

Raymond Williams

# Keywords

*A vocabulary  
of culture  
and society*

*Revised edition*

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*New York*

Note from Pietro Calogero, 26 April 2013

Williams' *Keywords* remains an incredibly useful concept for scholars focusing on politically-contested issues. This softcopy of the Introduction is designed to be used as a reading in a university course. It has been formatted to be printed either 2-up per page (letter or A4) or to be viewed on a small-screen electronic reader.

This file was created through optical character recognition (OCR) from a scan of the 1983 edition of *Keywords*. Page-breaks are identical to the original hardcopy, and most line-breaks are also the same, to facilitate referencing of the text. Spelling and punctuation are unchanged, thus the word "centring" which will surprise American readers.

Profound cultural changes since 1983 have made this critical approach to language even more relevant. Several vital changes can give us points of perspective from which to reflect on Williams' arguments:

1. The rise of the internet, and debates about 'authoritative knowledge' with the disappearance of professional newspaper editors and the rise of both blogs and wiki sites;
2. The adoption of English as a global *second* language, and the spread of the struggle over meanings to whole new cultural-political settings;
3. The active and effective adoption of 'lexical aggression' by conservative think-tanks, lobbyists, and interest-groups, starting in the 1980s with the Heritage Foundation. Conservatives have shown, and openly admitted, that control of the talking-points means control of the political debate.

In his *Autobiography*, Malcolm X describes how he carefully read the dictionary while in prison, to become more effective at debating. This was a revolutionary moment for X, and one that enabled him to exert influence long after his assassination. My first impression of dictionaries was that they were prosaic, everyday things; quintessentially uncontroversial. Malcolm X revealed the radical power one can gain through the methodical study, critical reflection, and strategic deployment of words as acts of speech; as acts of intervention.

Here, Raymond Williams lays out a thoughtful reflection on how he came to understand the distinction between most uncontested words and the politics of knowledge around keywords. His list of keywords is deliberately general—not merely to be 'interdisciplinary' in the academic sense, but to focus on the words that shape public, political debate.

Please notify me regarding any errors that I failed to correct from the OCR.  
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*Back cover description of the book:*

Raymond Williams has been writing about the social and cultural history of England for more than 30 years. His *Culture and Society, 1780-1950*, a brilliant work describing the effect of the dominant words in British literature, established him as one of England's most incisive cultural critics. In *Keywords*, Williams once again focuses on the sociology of language, demonstrating how words that are key to understanding our society take on new meanings and how these changes reflect the political bent and values of society.

Originally conceived of as an appendix to *Culture and Society*, *Keywords* was expanded to include 155 words and published in book form in 1976. As words constantly evolve and undergo subtle transformation, revisionist o the original text were soon necessary. Therefore, based on his extensive notes on language and meaning, Williams revised *Keywords*, adding 21 new words and rewriting many of the original essays. The additions include words such as "development," "ecology," "generation," and "sex" that have taken on increased importance in our lives; the revisions take into account changes in nuance and the findings of recent linguistic studies. The resulting series of connecting essays offers not only a provocative study of contemporary language but an insightful look at the society in which we live.

**Raymond Williams**, a Fellow of Jesus College, Cambridge University, is the author of *The Long Revolution*, *The English Novel from Dickens to Lawrence*, and *The Country and the City*.

## Keywords included in the 1983 second edition:

Aesthetic  
Alienation  
Anarchism  
Anthropology  
Art

Behaviour  
Bourgeois  
Bureaucracy

Capitalism  
Career  
Charity  
City  
Civilization  
Class  
Collective  
Commercialism  
Common  
Communication  
Communism  
Community  
Consensus  
Consumer  
Conventional  
Country  
Creative  
Criticism  
Culture

Democracy  
Determine  
Development  
Dialect  
Dialectic  
Doctrinaire  
Dramatic

*[Note: I have arranged the Keywords in single-column lists so that you can annotate each word, and add a few of your own. --PC]*

*List of Keywords continued, page 2 of 4*

Ecology  
Educated  
Elite  
Empirical  
Equality  
Ethnic  
Evolution  
Existential  
Experience  
Expert  
Exploitation

Family  
Fiction  
Folk  
Formalist

Generation  
Genetic  
Genius

Hegemony  
History  
Humanity

Idealism  
Ideology  
Image  
Imperialism  
Improve  
Individual  
Industry  
Institution  
Intellectual  
Interest  
Isms

Jargon

*List of Keywords continued, page 3 of 4*

Labour  
Liberal  
Liberation  
Literature

Man  
Management  
Masses  
Materialism  
Mechanical  
Media  
Mediation  
Medieval  
Modern  
Monopoly  
Myth

Nationalist  
Native  
Naturalism  
Nature

Ordinary  
Organic  
Originality

Peasant  
Personality  
Philosophy  
Popular  
Positivist  
Pragmatic  
Private  
Progressive  
Psychological

Racial  
Radical  
Rational

*List of Keywords continued, page 4 of 4*

Reactionary

Realism

Reform

Regional

Representative

Revolution

Romantic

Science

Sensibility

Sex

Socialist

Society

Sociology

Standards

Status

Structural

Subjective

Taste

Technology

Theory

Tradition

Unconsciousness

Underprivileged

Unemployment

Utilitarian

Violence

Wealth

Welfare

Western

Work

## Introduction

In 1945, after the ending of the wars with Germany and Japan, I was released from the Army to return to Cambridge. University term had already begun, and many relationships and groups had been formed. It was in any case strange to travel from an artillery regiment on the Kiel Canal to a Cambridge college. I had been away only four and a half years, but in the movements of war had lost touch with all my university friends. Then, after many strange days, I met a man I had worked with in the first year of the war, when the formations of the 1930s, though under pressure, were still active. He too had just come out of the Army. We talked eagerly, but not about the past. We were too much 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'.

It is a common phrase. It is often used between successive generations, and even between parents and children. I had used it myself, just six years earlier, when I had come to Cambridge from a working-class family in Wales. In many of the fields in which language is used it is of course not true. Within our common language, in a particular country, we can be conscious of social differences, or of differences of age, but in the main we use the same words for most everyday things and activities, though with obvious variations of rhythm and accent and tone. Some of the variable words, say lunch and supper and dinner, may be highlighted but the differences are not particularly important. When we come to say 'we just don't speak the same language' we mean something more general: that we have different immediate values or different kinds of valuation, or that we are aware, often intangibly, of different formations and distributions of energy and interest. 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. No single group is 'wrong' by any linguistic criterion, though a temporarily dominant group may try to enforce its own uses as 'correct'. What is really happening through these critical encounters, which may be very conscious or may be felt only as a certain strangeness and unease, is a process quite central in the development of a language when, in



certain words, tones and rhythms, meanings are offered, felt for, tested, confirmed, asserted, qualified, changed. In some situations this is a very slow process indeed; it needs the passage of centuries to show itself actively, by results, at anything like its full weight. In other situations the process can be rapid, especially in certain key areas. In a large and active university, and in a period of change as important as a war, the process can seem unusually rapid and conscious.

Yet it had been, we both said, only four or five years. Could it really have changed that much? Searching for examples we found that some general attitudes in politics and religion had altered, and agreed that these were important changes. But I found myself preoccupied by a single word, culture, which it seemed I was hearing very much more often: not only, obviously, by comparison with the talk of an artillery regiment or of my own family, but by direct comparison within the university over just those few years. I had heard it previously in two senses: one at the fringes, in teashops and places like that, where it seemed the preferred word for a kind of social superiority, not in ideas or learning, and not only in money or position, but in a more intangible area, relating to behaviour; yet also, secondly, among my own friends, where it was an active word for writing poems and novels, making films and paintings, working in theatres. What I was now hearing were two different senses, which I could not really get clear: first, in the study of literature, a use of the word to indicate, powerfully but not explicitly, some central formation of values (and *literature* itself had the same kind of emphasis); secondly, in more general discussion, but with what seemed to me very different implications, a use which made it almost equivalent to *society*: a particular *way of life* – ‘American culture’, ‘Japanese culture’.

Today I can explain what I believe was happening. Two important traditions were finding in England their effective formations: in the study of literature a decisive dominance of an idea of criticism which, from Arnold through Leavis, had *culture* as one of its central terms; and in discussions of society the extension to general conversation of an anthropological sense which had been clear as a specialist term but which now, with increased American influence and with the parallel influence of such thinkers as Mannheim, was becoming naturalized. The two earlier senses had evidently weakened: the

teashop sense, though still active, was more distant and was becoming comic; the sense of activity in the arts, though it held its national place, seemed more and more excluded both by the emphasis of criticism and by the larger and dissolving reference to a whole way of life. But I knew nothing of this at the time. It was just a difficult word, a word I could think of as an example of the change which we were trying, in various ways, to understand.

My year in Cambridge passed. I went off to a job in adult education. Within two years T. S. Eliot published his *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture* (1948) – a book I grasped but could not accept – and all the elusive strangeness of those first weeks back in Cambridge returned with force. I began exploring the word in my adult classes. The words I linked it with, because of the problems its uses raised in my mind, were *class* and *art*, and then *industry* and *democracy*. I could feel these five words as a kind of structure. The relations between them became more complex the more I considered them. I began reading widely, to try to see more clearly what each was about. Then one day in the basement of the Public Library at Seaford, where we had gone to live, I looked up *culture*, almost casually, in one of the thirteen volumes of what we now usually call the OED: the *Oxford New English Dictionary on Historical Principles*. It was like a shock of recognition. The changes of sense I had been trying to understand had begun in English, it seemed, in the early nineteenth century. The connections I had sensed with *class* and *art*, with *industry* and *democracy*, took on, in the language, not only an intellectual but an historical shape. I see these changes today in much more complex ways. *Culture* itself has now a different though related history. But this was the moment at which an inquiry which had begun in trying to understand several urgent contemporary problems – problems quite literally of understanding my immediate world – achieved a particular shape in trying to understand a tradition. This was the work which, completed in 1956, became my book *Culture and Society*.

It was not easy then, and it is not much easier now, to describe this work in terms of a particular academic subject. The book has been classified under headings as various as cultural history, historical semantics, history of ideas, social criticism, literary history and sociology. This may at times be embarrassing or even difficult, but

academic subjects are not eternal categories, and the fact is that, wishing to put certain general questions in certain specific ways, I found that the connections I was making, and the area of concern which I was attempting to describe, were in practice experienced and shared by many other people, to whom the particular study spoke. One central feature of this area of interest was its vocabulary, which is significantly not the specialized vocabulary of a specialized discipline, though it often overlaps with several of these, but a general vocabulary ranging from strong, difficult and persuasive words in everyday usage to words which, beginning in particular specialized contexts, have become quite common in descriptions of wider areas of thought and experience. This, significantly, is the vocabulary we share with others, often imperfectly, when we wish to discuss many of the central processes of our common life. *Culture*, the original difficult word, is an exact example. It has specialized meanings in particular fields of study, and it might seem an appropriate task simply to sort these out. But it was the significance of its general and variable usage that had first attracted my attention: not in separated disciplines but in general discussion. The very fact that it was important in two areas that are often thought of as separate – *art* and *society* – posed new questions and suggested new kinds of connection. As I went on I found that this seemed to be true of a significant range of words – from *aesthetic* to *work* – and I began collecting them and trying to understand them. The significance, it can be said, is in the selection. I realize how arbitrary some inclusions and exclusions may seem to others. But out of some two hundred words, which I chose because I saw or heard them being used in quite general discussion in what seemed to me interesting or difficult ways, I then selected sixty and wrote notes and short essays on them, intending them as an appendix to *Culture and Society*, which in its main text was dealing with a number of specific writers and thinkers. But when that book was finished my publisher told me it had to be shortened: one of the items that could be taken out was this appendix. I had little effective choice. I agreed, reluctantly. I put in a note promising this material as a separate paper. But the file of the appendix stayed on my shelf. For over twenty years I have been adding to it: collecting more examples, finding new points of analysis, including other words. I began to feel that this might make a book on its own. I went through the whole file again, rewrote all the notes and

short. essays, excluded some words and again added others. The present volume is the result.

I have emphasized this process of the development of *Keywords* because it seems to me to indicate its dimension and purpose. It is not a dictionary or glossary of a particular academic subject. It is not a series of footnotes to dictionary histories or definitions of a number of words. It is, rather, the record of an inquiry into a *vocabulary*: a shared body of words and meanings in our most general discussions, in English, of the practices and institutions which we group as *culture* and *society*. Every word which I have included has at some time, in the course of some argument, virtually forced itself on my attention because the problems of its meanings seemed to me inextricably bound up with the problems it was being used to discuss. I have often got up from writing a particular note and heard the same word again, with the same sense of significance and difficulty: often, of course, in discussions and arguments which were rushing by to some other destination. I began to see this experience as a problem of *vocabulary*, in two senses: the available and developing meanings of known words, which needed to be set down; and the explicit but as often implicit connections which people were making, in what seemed to me, again and again, particular formations of meaning – ways not only of discussing but at another level of seeing many of our central experiences. What I had then to do was not only to collect examples, and look up or revise particular records of use, but to analyse, as far as I could, some of the issues and problems that were there inside the vocabulary, whether in single words or in habitual groupings. I called these words *Keywords* in two connected senses: they are significant, binding words in certain activities and their interpretation; they are significant, indicative words in certain forms of thought. Certain uses bound together certain ways of seeing culture and society, not least in these two most general words. Certain other uses seemed to me to open up issues and problems, in the same general area, of which we all needed to be very much more conscious. Notes on a list of words; analyses of certain formations: these were the elements of an active vocabulary – a way of recording, investigating and presenting problems of meaning in the area in which the meanings of *culture* and *society* have formed.

Of course the issues could not all be understood simply by analysis

of the words. On the contrary, most of the social and intellectual issues, including both gradual developments and the most explicit controversies and conflicts, persisted within and beyond the linguistic analysis. Yet many of these issues, I found, could not really be thought through, and some of them, I believe, cannot even be focused unless we are conscious of the words as elements of the problems. This point of view is now much more widely accepted. When I raised my first questions about the differing uses of culture I was given the impression, in kindly and not so kind ways, that these arose mainly from the fact of an incomplete education, and the fact that this was true (in real terms it is true of everyone) only clouded the real point at issue. The surpassing confidence of any particular use of a word, within a group or within a period, is very difficult to question. I recall an eighteenth-century letter:

What, in your opinion, is the meaning of the word *sentimental*, so much in vogue among the polite . . . ? Everything clever and agreeable is comprehended in that word . . . I am frequently astonished to hear such a one is a *sentimental* man; we were a *sentimental* party; I have been taking a *sentimental* walk.

Well, that vogue passed. The meaning of *sentimental* changed and deteriorated. Nobody now asking the meaning of the word would be met by that familiar, slightly frozen, polite stare. When a particular history is completed, we can all be clear and relaxed about it. But *literature*, *aesthetic*, *representative*, *empirical*, *unconscious*, *liberal*: these and many other words which seem to me to raise problems will, in the right circles, seem mere transparencies, their correct use a matter only of education. Or *class*, *democracy*, *equality*, *evolution*, *materialism*: these we know we must argue about, but we can assign particular uses to sects, and call all sects but our own *sectarian*. Language depends, it can be said, on this kind of confidence, but in any major language, and especially in periods of change, a necessary confidence and concern for clarity can quickly become brittle, if the questions involved are not faced.

The questions are not only about meaning; in most cases, inevitably, they are about meanings. Some people, when they see a word, think the first thing to do is to define it. Dictionaries are produced and, with a show of authority no less confident because it is

usually so limited in place and time, what is called a proper meaning is attached. I once began collecting, from correspondence in newspapers, and from other public arguments, variations on the phrases 'I see from my Webster' and 'I find from my Oxford Dictionary'. Usually what was at issue was a difficult term in an argument. But the effective tone of these phrases, with their interesting overtone of possession ('my Webster'), was to appropriate a meaning which fitted the argument and to exclude those meanings which were inconvenient to it but which some benighted person had been so foolish as to use. Of course if we want to be clear about *banxring* or *baobab* or *barilla*, or for that matter about *barbel* or *basilica* or *batik*, or, more obviously, about *barber* or *barley* or *barn*, this kind of definition is effective. But for words of a different kind, and especially for those which involve ideas and values, it is not only an impossible but an irrelevant procedure. The dictionaries most of us use, the defining dictionaries, will in these cases, and in proportion to their merit as dictionaries, list a range of meanings, all of them current, and it will be the range that matters. Then when we go beyond these to the historical dictionaries, and to essays in historical and contemporary semantics, we are quite beyond the range of the 'proper meaning'. We find a history and complexity of meanings; conscious changes, or consciously different uses; innovation, obsolescence, specialization, extension, overlap, transfer; or changes which are masked by a nominal continuity so that words which seem to have been there for centuries, with continuous general meanings, have come in fact to express radically different or radically variable, yet sometimes hardly noticed, meanings and implications of meaning. *Industry*, *family*, *nature* may jump at us from such sources; *class*, *rational*, *subjective* may after years of reading remain doubtful. It is in all these cases, in a given area of interest which began in the way I have described, that the problems of meaning have preoccupied me and have led to the sharpest realization of the difficulties of any kind of definition.

The work which this book records has been done in an area where several disciplines converge but in general do not meet. It has been based on several areas of specialist knowledge but its purpose is to bring these, in the examples selected, into general availability. This

needs no apology but it does need explanation of, some of the complexities that are involved in any such attempt. These can be grouped under two broad headings: problems of information and problems of theory.

The problems of information are severe. Yet anyone working on the structures and developments of meaning in English words has the extraordinary advantage of the great Oxford Dictionary. This is not only a monument to the scholarship of its editors, Murray, Bradley and their successors, but also the record of an extraordinary collaborative enterprise, from the original work of the Philological Society to the hundreds of later correspondents. Few inquiries into particular words end with the great Dictionary's account, but even fewer could start with any confidence if it were not there. I feel with William Empson, who in *The Structure of Complex Words* found many faults in the Dictionary, that 'such work on individual words as I have been able to do has been almost entirely dependent on using the majestic object as it stands'. But what I have found in my own work about the OED, when this necessary acknowledgment has been made, can be summed up in three ways. I have been very aware of the period in which the *Dictionary* was made: in effect from the 1880s to the 1920s (the first example of the current series of Supplements shows addition rather than revision). This has two disadvantages: that in some important words the evidence for developed twentieth-century usage is not really available; and that in a number of cases, especially in certain sensitive social and political terms, the presuppositions of orthodox opinion in that period either show through or are not far below the surface. Anyone who reads Dr Johnson's great *Dictionary* soon becomes aware of his active and partisan mind as well as his remarkable learning. I am aware in my own notes and essays that, though I try to show the range, many of my own positions and preferences come through. I believe that this is inevitable, and all I am saying is 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 from its occasional use. Indeed, to work closely in it is at times to get a fascinating insight into what can be called the ideology of its editors, and I think this has simply to be accepted and allowed for, without the kind of evasion which one popular notion of scholarship prepares the way for. Secondly, for all its deep interest in

meanings, the Dictionary is primarily philological and etymological; one of the effects of this is that it is much better on range and variation than on connection and interaction. In many cases, working primarily on meanings and their contexts, I have found the historical evidence invaluable but have drawn different and at times even opposite conclusions from it. Thirdly, in certain areas I have been reminded very sharply of the change of perspective which has recently occurred in studies of language: for obvious reasons (if only from the basic orthodox training in dead languages) the written language used to be taken as the real source of authority, with the spoken language as in effect derived from it; whereas now it is much more clearly realized that the real situation is usually the other way round. The effects are complex. In a number of primarily intellectual terms the written language is much nearer the true source. If we want to trace *psychology* the written record is probably adequate, until the late nineteenth century. But if, on the other hand, we want to trace *job*, we have soon to recognize that the real developments of meaning, at each stage, must have occurred in everyday speech well before they entered the written record. This is a limitation which has to be recognized, not only in the *Dictionary*, but in any historical account. A certain foreshortening or bias in some areas is, in effect, inevitable. Period indications for origin and change have always to be read with this qualification and reservation. I can give one example from personal experience. Checking the latest Supplement for the generalizing contemporary use of *communications*, I found an example and a date which happened to be from one of my own articles. Now not only could written examples have been found from an earlier date, but I know that this sense was being used in conversation and discussion, and in American English, very much earlier. I do not make the point to carp. On the contrary, this fact about the Dictionary is a fact about any work of this kind, and needs especially to be remembered when reading my own accounts.

For certain words I have added a number of examples of my own, from both general and deliberate reading. But of course any account is bound to be incomplete, in a serious sense, just as it is bound to be selective. The problems of adequate information are severe and sometimes crippling, but it is not always possible to indicate them properly in the course of an analysis. They should, nevertheless, always be remembered. And of one particular limitation I have been very



conscious. Many of the most important words that I have worked on either developed key meanings in languages other than English, or went through a complicated and interactive development in a number of major languages. Where I have been able in part to follow this, as in alienation or culture, its significance is so evident that we are bound to feel the lack of it when such tracing has not been possible. To do such comparative studies adequately would be an extraordinary international collaborative enterprise, and the difficulties of that may seem sufficient excuse. An inquiry into the meanings of democracy, sponsored by UNESCO and intended to be universal and comparative, ran into every kind of difficulty, though even the more limited account that Naess and his colleagues had to fall back on is remarkably illuminating. I have had enough experience of trying to discuss two key English Marxist terms – base and superstructure – not only in relation to their German originals, but in discussions with French, Italian, Spanish, Russian and Swedish friends, in relation to their forms in these other languages, to know not only that the results are fascinating and difficult, but that such comparative analysis is crucially important, not just as philology, but as a central matter of intellectual clarity. It is greatly to be hoped that ways will be found of encouraging and supporting these comparative inquiries, but meanwhile it should be recorded that while some key developments, now of international importance, occurred first in English, many did not and in the end can only be understood when other languages are brought consistently into comparison. This limitation, in my notes and essays, has to be noted and remembered by readers. It is particularly marked in very early developments, in the classical languages and in medieval Latin, where I have almost invariably simply relied on existing authorities, though with many questions that I could not answer very active in my mind. Indeed, at the level of origins, of every kind, this is generally true and must be entered as an important reservation.

This raises one of the theoretical problems. It is common practice to speak of the 'proper' or 'strict' meaning of a word by reference to its origins. One of the effects of one kind of classical education, especially in conjunction with one version of the defining function of dictionaries, is to produce what can best be called a sacral attitude to words, and corresponding complaints of vulgar contemporary misunderstanding and misuse. The original meanings of words are always

interesting. But what is often most interesting is the subsequent variation. The complaints that get into the newspapers, about vulgar misuse, are invariably about very recent developments. Almost any random selection of actual developments of meaning will show that what is now taken as 'correct' English, often including many of the words in which such complaints are made, is the product of just such kinds of change. The examples are too numerous to quote here but the reader is invited to consider only *interest* or *determine* or *improve*, though *organic*, *evolution* and *individual* are perhaps more spectacular examples. I have often found a clue to an analysis by discovery of an origin, but there can be no question, at the level either of practice or of theory, of accepting an original meaning as decisive (or where should we be with *aesthetic*?) or of accepting a common source as directive (or where should we be as between *peasant* and *pagan*, *idiot* and *idiom*, or *employ* and *imply*?). The vitality of a language includes every kind of extension, variation and transfer, and this is as true of change in our own time (however much we may regret some particular examples) as of changes in the past which can now be given a sacral veneer. (*Sacral* itself is an example; the extension from its physical sense of the fundament to its disrespectful implication of an attitude to the *sacred* is not my joke, but it is a meaningful joke and thence a meaningful use.)

The other theoretical problems are very much more difficult. There are quite basic and very complex problems in any analysis of the processes of meaning. Some of these can be usefully isolated as general problems of signification: the difficult relations between words and concepts; or the general processes of sense and reference; and beyond these the more general rules, in social norms and in the system of language itself, which both enable sense and reference to be generated and in some large degree to control them. In linguistic philosophy and in theoretical linguistics these problems have been repeatedly and usefully explored, and there can be no doubt that as fundamental problems they bear with real weight on every particular analysis.

Yet just because 'meaning', in any active sense, is more than the general process of 'signification', and because 'norms' and 'rules' are more than the properties of any abstract process or system, other kinds of analysis remain necessary. The emphasis of my own analyses is deliberately social and historical. In the matters of reference and

applicability, which analytically underlie any particular use, it is necessary to insist that the most active problems of meaning are always primarily embedded in actual relationships, and that both the meanings and the relationships are typically diverse and variable, within the structures of particular social orders and the processes of social and historical change.

This does not mean that the language simply reflects the processes of society and history. On the contrary, it is a central aim of this book to show that some important social and historical processes occur *within* language, in ways which indicate how integral the problems of meanings and of relationships really are. New kinds of relationship, but also new ways of seeing existing relationships, appear in language in a variety of ways: in the invention of new terms (*capitalism*); in the adaptation and alteration (indeed at times reversal) of older terms (*society* or *individual*); in extension (*interest*) or transfer (*exploitation*). But also, as these examples should remind us, such changes are not always either simple or final. Earlier and later senses coexist, or become actual alternatives in which problems of contemporary belief and affiliation are contested. It is certainly necessary to analyse these and other consequent problems as problems of general signification, but my emphasis here is on a vocabulary of meanings, in a deliberately selected area of argument and concern.

My starting point, as I have said, was what can be called a cluster, a particular set of what came to seem interrelated words and references, from which my wider selection then developed. It is thus an intrinsic aim of the book to emphasize interconnections, some of which seem to me in some new ways systematic, in spite of problems of presentation which I shall discuss. It can of course be argued that individual words should never be isolated, since they depend for their meanings on their actual contexts. At one level this can be readily conceded. Many of the variable senses that I have analysed are determined, in practice, by contexts. Indeed this is why I mainly illustrate the different senses by actual examples in recorded use.

Yet the problem of meaning can never be wholly dissolved into context. It is true that no word ever finally stands on its own, since it is always an element in the social process of language, and its uses depend on complex and (though variably) systematic properties of language itself. Yet it can still be useful to pick out certain words, of

an especially problematical kind, and to consider, for the moment, their own internal developments and structures. This is so even when the qualification, 'for the moment', is ignored by one kind of reader, who is content to reassert the facts of connection and interaction from which this whole inquiry began. For it is only in reductive kinds of analysis that the processes of connection and interaction can be studied as if they were relations between simple units. In practice many of these processes begin with the complex and variable sense of particular words, and the only way to show this, as examples of how networks of usage, reference and perspective are developed, is to concentrate, 'for the moment', on what can then properly be seen as internal structures. This is not to impede but to make possible the sense of an extended and intricate vocabulary, within which both the variable words and their varied and variable interrelations are in practice active.

To study both particular and relational meanings, then, in different actual speakers and writers, and in and through historical time, is a deliberate choice. The limitations are obvious and are admitted. The emphasis is equally obvious and is conscious. One kind of semantics is the study of meaning as such; another kind is the study of formal systems of signification. The kind of semantics to which these notes and essays belong is one of the tendencies within *historical semantics*: a tendency that can be more precisely defined when it is added that the emphasis is not only on historical origins and developments but also on the present – present meanings, implications and relationships – as history. This recognizes, as any study of language must, that there is indeed community between past and present; that there are also radical change, discontinuity and conflict, and that all these are still at issue and are indeed still occurring. The vocabulary I have selected is that which seems to me to contain the key words in which both continuity and discontinuity, and also deep conflicts of value and belief, are in this area engaged. Such processes have of course also to be described in direct terms, in the analysis of different social values and conceptual systems. What these notes and essays are intended to contribute is an additional kind of approach, through the vocabulary itself.

For I believe that it is possible to contribute certain kinds of

awareness and certain more limited kinds of clarification by taking certain words at the level at which they are generally used, and this, for reasons related to and probably clear from all my other work, has been my overriding purpose. I have more than enough material on certain words (for example *class* and *culture*) and on certain formations (for example *art*, *aesthetic*, *subjective*, *psychological*, *unconscious*) to write, as an alternative, extended specialist studies, some themselves of book length. I may eventually do this, but the choice of a more general form and a wider range was again deliberate. I do not share the optimism, or the theories which underlie it, of that popular kind of inter-war and surviving semantics which supposed that clarification of difficult words would help in the resolution of disputes conducted in their terms and often evidently confused by them. I believe that to understand the complexities of the meanings of *class* contributes very little to the resolution of actual class disputes and class struggles. It is not only that nobody can ‘purify the dialect of the tribe’, nor only that anyone who really knows himself to be a member of a society knows better than to want, in those terms, to try. It is also that the variations and confusions of meaning are not just faults in a system, or errors of feedback, or deficiencies of education. They are in many cases, in my terms, historical and contemporary substance. Indeed they have often, as variations, to be insisted upon, just because they embody different experiences and readings of experience, and this will continue to be true, in active relationships and conflicts, over and above the clarifying exercises of scholars or committees. What can really be contributed is not resolution but perhaps, at times, just that extra edge of consciousness. In a social history in which many crucial meanings have been shaped by a dominant class, and by particular professions operating to a large extent within its terms, the sense of edge is accurate. This is not a neutral review of meanings. It is an exploration of the vocabulary of a crucial area of social and cultural discussion, which has been inherited within precise historical and social conditions and which has to be made at once conscious and critical – subject to change as well as to continuity – if the millions of people in whom it is active are to see it as active: not a tradition to be learned, nor a *consensus* to be accepted, nor a set of meanings which, because it is ‘our language’, has a natural authority; but as a shaping and reshaping, in real circumstances and from profoundly different and important points of view: a vocabulary to use, to find our own ways in, to

change as we find it necessary to change it, as we go on making our own language and history.

In writing about a field of meanings I have often wished that some form of presentation could be devised in which it would be clear that the analyses of particular words are intrinsically connected, sometimes in complex ways. The alphabetical listing on which I have finally decided may often seem to obscure this, although the use of cross-reference should serve as a reminder of many necessary connections. The difficulty is that any other kind of arrangement, for example by areas or themes, would establish one set of connections while often suppressing another. If *representative*, for example, is set in a group of political words, perhaps centring on *democracy*, we may lose sight of a significant question in the overlap between representative government and representative art. Or if realism is set in a group of literary words, perhaps centring on *literature* or on *art*, another kind of overlap, with fundamental philosophical connotations and with descriptions of attitudes in business and politics, may again not be readily seen. Specialized vocabularies of known and separate academic subjects and areas of interest are, while obviously useful, very much easier both to write and to arrange. The word-lists can be fuller and they can avoid questions of overlap by deliberate limitation to meanings within the specialism. But since my whole inquiry has been into an area of general meanings and connections of meaning, I have been able to achieve neither the completeness nor the conscious limitation of deliberately specialized areas. In taking what seemed to me to be the significant vocabulary of an area of general discussion of culture and society, I have lost the props of conventional arrangement by subject and have then needed to retain the simplest conventional arrangement, by alphabetical order. However, since a book is only completed when it is read, I would hope that while the alphabetical order makes immediate use easier, other kinds of connection and comparison will suggest themselves to the reader, and may be followed through by a quite different selection and order of reading.

In this as in many other respects I am exceptionally conscious of how much further work and thinking needs to be done. Much of it, in fact, can only be done through discussion, for which the book in its present form is in part specifically intended. Often in the notes and essays I have had to break off just at the point where a different kind

of analysis – extended theoretical argument, or detailed social and historical inquiry – would be necessary. To have gone in these other directions would have meant restricting the number and range of the words discussed, and in this book at least this range has been my priority. But it can also be said that this is a book in which the author would positively welcome amendment, correction and addition as well as the usual range of responses and comments. The whole nature of the enterprise is of this kind. Here is a critical area of vocabulary. What can be done in dictionaries is necessarily limited by their proper universality and by the long time-scale of revision which that, among other factors, imposes. The present inquiry, being more limited – not a dictionary but a vocabulary – is more flexible. My publishers have been good enough to include some blank pages, not only for the convenience of making notes, but as a sign that the inquiry remains open, and that the author will welcome all amendments, corrections and additions. In the use of our common language, in so important an area, this is the only spirit in which this work can be properly done.

I have to thank more people than I can now name who, over the years, in many kinds of formal and informal discussion, have contributed to these analyses. I have also especially to thank Mr R. B. Woodings, my editor, who was not only exceptionally helpful with the book itself, but who, as a former colleague, came to see me at just the moment when I was actively considering whether the file should become a book and whose encouragement was then decisive. My wife has helped me very closely at all stages of the work. I have also to record the practical help of Mr W. G. Heyman who, as a member of one of my adult classes thirty years ago, told me after a discussion of a word that as a young man he had begun buying the paper parts of the great Oxford *Dictionary*, and a few years later astonished me by arriving at a class with three cardboard boxes full of them, which he insisted on giving to me. I have a particular affection for his memory, and through it for these paper parts themselves – so different from the bound volumes and smooth paper of the library copies; yellowing and breaking with time, the rough uncut paper, the memorable titles – *Deject to Depravation*, *Heel to Hod*, *R to Reactive* and so on – which I have used over the years. This is a small book to offer in return for so much interest and kindness.

## Preface to the Second Edition

The welcome given to this book, in its original edition, was beyond anything its author had expected. This has encouraged me to revise it, in ways indicated in the original Introduction, though still with a sense of the work as necessarily unfinished and incomplete. In this new edition I have been able to include notes on a further twenty-one words: *anarchism*, *anthropology*, *development*, *dialect*, *ecology*, *ethnic*, *experience*, *expert*, *exploitation*, *folk*, *generation*, *genius*, *jargon*, *liberation*, *ordinary*, *racial*, *regional*, *sex*, *technology*, *underprivileged* and *western*. Some of these are reintroduced from my original list; others have become more important in the period between that original list and the present time. I have also made revisions, including both corrections and additions, in the original main text.

I want to record my warm thanks to the many people who have written or spoken to me about the book. Some of the new entries come from their suggestions. So too do many of the additions and corrections to the original notes. I cannot involve any of them in my opinions, or in any errors, but I am especially indebted to Aidan Foster-Carter, for a series of notes and particularly on *development*; to Michael McKeon, on many points but especially on *revolution*; to Peter Burke, for a most helpful series of notes; and to Carl Gersuny, for a series of notes and particularly on *interest* and *work*. I am specifically indebted to Daniel Bell on *generation*; Gerald Fowler on *scientist*; Alan Hall on *history*; P. B. Home on *native*; R. D. Hull on *industrial*; G. Millington, H. S. Pickering and N. Pitterger on *education*; Darko Suvin on *communist* and *social*; René Wellek on *literature*. I am also indebted for helpful suggestions and references to Perry Anderson, Jonathan Benthall, Andrew Daw, Simon Duncan, Howard Erskine-Hill, Fred Gray, Christopher Hill, Denis L. Johnston, A. D. King, Michael Lane, Colin MacCabe, Graham Martin, Ian Mordant, Benjamin Nelson, Malcolm Pittock, Vivien Pixner, Vito Signorile, Philip Tait, Gay Weber, Stephen White, David Wise, Dave Wootton, Ivor Wymer and Stephen Yeo.

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