

Keywords as method

Marie Moran 

University College Dublin, Ireland

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Abstract

This short essay seeks to restore the keywords approach initiated by Williams to a more central place within the cultural materialist paradigm he also developed. Combining Williams' cultural materialist account of language with the practical orientation of *Keywords*, it sketches a way of developing the keywords approach as a method of sociocultural analysis. Drawing on some practical examples, it offers 'keywords-as-method' as a means of carrying out a historicist and materialist study of the relationship of linguistic to social change, that goes beyond the simple glossary of terms approach that has thus far limited the explanatory and critical potential of *Keywords*. In so doing, I hope to contribute to the renewal of Williamsian scholarship that has coincided with the centenary of his birth.

Keywords

Cultural Marxism, cultural materialism, identity, keywords, practice, Raymond Williams

Introduction

Within the recent renewal of attention to the work of Raymond Williams, there has been a particular revival of interest in the 'keywords' form of analysis he initiated, with several new books published on the subject (see, for example, Garrett, 2018; Leary, 2018; MacCabe and Yanacek, 2018; Parker, 2017). These more recent efforts to update 'keywords' for new times are nonetheless not the first, and since Williams published *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* in 1976 (with a revised edition in 1983), there has been a steady stream of efforts to identify and analyse those words whose evolving meanings seem somehow to capture, express and legitimise the politics and sensibility of their sociohistorical context (Bennett et al., 2005; Burgett and Hendler,

Corresponding author:

Marie Moran, University College Dublin, Dublin 4, Ireland.

Email: marie.moran@ucd.ie

2007; Levine, 2007; Smith et al., 2006; Wolfreys, 2004).¹ These books provide a valuable inventory of powerful, complex and ideologically loaded words associated with and illuminative of the context with which they are bound up, showing how our everyday vocabulary often works to naturalise or promote class interests and other relations of inequality. But, in emulating closely the format of the original – a short introduction plus how-to-use guide, followed by alphabetically arranged entries for consultation – many of these newer texts do not, to my mind, fully realise the unique promise of *Keywords*. That promise was to explore, not just the ideologically inflected meaning change of individual words, but the whole way in which language change generally, and meaning change specifically, forms part of and provides insight into the nature of social and cultural transformation. As Williams (1983 [1976]) saw it, a keyword demonstrates how ‘some important social and historical processes occur *within* language’ (p. 22, emphasis in original), and thus investigation of these keywords can tell us much about the changing time in which they came to prominence. As Bennett et al. (2005: xvii) explain in their introduction,

For Williams the point was not merely that the meanings of words change over time but that they change in relationship to changing political, social and economic situations and needs. While rejecting the idea that you could describe that relationship in any simple or universal way, he was convinced it did exist – and that people do struggle in their use of language to give expression to new experiences of reality.

Of course, from one perspective it is unfair to criticise these newer ‘keywords’ texts for offering what Williams himself essentially provided – a glossary of the ideologically-laden terms of a particular historical moment. But at the same time, we should remember that *Keywords* was originally offered as an appendix to *Culture and Society*; that it was conceived of and intended as a companion exposition of those key terms that were centrally bound up with the bigger social shifts he traced – captured most famously for Williams in the changing meanings and uses of the word ‘culture’. The unassuming but wonderfully rich introduction to *Keywords* itself provides a link between the keywords project and the overarching analytical paradigm Williams was to develop, which he came to call ‘cultural materialism’. In this short essay, written to mark the centenary of Williams’s birth, I propose to return to and resurrect this cultural materialist orientation in order to develop more fulsomely what I have come to think of as ‘keywords-as-method’; that is, to explore how we might use the power of the keywords approach for a deep study of the relationship of linguistic to social change, without stopping at or being confined by a simple glossary of terms. In so doing, I will reflect upon my own work in which I develop this approach, including a focus on the keywords ‘identity’ (Moran, 2015, 2018, 2020) ‘student experience’ (Pötschulat et al., 2020) and ‘elites’ (Moran, 2022).

Cultural materialism

To fully realise the potential of *Keywords*, we must understand the explanatory paradigm in which it is embedded. Developed over the course of his writings, the mature Williams came to refer to this as ‘cultural materialism’. Reflecting on this development, he noted,

It took me thirty years to move from that received Marxist theory . . . to the position I now hold, which I define as ‘cultural materialism’. The emphases of the transition – on the production (rather than reproduction) of meanings and values by specific social formations, on the primacy of language and communication as formative social forces, and on the complex interaction both of institutions and forms and of social relationships and formal conventions . . . [allowed me to reach] a theory of culture as a (social and material) productive process, and of specific practices, of ‘arts’, as social uses of material means of production. (Williams, 1976: 88)

As I have discussed in detail elsewhere (McGuigan and Moran, 2014; Moran, 2015), there are three key features to Williams’s cultural materialism that distinguish it from both the culturalist method of ‘close reading’ of English literature and the materialist method of Marxist analysis that Williams drew on and wrote against. First, against elitism, there is the insistence that ‘culture is ordinary’ (Williams, 1958). This attention to working-class or ‘ordinary’ rather than ‘high’ cultural forms, and their treatment as legitimate subjects of cultural analysis, though dramatic in its day, is now an established hallmark of cultural studies. In Williams’s (1989 [1958]) work, however, the particular emphasis on the co-production of the ‘shared meanings and directions’ of a society (p. 4), available and known at that social level, but also internalised and remade at the level of each individual mind, was to provide the basis for the distinctive methodology of cultural materialism.

Second, against idealism, there is the insistence that culture is material. From early on, Williams (1989 [1958]) had argued that the production of meanings and values that constitutes culture involves the ‘testing of these in experience, the making of *new* observations, comparisons, and meanings’ (p. 4). This allowed him to develop the claim that ideas and meanings do not arrive ‘from above’, so to speak, but are produced in and through the practices and lived experiences of everyday life. The cultural, therefore, is not a set of ‘isolable’ meanings, ‘occupying merely the top of our minds’; nor is it a simple reflex to or reflection of the ‘real’ material activity taking place elsewhere in the economy (Williams, 1973: 9). Instead, it is part of, and helps to constitute, the material reality of our lives – it is ‘built into our living’ (Williams, 1973: 9). This put a decisive challenge to the standard Marxist account of culture – the irony of which, Williams (1979) was quick to note, was that in its relegating of culture to the sphere of the super-structural or ideal, its conceptions of culture and ideology exhibited ‘not so much . . . an excess but . . . a *deficit* of materialism’ (p. 350). This was what Williams remedied in his resolutely materialist account of culture.

Williams (1977) was also critical of the materialist ‘realism’ in Marxism, which undermined what he viewed as the ‘controlling power of ideas’ (p. 59). This brings us to a third feature of cultural materialism, which, against ‘mechanical materialism’, is the insistence that culture has causal power. It is precisely in virtue of their materiality – that is, their embodiment, animation and realisation in social behaviour, practices and institutions – that language, ideas, values, beliefs, stories, discourses and so on are *productive*. What we think of as the cultural, therefore, has a causal power that cannot be separated from nor reduced to this material embodiment. As I concluded in *Identity and Capitalism* (Moran, 2015: 63), ‘[C]ulture can be a material, causal force, and ideas grip the minds of people in the cultural field precisely because culture is not some idealised sphere but

exists as ideas made manifest in everyday practice: a '*realized signifying system*' (Williams, 1981: 207). As a key paradigm within Marxist approaches to culture, then, cultural materialism does not so much challenge the proposition that material forces drive history as reconsider what may legitimately be considered a material force, by construing 'culture' as itself a form of material production.

Language as productive social practice: a cultural materialist reading of *Keywords*

These three foundational claims took shape in Williams' understanding of the relationship of culture to society, and of ideational to social change. Where other writers on this relationship, before and after Williams, have been persuaded by notions of a 'informing spirit' (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005; Weber, 1976 [1930]) or a 'governing rationality' (Brown, 2015; Foucault, 2004), Williams (1973) was more convinced by the power of practical experience and activity, evident in, among other things, his account of 'an effective dominant culture' as that 'set of meanings and values which as they are experienced as practices appear as reciprocally confirming' (p. 9). In this emphasis on practice and experience, there are important alignments between his work and that of Pierre Bourdieu (1977) who indeed referred to his whole sociological oeuvre as a 'theory of practice'. Williams, nonetheless, was more attentive to the practical role of language in this relationship between culture and society, and ideational and social change.

In this regard, Williams focused not only on the social and material conditions for language production, but also on the way in which language existed itself as constitutive material activity.

'Signification, the social creation of meanings through the use of formal signs', wrote Williams (1977), is 'a practical material activity; it is indeed, literally, a means of production' (p. 38). Challenging the Marxist emphasis on labour as the means through which 'man makes his own history' (sic), Williams (1977) suggested that an equally constitutive activity in making our own history is our 'practical consciousness' (p. 38), that must be 'seen from the beginning as part of the human material social process, and its products in "ideas" . . . as much part of this process as material products themselves' (p. 59–60). On this basis, Williams argued for recognition of 'an active *social language*' (p. 37, emphasis in original), which cannot be understood in purely idealist terms, nor as 'a simple "reflection" or "expression" of "material reality"'. 'What we have, rather', he writes,

is a grasping of this reality through language, which as practical consciousness is saturated by and saturates all social activity, including productive activity. And since this grasping is social and continuous . . . it occurs within an active and changing society . . . language is the articulation of this active and changing experience; a dynamic and articulated social presence in the world. (Williams, 1977: 37–38)

This cultural materialist understanding of language quietly informs and animates the keywords approach that Williams was at the same time developing. Routinely underestimated as simple iteration of Williams' earlier and less developed 'culturalist' thinking

(Inglis, 1995; Milner, 2002), it is possible instead to view *Keywords* as practical exposition of the more sophisticated cultural materialist philosophy he developed, that, when read alongside it, gives rise to a fruitful method of socio-cultural analysis.

Looking, then, at the central characteristics of keywords, we find that keywords are deeply familiar words, which include ‘strong, difficult and persuasive words in everyday usage’ as well as ‘words which, beginning in particular specialized contexts, have become quite common in descriptions of wider areas of thought and experience’ (Williams, 1983 [1976]: 14). There is no general puzzlement over the meaning of these words; on the contrary, their meaning seems self-evident, obvious, accompanied by a general sense that ‘everyone knows’ what they mean. But such familiarity masks what is in fact a deep lexical and semantic complexity, that Williams notes is both particular and relational, synchronic and diachronic (cf. Moran, 2015: 31–32). For behind such familiarity, he argues, we find

a history and complexity of meanings; conscious changes, or consciously different uses; innovation, obsolescence, specialization, extension, overlap, transfer; or changes which are masked by a nominal continuity so that the words which seem to have been there for centuries, with continuous general meanings, have come in fact to express radically different or radically variable, yet sometimes hardly noticed, meanings and implications of meaning. (Williams, 1983 [1976]: 17)

The problems of meaning that characterise a keyword are thus historically and contextually specific and cannot be resolved by reference to a dictionary or glossary of terms, which, at any rate, often do not capture fully the contemporary breadth or evolving intricacies of use. As Williams (1983 [1976]) wrote of his ur-keyword, ‘culture’, ‘the complexity . . . is not finally in the word but in the problems which its variations of use significantly indicate’ (pp. 91–92).

These characteristics of a keyword provide a route into the historical, genealogical method that Williams uses in their analysis. It is on the grounds that their complexity is often hidden behind a façade of familiarity that Williams (1983 [1976]) suggests it is a useful exercise to ‘pick out certain words, of an especially problematical kind, and to consider, for the moment, their own internal development and structures’ (p. 23). Here Williams (1983 [1976]) is especially attentive to the persistence and continuity of older meanings, and to the way in which ‘earlier and later senses coexist, or become actual alternatives in which problems of contemporary belief and affiliation are contested’ (p. 22). He also attends to the relational meanings, that is, the connections people were making between different clusters of words that suggested to Williams (1983 [1976]) new ‘ways not only of discussing but at another level of seeing many of our central experiences’ (p. 15). But since these meanings and relationships, he argues, ‘are typically diverse and variable, within the structures of particular social orders and the processes of social and historical change’ (Williams, 1983 [1976]: 22), ‘other kinds of (deliberately social and historical) analysis remain necessary’ (Williams, 1983 [1976]: 21).

Crucially, then, as well as uncovering and tracing the changing and conflicting meanings behind the ‘nominal continuity’ of the word, the whole force of Williams’s cultural materialist orientation is to urge us to look, too, to the context for their use, and to

examine the changing historical and social forces that might have provided the impetus for such semantic evolution, creating the need for a new way of describing and engaging with a reality that had not hitherto existed. Echoing in more concrete terms the central propositions of his deliberately cultural materialist account of language as a form of social production as set out in *Marxism and Language* (Williams, 1977), Williams (1983 [1976]) posits that what is at stake in *Keywords* is

an exploration of the vocabulary of a crucial area of social and cultural discussion . . . [that exists] as a shaping and reshaping, in real circumstances and from profoundly different and important points of view: a vocabulary to use, to find our ways in, to change as we find it necessary to change it, as we go on making our own language and history. (pp. 24–25)

The onus, then, on the analyst concerned with ‘keywords as method’ is to show how the meanings of certain words change and become useful only in terms of the more general practices and beliefs active in a particular sociohistorical context, and, in line with an understanding of language as a form of social production, to investigate how the developing meanings and uses offer new possibilities for engaging in social action and organising social relations.

‘Keywords as Method’ in practice

What, then, would a more substantive cultural materialist investigation that relies on the ‘keyword as method’ approach involve? Clearly, it suggests that the analytical focus should be on the changing meanings and senses of a keyword, identified according to the characteristics outlined above, *within the material, historical contexts of its use*. In practical terms, this means identifying the period in which the meaning change took place, and then searching catalogues, magazines, books, manifestos, political and policy documents, corporate and institutional literature, new and traditional media, and more, for evidence of transitional, emergent and consolidating senses, noting who used these words, in what context, with what ambition, and with what effects.² As Williams (1983 [1976]) notes, such historical semantics do not involve an emphasis ‘only on historical origins and developments but also on the present – present meanings, implications and relationships – as history’ (p. 23). This means ongoing and contemporaneous linguistic changes can be treated within the historicist method too. The requirement to access actual uses of a keyword, in real circumstances, implies a documentary method, which Williams (1961) explicitly advocated in *The Long Revolution* – not as a simple means of gathering data but rather as the best means of capturing what he called ‘the structure of feeling’, the ‘felt sense of the quality of life at a particular time and place: a sense of the ways in which the particular activities combined into a way of thinking and living’ (p. 63). Within such analysis, he claims, ‘a key-word . . . is pattern’ (Williams, 1961), and tracing the pattern provides important insights into the interests, activities and evaluations that structure and animate that period. Here, the developed cultural materialist philosophy encourages digging deeper into the context, and asking, what *else* was going on where this change of meaning started to manifest and then consolidate? *Why* did a keyword emerge when it did, and what this has to do with the changing shape of capitalist

societies in which it came to prominence? And what new practices and experiences are being enabled and shaped by this emergent and novel use of language?

I will conclude with some illustrative examples from my own work. In my exploration of identity politics in capitalist societies (Moran, 2015), a keywords analysis led to the startling discovery that identity, particularly as it is elaborated in the associated categories of ‘personal’ and ‘social’ identity, is a relatively new concept, emerging into Western thought, politics and culture only in the second half of the 20th century.³ Further developing the keywords-as-method approach outlined here, I showed moreover that these new senses emerged and became useful in particular socio-historical contexts. The personal sense, signifying the experience of being a unique person with distinctive characteristics, evolved in contexts of consumption, where it became useful for elaborating a sense of individuality in a mass consumer society (though quickly ending up as a focus of and motivation for consumption itself). Meanwhile, the social sense, signifying meaningful membership of a particular social group, emerged in the so-called new social movements of race and gender of the 1960s and 1970s, where it offered a means of mobilising against the specificity of group oppression while also celebrating group-based differences. This development also led to the now commonplace but historically very recent tendency to refer to different social categories, most typically gender, race, sexuality and religion, as different ‘identities’ themselves. As I claim in *Identity and Capitalism* – for some, controversially – ‘there was no identity before identity politics’. This analysis challenges conventional histories that claim the people have always ‘had’ identities, and that the emergence of identity politics simply politicised these. In contrast, the keywords-as-method approach reveals that in response to a range of economic and political pressures, ‘identity’ has come to function as a modern classificatory technology that draws on older, suppressed meanings of ‘identity’ as sameness to offer a particular essentialist way of construing personhood and grouphood, with a range of complex and sometimes competing effects in the capitalist societies in which it remains highly active in both political and commercial terms (Moran, 2018, 2020).

In current research, I am applying a keywords-as-method approach to explore the competing uses of the concept of ‘elites’ across left and right-wing forms of anti-elitist sentiment, examining how the concept offers a historically specific way of framing and shaping concerns about class, merit, hierarchy and inequality in capitalist societies (Moran, 2022). Finally, in a collaborative study of concept of ‘the student experience’ in British university contexts, a keywords-as-method analysis has revealed the concept to work as an aspirational membership category that encourages and obfuscates a market logic in contemporary student behaviours while also, through its reification in university policy, enabling the scramble for its attainment and management in an increasingly competitive and metrics-driven university sector (Pötschulat et al., 2020).

Methodologically, in each case, these difficult words and concepts are not barriers to social scientific analysis as is often assumed to be the case (cf. Brubaker and Cooper, 2000), but rather, properly mined, offer a unique insight into the social changes with which the new and sometimes conflicting uses of these words are bound up. In this respect, a ‘keyword’ functions as a ‘key to a cipher’ (Durant, 2006: 3), promising to unlock a wealth of sociological information on culturally mediated and inflected social change, within a cultural materialist paradigm that insists that we should not, in an

idealist fashion, understand concepts only in relation to other concepts, but rather, crucially, in relation to the material, practical world of their use.

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ORCID iD

Marie Moran  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1146-361X>

Notes

1. It has also become commonplace in the social sciences to note that a particular word or phrase under investigation is a 'keyword' in the sense intended by Williams, and to thereafter offer a short historical etymology that is often abandoned in the analysis that follows.
2. The digitalisation of almost everything makes this project so much easier than it was even a decade ago.
3. Prior to this point, the word identity was used in a much narrower sense to refer to the sameness of an entity to itself or its continuity as a self-same entity over time.

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Biographical note

Marie Moran is an assistant professor in Equality Studies at UCD, where she is also director of the Equality Studies Research Centre. She is author of *Identity and Capitalism* (Sage, 2015) and is currently working on two further books, *Inequality in the 21st Century* (Polity), and *Elites in Populist Times* (Verso).