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Introduction

Language and socialism

Tony Crowley

Raymond Williams ends the introduction to *Culture and Society* with these words: ‘I am enquiring into our common language, on matters of common interest, and when we consider how matters now stand, our continuing interest and language could hardly be too lively’.¹ It was an engagement with language that ran throughout Williams’s work, from *Culture and Society* to *Keywords* and through to what he considered ‘the most pivotal’ section of *Marxism and Literature*.² Given this, it is fitting that this issue of *Key Words* is mostly dedicated to research that follows Williams’s concern for language as a matter of political interest. Before introducing that work, however, it might be useful very briefly to sketch why language should be of interest to socialists.

I.A. Richards once asserted that ‘language... is the instrument of all our distinctively human development, of everything in which we go beyond the other animals’.³ In the light of research demonstrating the extent to which other forms of animal life are sign-making beings, a more appropriate (if tautological) formulation might be: ‘human language is the instrument of our distinctively human development’. In other words, human language - arbitrary, creative and productive, and thus the facilitator of a specific type of critical, creative consciousness - is the medium that sets us apart in terms of our species being. For socialist thinkers, this is significant because it means that language is an essential part of our sociality, an important component in the process by which we labour – as human beings - upon the natural world, and the already existing social conditions, to make history.

The central role of language in social life has been generally recognised. The English philosopher John Locke, for example, described language as ‘the great Instrument, and

Common Tye of Society' and devoted an important part of his Essay Concerning Human Understanding (1690) to words and their significance.⁴ In more specific terms, Angela Carter, writing two centuries later, gave a more nuanced and critical account: 'language is power, life and the instrument of culture, the instrument of domination and liberation'.⁵ The different emphases are significant. For Locke, language is both the general and undifferentiated 'instrument' by which society works, and the bond that ties us together communally. Whereas for Carter, precisely because it is the 'instrument' (that word again) of culture, language therefore has a dual role. Given our history and the nature of our social life, language can allow us to dominate others and be dominated by them, and it can facilitate the achievement of liberation, of ourselves and others.

Carter's comment points to the ways in which language is entwined with power relations. And given that the transformation of power relations is fundamental to the socialist project, it follows that language should be a concern for socialist thinkers. And yet, although there has been considerable work on language from a socialist perspective, there is no developed tradition of socialist thought on language, nor indeed any coherent methodological approach.⁶ The essays that appear in this issue of Keywords do not and cannot rectify that puzzling omission. But they can at least point to issues of concern, problems that need to be addressed, ways of thinking about such matters, methods that might be adopted in later work.

The essays fall into two distinct but related groups. The first – the essays by Lecercle, Crowley, Holborow and Ware - is concerned with ways of theorising language and the relations between language and ideology. Jean-Jacques Lecercle's analysis sets out to delineate a socialist politics of language based on a critique of the dual function of language – domination and liberation - noted by Carter. Rejecting the dominant trends in the study of language in the twentieth century (from Saussure and Chomsky through Habermas and sociolinguistics), Lecercle follows Williams in focussing on language in practice – 'in and of the world'. As he

outlines, this is crucial given the role of language in the process of subject-formation, specifically, how we become ideological subjects in particular societies at a given moment in history. But what distinguishes Lecercle's study, and again links back to the work of Williams, is his insistence that the open, unfinished, unfixable nature of language allows for the possibility of ideological interpellation and 'counter-interpellation' (otherwise known as resistance).

The possibility of domination of and by language is taken up in Tony Crowley's study of the central role played by language in the work of George Orwell and Raymond Williams. Focussing on Orwell's essay, 'Politics and the English Language', and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Crowley notes the significance of Orwell's critique of political discourse and its continuing relevance. But after tracing the version of linguistic determinism that apparently underpins Orwell's work, Crowley explores the political ramifications of an account of language that sees it as potentially subject to absolute hegemonic rule. Taking this as a damaging and possibly defeatist stance, Crowley turns to Williams's view of language as part of the social order by which individuals are shaped, but which they also actively create in an ongoing process. This leads again to a consideration of the role of language in both subject-formation and counter-resistance which ends with a call for a view of words as essential baggage on the journey of hope rather than as a burden on a voyage of pessimism.

Marnie Holborow's examination of the effects of a set of powerful neoliberal keywords takes issue with Williams's notion of 'structures of feeling' and his use of the concept of hegemony, and argues instead for a stronger understanding of the force of ideology and a renewed emphasis on the relations between the economic base, political economy and public discourse. In the context of the propagation and acceptance of neoliberalism as the common sense of global capitalism, Holborow considers the use and meanings of terms such as 'market', 'customer', 'entrepreneur', 'brand' and 'human capital' in policy documents published by the

OECD and national governments, and in the discourse of higher education. Focussing on Ireland, Holborow, points to the way in which the linguistic ‘refraction’ of reality both demands critique and offers the potential for a socialist alternative.

The question of how to live under advanced capitalism – to lead a right life in a wrong world - is the topic of Ben Ware’s essay on Kant and Marx. Focussing on Kant’s ‘Formula of Humanity’ – that people are not means but ends in themselves, not things with a market price but beings with dignity – Ware demonstrates how Marx revealed the structural impossibility of realising this doctrine under the social order of capitalism and thus asserted the ‘categorical imperative’ of overthrowing it. As Ware shows, however, such a project demands practical critique – as a means to clear the ground intellectually, politically, practically – in order to facilitate a new social order. And part of that general critique, as Ware argues in a way that links his work back to the previous essays, must consist in a critique of language that does not simply debunk the nonsense in and through which we are interpellated, but again takes advantage of the possibilities of alternative formulations.

The second set of essays, by Cameron and Ives, focusses on the political functions of the English language today. Cameron’s work concentrates on the role played by English in the contemporary discourse around British national identity and multiculturalism. Taking the newly created link between being British and speaking the English language, Cameron demonstrates how debates around this issue have been in effect arguments about immigration based on distortions of fact (the 2011 Census records a figure of 138,00 non-English-speakers from a total 62.3 million – less than 0.3%). The real point is that Britain has been, is, and will be a multilingual country for reasons related to both to its history and its contemporary economic structure. Given that, the task for socialists, Cameron argues, is to challenge the false equation between language and a set of supposed values (‘Britishness’), and to demand

language policies that will prevent discrimination and empower all British citizens on an equal basis.

Peter Ives's essay addresses one of the most significant social developments in the last half-century: the appearance and diffusion of 'global English'. As with Cameron's critical demystification of the discourse around the English language in Britain, Ives considers the ways in which 'global English' has been figured as an inevitable, quasi-automatic process, engaged in by individuals making rational choices. Rejecting this explanation, Ives presents a new reading of Marx's notion of the 'general intellect' (roughly speaking, technological expertise and accumulated social knowledge – including knowledge of language) as a force of production. From this viewpoint, the development of 'global English' can be compared to the way that States instituted and imposed standard national languages at the end of the nineteenth century. Which is to say, it is part of the re-structuring demanded by global capitalism in its most recent neoliberal phase. And yet, as Ives argues, if an education in English is now part of the formation of the global worker in the 21st century, this very fact offers up new possibilities for the forging of counter-hegemony.

The Simon Dentith Memorial Prize for 2015 was won by Owen Holland's essay, 'From the Place Vendôme to Trafalgar Square: Imperialism and Counter-hegemony in the 1880s Romance Revival', and it is printed as the final long piece in this issue. An important re-reading of William Morris's *News from Nowhere* that focusses on the imagined transformation of Trafalgar Square, Holland places Morris's text firmly in its historical and literary context. The result is a fascinating, detailed reading which emphasises the full radical significance of Morris's use of the late nineteenth century romance revival to offer a utopian challenge to high British Imperialism.

There have been a number of changes at both Key Words and the Raymond Williams Society during the past year. Stan Smith, long-time member of the editorial board, Kristin Ewins, Secretary to the RWS and member of the board, and Jennifer Birkett, Treasurer of the RWS, have departed. All three have been mainstays and we would like to record our sincere thanks for their stellar contributions over a number of years; they have been central to shaping the journal and ensuring its long-term viability and we are grateful to them. We have been joined by John Connor, Assistant Professor in English at Colgate University, Phil O'Brien, who recently completed his doctorate at Manchester University, Liane Tanguay, Assistant Professor of English at the University of Houston-Victoria, and Claire Warden, Senior Lecturer in Drama at De Montfort University. We welcome them all very warmly.

Finally, a brief note on past and future activities. The 2015 Annual Raymond Williams Society Lecture was given by Susan Watkins, editor of *New Left Review*, on 'Social Perspectives in Bad Times: Re-Reading Williams's Modern Tragedy' (published in revised form as 'Left Oppositions' in *NLR* 98). This year's lecture will be given in Oxford by Professor Deborah Cameron on the topic of 'gender'; full details available on the RWS website (see below). Key Words 15 will be on the topic of 'Williams and Performance', edited by Claire Warden, and KW 16, edited by Ben Harker, will be dedicated to the theme of 'commitment'. We continue to welcome unsolicited submissions from established and up-and-coming scholars, as well as suggestions for our 'Recoveries' feature, which in this issue features a re-assessment of *Winter Sonata* (1928) by the Welsh writer Dorothy Edwards. A last reminder to RWS members: the Key Words Facebook page is at www.facebook.com/keywordsjournal, while the RWS website can be found at <https://raymondwilliams.co.uk>.

Notes

¹ Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society 1780-1950* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1958), xx.

² Raymond Williams, *Politics and Letters: Interviews with New Left Review* (London: New Left Books, 1979), 324.

³ I.A. Richards, *The Philosophy of Rhetoric* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1936), 131.

⁴ John Locke, *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690), ed. P. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), 402.

⁵ Angela Carter, 'Notes from the Front Line', in *Writing and Gender*, ed. Michele Wandor (London: Pandora, 1983), 72.

⁶ For a brief survey of Marxist thought on language, see Tony Crowley, 'Marxism and Language', *The Cambridge Encyclopaedia of the Language Sciences*, ed. P. Hogan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).