

This wonderful compendium makes a major intervention in English Studies and in the teaching of both criticism and critique. Its revival and amendment of the *Keywords* project has been brought to fruition artfully by Colin MacCabe and his various colleagues and collaborators. What I want to say in appreciation of it departs from a particular set of linked concerns which, when combined, amount to the transformation of our political culture and communications: war, technology and the cultivation of ignorance.

I was a little disappointed by the absence of military-related words and concepts from the book. So in response to that absence, I want to begin by summoning the image of Raymond Williams returning to Cambridge University after his formative and distinguished military service in world war 2. It seems worthwhile to remind ourselves of what he says was an abrupt transition from his artillery regiment stationed on the Kiel Canal, to the calmer yet steeper hierarchy of college life.

Williams informed the readers of the original *Keywords* volume that his project belonged somehow to the end of the war. He was struck in new ways by the capacity of words to divide rather than connect people who “no longer spoke the same language”. His account of that linguistic and cultural discrepancy suggests that the roots of the keywords project lay in shocking experiences of class conflict and class transition that had unfolded during the war and were intensified by England’s institutional and attitudinal changes both inside the military as well as beyond it. The immediate after-effects of war seem to have been critical. They catalysed a new and different political orientation towards the problems posed by culture and its workings which could be observed clearly amid the flux of the postwar political conflict that formalised Britain’s welfare state settlement.

At the most basic level, the reflexive provision of a shared vocabulary might contribute to the emergence of an improved set of civic aspirations. Common language might even provide a stimulus towards common political imagination and solidary energies. We’re told that the original keywords book (was) . . . “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.”¹

Williams' was certainly concerned by "the available and developing meanings of known words" but his project went beyond the problems of vocabulary. He was guided also by "the explicit but as often implicit connections which people were making, again and again, in particular formations of meaning - ways not only of discussing but, at another level of seeing many of our central experiences." These apparently perennial problems had a strong conjunctural resonance. It is helpful to remember that, nearby and at the very same moment, George Orwell was writing *1984*. In that setting, it is particularly instructive to consider the character and fate of Winston's workmate Syme, the "venomously orthodox" philologist and expert in Newspeak who is employed in the Research Department compiling the Eleventh Edition of the Newspeak Dictionary. Syme tells Winston about the scope and likely effects of this important labour.

'We're getting the language into its final shape . . . You think, I dare say, that our chief job is inventing new words. But not a bit of it! We're destroying words—scores of them, hundreds of them, every day. We're cutting the language down to the bone. . . 'Don't you see that the whole aim of Newspeak is to narrow the range of thought? In the end we shall make thoughtcrime literally impossible, because there will be no words in which to express it . . . Even the literature of the Party will change. Even the slogans will change. How could you have a slogan like 'freedom is slavery' when the concept of freedom has been abolished? The whole climate of thought will be different. In fact there will be no thought, as we understand it now. Orthodoxy means not thinking—not needing to think. Orthodoxy is unconsciousness.'

The need for critical and political attention to the constitutive power of language and concepts that can operate on this scale has only increased. The quantity of available information has proliferated in seventy years, but the vocabularies that carry it have contracted. Its ubiquity and the ease of access to it have failed to nurture either a richer civic culture or a more educated polity. To make matters worse, today we are not, as Williams was, *postwar*. Indeed we have been required to adjust to very different conceptions of time that do not divide neatly along *any* line between peace

and war. Mary Dudziak has been right to insist that war-time is now the only time there is.³ It is not the welfare, but the warfare state that supplies an unspoken and continual feature of everyday experience. Security has come to dominate other governmental functions. It saturates the commercial architecture of surveillance capitalism in which public and private interests are characteristically indeterminate and obscure.⁴ This too helps language contract to the dimensions of the attention economy and its psychographic management of our affects and behaviours.

War in new forms, remote, mediated and mediatized, is a continuing and apparently a limitless condition—the unacknowledged yet fundamental mechanism of an ailing, catabolic capitalism. The triumph of public relations--what used to be called propaganda--has made those effects into a central feature of emergent governmental systems that are as hostile to the practice of democratic politics as they are to knowledge and to Enlightenment. Algorithmic governmentality and artificial intelligence are in their emergent phase.⁵

These developments demand acknowledgement of the fact that the wholeness of the whole way of life that underpinned Williams' interventions in the field of social culture, has now been desiccated. That outcome is popularly associated with the challenges that racist, xenophobic, populist civilisationism projects onto aliens and incomers: problems of belonging, hospitality and heteroculture and their attendant difficulties of translation.

I have argued for a long time that the common sense interpretation of these morbid symptoms masks the obvious conclusion that their historical and psychic sources lie elsewhere. They can be found in melancholia and prospective nostalgia; in problems that arise not only from a deficit of *historical* knowledge, but from an orchestrated or *curated* ignorance that has been coupled catastrophically with an induced or “groomed” failure of imagination.

The possibility that this combination characterises our epoch generates more than disenchantment. It triggers fear among the residuum of critical intellectuals and fatigue, or perhaps burnout, among the academics who encounter its social and cultural consequences in their most vivid and corrosive forms.⁶ However, any approach to the latest manifestations of our country's chronic crisis that engages with contemporary culture solely to denounce it, will be as unsatisfactory as the

standard left diagnoses. Those commentaries identify specific experiences of technology with populist and authoritarian government and show how they have been articulated together with an unchecked and unsustainable consumer culture. These observations are frequently combined with jeremiads against the rising tide of stupidity, dumbing down. Without ascending to an unproductively abstract philosophical altitude, I would like to suggest that there are a number of small but promising signs of hope that bear upon the recycling and extension of Williams' original intervention.

The re-historicising of words and the enhancement of the concepts they incubate and nurture are urgent gestures in the teeth of today's neo-fascism, nihilism and techno-populism. All those formations exult in ignorance and collude in the destruction of educational institutions. They all place distinctive pressures upon language. Resistance against them comes in many forms, of which this noble book is one. Similar initiatives have appeared recently not least in the field of environmental education and the infowar that surrounds climate catastrophe and its denial. Robert Macfarlane, another Cambridge academic who, though he does not explicitly acknowledge Williams, has been particularly influential in salvaging and cultivating a new familiarity and literacy with regard to political ecology and nature. Macfarlane's *The Lost Words* demonstrates both the strengths and the limitations of this kind of strategy. His core argument is that the disappearance of words for plants and animals in our immediate environment affects our ability to imagine and respond to the crisis of the biosphere. Aimed at young readers, the work retains a pronounced class accent, but it has been institutionally situated with care and combined productively with an appealing visual culture. It remains more or less comfortably complicit with the "art gallery" problem in which nature reappears primarily as an object of aesthetic contemplation and connoisseurship.

Of course, the loss of words and the failure of imagination are much more than matters of language. They are also effects of the stress that emerged from the obligations of transparent self-making in an anti-social media ecology which appears significantly to have diminished and impoverished the human capacity to *communicate* experience at all.⁷

That inability to communicate is a secondary symptom of the attack on language that results from its shrinkage and flattening, from the muting effects that arise with the dominance of visual and iconic forms of communication and from the attendant rise of *functional* illiteracy as part of the management, assembly and “grooming” of ignorance.⁸ Britain’s National Literacy Trust argues that around fifteen per cent, or 5.1 million adults in England, can be described as *functionally* illiterate. This category means that they would be unable to pass an English GCSE and that they have literacy levels at or below those expected (in this test obsessed regime) of a successful 11-year-old. These adults would be able accurately and independently to comprehend short, straightforward texts on familiar topics and to obtain information from everyday sources. However, reading information from unfamiliar sources, or on unfamiliar topics, would cause them significant problems. The implications of this for analysis of the EU vote do not need to be spelled out.

The democratic tradition of education implicitly celebrated by Williams ought, I suppose, to be a durable and supple thing which can be made to speak to new circumstances without being either betrayed or abbreviated. Our commitment to its adaptation, renewal and ongoing relevance may reside in identifying the creation, manipulation and projection of ignorance as the core of a discrete social and cultural problem that is still *just about* amenable to political resolution.

Understanding the historical, and economic significance of the private and public forces now allied in the systematic work of keeping people ignorant necessitates critical exercises in the emergent field of Agnatology--the study of how ignorance is managed, (re)produced, and politicized. The pairing of power with knowledge is succeeded theoretically here by the coupling of power with ignorance.⁹

The ascendancy of ignorance is a decisive feature of contemporary life and cannot be masked by technological novelties or the glamour of round-the-clock shopping, interminable trivia and the flow of always eventful, celebrity-saturated surrogates for news that are accessed via the proliferating portals of timeline media.

Anger at the morbid state of this “disgnostic” culture can assume various shapes according what it is being pressed against. If the primary target is accelerated technological change and negative experiences of globalisation as an exported variety of Americanisation, then certain consequences follow. They are likely to be absent

when the same anger yields a desire for the restoration of western culture or the recovery of national greatness and is oriented by yearning for a new political time aimed at taking a country back, purging it of alien influences or restoring the plummeting value of “whiteness” in order to conserve the monopoly of humanity claimed by “white” Europeans and their postcolonial descendants. Like Britain’s narrow vote to leave the EU, The political movements that have vowed to stop Europe’s supposed Islamification and made a target out of immigrants, refugees and sans-papiers, are fuelled by austerity, precariousness, anxiety and fear but they rely upon a deficit of information about the present and concerning Europe’s colonial and imperial past. On the other hand, the victims [and their descendants] of Europe’s colonial crimes often know that bloody history far more intimately than the Europeans who frequently appear to be determined to re-enact it. Historical information is thus more important than ever, even or perhaps especially, when combined with vivid concepts, it can promote the possibility of “working through” the past and resist being turned into the sorts of knowledge amenable to rapidly-clicked transmission on the internet. The fog of PR and the shift towards iconized news and visual communication of choreographed events also make accurate, detailed knowledge of the present harder to acquire. Informational asymmetry disfigures postcolonial Europe’s ailing democracy.

Renewed critical attention to the power of language may be part of the answer. It is not long since Britain’s antiracist movement was able to make a new vocabulary centred on the idea of multi-culture. That idiom is now unspeakable but in Britain at least, we continue to have debates about racism even as the term is being drained of meaning. The effects of a rinsed out vocabulary are being compounded not only by ignorance but also by a further error that views the provision of better information as the fundamental task of critique. Not knowing, is a problem to be remedied. The best possible information is certainly necessary, but it alone will never be sufficient. When we consider these areas of political conflict, we begin to appreciate that the wrongness of the information at hand, just like the errors of raciology in general, is in fact its essence. The forces of progress, justice and democracy will not triumph in this case simply as a result of deploying more accurate epistemological explanations of the errors of racial science or fear-inducing population demography, immigration

statistics or the anthropological habits of strangers ranged across the digiscape and the expanding “human terrain” of social media. The racist mentalities on which today’s authoritarian populism relies, will never be undone simply by the corrective provision of startling new facts. Rather than either information or knowledge, it is a constellation of new concepts that we lack. Only a forensic archaeology of the accelerating decline of the English language will enable us to develop them and then, hopefully to apply a brake.

¹ Raymond Williams *Keywords* (revised edition) Oxford University Press, 1983, p.15.

² George Orwell *Nineteen Eighty-Four* Penguin Books, 1954, pp. 44-45 passim.

³ Mary L. Dudziak *Wartime An Idea, Its History, Its consequences*. Oxford University Press, 2013.

⁴ Shoshana Zuboff *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The fight for a human future at the new frontier of power* Profile Books, 2019. See especially the section “Big Other and the rise of Instrumentarian Power” pp.376-398. Jocelyn Wills *Tug of War: Surveillance Capitalism, Military Contracting and the rise of the Security State* McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2017. David Patrikarakos *War In 140 Characters: How Social Media is reshaping Conflict in the Twenty-First Century* Basic Books, 2017. Paulo Gerbaudo *The Digital Party: Political Organisation and Online Democracy* Pluto Press, 2019.

⁵ Nanjala Nyabola, *Digital Democracy, Analogue Politics/How The Internet Era is Transforming Politics in Kenya* (London: Zed Books, 2018). Amanda Taub and Max Fisher, “Facebook Fueled Anti-Refugee Attacks in Germany, New Research Suggests” *New York Times* August 21, 2018. See also

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/topics/cpz72doxmm7t/vote-leave-spending-investigation> last accessed April 24, 2019.

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Carole Cadwalladr, “The great British Brexit robbery: how our democracy was hijacked” *Observer* May 7, 2017, p. 45.

<https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2017/may/07/the-great-british-brexit-robbery-hijacked-democracy>

⁶ Byung-Chul Han *The Burnout Society*, trans. Erik Butler, Stanford University Press, 2015; and *Psychopolitics: Neoliberalism and New Technologies of Power* trans. Erik Butler London: Verso, 2018.

⁷ Walter Benjamin had discussed the effects of the first world war on the communicative capabilities of returning soldiers in his essay “The Storyteller” reprinted in *Illuminations* trans. Harry Zohn, ed. Hannah Arendt, Fontana 1977, p.84. On another occasion it would be good to link Benjamin’s view of war, shock and communication to the appearance of related themes in Williams and Orwell.

⁸ *Agnotology: The Making and Unmaking of Ignorance*, edited by Robert N. Proctor and Londa Schiebinger, Stanford University Press, 2008. See also Schiebinger’s *Plants And Empire*, Harvard University Press, 2004; Robert N. Proctor *Cancer Wars* Harper Collins, 1996; and Shannon Sullivan and Nancy Tuana *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance* SUNY Press, 2007.

⁹ See how Dick Hebdige develops the concept of “Disgnosis” in two essays. “Contemporizing ‘subculture’: 30 years to life” *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 15, 3, pp. 399-424; “Dis-gnosis: Disney and the retooling of knowledge, art, culture, life, etcetera.” in: Budd M. and Kirsch M. H. (eds.) *Re-thinking Disney: Private Control, Public Dimensions*. Wesleyan University Press, 2005, pp. 37–52.