

Jeff Browitt

Maria Elisa Cevalco, 2003: Para leer a Raymond Williams, Buenos Aires: Universidad Nacional de Quilmes Editorial, 311p.

Maria Elisa Cevalco, 2003: Dez lições sobre estudos culturais, São Paulo: Boitempo, 188p.

The first of these two books *Para leer a Raymond Williams* (originally published in Portuguese in 1991 under the virtually identical title, *Para ler Raymond Williams*), loosely translates as *How to Read Raymond Williams*, the second as *Ten Lessons on Cultural Studies*. Both are a polemical intervention into the international field of ‘cultural studies’. *Para leer* is an intellectual biography that situates Raymond Williams within the broader, British intellectual culture of the twentieth century, the more specific intellectual culture of the New Left and finally, within the field of cultural studies itself. The book is as much about the genesis of a field as the particular trajectory of Williams. Cevalco declares from the beginning that no one book of modest length can ever hope to fully encapsulate the range, depth and innovativeness of Williams’s work, and wisely chooses to elaborate key points (‘foundations’) of Williams’s developing theory and practice: a critical, dissenting engagement with the hegemonic, conservative British literary tradition (Leaviste culturalism) and how this engagement generates a new theoretical formulation (cultural materialism), which in turn institutes a new field (cultural studies), which then reads both past and present British cultural texts and processes in the name of a future, radically democratic and egalitarian socialist culture. Cevalco reminds us of Williams’s central concern with ‘culture’: how it is deeply and unavoidably implicated in the workings of social domination, but also, importantly, of social resistance. The lessons which Cevalco wishes to draw from Williams, then, related not only to how to go about oppositional cultural criticism, but also about how to fashion theoretical responses out of the lived experience of the present and, just as importantly, the moral-political example set by Williams.

The 2003 Spanish translation also contains new information, as Cevalco engages

with more recent scholarship on Williams from his death up until 2001. In the opening chapter, '*Para leer a Raymond Williams: una presentación*', while she acknowledges the odd book or essay (Mulhern, O'Connor, Milner, Higgins), she nevertheless criticises the way various books and essays are either totally unproductive (Gorak), too narrowly focused (Pinkney), misrepresentative (Inglis's biography), or simply too ambitious in trying to cover absolutely everything (Tredell): 'to do justice in one blow to the totality of a critical and fictional oeuvre, is generally impossible – it is necessary to select an angle, an objective'. To this end, Cevasco chooses to make the centerpiece of her story the principal ways in which Williams approached the problem of 'determination'. This first chapter is also an occasion to take to task, in particular, two anthologies of essays: *Views beyond the Border Country* (1993), edited by Dworkin and Roman, and *Cultural Materialism: On Raymond Williams* (1995), edited by Prendergast. Many of the essays are chided for fundamentally misrepresenting Williams's work by denouncing his supposed failure to centrally address issues of race, gender and imperialism. Cevasco mounts a spirited defense of Williams on these issues, appropriately quoting from passages in the Welsh critic's work where he does indeed engage with them, but also pointing out that, to be fair, these issues were never the objects of his research – one simply cannot cover everything. The absence of their extended treatment may leave his work open to the charge of incompleteness, but never to closet sexism, racism or imperialism, which is the implication if not the direct accusation. Those critics who reprimand Williams on this score would thus do well to remind themselves of the broadness, profundity and impact of his legacy and then compare it to their own.

Cevasco reviews the seminal essay, 'Culture is Ordinary' (1958), in which the key movement is democratic – a dethroning of elite cultural taste and control in order to recover ordinary, everyday practices, especially those of the labouring classes, as culture. Here, for Cevasco, the 'central contribution of Williams's thought is captured under the rubric of "how to think new ways" of opening up the possibility for a common culture'. In 'Cuestiones de historia intelectual: idealismo, hegemonía y la función social de la crítica literaria', Cevasco discusses Williams's confrontation with the hegemony of Leavisite literary criticism, especially as this creates and polices the 'Great Tradition'. Williams re-orientes 'the concept of culture' as 'a register of the reactions to change in our way of life'. The moment of Leavis is therefore 'the reaffirmation of an idealized version of culture' in the face of industrial modernity and its atomising tendencies. This idealized version then comes to underpin the expanding discipline of English literary criticism, which in turn becomes determined and dominated by the values of the ruling classes. For Cevasco, *cultural studies* would thus come to signify for Williams the 'conformation of a space from which it would be possible to oppose that hegemony'. It would do so, importantly, by steering a path between the values of *Scrutiny* (the journalistic

flagship of such cultural conservatism) and the orthodoxy of the vulgar Marxist base/superstructure model of literary criticism (best exemplified by Christopher Caldwell), which had too easily, because inept, ceded the field to Leavisite idealism.

In 'Cuestiones de teoría: el materialismo cultural', Cevasco traces Williams's intellectual formation as he moves out of the Welsh, rural community of Pandy and into academia at Cambridge. The 30 years after the end of the Second World War mark the passage from a questioning adherence to Leavism to its deconstruction via a renovation of Marxist thinking on culture and to the genesis of Williams's key concepts of 'cultural materialism' and 'structure of feeling', especially as these culminate in the landmark *Marxism and Literature* (1977).

In the chapter on 'Cuestiones de análisis: el materialismo cultural en la práctica', Cevasco diverges from what she regards as a standard expository division of Williams's work into 'criticism, theory and socialism', since for her all three are generally implicit in everything Williams did. Instead, she prefers to take her cue from Williams's own chapter divisions in *Culture* by utilising the categories of 'Forms', 'Formations' and 'Organizations'. In 'Forms' she firstly examines the way Williams frames and analyses the English nineteenth-century realist novel and how he re-thinks that over-generalised term, 'bourgeois realism'. Williams selects a set of novels written around 1848, among others, *Jane Eyre*, *Wuthering Heights*, *Vanity Fair*, *Shirley*, *Dombey and Son*, and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, and notes two important things: firstly, empirical research shows that the reading public of the time, including the middle classes, were not reading this kind of literature so much as historical and exotic-adventure literature, in which the protagonists were still the residual aristocrat in decline, and not the bourgeois; secondly, given their multiple viewpoints and a sometimes great divergence in the implicit relationship between author and reader, these novels in no way represent some homogeneous, simplistic confirmation of bourgeois ideology and the economic system on which it is based.

According to Cevasco, as opposed to conventional Marxist class critique, Williams encourages us to see nineteenth-century realism not as 'mere ideological expression of the system', but as 'emergent' for its 'consciousness of the social limits it is necessary to transcend in order to construct an authentic life', limits which, nevertheless, proved impossible for the novels' protagonists to overcome. Cevasco draws attention to Williams's re-appraisal of Dickens and the way the latter's novels were devalued by both conservative critics (too common for the 'Great Tradition') and the Left (too sentimental). In an original analysis, Williams charts the evolution of English prose style from 1780-1950, revealing how changing social relations within the growth of capitalist industrialisation are captured in the texture of language use itself. Style, rather

than simply an absolute related to good manners of the genteel classes, is crucially linked to the increasing technification of both fictional and non-fictional prose writing – precise, impersonal, rational, and cultivated – shared by a restricted linguistic-class community. This style, prevalent in the novels of Austin, Eliot, James and Forster, contrasts tellingly with that of Dickens, considered ‘crude’ and ‘vulgar’ for incorporating not only the rhythms of common speech, but also the social questions bearing on the underclasses within that selfsame capitalist industrialisation, questions which made Dickens’s novels a much more accurate window onto the broader social reality of the time. ‘Cuestiones de análisis’ is also an occasion to examine Williams’s reaction to a central concern of his generation: the advent of a new and important technological-cultural form – television – and its potential for mass manipulation, but also democratic communication.

In ‘Formations’, the example Cevasco chooses from Williams’s oeuvre is the analysis of the Bloomsbury Group, whose most famous member was Virginia Wolff, and how Williams demonstrates that, for all their laudable opposition to ignorance, poverty and sexual discrimination, the Bloomsbury group perpetuated an enlightened bourgeois conception of the ‘civilized individual’ and individual autonomy, not opting for an alternative social order, but rather modernising their own class biases. In spite of their perceived opposition to the conservatives, these enlightened liberals thus contributed to the consolidation of bourgeois hegemony by softening its image. Cevasco closes with a review of ‘Organizations’ through a reading of the more directly political essays collected in *The Long Revolution* and *Towards 2000*.

What is signally important in *Para leer* is that Cevasco’s is perhaps the first book-length treatment by a non-metropolitan critic of Williams’s work and one which, moreover, comes decidedly down in favour of Williams’s cultural criticism and politics as still contemporary. Furthermore, it is highly significant that in an era when non-metropolitan theorists are deeply suspicious of imported theories, other renowned Latin American cultural critics such as Beatriz Sarlo, Nestor García Canclini and Roberto Schwarz, whose works in no way comprise a homogeneous bloc, should also find so much of value in Williams. This is a valuable corrective to the somewhat fashionable stance of viewing Williams as merely a well-intentioned but now passé critic, unable to engage with the more pressing issues of globalised capitalism and postmodernity. No doubt his acceptance as a still highly-relevant cultural critic is tempered for many post-Marxists by his attachment right up until his death to a culturalist version of historical materialism and his disdain for much of that which goes under the rubric of structuralism/post-structuralism (‘the new idealism’) and its central focus on identity politics, fragmented subjectivity and linguistic deconstruction (I will return to this issue shortly). Interestingly, Cevasco’s book demonstrates that

Williams himself was continuously and centrally occupied with language – both in its progressive, creative elaborations, but also in its service to political obfuscation – but always, however, with a view to its material grounding and conditioning in the workings of political economy and social process.

Cevasco's second book, *Dez lições*, is basically a restatement in slightly different guise of *Para leer a Raymond Williams*. Cevasco sees the book as a contribution towards the evaluation of the field of cultural studies, based on what she considers its British antecedents, so as to stress its usefulness for Brazilian academic studies of culture. What is of interest, then, are the last two chapters/lessons: 'Estudos culturais contemporâneos' ('Contemporary Cultural Studies') and 'Estudos culturais no Brasil' ('Cultural Studies in Brazil'). The first is an appraisal of the directions cultural studies has taken in recent years, both in Britain and in its transplanted form in the United States. Cevasco is critical of those versions of cultural studies or cultural theory that diverge from Williams's legacy, especially those variants (semiological, structuralist-poststructuralist, the politics of difference) generated from the Birmingham Centre for Cultural Studies under Stuart Hall and which seem to have become the dominant paradigm in the United States. Cevasco is disapproving, for example, of cultural theorists like Lawrence Grossberg and even such luminaries as Homi Bhabha, for what she considers their wilful displacement of cultural studies away from a theoretical practice that has as its practical-political end radical change and socialism, and towards a narcissistic, self-consuming theoretical practice more concerned with the market priorities of intellectual consumption, which seeks an easy accommodation with social democracy.

Whereas Stuart Hall, 'in a moment of institutionalisation and internationalization of the discipline, recommends intellectual modesty', at least in his work there still remains, for Cevasco, 'the desire to intervene in society with a view to changing it and a sense of practical intervention'. On the other hand, in the discourse of Grossberg, who in a 1998 article for the *European Journal of Cultural Studies* called for 'a different way of theorizing politics and politicizing theory', Cevasco only finds, in Williamsite fashion, a slogan from market speak: we are witnessing 'the problems the discipline encounters in times of an exacerbated mercantilization: cultural studies becomes one more product at the disposition of intellectuals in a transnational context, defined in terms of a jingle, and not in the terms proper to the market society that it proposes to criticize'. This criticism is highly unfair. Perhaps Grossberg can be taken to task for certain aspects of his critical work, but to claim that it is encapsulated by a market slogan is simply exaggerated. Cevasco is on much safer ground indicting Angela McRobbie for her flatulent statements ('the free market offers opportunities for new emergent identities'), than trying to reduce the work of Bhabha or Grossberg to mere 'theoretical abstraction', tantamount to a sell-out. And this is

related to what appears to be an attempt on Cevasco's part to contain the field. But just as popular cultural expression cannot be wholly contained or administered by the cultural industries, neither can cultural criticism be policed; it is simply too complex today and, dare I say, too 'hybrid' to lend itself to univocal representation or proscription. Secondly, Raymond Williams-style cultural studies are in no danger of disappearing – they are merely not hegemonic, which can sometimes be a blessing in disguise. Thirdly, part of the reason sociologies of mass media and identity politics are so popular is that for many people suffering racism, sexism and homophobia, they speak more directly to their concerns, which is not to deny that the sources of such concerns are driven or inflected by the workings of political economy, class contradictions and capitalist globalization, which powerfully impinge on cultural processes. Furthermore, it is not self-evident, to this reviewer at least, that Williams's concepts and categories are always the most helpful. Take as an example the notion of a 'common culture', or indeed the word 'culture' itself. (Let us suspend, for the sake of argument, the issue of whether the usage of the English-language term culture translates happily across to other languages and 'cultures').

Williams, like the Leavises, like T.S. Eliot and like Mathew Arnold, would also come to call for a common culture, albeit a socialist one. But for all the talk of a common culture, it seems unachievable outside of more localised and less populous tribal societies, except in the most abstract sense as a potential never to be realised unless coercively imposed, and we have examples of such attempts at cultural engineering in some of the failed socialist experiments of the twentieth century. In other words, not only can one question its feasibility, but also its dangers – the problem of the state and left authoritarianism. Nevertheless, Williams kept banging away at the idea and tried to merge it into the idea of a common *political* culture. At this point we must make a brief detour via Terry Eagleton's *The Idea of Culture* (2000).

In his otherwise fine book, Eagleton sets out to trace the rise of the word culture and its use in cultural studies. Like Geoffrey Hartmann and other critics, he is worried by the fact that the word *culture* is now over-inflated and tagged onto just about everything: gun culture, mall culture, corporate culture, and so forth. After reviewing the word throughout the last two hundred years in the West, he concludes his book thus: 'We have seen how culture has assumed a new political importance. But it has grown at the same time immodest and overweening. It is time, while acknowledging its significance, to put it back in its place' (131). Nevertheless, Eagleton fails to heed his own advice when he continues to call for a 'common culture', *pace* Williams: 'cultural commonness for Williams lies chiefly in its political form. And this common participatory form is not only compatible with a plurality of cultural experience, but logically entails it. Only

through a fully participatory democracy, including one which regulated material production, could the channels of access be fully opened to give vent to this cultural diversity' (122). Two points here: firstly, one fails to see how cultural diversity is a common culture (especially given Eagleton's concerns about the semantic chaos implied in the overworked notion of the sliding signifier – can one have one's signifier and eat it too?); secondly, by calling common political institutions a common political *culture*, Eagleton goes against his stated aim of putting the word culture 'back in its place'. But what Bhabha's work deals with, among other things, and what underpins his notion of cultural hybridity, is 'cultural difference', and precisely what seems to be lurking behind utopian calls for a common culture, in spite of undoubted good intentions, is a desire to erase such difference, an assumption of absolute cultural commensurability, in spite of denials to the contrary by positing 'cultural diversity' within a supporting framework of 'common political culture'. Surely we do not need a programmatic common cultural orientation to buttress cultural tolerance and diversity: surely education in friendship, respect and generosity can achieve that, yet still leave open the sometimes (radical?) *incommensurability* between some cultures. And there is yet another related issue. To say that the making of a common culture would make all cultural products available to all, merely smuggles in cultural elitism via the back door: the cultural elites already have popular culture at their disposal if they so wish, therefore the implication is that the popular classes would have access to elite culture – the 'really good stuff'. There are many examples in cultural studies literature where this precise inference can be drawn, for example, in the early work of Stuart Hall and Paddy Whannel on youth sub-cultures.

What seems to be working under the surface of Cevasco's critique is a struggle for hegemony between different fractions of the Brazilian culturalist academic intelligentsia, and this struggle is in turn related to the failure of socialism to materialise in what was considered one of its optimum breeding grounds – Latin America. But socialism, which was the political point of reference and commitment for Williams's project (and for many others), is only accessible in its twentieth-century manifestations, which have largely failed. Given the absence of the ideal socialist society, it is forever projected into a utopian future (as in Williams) where it is quarantined from practical criticism – because not yet formed – and from where it serves as a court of judgment on any position not considered to be towing the line. While we must always preserve the impulse of utopian thinking, we should not let it stand in for The Truth: at the risk of sounding patronising, we only ever establish contingent truths in the plural, which may be slowly, or quickly and radically, overturned. This is simply the messy nature of truth in the Humanities. There is a fear here, then, that a certain brand of cultural studies (Marxist-humanist, cultural materialist) attempts to become a kind of orthodoxy.

Cevasco criticizes those who prosecute the politics of difference for not having as a 'horizon a general transformation', but she does not herself offer any specifics about such a plan or horizon other than the usual desire of many of us on the Left to base the future on values and practices other than ones derived from capitalism. But confronted with the failings of 'really existing socialism', to borrow the jargon, all bets must be placed on the notion of an ideal socialist future for which, unfortunately, no one seems to have a concrete description, rather only decontextualized appeals to notions of commonality, equality, fairness, radical democracy and so forth. While these values are no doubt the ones to go for, how we get there and maintain those values intact and yet continue to provide prosperity and freedom from want for all, including those 'individual' freedoms that even progressive Western intellectuals seem to enjoy, is radically under-theorised. There seems to be an assumption among some on the Left that the path to the socialist future can still be clearly delineated and the concomitant fear that it will be eroded by Leftist backsliders. And this fear seems partially confirmed in the final chapter to *Dez lições: 'Cultural Studies in Brazil'*.

Cevasco traces the genealogy of a specific Brazilian literary-cultural intellectual formation, which she sees as the precursor to contemporary Brazilian cultural studies and the strand with which she wants to be associated. It begins with Antonio Candido and Paulo Emilio Salles Gomes at São Paulo University in the 1940s. These two critics look back and read some Brazilian classics: *Casa Grande e Senzala (The Master and the Slaves)* by Gilberto Freyre, *Raízes do Brasil (Brazilian Roots)* by Sergio Buarque de Holanda, and *Formação do Brasil Contemporâneo (The Formation of Contemporary Brazil)* by Caio Prado Júnior. Candido meditates on, among other things, the way that the Brazilian literary tradition has been formed *as a tradition* and for Cevasco, this is a similar kind of enquiry to the best of Raymond Williams's work. The next generation is significant for the presence of Roberto Schwarz, an ex-student of Candido, and author of the celebrated essays, 'As ideias fora do lugar' ('Misplaced Ideas'), and 'Nacional por subtração' ('National by Subtraction'), both classics of Latin American cultural studies. Cevasco, who is obviously the third generation, looks at Schwarz's most recent book, *Duas meninas* (1997), in which her colleague carries out a comparative analysis of Brazilian race-class politics in Machado Assis's *Dom Casmurro* (1899) and Helena Morley's 1942, *Minha vida de menina*. Cevasco demonstrates how Schwarz's book can be clearly classified as cultural studies because of its linking of art to society and history and its study of the way a cultural form is produced and received. Furthermore, it combines a classic of the high literary canon with what was regarded at the time as 'popular fiction'. The immense popularity at the time of Morley's Mills and Boonish book in comparison to that of *Dom Casmurro* needs explaining, because stylistically it lacks Machado de Assis's canonical sophistication. For Schwarz, while both are part of a century-long discursive formation trying to come to terms aesthetically

with race and class relations in a modernising Brazil, the popularity of Morley's book is due to the ability of a popular text to *communicate* at the level of popular reception, to strike a more direct and responsive chord with ordinary people who may have lived or suffered under similar conditions to the protagonist of *Minha vida de menina*. Nevertheless, in spite of this practical demonstration of Brazilian cultural studies, Cevasco's chapter is significant for what it leaves out.

While Schwarz is a renowned Brazilian literary cum cultural critic, he's certainly not the only one, unless of course one is working with a highly restricted idea of cultural studies, and this seems to be precisely what Cevasco is doing. There is no mention, for instance, of Renato Ortiz and his book, *Otro Territorio*, on culture and globalisation, nor Silviano Santiago, who analyses culture from a postcolonial perspective (*The Space In-between: Essays on Latin American Culture*). A simple explanation for such an absence may be the need to advance an argument and give a representative example in a chapter of barely 15 pages, without resorting to a superficial enumeration of cultural studies practitioners. Yet given the appraisal of Williams throughout Cevasco's two books, there is more than enough reason to suspect that she is playing a policing role, rebuking those who veer from the Williams line of cultural studies, while simultaneously outlining what she regards as its legitimate Brazilian counterpart: the *Paulista* tradition of which she is heir. There is a sense, then in which, in spite of any ecumenical gestures, the version of cultural studies which Cevasco sanctions is a humanist, Marxist literary sociology that will have no truck with sociologies of mass media (Williams's analyses of television notwithstanding), or with analyses which are content to begin and end with questions of race, gender or identity. Cevasco is highly suspicious, for instance, of the term 'hybridity' (Bhabha is one of her targets), and this is certainly a key term in the work of Santiago and Ortiz. But Santiago certainly does cultural studies in the broad, variously covering media studies, travel literature, mass culture and Brazilian modernist literature. For his part, Ortiz covers many aspects of contemporary culture that are not primarily literary, including newspapers, TV, magazines and so forth. Both are much more expansive cultural critics than Schwarz – not necessarily better cultural critics – and both are decidedly of the Left.

Cevasco, then, for all her perceptiveness in surveying and summarising Williams's work, seems to want to institutionalise and sanction only a literary version of cultural studies. In this I think both Williams and Cevasco cede too much to art and literature as the barometer of social change and as somehow privileged insight into social processes, and indeed, 'privileged' is the word both critics use. It leads us once more to an unintentional and ironic over-idealisation of art, or at least of artistic print culture. Cevasco seems to share with the Argentine literary-cultural critic, Beatriz Sarlo, more than a little residual cultural elitism. In both, though there is due acknowledgement of the importance of the

popular, it is only mentioned in discussions of mass media – the site of manipulation. But this cedes *too much* ‘determination’ to mass media (even in Williams’s terms) and *too little* to high print culture as a refuge or ground for autonomous critique: it over-inflates high print culture as the refuge of an intelligentsia (whether of the Left *or* the Right) whose legitimating and legislative functions in modernity have now been largely displaced by the new cultural technologies; in Zigmunt Bauman’s felicitous phrase, they have been transformed ‘from legislators to interpreters’.

High print culture could only come into its own, so to speak, through its production and distribution by capitalist technology in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries up until the 1950s and its dissemination through the state-sponsored higher education systems, that is to say, high print culture and its possibilities for grounding radical critique were always imbricated in state and market economy. Thus to call for a defence of an idealised, bookish notion of intellectual radicality and autonomy through print culture ironically reifies what was always an uneasy, partially compromised, ambivalent and more nuanced accommodation to the forces and conditions of socio-cultural and technological modernisation than many radicals will care to admit. But even this limited realm has been overtaken by further mutations in the technological means of social communication - film, early in the twentieth century, and later television and then the internet. This is also the moment of the entry of popular culture into a position of dominance on the national and then global stage. This in no way implies an absolute technological determinism or the disappearance of print culture, but certainly the latter’s limited impact on the formation of citizen subjectivities. Its labours of negativity no doubt provide consolation and a fertile source of ideas – even an academic career, but this hardly equates to a springboard for revolutionary change. This is the impasse in which progressive thought finds itself: how to have an impact on the seemingly inexorable logic and triumphant march of capitalism, but without the failed models of the past, including those of twentieth-century socialism and those which sought to work through the lettered city and the academy.

In spite of the caveats, Cevasco is undoubtedly an expert on Raymond Williams’s work and her books represent an important intervention in the ongoing debates about the significance and the uses of cultural studies. She has done a great service to Brazilian cultural studies by presenting and interpreting Williams’s work in an exemplary way and thus making its full range available for other critics. *Para leer a Raymond Williams*, in particular, deserves to be translated into English, not only because of its depth of insight and its clarity of style and thinking, but also as an instance of a non-metropolitan perspective on one of the most important Western cultural critics of the twentieth century.