which is recorded. In this active ignoring of the proliferation of keywords, it is not alone: the OED itself does not mention or seek to understand Williams's particular take on the term, and this despite the important fact that its use has been extended and taken on by many more commentators in ways that suggest it should be registered. Surely enough, in other words, to become a part of standard use, if only in academia.

The evidence for this is obvious enough, to the unprejudiced eye. Let us briefly mention some of the re-activations of Williams's keywords project. The British journal of the Raymond Williams Society is itself named after Williams's book: *Key Words: a journal of cultural materialism* and it began to devote some specific attention to the Keywords project from 1998, and to feature new articles on keywords such as Gender (and so on). Similarly, the Department of English at the University of Pittsburgh set up its own online keywords site, and invited contributors to add entries in the spirit of Williams's project (see keywords.pitt.edu).

Other works which acknowledge the influence of Williams's work, even if modifying the terms of its deployment now include (amongst others, to give a sense of the presence of this now 'other' sense of keywords): *South African Keywords: the uses and abuses of political concepts* (Boonzaier and Sharp 1988); Bennett et al. (2005) *New Keywords: a revised vocabulary of culture and society*; a second volume from South Africa, *New South African Keywords* (Shepherd and Robins 2008); Kelly Fritsch, Clare O'Connor, AK Thompson (eds), *Keywords for Radicals. the contested vocabulary of late-capitalist struggle* (2016); *Keywords for Today: a twenty-first century vocabulary* (MacCabe and Arac 2018) (the culmination of the University of Pittsburgh project); and, in 2018, John Leary's *Keywords: the new language of capitalism*, described by the author in the spirit of Williams's original project as '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"'.

In addition, two book series also appeared, surely cementing Williams's idea of keywords as something like a standard part of the academic lexicon, at the very least.[5] The New York University Press series currently comprises: *Keywords for African American Studies*; *Keywords for Disability Studies*; *Keywords for Children's Literature*; *Keywords for Environmental Studies*; *Keywords for Media Studies*; and, most recently, *Keywords for Latina/o Studies* (https://keywords.nyupress.org). Each of these reference Williams's *Keywords* as the model for their varied investigations. And, while the second series does not reference Williams directly, it is important that its set goal – the analysis of 'fundamental notions across different cultural points of view, taking a hard look at a common object with a view from afar' (Tazi 2004:vii) – seems entirely compatible with Williams's project. The second, the Keywords Series, is devoted to the comparative analysis

5 Perhaps the surest sign of this was the session held at the American Studies Association Conference in 2014: 'Kill that Keyword!', devoted to showing 'how and why certain academic terminologies are overused and undertheorized, or overtheorized and underused, producing the effect of jargon'.

of keywords in and across 'different systems of thought' (Tazi 2004) and current volumes focus on contrasting ideas of Identity; Truth; Gender; and Experience.[6]

All in all, even the mere mention of the various works cited above certainly adds to the sense that there is something missing from the OED's entry on keywords, as well as from the much sketchier discussion of the Wikipedia entry. In other words, one purpose for opening this essay with this brief sketch of keywords is useful in exemplifying a central feature of Williams's *Keywords:* its emphasis on the contest of meanings, a contest in which, as he puts it, through the confident (exclusionary) definition of a word, people try 'to appropriate a meaning which fitted the argument and to exclude those meanings which were inconvenient to it' (1976: 15)

Resistances

So it is that the current OED entries on keywords (and the Wikipedia entry) are either unaware or actively ignore the by now well-established sense that Williams gave to it.

In this brief survey of the different senses and meanings of keywords, it is striking that the most neglected sense is that put forward by Raymond Williams in his 1976 book *Keywords*, a book reprinted many times and re-issued in 1983, and the acknowledged source or referent point for a whole new disciplinary or inter-disciplinary area of academic and activist research and writing.

I want to suggest that the very reasons for its rejection help us to better understand its value, and that in this, it's very rejection is like that often given to Theory. For, as with theory, there is something in *Keywords* which is deliberately unsettling, something which actively challenges the consensus, and the

6 This series is very much in line with Williams's recommendation, in *Keywords*, for comparative research, and this emphasis that 'key developments…can only be understood when other languages are brought consistently into comparison' (1976: 18). For an exemplary instance of the benefits of such comparative inquiry, see Cassin (ed) (2014) *Dictionary of Untranslatables*. Though referring to Europe, the core and direction of its arguments could well be directed at the (South) African experience when it talks of the 'two kinds of solution' available to the problem of languages: 'We could choose a dominant language in which exchanges will take place, from now on, a globalized Anglo-American. Or we could gamble on the retention of many languages, making clear on every occasion the meaning and interest of the differences – the only real way of facilitating communication between languages and cultures' (Cassin 2014:xvii). Rather than tied 'to a retrospective and reified Europe [Africa?], defined by an accumulation and juxtaposition of legacies that would only reinforce particularities', the latter option 'explores divisions, tensions, transfers, appropriations, contradictions, in order to construct better versions of itself' (Cassin 2014:xvii)

apparently secure ground of common sense on which we stand in the world.[7] *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 [1972-3] 2001: 167-8). Here, let us seek to get a sense of the depth of this challenge by examining the social and political context in which the work of *Keywords* emerged, as well as some of the resistances to it, as it is these which may be at work in or behind the omission or marginalising of Williams's idea of keywords from the senses preserved in the OED and the world of online definition.

Theory is abstract work, to be sure, but it is intellectual labour that arises in real historical circumstances. As such, complex issues in theory may at times be more easily grasped through an understanding of those historical situations. Such is the essence of Williams's *Keywords*; and such is the case for the better understanding of the complexities and aporia of Williams's own project, and its continued relevance to our own projects.

The roots of the Keywords Project

The great anti-fascist writer of the 1930s, Walter Benjamin, observed how for the progressive critic, the past constituted an archive of texts and events which were available for rereading and reactivating under the pressures of the particular moment. In one of his final writings, 'Theses on the philosophy of history', he wrote 'Nothing that has ever happened should be regarded as lost for history'. '[S]eize hold of a memory as it flashes up at moment of danger', he advised (Benjamin 1973: 256). Williams's *Keywords* is one of the texts that should not be lost, and is well worth the retrieval and reappraisal which Benjamin advocates.

There are two broad sets of reasons for such rereading and reactivation 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.

7 I further examine the unsettling qualities of *Keywords* in particular relation to Derrida's idea of deconstruction in Higgins (2003). I also address here the conceptual challenges to Williams's method usefully summarized in Inglis (1995: 246-7).

In my view, the act of retrieval which interested Benjamin relied on a specific force of comparison between past and present, one which gave his central writings on Baudelaire their particular force and appeal. Without going into the detail of just why it was Baudelaire and nineteenth-century France should be the focal point for a Jewish anti-fascist intellectual writing under the shadows of Hitler's rule, the comparative intention is clear enough. Benjamin believed the study of the past can throw unexpected light on the present through the act of juxtaposition. Thinking historically, through the act of selective comparison and historical montage, can defamiliarise the present in useful ways.[8]

Here, to ground the underlying act of selective comparison, I choose the term 'transformation' as a bridging word for the reader. Transformation is, of course, a keyword in the representation and understanding of contemporary South Africa.[9] It is also a term that can be applied with some accuracy (it does not form part of the active vocabulary of the period itself) for grasping the specific social and political context of the writing of *Keywords*. The keywords project emerges from, and seeks to contribute to, the project of transformation in post war Britain.

Though *Keywords* was published in 1976, its roots go back to the Second World War and the visible project of social transformation taken up in Britain at that time. In the Introduction to the book, Williams recalls how the ideas behind the keywords project began to take shape after his return to Cambridge University in the autumn of 1945.

Williams had started his degree in English literature in 1939. He completed the first two years of the three-year course before volunteering for the army in 1941, serving in the 21st Anti-Tank Regiment of the Guards Armoured Division, taking part in the D-Day landings in Normandy. He was released from service to complete his undergraduate degree in the autumn of 1945.

Not surprisingly, he found it 'strange to travel from an artillery regiment on the Kiel Canal to a Cambridge college' (1976: 9). It was in discussions with another student returning to complete his own degree after his army service that the seed for the keywords project was first planted. Williams recollects how, on meeting up, the two students 'talked eagerly but not about the past'.

'We were much too preoccupied with this new and strange world around us. Then we both said, in effect simultaneously: "the fact is, they just don't speak the same language"' (1976: 9).

8 For further discussion of Benjamin's place in the understanding of the political possibilities of montage, see Higgins 2021b (in press).

9 For a useful sketch, see Reddy (2008).

The phrase 'they just don't speak the same language' is a common one, notes Williams, usually used to express differences of outlook between parents and children in an exaggerated and exasperated way. But what Williams found it expressed in this simultaneous use was something different, something referring to the appearance of broader social differences and political dispositions which lay beyond the familial. This something different, something 'more general' was articulated in 1976 as the starting point for the keywords project. It was the (usually unnoticed) fact that in such a case 'Each group is speaking its native language, but its uses are significantly different, and especially when strong feelings or important ideas are in question' and the crucial insight that 'No single group is "wrong" by any linguistic criterion, though a temporarily dominant group may try to enforce its own uses as "correct"' (1976: 9).

This situation, in which a 'temporarily dominant group' seeks, illegitimately, to assert its control over social meaning, stands as the theoretical and political core of *Keywords*. The situation which frames and makes possible Williams's insight is that of the social and political context of the post war period, this 'new and strange world'.

Strange new world

What was it about Britain as it entered the post war world that made it seem to strange and new? We can get a preliminary grasp of its contours by looking at one of George Orwell's most neglected writings, the pamphlet published in 1941 as *The Lion and the Unicorn: socialism and the English genius* (Orwell [1941] 1982). It was composed during the Blitz ('As I write, highly civilized human beings are flying overhead, trying to kill me' ([1941] 1982: 31)) He was one of the first to put his finger on the transformative forces set in motion in Britain by the Second World War, forces which seemed to him to promise a new, different and better world. For Orwell, the dark days of 1941 seemed to herald nothing less than a specifically English form of socialist revolution.

War, argued Orwell, is 'the greatest of all agents of change'; it 'speeds up all processes, wipes out minor distinctions, brings realities to the surface') (Orwell [1941] 1982: 111]). 'Right through our national life' he argued, 'we have got to fight against privilege, against the notion that a half-witted public-schoolboy is better for command than an intelligent mechanic … we have to break the grip of the moneyed class as a whole' ([1941] 1982: 87). The war starkly revealed that the whole structure of British society had to be transformed, and one of the key elements in this was the education system. In 1940, the past was 'fighting the future and we have two years, a year, possibly only a few months, to see to it that the future wins' ([1941] 1982: 111).

Despite his deep reservations concerning the forms he had seen Communism take in Spain and in Stalin's Russia, he insisted that 'a conscious open revolt by ordinary people against inefficiency, class privilege and the rule of the old' was absolutely necessary to defeat Hitler (Orwell [1941] 1982: 87).[10] The proper name for such an open revolt against inequality and the 'moneyed class as a whole' was in fact Socialism: 'since a classless, ownerless society is generally spoken of as "Socialism", we can give that name to the society towards which we are now moving'.

Orwell was not as alone in these feelings as might be imagined. As Angus Calder put it, in his detailed account of the period, *The People's War*, 'In the shocked Britain which faced defeat between 1940 and 1942 there were very obviously the seeds of a new democracy'. 'The nation's rulers', he emphasised,

> whether they liked it or not, depended on the willing co-operation of the ruled, including even scorned and underprivileged sections of society, manual workers and women. This co-operation must be paid for by concessions in the direction of a higher standard of living for the poor, greater social equality and improved welfare services (Calder 2008: 17).

The concerns about the country's morale, and the consequent need to offer the vision of a more progressive and democratic society to come, both for those in the armed forces and for people on the home front came through in two significant initiatives. First, in the formation, in August of 1941, of the Army Bureau of Current Affairs and, second, in 1942, in the publication of the Beveridge Report.[11]

In *Education in the War-Time Army* (a research paper prepared for the Ministry of Defence), advisers urged the formation of an educational body within the army. Its central aim would be to show 'how the British Empire stands for the essential factors of a new and better life' (cited in Summerfield 1981: 137). This body was to be the Army Bureau of Current Affairs (the ABCA). Its activities would all be devoted to improving morale through a regular programme of civic education. As one of the leading figures in the initiative explained, 'It cannot be disputed that if we can employ men's minds and stimulate their interests by promoting knowledge, discussion and thought about the affairs of the world in which they live, we go far to maintain their morale and thus to make them better soldiers'(cited Summerfield 1981: 141).

10 And for which he is much better known, especially due to the iconic place given to his late works *Animal Farm* and *1984* in the culture wars of the Cold War. But see also the earlier text *Homage to Catalonia* and the retrospective essay, 'Looking Back on the Spanish Civil War'.

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The education envisaged for the ABCA was above all education for the formation of a new democratic citizen for the promised transformed society.

Not surprisingly, the initiative was not without its critics, and several events and publications of the ABCA were censored or prohibited by the Ministry of Defence. All in all, the ABCA came to be seen – and especially by the conservative establishment – as supporting a radical project of social transformation, akin to that figured in Orwell's definition of socialism. Indeed, the electoral defeat of the Conservative Party in the 1945 elections was held to be due in large part to the influence of the ABCA on the armed forces vote through its evident endorsement of the Beveridge Report.

The Beveridge Report was that rare thing for government reports, an instant best-seller for a public looking forward to a transformed postwar society (Whiteside 2014: 1).[12] 'A revolutionary moment in the world's history is a time for revolutions, not for patching', declared Beveridge (1942: 6). The report – *Social Insurance and Allied Services*, to give it its proper name – called for social protection for all 'from the cradle to the grave'. It identified 'Want' along with 'Disease, Ignorance, Squalor and Idleness' as the 'five giants' to overcome on the 'road to reconstruction' (Beveridge 1942: 6) With the victory of the Labour Party in 1945 – in large part due to its promise to fulfil the recommendations of the Report – various legislations put in place the constituent elements of the new 'Welfare State'.

At the core of these proposals was the attempt to bring dignity to the working-class population, removing, in particular, the humiliating social stigma of 'means-tested' benefits for the unemployed.

Alongside and in addition to these social security measures – and of particular interest to Williams as (on completing his degree) he entered Adult Education as a staff tutor – was how the giant adversary 'Ignorance' was to be defeated. The 1944 Education Act extended secondary education to cover all children up the age of fifteen and, through the mechanism of the '11+' examination, to give all children the possibility of attending a grammar school and consequently make possible entry to higher education. At the same time, higher education was itself moving to make a transition from the pre-war 'elite' access to broader access, including women and working-class students.

12 According to Calder, a Gallop Poll held two weeks after its publication discovered that nineteen out of twenty people had heard of the report, while nine out of ten believed its proposals should be accepted' (Calder 2008: 528).

Such an opening-up of the educational system was controversial. Understanding some of this controversy helps us to fill out the abstractions of what Williams calls the 'different immediate values or different kinds of valuation' with their 'different formations and distributions of energy and interest' that were to be found in that other social grouping, who so confidently insisted that their meanings for words were the only meanings.

For Williams, one of the central antagonists, one who exemplified this 'different formation' and its particular 'distribution of energy and interest', was the influential figure of poet, dramatist and critic, TS Eliot. Eliot's poetry, drama and criticism had been a significant influence on Williams as a student, but with the publication of his *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture* in 1948 a line had been drawn.[13]

In the Introduction to *Keywords*, Williams describes this as 'a book I grasped but could not accept' (1976: 11). Eliot's *Notes* was assembled from a variety of essays and lectures he had composed between 1943 and 1948. Their guiding-thread was the firm opposition to the egalitarian impulses of the Beveridge Report and the new Education Act: an opposition which certainly expressed a very different set of values to the democratising ones of Beveridge. Eliot went on to argue:

> the idea of a uniform system such that no one capable of receiving higher education could fail to get it, leads imperceptibly to the education of too many people, and consequently to the lowering of standards to whatever this swollen number of candidates is able to reach. (Eliot [1948]1983: 100-1).

The panic of Eliot's argument, with its fear concerning 'the education of too many people and consequently to the lowering of standards', *despite* the admission that the reform is simply intended to assure a system in which 'no one capable of receiving higher education should fail to get it', exemplifies the very different set of 'immediate values' animating his position: elite rather than democratic values.

For Eliot's hostility to the democratisation of education and the general social transformation of which it was a part was far from being his alone. Indeed, it was the very prospect of social transformation towards a more equitable and democratic society that brought into relief and made more visible the constant system of micro-aggressions which gathered around the ideas of culture and education.

13 I discuss the complexity of Williams's relation to Eliot, and his final break with that influence in Higgins 1999: 22-36; 52-53.

Both in *Keywords* (1976: 10) and in the essay 'Culture is ordinary', Williams locates the teashop, a popular meeting place for students outside the closed walls of the Cambridge colleges, as the particular site of such micro-aggressions. 'I was not oppressed by the university,' he writes, 'but the teashop, acting as if were one of the older and more respectable departments, was a different matter'. For here there was culture, but culture 'not in any sense I knew, but in a special sense: the outward and emphatically visible sign of a special kind of people, cultivated people'. (Williams [1958] 1972-3: 12).

It was the experience of such everyday aggression that led Williams to the study and analysis of his first keyword, the keyword of keywords, 'culture'. In reaction to this discourse of distinction (to borrow the apposite term championed by Bourdieu),[14] Williams responded through the foundation of his keywords project. In one of the essays which form the earliest formulation of the project, 'The Idea of culture', he repeats his sense of the aura of distinction surrounding the idea of the 'man of culture', writing of how such a person 'is recognizable not by any specific attributes, but by certain qualities best perceived by others of the same kind' ([1953] 1993: 58). Of course, writes Williams with a deliberately distancing contempt, there are 'cross-currents and deposits of emotional association which further complicate the use of the idea and the word [culture] … Abstraction, snobbery and fear are facts, and it is not surprising that they have left their mark on this difficult idea and word. We note the marks, not to set them aside, but to assemble them as active senses of *culture*, along with the more formal definitions' (([1953] 1993: 58-59). In the act of assembly – in the persistent cataloguing of keywords that he undertook after the war – Williams used the irritation of micro aggression as the fuel to power his highly original inquiry.

Vocabulary in action

As he seeks to explain the nature of the intervention that *Keywords* represents, Williams picks the term vocabulary to differentiate his analyses from the related work done on various other forms of disciplinary inquiry into the meaning of words. First and foremost of these other forms is the monumental work of scholarship, produced over generations of patient labour, and now generally known as the *Oxford English Dictionary*.

14 For Bourdieu, see especially Bourdieu 2005. Compare also how he describes the 'naturally' distinguished in the education system as those who 'merely need to be what they are in order to be what they have to be, that is, natural distinguished from those who are obliged to struggle for distinction' (Bourdieu 1990: 11). For related discussions (though lacking any reference to this conceptual vocabulary) of such dynamics in South Africa, see, for instance, Tabensky and Matthews (eds) 2015.

Williams recalls how, in teaching the classes in adult education that went into the writing of 'The Idea of culture', he was approached by a student, WG Heyman, who pointed out the similarity of his project to that of the *Oxford English Dictionary*. Alerted to this, in a public library in Seaford, Williams looked up the word 'culture' in the *Dictionary*. It was a moment in which Williams experienced 'a shock of recognition' ([1953] 1993: 11). Heyman later gave Williams three cardboard boxes, containing a copy of the *Dictionary* as it had originally been published in serial form, as what was termed 'fascicles' ('Deject to Depravation', 'Heel to Hod', as Williams recalls). He pays tribute to 'the majestic object' (citing the critic William Empson's description of it) ([1953] 1993: 16)

At the same time, though, he is quick to express his distance from the *Dictionary*, noting in particular the question of the 'ideology of its editors' and suggesting that 'the air of massive impersonality which the *Oxford Dictionary* communicates is not so impersonal, so purely scholarly, or so free of active social and political values as might be supposed' ([1953] 1993: 16). He also notes the significant distance between the real source of the changing meanings of words – often made orally, in and through the active speech and dissent of people through the agency of speech – and only subsequently recorded by notation in the written record.

For Williams, vocabulary is above all language in use rather than the static image of language so often associated with dictionary definition. In placing the emphasis on mobile and conflictual use in the meanings of words, Williams came up with a key theoretical challenge, one that still resonates in contemporary linguistics. For here, as Rajend Mesthrie has observed, 'a conflict model of society is not a point of departure that the majority of sociolinguists are comfortable with' (Mesthrie 2003: 317).

It may well be that of all the practitioners of theory, Roland Barthes, with his grounding in literary studies, came closest to articulating (without, of course, being aware of this, or seeking to do so: Williams's work was entirely unknown to him) the core of the keywords project. For Barthes, as for Williams, 'In our culture … there is an inveterate war of languages; our languages exclude each other; in a society divided by social class, money, academic origin, language itself divides' ([1989]1992: 101); 'there is a division of languages, for which no simple science of communication can account; society intervenes … constructing language like a battleground' ([1989]1992106). Because of the fact of these social divisions, 'lack of communication is not strictly speaking of an informational order but of an interlocutory order' ([1989]1992: 112). Interlocutory here signalling that dimension of active use which *Keywords* insists on.

And again, with a striking convergence of insight, Barthes presses on the same sore point in linguistics that Williams probes and identifies in *Keywords*, the fact that 'linguists know that a national idiom contains a certain number of species; but the specification which has been studied is geographic (dialects, patois) not social' ([1989]1992: 112). In this perspective, the orthodox idea of a standard national language – available to all through the rigour of static dictionary definitions – is shattered and there is a 'division of languages for which no simple science of communication can account' ([1989]1992: 106). Precisely the starting point (as we saw above) of Williams's investigation into the phenomenon in which 'each group is speaking its native language, but its uses are significantly different' (Williams 1976: 9).

At a more general level (and what characterises Theory with a capital T from the wide range of theorising proper to all disciplines), Theory challenged the orthodox assumptions regarding language of the Western philosophical tradition.[15] According to this tradition, language was generally taken as the tool or instrument of an autonomous self and held to work best at its most scientific, when acting as a mirror to, or reflection of, an independently existing reality. But, as Emile Benvenisite (a French socio-linguist operating outside this tradition) argued, to speak of language as an instrument sets up an opposition between nature and humanity which ignores the fundamentally constitutive role that language plays in founding human consciousness and identity. While human beings make and use tools which exist independently of them, language is rather 'in the nature of man, who did not fabricate it … It is in and through language that man is constituted as *subject*' (Benveniste 1966: 259; my translation). Following from this insight, the thinkers most associated with Theory – Lacan, Derrida, Barthes, Foucault, Kristeva, and Althusser – all insisted, in their own ways to be sure, on the real sociability and intrication of language and thinking that Williams examines in *Keywords* and in the keywords project as a whole.

Conclusion

The war did indeed prove to be an agent for change and social transformation; but it soon became evident that transformation was never going to be the relatively simple and immediate process Orwell (and others) had envisaged as, effectively, a revolution. Instead, as Williams came to realise, the promised post war transformation was always likely to be in part a compromise, a moment in the longer struggle for a fuller more participatory democratisation that he came

15 In this sense, Theory is the resurgence of the emphasis on the theory of language as constitutive rather than instrumental whose tradition is brilliantly outlined in Taylor 1985.

to call the 'long revolution' (Williams [1961]1975). In this longer struggle, he insisted, it was absolutely necessary to see education as a driving force in social transformation. 'We must certainly see the aspiration to extend the active process of learning, with the skills of literacy and other advanced communication, to all people rather than to limited groups, as comparable in importance to the growth of democracy and the rise of scientific industry' ([1961]1975: 11).

In this active process of learning, the central theoretical insight embodied in Keywords and the keywords project is absolutely crucial. Language – despite the bland omniscience of static dictionary definitions – is in reality always an active and selective vocabulary, one in which we can see at work what theorists now term the dynamics of representation, the ways in which when 'we have actual relationships, we start from the descriptions we have learned' ([1961]1975: 89). Thus, even when we use such common terms as 'the individual' or 'society', we are in fact 'using descriptions which embody particular interpretations of the experience to which they refer' ([1961]1975: 65).

'Descriptions which embody particular interpretations of the experience to which they refer': this, above all, was the central theoretical point embodied in the idea of keywords and the practice of keywords analysis. It was a point of theory that came into focus as the social transformation promised by the post war period met with resistances both conscious and unconscious. The theoretical innovation emerged from the ways in which the process of social transformation taken up in the post war period brought into visibility forms of class difference and social conflict in the very use of language itself.

In thinking on education in the post war period, the emphasis had been placed on a certain idea of education for active citizenship. This citizenship was understood – as we have seen – in terms of the 'pursuit of a common aim' (Wintringhman 1940: 5), the aim to transform society into a society of equals. But the current moment – in South Africa as elsewhere – is one in which the critical query first put by Karl Marx in response to the emergent discourse of human rights and democracy is more pertinent than ever.[16] What does my abstract right to equal citizenship mean in a society riven with material inequality? What does the right to citizenship mean in a society where the material foundations for its practice are lacking or unevenly distributed because of material inequalities, including – as now in current legislation in the USA – the material possibility of practical access to voting? As Etienne Balibar warns, simply 'abandoning the terms "democracy" and "citizenship" would not be a renewal of the political, so much as it would be of

16 For this, see Marx's review of Bruno Bauer's *On the Jewish Question* (Marx 1975). For more recent cautionary evaluations, see also Dunn 2014, Balibar 2016 and, in the African context, Chipkin 2007 and Nyamnjoh 2017.

resigning in the face of the difficult task that confronts the political' (Balibar 2016: 122). In the ongoing work of social transformation – our own 'long revolution' – an ongoing commitment to not feeling comfortable with our vocabulary is as pertinent today as it was for Williams. Williams's lesson – the lesson of *Keywords* – remains a powerful one for attending to social transformation today.

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