Remnants of Humanism

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Black and white are bonded together by the mechanisms of ‘race’ which estrange them from each other and amputate their common humanity (Paul Gilroy, 2000, p. 15).

Every flower gotta right to be bloomin’ … stay human (Michael Franti, 2001).

There is a curiousness, as well as a timeliness, to Paul Gilroy’s recent suggestion that cultural politics should adjust its frame of vision to better capture a meaningful ‘planetary humanism’. The curiousness of the proposal is that it comes at a time when the distance between competing political allegiances seems to preclude the unanimity necessary for such a position. A tendency to polarize political practices into antagonistic camps (such as ‘cultural’ versus ‘economic’ targets, ‘discursive’ against ‘material’ analyses, global as opposed to local sites for investment) can be identified in both popular and academic appraisals of the state of contemporary politics, providing harsh terrain for Gilroy’s argument to enter. And yet the re-emergence of a concept like humanism is fascinating, with all of its exclusionary and Eurocentric baggage that Gilroy himself has been first in line to point out. What is timely about the project is the way that it draws attention to some of the problems that Cultural Studies has lately and to some extent always had, in recognizing and remembering its radical political resources. That humanism is back on the table might seem to suggest circularity; but perhaps instead it indicates the need to move on from the contamination attached to certain terms in Cultural Studies’ history. Gilroy wants to shake up the way that radical politics can be imagined and realized, and believes our self-consciousness about tainted Enlightenment ideals is starting to have an effect on our dreams. Stigmatizing particular terms—indeed, I will argue, certain figures too—comes to hinder the possibilities for connection between similarly minded practitioners in Cultural Studies’ past and present. Here, then, I want to contemplate whether humanism can still be usefully deployed, on the one hand to make sense of new kinds of politics emerging right now, but also to usher forward a little more quickly the kind of culture we might want in the future.

Preferred Politics

The current hostility I want to pinpoint between opposing political practices is manifested in that particular irreverence for accurately representing the motivations for, and usefulness of, an alternative methodology or focus for cultural criticism. This ungenerous method of furthering one’s own chosen approach is evident in several key releases in the domain of cultural politics in recent years. Dennis Altman in his Global Sex (2001)
demonstrates the trend succinctly when he attributes ‘the fashion for analysis of representation and discourse’ to a generation ‘disenfranchised from political engagement’ (Altman, 2001, p. 54). While summarily dismissing an entire generation of academics as apolitical, his statement also suggests that discourse analysis is a vacuous exercise, something of a lingering false ideology, without any ‘real’ consequence, or even long-term viability. He forgets that the principles of semiotics, even if dated from Barthes, have been with us since the 1950s; and the teaching methods made prominent by the likes of Richard Hoggart, Raymond Williams and others enjoy a similar time-frame (detectable in the soldiers’ classes in Britain’s World War II camps as well as the antecedent WEA tutorials). Faced with Altman’s critique, Cultural Studies stands in a strange place, where its currently existing political sites, as well as the potential for any new ones, appear to be at risk. Such comments, which disappointingly permeate his book (see also Altman, 2001, pp. 34–36, 157–164), add weight to the idea of a singular, transcendent mode of performing politics, established at an earlier, unspecified moment of radical action. Surely one of the great purposes of Cultural Studies has been, though, to further the horizon of what constitutes ‘the political’. It needs to reassure itself of this role in the face of attacks which seek to curb, or restrict to predetermined sites, the opportunities for political work.

Attacks which demonize the political efficacy of Cultural Studies’ insights are not confined to the academy. With the increased visibility of new movements in the popular media since the Seattle protest of 1999, a spirited batch of attractive models for politics has manifested itself, best represented in the figure of No Logo author Naomi Klein. While Klein’s book, along with her journalism, has been enormously significant in raising awareness of global business ills, it is becoming difficult to convince students of the merits of Cultural Studies’ theory and practice when they are so comforted by the insistent macro-scale argument of these popular works. A subtle subtext to the arguments promoted by Klein is that the reason we’re in this paralysing mess called globalization is due to the political energy wasted on the ‘culture wars’ of the 1970s and 1980s. In Klein’s words, concentrating on cultural change (reverse-discrimination policy, political correctness) rather than economic has proved an ‘immensely problematic’ detour for political investment in recent decades: ‘At the moment when the field of vision among left-wing progressives was shrinking to include only its immediate surroundings, the horizons of global business were growing to encompass the whole globe’ (Klein, 2000, p. 104). Furthering the polemic, she writes: ‘there they all were, fighting about women’s studies and the latest backlash book while their campuses were being sold out from under their feet’ (Klein, 2000, p. 122).

Klein argues that the ‘brand bullies’ were handed niche markets on a platter, given that individual identity politics claims could be easily translated into new marketing devices. This process, she maintains, ‘exposed the impotence of almost all other forms of political resistance except anti-corporate resistance, one cutting-edge marketing trend at a time’ (Klein, 2000, p. 81). At work here is a logic comparable with Altman’s in its conviction that the economic system (and both definitions of this are hazy) is the only adequate focus for activism and change. Like Altman, Klein sees alternative conceptions of politics as misdirected and ultimately ineffective.

But Klein’s argument is itself seductive owing to the capitalist rationale behind her reasoning. In her book the mistakes of the past—that is, previous sites of political mobilization—are openly acknowledged and apologized for, while the enlightened
perspective of the present is asserted. The history of politics is ransacked so as to prove the acceptability, the uncontested status, of the new focus being championed. As its recognized spokesperson, Klein does a disservice to the complexity of the new movements against globalization, creating unnecessary divisions between past and present political causes. She readily marginalizes moments when Cultural Studies’ insights have been successfully used to ‘real’ political consequence (when this is equated with penetrating mainstream consciousness).

I will return to some examples of new political practices shortly, but here I want to point to another unhelpful binary which still characterizes cultural politics at present. While the local/global split has been around in academic debates for a good decade or more, its heated proponents on both sides continue unabated. Perhaps invigorated by Hardt and Negri’s *Empire* (2000), which begins by asserting that local political practice ‘merely yokes uniqueness into a hegemonic power field—Empire’ (Hardt and Negri, 2000, p. 2), these distinctions remain a source of frustration, particularly for feminist writers who have long criticized the phallocentrism of the local/global figuration.¹ What is assumed by a localized politics remains uncomplicated and therefore discredited, according to Gibson-Graham’s (2001) appraisal of globalization. For these commentators,² the sheer amount of weight behind the local/global paradigm—where global is equated with consequential, and local is shorthand for trivial politics—requires a continued, diligent questioning. Community-based political work is still maligned for ignoring ‘the power of global economic dynamics’ and ‘the force of political conservatism’. Economic globalization is seen as ‘inevitably more powerful than progressive, grassroots, local interventions’, despite the bias that has been revealed as inherent to these modes of rationalization (Gibson-Graham, 2001, pp. 1–3; emphasis added). The idea of ‘the global’ continues to thrive on an associative history linking it to notions of strength, so that not only is the local

subsumed as the interior ‘other’ to the global, but noncapitalist economic activities involving households, collectives, independent producers, barter networks, etc.—all ostensibly local—are seen as contained and ultimately dominated by a global capitalist economy (Gibson-Graham, 2001, p. 2).

Spawned from a first-instance simplification, the local/global divide cannot appreciate the way that matrices of power link together in sophisticated ways—as Foucault describes it, in a net-like structure. Following Judith Butler’s lead, Gibson-Graham apply the principles of gender re-production to economic analysis. Breaking the cycle of citation and reiteration they see as constituting existing economic discourse, they try to ‘perform’ economics differently, exploring the kinds of subjectivities which could inhabit a new economic framework. They seek more interesting and fruitful ways to figure politics than assenting to the either/or logic of a global or local allegiance.

It is evident, then, aside from Gilroy’s work, that there is a fight being waged on some of the shaky foundations supporting the idea of appropriate or correct political performance. Yet the point of this brief overview has been to highlight the amount of effort involved on the part of these writers to distance themselves from other, even loosely defined, left advocates. There is a process of adamant and careful distancing at work in these examples, between the politics being promoted on one side and the loci of activity endorsed by others. Such a situation has a strong resonance with the contested positions on the left in the early stage of Cultural Studies’ institutional history in 1950s and 1960s Britain. I hesitate to mention the facilitating role of Raymond Williams in this situation, because there is also a tendency to distinguish contemporary Cultural Studies from the
forms promoted by Williams during this period, which could be attributed to his latent colonial mindset (see Williams, 1979, pp. 104–105; Gilroy, in Higgins, 1999, p. 170, and in San Juan Jr, 1999; Radhakrishnan, 1993), his inadequate recognition of feminism and the politics of sexuality (Shiach, in Prendergast, 1995, p. 51) or simply his disfavour due to constant citation (see Hartley, 1992, pp. 15–16). Nonetheless, I want to mention some of Williams’s resources for the way that they ease splintering on the left at a crucial time, and summon a humanist impulse able to reorient radical politics onto a common enemy. The extent to which Williams’s humanism wavers from the recent model put forward by Gilroy is an added intrigue. In the same vein that I think our concepts for politics should be allowed some dynamism, then, I want to argue the necessity for a more generous recognition of the productivity our forebears in practice still afford.

(Dis)placing Williams’s Humanism

The most common accusation levelled at Williams is his unproblematic Britishness. Gilroy has made clear the racial blindness inherent to this form of socialist humanism, and his new planetary model ‘is conceived explicitly as a response to the sufferings that raciology has wrought’. Concentrating on Williams’s figuration, though, it is important to recognize that his was a peculiar Britishness for its time. In retrospect we can perceive the difference his Welshness brought to the singularly English notion of Empire favoured by the academy. (His anecdotes in Politics and Letters, adumbrated by his ideas of a common humanity during tertiary education; see particularly Williams, 1979, p. 67.) For Williams, being British was not a significant part of his upbringing; it ‘was not used much, except by people one distrusted … “British” was hardly ever used without “Empire” following and for that nobody had any use at all’ (Williams, 1979, p. 26). From an early age he was aware of the threat the Anglican education system—its barely disguised push for assimilation endemic in grammar schools—brought to Welsh identity (Williams, 1979, pp. 25, 119). Williams tried hard to maintain a different conception of the world from the English mode of valuing so entrenched in his favoured fields of study (see Williams, 1980, pp. 213–229).

Crucial for Williams was the need to retain a human element to all theoretical and political considerations. While he was cognizant, on reflection, that his ideas of community and shared human interest were insufficiently developed in early work (Williams, 1979, p. 120), nonetheless the humanist motivation evident in both this and later material remains compelling. It is this endeavour always to promote the human consequences of current politics that I want to draw out.

As Ken Hirschkop describes it, Williams found optimism ‘in the continuous and creative activity of caring, working, nurturing and struggling of ordinary working people’ taking place ‘underneath the official requirements of a capitalist political and economic system. No matter what, these activities continued’ (Hirschkop, 1989, p. 12). It is an unwavering confidence in the productive energies and capacities of others that Williams upholds, and his critique of capitalism is precisely the way that it curbs this potential (Williams, 1968, 1979, p. 151, 1980, pp. 187–193). In the May Day Manifesto socialism is defined ‘as a humanism: a recognition of the social reality of man in all his activities, and of the consequent struggle for the direction of this reality by and for ordinary men and women’ (Williams, 1968, p. 16). As such,

the system we now oppose can only survive by a willed separation of issues, and the resulting fragmentation of consciousness … The problems of whole
men and women are now habitually relegated to specialized and disparate fields, where the society offers to manage or adjust them by this or that consideration or technique (Williams, 1968, pp. 15–16).

This emphasis on the connectedness of political grievances and the need to trace their fragmentation to a wider system is the point that has resonance for the contemporary examples I mention above. Instead of dividing political claims it is essential to have confidence in an holistic approach. This urgency is apparent in other instances of Williams’s writing, such as The Long Revolution somewhat earlier:

It has been the gravest error of socialism, in revolt against class societies, to limit itself so often to the terms of its opponents: to propose a political and economic order, rather than a human order. It is of course necessary to see the facts of power and property as obstacles to this order, but the alternative society it has proposed must be in wider terms, if it is to generate the full energies necessary for its creation (Williams, 1961, p. 113).

At issue here is the need to instate a consideration of human costs and effects as the fully orchestrated socialist alternative to economically driven priorities of capitalist politics. Later the same point is reiterated in the Politics and Letters clarification: ‘All the essential human needs that could not be co-ordinated by commodity production—health, habitation, family, education, what it calls leisure—have been repressed or specialized by the development of capitalism … the point has still to be made, about liberal capitalism and about actually existing socialism’ (Williams, 1979, p. 151). Williams pinpoints the way that capitalism works to alienate all of our claims and desires into falsely differentiated service areas, willing a separation of our lives into various financially accountable sectors. His thoughts have a prescient force in the current Australian experience of liberal capitalism, where the privatization of health services, the corporatization of education and the indemnity crisis threatening parts of the leisure and welfare sector all take place under the existing form of political economy. So while, on the one hand, the historical specificity of Williams’s humanism is certainly a weakness (in terms of its national horizon and confident, white male speaking position), for the critical insights that do stand up over time, this specificity is testimony to the strength of his humanist convictions. In Edward Said’s words, haunting intellectuals is the ‘commitment and risk, boldness and vulnerability’ of a situated speaking position (Said, 1994, p. 10). The parochialism of Williams’s writing (its most objectionable aspect from a post-colonial perspective) is nonetheless the key to its successful appeal. Williams’s important role was his ability to record the alienating effects of capitalist society on humanist sympathies, which was for him the prominent ontological difficulty of political work. Seeking to forge human connections, asserting the many ways people are similar rather than antagonistic, Williams’s common culture ideal was an attempt to overcome ‘that divided and fragmented culture we actually have’ (Hirschkop, 1989, p. 35).

For post-war Britain, this humanist vision was steeped in the lessons taken from battle. In a memorable line from the ‘Culture is ordinary’ essay, Williams writes: ‘We must emphasize, not the ladder but the common highway, for every man’s ignorance diminishes me, and every man’s skill is a common gain of breath’ (Williams, 1958b, p. 89). This motto conveys not only the camaraderie of wartime service, but also the changed attitudes pertaining to working-class opportunity following the war (see Gregg, 2003, forthcoming). The quotation is all the more interesting given its analogous use in Ernest Hemingway’s For Whom the Bell Tolls (1941). In Hemingway’s saga of the Spanish conflict, his epigraph invokes John Donne’s poem, where ‘any mans death
diminishes me, because I am involved in Mankinde’ (Hemingway, 1941, p. 3; emphasis in original). Both works similarly contemplate the human cost of war, and while in Williams’s case the stakes are no longer life and death, in the peacetime aftermath it is not lives at stake so much as the quality of life perceived as worthy. In the ‘Culture is ordinary’ essay it is education standards that Williams confronts, arguing how much a projected estimate of appropriate knowledge speaks the measure of our image of others. The ladder of bourgeois society, with its hierarchical segmentation, alienates classes from ways they might otherwise relate.7

If Williams’s humanism was successful for his response to the political concerns of an identifiable constituency (Radhakrishnan, 1993, p. 282), what his example highlights for Cultural Studies today is the increased difficulty, indeed the luxury, of this grounded, knowable community for activists now working in the field. Post-colonial critiques point out the danger of speaking too authoritatively on others’ behalf in a world now characterized by mass migration. Creating a comparable politics of relevance and care is also more challenging in the contemporary academic climate, given the constant threat of ‘uprootedness’. In Australia, the insecurity of the job market, the limited number of tenured positions, and the oversupply of PhD graduates make old ideals, such as Gramsci’s organic intellectual, close to unworkable.8 In this respect, David Hollinger and Mitchell Cohen’s respective formulations of the ‘rooted cosmopolitan’ are laudable—if difficult—goals to realize, given the actual circumstances of academic work (see Robbins, 1998, p. 1). The possibility of a radical politics dependent on notions of specialized knowledge or groundedness appears to some extent thwarted. We need better, more lively models for politics which take into account the reality of new cultural and economic formations.

Williams’s motivation is nonetheless appreciable in the terms suggested by Cornel West, of a ‘subtle humanism’, one ‘constantly attentive to historical contextualization and determination while unmovingly grounded in an ethics of agency’ (West, in Prendergast, 1995, p. 23). The imperative to make possible a human equation, regardless of the seeming hopelessness of the situation, was crucial for Williams; in regard to the circumstances I’ve alluded to in Australia alone, he remains uniquely inspiring in

his refusal to sidestep the existential issues of what it means to be a left intellectual and activist—issues like death, despair, disillusionment and disempowerment in the face of defeats and setbacks … he highlighted what most left thinkers tend to ignore: the need for vision and the necessity of linking vision to visceral forms of human connectedness (West, in Prendergast, 1995, p. xi).

It is here that I think Gilroy can be seen to correspond, perhaps despite himself, with aspects of Williams’s model. Both writers are mindful of the function that Cultural Studies can play in linking a political vision with resources already available in culture. An awareness of and readiness to vocalize the kinds of ethical problems accompanying a humanist benevolence makes Gilroy’s work less susceptible to charges of assumption in both geographic and gender terms. Informed by the lessons learned in Cultural Studies since Williams’s initial forays, Gilroy’s is a more embracing planetary consciousness than Williams could foresee. It also appreciates the multifarious nature of politics and power in these times, and the strategic need for a diversity of action in realizing a counter-hegemonic movement. This goes against the more didactic approaches mentioned in the writing of Altman and Klein.
Reconceiving Humanism

Striving to increase the likelihood of ‘human mutuality and cosmopolitan democracy’, Gilroy’s *Against Race* argues for a thorough reassessment of available political concepts (Gilroy, 2000, p. 7). Gilroy is set on ‘revitalising ethical sensibilities’ (Gilroy, 2000, p. 6) which would bring about the humanitarian element crucial for realizing a more effective cultural politics. His particular bent, as his previous work anticipates, is the continued urgency of anti-racist politics. He decries the vacuity which comes to characterize even the most vital of radical claims, arguing that the ephemeral fashions of politics, fanned by consumerism and its individualizing mechanisms, have emptied our souls of any mobilizing empathy. The unique angle Gilroy takes is to consider the possibilities that new developments in genetic technology offer cultural theory in terms of thinking past ‘race’. Rather than feeling obliged to weather the beatings of older models of political thought, Gilroy spies fresh opportunities for creating change in the realities of our contemporary everyday.

There is in Gilroy an exigency to really question the influences on our sense of what counts as politics (an attitude also akin to Williams’s questioning of a straitjacket left politics, well demonstrated in Williams, 1973). As we’ve seen, for Gilroy, the history of nationalism intrinsic to radical political thought and now scarred by colonial and fascist legacies has been a ‘frozen past on our political imaginations’ (Gilroy, 2000, p. 8). His proposed humanism wants to move the goalposts of currently familiar political allegiances even further:

[I]t must be distinguished from earlier, less satisfactory attempts to refigure humankind. Its attempt at a comprehensive break from those traditions of reflection is signalled fundamentally by a refusal to be articulated exclusively in the male gender. From this angle, the precious, patient processes that culminate in community and democracy do not exist only in the fraternal patterns that have proved so durable and so attractive to so many. The ideal of fraternity need no longer compromise or embarrass the noble dreams of liberty and equality. This wilfully ungendered humanism is not reducible to demands for equality between men and women or even reciprocity between the sexes. Those revolutionary ideas are already alive and at large in the world. They can be complemented by a change of the conceptual scale on which essential human attributes are being calculated (Gilroy, 2000, p. 16).

Prominent in the blueprint is the recognition of gendered interests in past models for humanism. Gilroy humbles Enlightenment assumptions, so that while liberty and equality remain acceptable goals, their association with fraternity can no longer be upheld. Sexism, like raciology, has had a destructive claim upon ‘the very best of modernity’s hopes and resources’ (Gilroy, 2000, p. 30). The passage above confers approbation for the ‘revolutionary ideas’ now working practically in the world to improve the expectations of both sexes. In this vein Gilroy generously accepts the political choices of others, rather than condemning their efforts as misguided. Yet he is careful to state that this should not be the limit of our desires or demands. What is called for is a new ‘spirit’ to inspire political work: ‘corrective or compensatory inclusion in modernity should no longer supply the dominant theme’ (Gilroy, 2000, p. 335; cf. Probyn, 1998).

Gilroy stresses patience in moving towards a better society. Like Williams, he is attentive to the emptiness of voguish political concerns (they are too complicit with the isolating modalities of consumer capitalism). Gilroy wants to ensure time and com-
plexity for an adequate political force, as well as extensive participation: his emphasis on community in the same breath as democracy indicates that localized involvement is a significant component of his otherwise broad-scale thinking.

In contradistinction to those who would consider a return to humanism either regressive or inconceivable, Gilroy provides concrete measures for uncovering such an impulse to enable a workable, relevant and caring political project. He believes ‘the recurrence of pain, disease, humiliation and loss of dignity, grief, and care for those one loves can all contribute to an abstract sense of a human similarity powerful enough to make solidarities based on cultural particularity appear suddenly trivial’ (Gilroy, 2000, p. 17). Confronted with the sufferings of others, there is a certain identifiable level where a response only explicable as human comes into effect. Gilroy urges us to recognize this as the precious force for political practice, rather than older constructs such as nation, race or culture. It is our fixation on these increasingly outdated, increasingly inaccurate analytic concepts which holds us in the ‘heterocultural present’ rather than hastening a more promising ‘cosmopolitan future’ (Gilroy, 2000, p. 335).

Planetary Humanism Now

Gilroy’s model is a helpful complement when analysing some of the promising examples of political expression evident in popular culture now. If humanism has re-emerged on the theoretical agenda, it is also being promoted in other areas as a strong force for consolidating grievances experienced on a world scale. Michael Franti and Spearhead’s recent album, Stay Human, pointedly criticizes the racial prejudice characterizing America’s capital punishment infrastructure. The CD sleeve quotes various opponents of the death penalty from different branches of Western and non-Western culture, while the sustained critique Franti delivers to US policy argues the irrelevance of corrupt parliamentary politics to the materiality of many people’s lives:

‘cause you gave cash to the feds, left your school district for dead
fucked you up in the head, but still they sayin’ nothin’s wrong
sellin’ firewater but outlawing the bong
still believing the system is workin’
while half of my people are still outta workin’
anonymous notes left in the pocket and coats
of judges and juries from ‘Frisco to Jersey
threats and protests politicians mob debts
trumped up charges and phony arrests
stage a lethal injection, the night before the election
‘cause he got donations from the prison guard’s union

(‘Oh My God’, Franti, 2001)

In this instance the sinister nature of institutionalized forms of politics is recognized and disowned. Throughout the album Franti inspires listeners to take voice against the unethical practices of their elected representatives, urging a detour past the mainstream parliamentary system currently so tainted. Franti is one of a number of artists who advocate participation in politics by other means. The official Website of the band, stayhuman.org, is a sophisticated page devoted to spreading the message of social justice around the world. Among the site’s features is a highly active and participatory discussion board for fans to debate issues dearest to them, with separate lists for ‘world’,
‘music’, and ‘poetry’ passions. The three billboards intertwine in their concerns to raise awareness of regional political matters to a global audience.

But unlike a number of artists who use Web-based facilities as a substitute for touring and meeting fans directly, Franti complements this virtual interaction with appearances which concur with the humanist philosophy espoused in the music and Web page. Franti’s 2002 visit to Australia included a spoken word and acoustic appearance at the South Sydney Leagues Club in the heart of inner-city suburb Redfern. This area, which supports a diverse if depressed culture of housing commission dependence, student accommodation and backpacker hostels, is currently enduring a drawn-out process of gentrification, as affordable real estate close to the city inevitably dries up. More significantly, Redfern also houses the site for aboriginal residential and cultural convergence known as ‘The Block’ (the conditions of which are slum-like, and suffer constant surveillance from the police unit marshalled at the train station it faces). The benefit concert, organized by Redfern Residents for Reconciliation, raised money for an oral history project directed at sharing stories about life on The Block from an aboriginal and non-aboriginal perspective. Franti’s presence (his drawing power brought 600 punters to the gig, impressive given that two more shows were scheduled for other venues) testified a graciously negotiated anti-racist message which, through stylish beats, poetic lyricism and energetic performance, has furthered humanitarian consciousness in many parts of the world.

Giving support to causes with a relevance and responsiveness to people’s everyday experience, Franti’s politics appeals to a constituency disillusioned by the options proffered by electorally based methods for change. Looking at this example, we can see that while the effects of globalization on the one hand afford profitable prospects for the ‘brand bullies’ of the corporate world, so too the new resources offered by a changed economy (including the Internet but also the wider distribution of popular culture goods) also allow like-minded souls to gather in the pursuit of a better, more sympathetic and compassionate culture.

While Franti is not yet the ‘planetary figure’ Gilroy attributes to the Rastafarian reggae star Bob Marley (see Gilroy, 1987), his politics stands as one example of the way popular culture is also seeing a turn to humanist-inspired thinking. Coupled with the catch-cry of Seattle activists, ‘human need not corporate greed’, they make it apparent that even if the academy is not completely convinced of humanism’s cogency right now, others beg to differ. This is why I think it necessary to keep the resources contained in Cultural Studies’ political history always within arm’s reach. It is hard to be sure of the factors that will prove the most motivating at any time; and if cultural theorists are reluctant to return to tainted political models for fear of breaching intellectual fashion, others appear more forgiving of misused concepts and more prepared to test their contemporary potential.

Echoes through Time

Thinking about new performances of politics signified in Franti’s lyrics, one can notice echoes of the critique offered in Williams’s work of the insufficiency of our Western political institutions. In the May Day Manifesto, condemning parliament is not ‘some sort of dangerous sign: the symptom of a growing disbelief in democracy, or of cynicism and apathy’:

On the contrary, the criticism of parliament is in the interest of democracy as something other than ritual. It is not just the style but the effect of the
institutions that we are really opposing ... Representative democracy, as it is now interpreted, seems to us very clearly the surviving sign and medium of a class society ... In separating itself from continuing popular pressure, it becomes emptied of the urgent and substantial popular content which would enable it to resist or control the administrative machine ... And this, though tragic, is a kind of justice, for it has prepared its own impotence, by substituting its representative rituals for the reality of participating democracy anywhere (Williams, 1968, pp. 147–148).

Then, as now, the ‘waning of affect’ (Jameson, 1991) supposed in our political participation is all to do with where you look, and the preferred model of politics you hold. Against the divisiveness and fragmentation reproduced by certain progressive cultural commentators, I urge with Williams and Gilroy a more encompassing frame of analysis. If the enthusiasm to clearly define one’s individual terrain is felt to be necessary by left advocates, this tendency accords with the requirements for a counter-hegemonic constellation strong enough to contest the current form of capitalism. But we need to welcome more generously others’ political methods, given that radical action at each level of the splintered social whole is imperative to significantly shift the current hegemonic arrangement. In Williams’s words:

We have to emphasize that hegemony is not singular; indeed that its own internal structures are highly complex, and have continually to be renewed, recreated and defended ... If what we learn were merely an imposed ideology, or if it were only the isolable meanings and practices of the ruling class, or of a section of the ruling class, which gets imposed on others, occupying merely the top of our minds, it would be—and one would be glad—a much easier thing to overthrow (Williams, 1980, pp. 38–39).

The specificity of a Cultural Studies humanism patented in the work of Williams and Gilroy works to bridge the contrasting targets, the exclusionary camps of leftist political critique. It animates a respect for others, and recognizes the equally genuine and urgent political commitments of differing political choices—a sensitivity often lost in the divide between street and library and between departmental corridors. Cultural Studies can draw solace and strength from its own storage-house of political strategies. Its politically minded writers need to be confident that their own experiences resonate, albeit in modest ways, with others in a globalized world. One of the ways to encourage a common project for Cultural Studies’ politics is to adjust the accent of our proclamations from squabbles amongst peers to more vocal admonitions of our far greater opponents. Appreciating the potential of humanism, not only in recognizing those who are really ‘on our side’ but to appeal to the hearts of our fundamental adversaries, is a step towards humility in what we assume we know about concepts as well as practitioners in the past and present. Revealing ‘that crushingly obvious, almost banal human sameness’ we all share (Gilroy, 2000, p. 29), cultural politics might become a more attractive exercise, both for those currently in the field and for others.

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Notes


[2] The two writers share a pseudonym as a means towards collaborative goals.

[3] The macro-perspective implicit in the labels ‘socialist humanist’ (Eagleton, 1976) but more recently ‘cultural Marxist’ (Dworkin, 1997) serves to discount the specificity of Williams’s political project.

[4] Gilroy wants to dispense with ‘the unreliable charts supplied by covertly race-coded liberal or even socialist humanisms’ which, ‘if they did not steer us into this lost position, have offered very few ideas about how we might extricate ourselves from it and find ourselves again without the benefit of racial categories or racial lore’ (Gilroy, 2000, p. 18). Gilroy is critical of past uses of humanism in cultural thought, but does not dismiss the continued potential offered by the concept.

[5] As John Brenkman notes, it is not necessary to restrict the relevance of his thought to its national context—as though to explain what makes his Marxism so British—nor am I suggesting that the biographical benchmarks limit the import of his work. On the contrary, these pressures coming from his own political experience animate his thought and are key to its broader validity. Historical thinking cannot test its validity except against history, a history that is concrete and pressing (Brenkman, in Prendergast, 1995, p. 240).

[6] A ‘common culture’ was Williams’s unique vision of democracy, which accentuates similarity between people rather than class conflict. Here he differs from E. P. Thompson’s vision of socialism promoted at a similar time (see Williams, 1979, pp. 134–135). Initially conceived within the field of literature in Culture and Society (Williams, 1958a), the ‘common culture’ idea relied on a specific combination: the strength of existing bourgeois achievements mixed with a restored recognition of the silenced voice of history, namely that of the dissident. In later writing Williams extends the application of the term, endorsing the objective as a suitable blueprint for a new kind of society. In The idea of a common culture this is made clear: ‘the whole tradition of what has been thought and valued, a tradition which has been abstracted as a minority possession, is in fact a common human inheritance’ (Williams, 1989, p. 37).

[7] See also Williams (1958a, p. 318): ‘in the end, on any reckoning, the ladder will never do; it is the product of a divided society, and will fall with it’.

[8] Gramsci’s organic intellectual was conceived to further the advance of the Italian proletariat of the 1930s, to ‘organize interests, gain more power, get more control … to gain the consent of potential customers, win approval, marshall consumer or voter opinion’ (Said, 1994, p. 4). I prefer Stuart Hall’s catchier interpretation, which describes the organic intellectual’s function as simply ‘to know more than the traditional intellectuals do: really know, not just pretend to know, not just to have the facility of knowledge, but to know deeply and profoundly … If you are in the game of hegemony you have to be smarter than “them”’ (Hall, 1992, p. 283).

[9] Richard Rorty’s work, for example, leads Robbins to the depressing conclusion that ‘common humanity is too weak a force to generate sufficient solidarity’ (Robbins, 1998, p. 4).

References


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Websites


http://www.stayhuman.org

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