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What Makes Cultural Studies Political

<https://doi.org/10.1515/jlt-2026-2006>

Raymond Williams, in a foundational moment for cultural studies, defined culture as »a realized signifying system« (1981, 12), arguing that culture defined in this way is fundamental to the shaping and holding together of all ways of life, insisting that it should be seen »as essentially involved in all forms of social activity« (ibid., 13). As he further explained, »the social organisation of culture, as a realised signifying system, is embedded in a whole range of activities, relations and institutions, of which some are manifestly ›cultural‹« (ibid., 209). While there is more to life than signifying systems, it is nevertheless the case that »it would [...] be wrong to suppose that we can ever usefully discuss a social system without including, as a central part of its practice, its signifying systems, on which, as a system, it fundamentally depends« (ibid., 207). In other words, signification is fundamental to all human activities, including practices we call political.

As Williams insisted, »Signification, the social creation of meanings [...] is [...] a practical material activity« (1977, 34). To share a culture, therefore, is to interpret the world, make it meaningful and experience it as meaningful in recognizably similar ways. When Williams said that »culture is ordinary« (1989, 3), he was drawing attention to the fact that meaning-making is not the privileged activity of the few, but something in which we are all involved. However, this does not, of course, mean that we are all involved in it in the same way; meaning-making, like all social activities, is usually entangled in relations of power. While we may all be involved in the making of meanings, it is also the case that some meanings and the people who make them have more power than other people and other meanings. Therefore, signifying systems consist of both shared and contested meanings. Culture is where we share and contest meanings of ourselves, of each other and of the social worlds in which we live.

Williams' argument is informed by his reading of Gramsci's concept of hegemony, used to describe processes of power in which a dominant group does not merely rule by force but leads by consent; a specific kind of consensus in which a social class presents its own specific interests as the general interests of the society as a whole. As Williams explained, hegemony »is a lived system of meanings and

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values [...]. It thus constitutes a sense of reality for most people [...]. It is [...] in the strongest sense a ›culture‹, but a culture which has also to be seen as the lived dominance and subordination of particular classes« (1977, 110).

There are two conclusions we can draw from Williams' concept of culture, and both, I want to suggest, point to the importance of seeing culture as political. First, although the world exists in all its enabling and constraining materiality outside culture, it is only in culture that the world can be made to mean. In other words, signification has a performative effect; it helps construct the realities it appears only to describe. Moreover, meanings inform and organize social action.

The second conclusion we can draw concerns the potential for struggle over meaning. Given that different meanings can be ascribed to the same »sign« (that is, anything that can be made to signify), meaning-making is always a potential site of struggle. The making of meaning is always confronted by what Valentin Vološinov identifies as the »multi-accentuality of the sign« (1973, 23). Rather than being inscribed with a single meaning, a sign can be made to mean different things in different contexts, with different effects of power. Those with power seek to make what is multi-accentual appear as if it could only ever be uni-accentual. In other words, a »sign« is not the issuing source of meaning but a site where the articulation of meaning (variable meanings) can be produced as it is re-articulated in specific contexts. The different ways of making something signify are not an innocent game of semantics; they are a significant part of a power struggle over what might be regarded as »normal« or »correct«, or what Vološinov calls »live[d] social intelligibility« (ibid). The politics of signification, therefore, are the playing out of who can claim the power and authority to define social reality; to make the world (and the things in it) mean in particular ways and with specific effects of power.

References

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