



– Call for Papers –

## **Beyond Crisis – Reassessing Raymond Williams’ Cultural Materialism**

**International Conference at the University of Potsdam, Germany**

19 - 21 January 2018

During the last decade a series of political crises has deeply unsettled parliamentary democracies in the Global North – from the banking crisis in 2008 followed by the collapse of several European economies to the rise of right wing political movements across Europe which culminated in the UK leaving the EU and the election of Donald Trump as president of the United States in 2016. 2017 will be another decisive year for Europe, with national elections taking place in France and Germany. Within a couple of years, or so it seems, the post-war democratic and social consensus has crumbled, leading some commentators to diagnose a ‘democracy fatigue’. But this picture is incomplete. The last decade has also seen the emergence of democratic protests at a scale unknown since the 1970s, a ‘return to the streets’ by movements demanding a socially and economically just democratic politics – many of them connected transnationally, adding up to what might be called a “global justice movement” (Steger). Following the Arab spring, large political protests formed in Europe and North-America including, for example, the Spanish anti-austerity movement 15-M, Occupy Wall Street and its international pendants, organised protests against police racism in the UK and US, large student demonstrations against tuition fees in England and, most recently, nationwide protest rallies in the US like the Women’s March on Washington.

Raymond Williams’ cultural materialism has been foundational for Cultural Studies as a cross-disciplinary field. In the current climate of crisis, his work has much to offer, because it stresses the historical openness of social processes and the agency of citizens. Influenced by the humanist literary tradition of F.R. Leavis and various strands of Marxist theory (from Benjamin to Gramsci) Williams became a leading figure of literary and cultural sociology in Britain. In his historical studies *Culture and Society* (1958) and *The Long Revolution* (1961) which gained him international recognition he traced the profound cultural changes and social progress brought about by collective democratic struggles. In these books he popularised a descriptive, sociological concept of culture that abandoned hierarchical definitions of high versus popular culture. Recognizing the need within cultural analysis to acknowledge the possibility of social agency and change from below, Williams updated the traditional notion of the role of culture in society and developed what he termed a ‘cultural

materialism'. Foreshadowing contemporary debates in affect studies, Williams drew attention to the social and political dimension of emotions. Against other, more sceptical or determinist cultural theory positions, he stressed the emancipatory dimension of art, holding throughout his life a deep interest in drama and fiction as well as in new, emerging cultural practices, subjectivities and identities vis à vis dominant and residual forms.

This conference asks what Raymond Williams' critical legacy has to offer for cultural and literary analysis today. We invite contributions from scholars within the humanities and social sciences that make use of cultural materialist concepts and methods in the tradition of Williams or critically investigate his work to set it in dialogue with other theory traditions and build on it. Contributions may touch upon one or more of the following topics (but can also exceed this preliminary list):

- The dominant, the residual and the emergent in the 21<sup>st</sup> century
- Williams' "structure of feeling" and affect theory
- Keywords: Historical semantics and keywords of the present
- Williams' cultural materialism and recent cultural, social and political theory
- Contemporary crises and the (modern) tragic
- Raymond Williams and the Global South
- Communication, media and the digital

We welcome papers from a diverse range of fields, including for example:

- Cultural History and Memory Studies
- Drama, Film and Media Studies
- Ecocriticism
- Gender Studies
- Postcolonial Studies
- Utopian and Science Fiction Studies

Please send proposals of about 300 words for 20-minute papers to michael.krause@uni-potsdam.de and harald.pittel@uni-potsdam.de by 30 June 2017.

For more information please visit the conference website: <http://www.uni-potsdam.de/beyondcrisis>

Organising team: Michael Krause, Harald Pittel (Department of English and American Studies)