

# The bus stop, the cathedral, fifty years on

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Raymond Williams went to the bus stop by the cathedral, in Hereford, in 1958, to take a trip across the border into another country - his own - through the ruins of past powers and past industries, he also observed the ambivalence displayed towards those ruins by a bus driver and conductress, who were obviously in love. He wrote this journey into his essay 'Culture Is Ordinary.' The route Williams takes works metaphorically, as an indication of how state power and commerce can mean little to people interacting intimately, but also how the end of a journey to 'there', inevitably brings us to somebody else's 'here', with their bus stop, near to their place of meaning. The cartoon version of Gulliver's Travels playing across the street at the cinema, in 1958, was re-presenting, via new technology, a version of Jonathan Swift's book, a tale involving a trip into the exaggeratedly unfamiliar cultures of others (1).

Williams, like Richard Hoggart (2) was trying to map how mass consumerism impacted on the working-classes of the time. His concept of 'structures of feeling' tried to bring together this emerging world - the circulation of mass consumer messages - with lived experience. Williams also tried to re-think the Marxist concept of 'base and superstructure' and accommodate into it his understanding of everyday life as lived.

Buses still stop near the cathedral, and culture is still ordinary. In 2008 and 2009, I tried to track the 'credit crisis' in the Hereford streets, during lunch breaks from teaching at the art college. This activity also involved trying to join up lived experience with those wider economic narratives of consumer capitalism, which shoot through all our lives. Both Adorno and Williams have pointed out that we are capable of both absorbing, resisting, and enhancing ourselves through mass popular forms, as well as being negatively affected by them. One of Minima Moralia's aphorisms ends:

"People who belong together ought not to keep silent about their material interests, nor to sink to their level, but to assimilate them by reflection into their relationships and surpass them" (3).

This resonates with Williams's refigured base-and-superstructure model, with the turn to culture, with the potential for what sits on the economic base to resist the 'corruption' of material interests, in Adorno's haughty-sounding description. But the amount of snake-oil salespeople at my door and telephone during the summer of 2008 were definitely not a 1958 cultural phenomenon. I wondered if Adorno would be able to breathe the cultural air of the early twenty-first century. I wondered how Williams might have revisited this place, fifty years on. In 'Culture Is Ordinary', he mentions the cheapjacks in offices developing lingo to sell us things, but suggests that we might simply refuse to learn their new language. I wondered just how much this refusal had slipped into amnesia over the fifty years. Our credulity at the cheapjack's language were a large part of the crash. Their ceasing to be novel had assimilated them into the fabric, making a refusal much harder.

Williams only starts his journey in Hereford, before moving across a national border, going 'home', something which is always complex and nuanced in his work. There are borders though, even within the city of Hereford. The line you hear talked about the most is geographical, locatable. Like the way racism works, it is scopic. The class divide between the north and south of the river in Hereford is as perceived, as culturally real, as it is 'really' real, material, as much as it is also a horrible stigma applied to a massive swathe of difference. On arriving, in 2006, a taxi driver told me not to go near the south side, and certainly not to rent there. So I went there often, there are many people who live happily, and others who have problems. This divide is spanned by two bridges, which are locally and very ordinarily known as 'the new bridge' and 'the old bridge'. There's a way back into Williams's concerns with cultural connections here, how they shift historically, in look and feel, although their functions may be very similar.

Yet there are disconnections, too. The way Williams figures the potential for everyday life to operate with 'ambivalence' in the face of power, spectacles of state and military might, is appreciated. Yet this ambivalence, as a disconnection, continues to enable it. On May 28th,

2009, the RAF set up a display in the centre of Hereford. Walking through it, I half expected a drunken Redcoat to be thrown out of a pub doorway at any moment.

Woolworths was an early casualty of the crash. In Hereford, the only businesses re-opening in the wake seemed to be pound shops. Chadds, the department store, closed in 2008 and a pound shop opened in one of its long series of ex-properties. Peter Beresford wrote about the significance of the 30,000 Woolworths jobs lost, which heavily affected female employees, but wasn't treated seriously "...as though these are workers who can just drift on to other casual work" (4). Beresford tried to relocate the significance of the loss, saying:

"...most Woolworths jobs were permanent jobs. I know people who have worked there ten and twenty years, with more than one generation in the family employed there. For Woolworths' workers this is as serious a loss as a closure or redundancy for any car worker or banker, yet it is not treated as such."

A Radio 4 comedy show around this time aired a song asking where all 'the chavs' would steal from now that Woolworths had closed. The class terms were very explicit.

The centre wasn't becoming a black void, if anything, it was a more dynamic field. Big chains were moving into more central retail units, including Carphone Warehouse, with a temporary sign, as scaffolding and building firms went out of business. The outlying rural areas were suffering, variously attributed to fuel costs putting rural pubs out of business (5) in contrast with village shopkeepers actually finding their takings up, as people weren't shopping in Hereford so much. A report on life in the countryside, published by the Commission for Rural Communities, highlighted "rising house prices, a lack of access to essential services and a 3% rise in the number of people living below the poverty line" (6).

On January 30th, Prince Charles visited Hereford cathedral to see the art work of Ludmila Pawlowska, arriving at the end of my lunch hour. Pawlowska's work

is inspired by Russian religious icons. The Prince of Wales and the Duchess of Cornwall also viewed the start of the restoration project at the cathedral. The Close project, new lighting, artwork and gardens, has a grant of £5 million from the Heritage Lottery Fund. Charles is patron of Hereford Cathedral Perpetual Trust (7). 'The venture is aimed at establishing Cathedral Close as a sacred space separate from the nearby street and shops.' I thought of Williams's idea of a wall separating elite culture from the everyday. Prince Charles said:

"I hope and pray that the good Lord will ensure my preservation for a good few years so that I can come back and see the work."

His controversial views on planned architecture are well known. Not far away, opposite my office, the John Haider building was incredibly run-down, a depressing sight, and seemed to be fully occupied. Yet towards the summer of 2009, it was renovated, a project linked to the newly built block of flats next to it.

The policeman who moved me from the Cathedral entrance was pleasant enough, commenting on my badge, 'state pension campaign, 1908-2008'. That morning, the Guardian reported on the unofficial Lincoln oil refinery protests. Workers were complaining about European labour being used in preference to British. Earlier in the month, Prince Harry had been criticised for his 'Paki' remark. Riots flared up in Paris the day before, on 'Black Thursday', where more than a hundred people clashed with police. Over a million workers were out on strike (8). They were expressing anger at the Sarkozy government and the financial crisis. It was interesting to see the use of wheelie bins as barricades on the television. Since Haussmannisation, Paris rioters have used many products of modernity to breach the wide streets, notably, in 1968, cars. These new, almost Lego-like walls looked comical.

There were no riots in Hereford, even though the pre-Haussmannisation medieval narrow streets of High Town didn't require much barricading. The Prince of Wales had just come from a visit to the SAS

headquarters in Creedenhill, so any risings would be quickly extinguished. In any case, David Harvey, at a recent Ralph Miliband lecture at the LSE had warned against naïve Marxist jubilation. He pointed out that we are seeing a consolidation of capital in the huge, sometimes strictly illegal bank mergers, the hoovering up of vast tracts of business and finance, by both capital and state. He asked if we wanted our children to live in a world where such massive amounts of money are controlled by so few, adding that either we can resist or be passive (9).

Photographing a branch of the Halifax, an employee came out and asked me what I was taking pictures of, 'for security reasons'. I suggested that the closed pound shop next door was empty because of the speculation of Sir James Crosby and others. She told me not to take any more photographs. Ever since the redevelopment of the post-1996 IRA bomb Manchester, I have read pound shops alongside the knowledge that massive areas in Salford Quays were sold to bidding developers for the nominal price of one pound, with names such as 'Pound Empire' re-signifying in the street. In 2008, the shift of banks from depositaries of our own money, to purveyors of their own products was clear (10) but their future wasn't. Unfortunately, neither was anybody else's. Everything seemed to be haemorrhaging. I thought about our students, their part-time jobs undertaken in order to get full-time jobs at the end of their courses, jobs which seemed to be vanishing.

On Friday, March 13th, I visited another site to speak to a colleague, to find the road cordoned off by the police due to a murder which occurred the night before, an appropriately symbolic date to find out:

"Police said the four men being held over his murder were of 'Eastern European' appearance and had not ruled out whether the attack was racially motivated. Supt Kevin Purcell said more officers would be deployed in the area in the next few days to avoid any reprisal attacks." The victim's aunt was "...asking witnesses to contact police and added: 'Someone must have seen something'" (11).

Although ethnicity or motivation wasn't clear at this point, the racialisation was implicit. Two press releases were then circulated by the Hereford Polish Association, asking any witnesses to contact the police. The subway opposite Aldi then became a dual space, with people using it as a shrine, as well as just walking through.

The Left Bank Village had collapsed with debts of £404,000 early in the new year. This 'showcase for Hereford's growing prosperity' featured bars, Floodgates Brasserie, conference and wedding hire. Its terraced exterior faced out on to the Wye. The connotations of 'the left bank', Paris, were both predictable and ridiculous. Trying to prove if it is left or right in relation to the river is pointless, but more interestingly, it places itself, geographically and culturally, north of the river. Helen Hills (12) has written of how middle class culture often co-opts the connotation of the 'wrong side of town', but re-placed into a 'safe' zone.

Some icons of conspicuous consumption seemed to be vanishing. Charlotte's wine bar closed not long after the crash, with its French script typeface windows whitewashed, yet as I finish writing it is re-opening, still as a wine bar, but re-named. At the same time, opposition to the Edgar Street Grid, a proposed retail development, gathers pace. Protest movements such as these are both radical and conservative, in that they stir up opposition to change, rather than stagnation. The Edgar Street Grid protesters are worried that the development will suck the life out of the town centre.

Adorno's aphorism, quoted above, in which he circles the culture-materialism dialectic in a highly complex way, is called 'Baby with the bath-water', and explores the difficulties of negotiating cultural perceptions and the economic base. Yet to turn away from the complexity really would be the point at which the baby gets thrown out. Williams knew that we have to keep going, push on through the triumphs and failures, eases and difficulties, and that culture is central to this.

Here's to the even longer revolution.



Figure 1. Waiting for Prince Charles with union jack flags, Williams accounts for a loose negotiation between nationalism and other forms of culture.



Figure 2. Credit Crunch advertising illuminates the robustness of capitalism.



Figure 3. A display for the controversial Edgar Street Grid redevelopment project.



Figure 4. RAF display, Hereford, with its Lilliputian soldiers.



Figure 5. A branch of The Halifax next to an empty pound shop.

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