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Raymond Williams' Term 'Structures of Feeling': A Critique of both Determination and Infinity

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Abstract:

This research paper enquires the critical nature of the term 'Structures of Feeling' given by the famous cultural-critic Raymond Williams. Through the conceptualization of temporary-essence as against the lived experience and practical-consciousness, Williams has dialogued with both- the modernist attitude of fixing meaning and reality, and the eternal delay of infinite meanings. This term, in nutshell, provides the crux of his whole theoretical work. Hence, the analysis of this term enables the reader to recognize, to some extent, the theoretical stance he bears in the world of theory and philosophy, that is the middle path between Marxism and Poststructural/Postmodern theories.

Keywords: Emergence, Pre-Emergence, Practical Consciousness, lived Experience, Essence, and Presence.

Raymond Williams first used this term in his work *A Preface to Film* (with Michael Orrom, 1954), developed in *The Long Revolution* (1961), and further extended and used elaborately throughout his work, particularly in *Marxism and Literature* (1977). *Drama from Ibsen to Brecht* and *Politics and Letters* are his other notable works defining this term.

For reaching the theoretical implications of the term, it should, right from beginning of this discussion, be described in terms of its most basic meaning/s. Williams himself has used a detailed list of words in order to denote what is very abstract and complex in its nature, and thus incapable of being fully captured by the single term he used for it: 'Structures of feeling'. The use of other terms by Williams in this regard helps us in tracing the exact meaning of this term, thereby allowing us to cope up with the problem of 'evasive' nature of this term. These terms can be listed as: 'presence', 'social experience', 'practical consciousness', 'living presence', 'experience', 'lived sense of life', 'emergence', 'pre-emergence', 'alive', 'active', 'not feeling against thought but feeling as thought and thought as felt', 'diverse and specific actualities',

‘specific present’, ‘known complexities’, ‘experienced tensions’, ‘shifts and uncertainties’, ‘the intricate forms of unevenness and confusion’, ‘immediate and actual significance of being’, ‘actively lived in real relationships’, ‘tension, unease, stress, displacement, and latency’, ‘the moment of conscious comparison not yet come, often not even coming’, ‘mixed experiences’, ‘lived practical consciousness’, ‘feeling and thinking, which is indeed social and material, but each in an embryonic phase’, ‘style’, ‘private or personal but social or general’, ‘general change’, ‘changes of presence’, ‘characteristic elements of impulse, restraint and tone’, ‘affective elements of consciousness’, ‘emergent, connecting and having dominant characteristics and its own specific hierarchies’, ‘social and material as well as private and individual’, ‘cultural hypothesis’, ‘true social content with present and affective aspects’, ‘art forms and conventions as indicators of it’, ‘social experience in solution’, ‘less immediately available’, ‘structured pre-formation, which is at the very edge of semantic availability’, ‘unarticulated’, and ‘lived tension’ etc.

Understanding and analysis of the set of expressions Raymond Williams uses to clarify the meaning of the term ‘structure of feeling’ lets us feel ‘the lived experience’ of Williams himself-- a ‘tension’ or an ‘unease’ he felt while partially rejecting and accepting Marxist and Poststructuralist perspectives both. Though his whole work produces an analysis of both, the term ‘structures of feeling’ is the strongest projection of this kind of thinking. On the one hand, the term catches a dialogue (revision) with the old Marxist perspective, which reduces alive experiences to finished and fixed forms(class etc.), on the other, it strongly rejects poststructuralist deconstructive notion of absence, silence or eternal postponement of meaning. Williams declares, right in the beginning of the chapter “Structures of Feeling” in his book *Marxism and Literature*, that the tendency of reducing culture and society into “past tense” or “finished products” is the strongest barrier to the recognition of human cultural activity (128). Whole of the Marxist analysis rests on this sort of reduction of ‘social’ to ‘fixed’ categories of class and determined and single path of the history of human development and growth. Against this single and continuous-path of history is the contingent and diverse path of history suggested by poststructuralists. Williams finds faultlines in both-- ‘permanent’ location of meaning and feeling in universal time and space and no grounding for it at all. He perceives humans as ‘existing’ in some specific time and space, the history of whose ‘lived experience’ can be documented in articulated form. The lived sense of past can be observed and analyzed in its

‘articulated’ form in the documented or recorded culture. Human history and cultural tradition is revised through selection and re-selection, thus forming a general body of culture and tradition. The operation of selective tradition provides continuity to the path of history of human development (*The Analysis of Culture* 55). The analysis of such articulations/documented human experience is the analysis of the history of ‘existence’ of something before articulation, which was ‘lived’ and ‘felt’ at some particular time and place. Williams focus on “recorded communication that outlives its bearers (*The Analysis of Culture* 53)” and his denial of giving approval to ‘ideal’ culture is an emphasis on the material nature of the abstraction he conceptualizes in the term ‘structures of feeling’. Thus, instead of reducing the ‘lived’ sense of life of some period into the ‘dead’ of the past or the ‘absence’ in eternity, Williams focuses on the analysis of its ‘presence’, ‘lived-ness’, and its sense of ‘being’. Analyzing ‘articulated/documented’ for ‘unarticulated’ is suggestive of Williams’ synthetic approach.

Raymond Williams defines this term as material and social as well as a ‘pre-emergent’ abstraction. He takes middle path in defining this term. On the one hand, he admits materiality of everything, even the abstract pre-emergent impulse or experience of persons taken together, on the other, declares the presence of a pre-form of articulated experience in its abstract form. Presence of an ‘abstract’ with material features is something that epitomizes the whole of his gaze on both traditional Marxism and Poststructuralism. Williams’ own defining words can be read in this relation:

...it [structure of feeling] is as firm and definite as ‘structure’ suggests, yet it operates in the most delicate and least tangible parts of our activity. In one sense, this structure of feeling is the culture of a period: it is the particular living result of all the elements in the general organization. (*The Analysis of Culture* 53)

Received articulations of social forms, which are explicit in their nature, were the only target of analysis for classical Marxism. Williams’, taking a leap ahead to this old version of analyzing works of art in their social context, stresses on the ‘actively lived’ part of these articulated, fixed formations and institutions; that part which is not yet articulated. He says, “they[social forms] become social consciousness only when they are lived actively in real relationships and moreover in relationships which are more than systematic exchanges between fixed units (*Marxism and Literature* 130)”. Here, he uses the term “practical consciousness” for

the term 'structures of feeling', which "is always more than handling of fixed forms and units (*Marxism and Literature*130)." He further talks about a "frequent tension between the received interpretation and practical experience", which is "often an unease, a stress, a displacement, a latency, the moment of conscious comparison not yet come, often not even coming (*Marxism and Literature*130)." So, there is something, that is not caught by the fixed forms, something that is left outside, which is referred to as "a tension, an unease" by Williams. This tension is the lived experience of some particular time, actually lived by the people of that time, which is against, or an addition to the meaning caught by earlier articulations. So a sense of 'change' is discernable here, which is 'general and social in its nature, because it is not the "selective individual choices" only but the individual choices forming a 'general' pattern of change in a particular society that is referred to as 'change' or new 'style' in the next generation. Williams seems to give an argument that one signified system of signification cannot sufficiently capture the 'essence' of this 'change', which every generation experiences with change in generation. The fixed signified corresponds to the reality it is formed in, but with change in generation, there is the need to correspond to, and deal with, a new kind of reality. Signifiers need to be flexible. There exists a "tension" between the old signifiers corresponding to single signifieds and the new experience of present generation. This 'tension' is felt by every new generation, which does not find old signifiers referring to its experience, and yet it does not have formed new signifiers or shaken the fixity of old 'stable' signs. This unarticulated tension is what is called by Williams 'structures of feeling'. Classical Marxism advocated the analysis of fixed formations and signs prior to this new and present experience. Such an analysis remains incapable of analyzing the practical experience of a new generation. For visiting the 'alive lived-ness' of a new generation, this 'tension' is to be analyzed, which is a temporary 'presence', but not an 'absence' or a 'silence'. Thus, revising old Marxism, Williams declares 'temporariness' of 'presence', which changes with the change in every generation. That is why every new generation does not find interest in the old cultural forms and meanings. For articulating this tension between "the received interpretation" and "the practical experience" of new generations, there is always the need to revise old signs and their signifying systems. New generations need to articulate their experience in their own terms, but definitely a 'continuity' with past is to be observed in signifying their newly acquired 'presence'. So, Williams' talking about this 'newly acquired presence', which is temporary in nature, is what actually tells us about Williams' conscious

effort of rejecting poststructural belief in 'no presence' at all. Criticizing the eternal process of delay of meaning, he negates the anti-humanist approach of poststructural thought in the following terms:

Yet the actual alternative to the received and produced fixed forms is not silence: not the absence, the unconscious, which bourgeois culture has mythicized. It is a kind of feeling and thinking which is indeed social and material, but each in an embryonic phase before it can become fully articulate and defined exchange. Its relations with the already articulate and defined are then exceptionally complex. (*Marxism and literature*131)

In these terms, Williams revises old Marxist belief in 'fixity' and 'permanent presence', and also challenges new poststructuralist discourse of no presence at all. He designates a bourgeois politics of late-capitalism in the latter, and provides us with a 'fighting space' against it in the form of a 'temporal presence'-- a 'structure of feeling'. Williams' rejection of 'one--signified closed' position of Marxists is not for giving space of acceptance to 'never-ended openness' of a signifier, which does not become a resting-place for any meaning/essence. Instead of favoring this sort of poststructural deconstructive 'essence-less' attitude toward the process of signification, Williams has offered a more alive and vibrant view-point, which believes in 'being' though not in stagnant and permanent sense.

He did so by analyzing the dichotomies of past/present, private/social, alive/dead, fixed/moving, defined and articulated/unarticulated, conscious/not yet conscious, known/unknown, social/individual etc., few of which can be further talked about. The dichotomy of past/present, out of them, is meant to reject the known and stagnant meanings of formed institutions and artefacts, which are incapable of catching real, vibrant and lived experience. Dichotomy of Private or individual or personal/social is raised by him to propound the idea of 'collective individual' forming a shared and general 'social'. A gathering or accumulation of such 'private' choices, if they are shared and they form general pattern of choices in a particular society, can be termed as 'social' or 'lived social experience'. This type of dealing with private, personal or individual as social is a clear-cut diversion from the Marxist conception of individual and social as separate categories.

Generally speaking, Williams' idea of 'structures of feeling' is a critique of Marxist "reduction of social to fixed forms (*Marxism and Literature* 129)" or from "terms of analysis to terms of substance (129)". He finds faults with the earlier Marxist method of 'social analysis', which deals with the analysis of known/dead/fixed/experienced and articulated, and claims that known complexities, experienced tensions, shifts, and uncertainties are against reduction, and hence, this sort of social analysis. These "changes of presence (132)", "emergent" or "pre-emergent (132)", which are 'reduction-less social', are suggested to be analyzed by the critics of cultural studies. Along with the strong advocacy of the analysis of the 'lived-experience' of the period, the negation of the idea of sign as 'without any reference' (deconstructive approach) provides us with a more humanistic approach or hope of finding a temporally and spatially located meaning and 'presence'.

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