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Structures of Feeling and the Critique of Everyday Life¹

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In Britain, in the 1960s and 70s, an ordinary ‘structure of feeling’ emerged that directed some of the democratic energy that was responsible for the emergence of the welfare state towards taste formations that transformed ideal domestic environments (and real ones of course) into a material landscape that was characterised by informality, private sociability and an individualised sense of freedom. Exemplary in performing this transformation was the taste formation that I want to name after the shop Habitat (it was called Conran in the United States), which, by the time Margaret Thatcher came to power, was in most large towns and cities in the UK, as well as France, Canada, US and Japan. In Japan it was included as part of the Seibu department store; in France it had a flagship store (which is still in operation) as part of the Montparnasse Tower in Paris. Habitat was the domestic aesthetic of the new middle classes in Britain. It was open, informal, it mixed the old and the new. It took simplified modernist designs from Scandinavia and Japan and mixed it with a Mediterranean sense of convivial ways of eating and socialising. In many ways it was left leaning, but this was a new form of liberalism of the left: newly private and laissez faire. It didn’t cause the emergence of neoliberalism as a cultural form, but it did furnish it with an environment where ‘freedom’ has a flavour and tactility, and where there was little room for equality and collectivity as the central political value. To persuade you that this characterisation is useful for understanding changes in everyday life in Britain in the 1960s and 70s and beyond I need to pursue a short theoretical journey.

To my mind there are two aspects of everyday life that have been of particular concern for critical enquiry and both of these concerns have interlinked histories. The first aspect can be summed up by a contradiction: the everyday is what separates us; the pattern of separations is what we share. Everyday life ‘in the modern world’ (as Henri Lefebvre might have qualified it) is thoroughly marked by competition, by forms of individualisation, and by the

commodity form. The effect of this is that everyday life articulates both the 'narcissism of small differences' and the structural inequalities that mark our global class system. On the basis of this we could say that there is no overarching 'everyday life': the hyper-wealthy or the celebrity lead a constitutionally different daily life than the social benefits claimant. From another angle, though, everyday life *is* precisely the overarching orchestration of small differences and structural inequalities that is shared by all, and which constitutes the different social positions of benefit recipients and the hyper-wealthy.

The second important aspect of everyday life that could concern critical enquiry today has been what, after Lauren Berlant and Walter Benjamin, we could call a concern with the 'historical sensorium'. This directs attention, not towards ideologies or the technologies of social reproduction, but to the particular sense of the historical as it is materialised in specific sensual forms. What marks out one period as different from another might not be dramatic changes in belief or in the structures that reproduce social differences but incremental changes in the taste and textures of daily life; in the amount of optimism and pessimism that circulates; in the sounds and sites that spill out from radios and television sets; in the practices of conviviality and anxiety; in the ordinary practices of administered life and democratic operations. The tang and the tone of everyday life might find its conveyors in such banal materials as tables and chairs, in sit-coms (situation comedies) and pop songs. Such materials might constitute the terrain of everyday life and their incremental accumulations might indeed produce and register significant cultural changes.

I imagine that this is what Stuart Hall was describing in one of his last interviews when he is addressing the changes that he saw being consolidated in the 1970s in Britain:

What I thought was that Thatcherism was really the end of one configuration – the post-war settlement – and the beginning of something else. [...] But about my sense of that break, people do ask me, 'How do you know of that?' I can't tell them that. It's not a precise methodology;

it's not something which I apply outside to it. It's interpretive and historical. I have to feel the kind of accumulation of different things coming together to make a new moment, and think, this is a different rhythm. We've lived with one configuration and this is another one.²

There are three words in this statement that I want to draw attention to – they are ordinary words but they are freighted with methodological importance. Stuart Hall has to '*feel* the kind of accumulation', which results in a constellation of '*things*' that produce a different '*rhythm*'. Feelings, things, and rhythms take us to a world that could be described as sensorial, a world that we might need to treat aesthetically – it is a world that pulses and circulates, it is animated by moods and atmospheres, and these moods and atmospheres are embedded in practices, objects and material circumstances.

If we are looking for theoretical tools and approaches for the problematics outlined above – namely an approach that is attentive to the contradictory sense in which everyday life is simultaneously differentiated and over-arching, and an approach that can attend to everyday life at the level of moods, tastes, energies, forms of attention and sensations – then I think we need an approach that is broadly interested in social aesthetics. In this short essay I want to draw particular attention to one approach: the literary historian and critic Raymond Williams's idea of pursuing an understanding of culture in terms of its 'structures of feeling'. I want to do two things with Williams' phrase. The first is to quickly explain it and connect it to a particular anthropological context that it emerges from and mobilises. The second is to acknowledge that while 'structures of feeling' is often used as a phrase for approaching literary culture, it is also a valuable tool for thinking about changes in the world of everyday life at the level of material things – and this emphasis can be found in Williams more autobiographical writing.

The phrase 'structures of feeling' was first used by Williams in 1954 in his jointly authored book (with the documentary filmmaker Michael Orrom) *Preface to Film*.³ In this book he coins the phrase as a way of holding together an argument that insists that dramatic forms are recognised as part of a social

totality, and as providing the most vivid evidence of what that totality is like as a living form (its qualities or attitudes, for instance). As a method of reading poems, films, plays, novels and so on, its aim is to transform finished artworks, that might be available for specialised and atomised interpretation, into unfinished, socially responsive works, that are ‘still’ emerging within the melange of a dynamic culture, and that rather than requiring specialist interpretation, require understanding, contextualising, and connecting. The phrase is intended to direct our attention towards the work’s historicity; its role as documentary evidence of ‘the native’s point of view’ (so to say), for a particular community, at a particular time.

‘Structures of feelings’ are, for Williams, what get remaindered when professionalised specialists get their hands on culture and divide it up into distinct realms of ‘psychology’, ‘society’, ‘economy’, ‘history’, ‘art’ and so on. ‘When one has measured the work against the separable parts’, writes Williams, ‘there yet remains some element for which there is no external counterpart. This element, I believe, is what I have named the *structure of feeling* of a period, and it is only realizable through experience of the work of art itself, as a whole.’⁴

In many ways a structures of feeling approach could be described as ‘social formalism’: thus Williams isn’t necessarily concerned with the explicit content of an argument, but in its ‘approaches and tones’ (indeed ‘tone’ is an insistent descriptor in Williams’s approach). Some of the ‘feeling’ words that Williams uses connect to behavioural attitudes (‘thrift’, ‘sobriety’, ‘piety’, ‘pathos’ and so on). Other words connect to a sense of the tempo of change and the orchestration of energies (‘pulse’, ‘rhythm’, etc.). And some words suggest, metaphorically, some hard-to-pin-down atmosphere or mood (‘colour’, ‘tone’, etc.).

This vocabulary is close to the language that the anthropologist Ruth Benedict and her associates (primarily, in this instance, Gregory Bateson) used in their analyses of cultural patterns. In her work in the 1930s Ruth Benedict sought a synthetic, comparative approach to the study of culture that looked for particular configurations of what she called ‘the emotional background’ of a culture in and across the observable rituals and forms of behaviour, which were

the privileged phenomena for anthropological concern at the time. Culture, for Benedict, was a gestalt form that configured beliefs and behaviours against affective and emotional conditions and traditions that often lay 'below' the declared content of a society.⁵ This emotional background was sometimes referred to by Benedict as 'ethos'; a term that was also deployed and elaborated by Bateson in his 1936 book *Naven*.⁶ An ethos might include tacit understandings that allow a statement to be understood as a joke rather than as a serious opinion; it might include shared sentiments that might be oblique or obscure to an outsider while requiring no reflexive attention on the part of an insider; it might signal those cultural forms that get called manners, mores, or 'appropriate' behaviour. In Benedict's analyses the emotional background or ethos is pushed to the foreground and used to characterise a particular society.

In Williams' work, especially in his early work, Ruth Benedict is a persistent presence. She is his most important reference for the kind of analytic work he is setting out to do. The difference between Benedict and Williams is that Williams wasn't interested in grasping culture as primarily a gestalt form, but as a dynamic articulation of fundamental contradictions that produce atomisation and uneven experience. That is to say that Williams was a Marxist and his topic was the culture of industrial capitalism. Benedict and Bateson, unlike Williams, were also dealing with cultures where the content and form of culture was often provided by material environments rather than literary products. Thus Benedict aimed anthropological attention at the gestalt of domestic life:

We still know in reality exactly nothing about them [cultural objects and practices] unless we know the way in which the arrangement of the house, the articles of dress, the rules of avoidance or of marriage, the ideas of the supernatural – how each object and culture trait, in other words, is employed in their native life.⁷

Williams was a literary historian and critic, so we might assume that dress and furniture were not his primary concern, yet in his autobiographical writing (his

novels as well as the constant reminiscences that punctuate essays and historical work) it is precisely these ingredients of everyday life that contain and sustain structures of feeling.

For instance in a conversation conducted in 1959 between Williams and the literary and social critic Richard Hoggart, the pair discuss ‘working class attitudes’ (and ‘attitudes’ is very much a ‘structure of feeling’ word), particularly in terms of the difference between the densely populated urban world of Leeds where Hoggart grew-up (an industrial and commercial city in Northern England) and the Welsh village of Pandy where Williams had lived. Williams describes how class feelings amongst agricultural labourers, railway workers and miners in Wales didn’t take the form of a sense of inferiority. Such feelings were sustained not simply by self-belief but by a whole panoply of material forms including clothing:

I remember the men at home – a whole attitude in a way of dress. Good clothes, usually, that you bought for life. The big heavy overcoat, good jacket, good breeches, leggings, then a cardigan, a waistcoat, a watchchain, and all of it open, as a rule, right down to the waist. Layers of it going in, and of course no collar. But standing up, quite open. They weren’t, really, people with a sense of inferiority.⁸

‘A whole attitude in a way of dress’, might be a useful way of locating structures of feeling within relays of material culture and social conventions that aren’t the usual evidential basis for social attitudes and structural sensitivities. Clothing or crockery or furniture are difficult to see as determining and sustaining carriers of feelings in themselves, which is why Williams treats them (as Benedict might) within a larger sense of practice and practical consciousness: it isn’t simply the wearing of a good quality jacket, waistcoat, and cardigan; it is a certain *practical* bravura in wearing these in a way that wasn’t ‘buttoned up’ (in both a literal sense and a metaphorical sense of not being tentative, inward, cagey). The modern sense of ‘having attitude’, meaning not being passive or compliant, is

enacted in this example of garment wearing a century before the modern sense of the word attitude had currency.

In the same discussion Williams mentions how his father had a feel for democratic practice, and that this disposition was the product of non-conformist religious institutions (the tradition of attending chapel):

Well, the self-government tradition in the chapels disposed many people to democratic feeling; feeling, really, rather than thinking. Someone like my father who grew up in a farm labourer's family, outside the tradition that brought conscious trade union attitudes, still got, I think, the feelings that matter.⁹

For Williams a democratic feeling is a crucial aspect of a progressive cultural politics. And you can see a crucial aspect of the politics of a 'structures of feeling' approach when you recognise that a democratic impulse might be more important as a feeling than as a thought, or rather unless it is lived as a felt-thought, it can just produce the gestures of an ersatz and empty impulse that various bureaucratic forces produce (the ersatz-democracy of the satisfaction survey and the feedback form, for instance).

Configurations of feeling, then, are not carried by words alone. The material world of things undergo all sorts of re-accentuation and re-attunement. For instance the pine kitchen table, once only found in working-class houses or in those kitchens where only servants worked, became in Britain and elsewhere in the 1960s and beyond an essential element of a more informal domesticity for the 'new middle classes' who were also re-accentuating words like freedom, liberty and community, in new directions. And kitchen tables connected to other relays of clothes, music, food, chairs, greetings, names, books, forms of relaxation, sayings, and on and on and on. They also disconnect: a second hand pine table is neither an oak dining table nor a Formica covered table. Williams prioritised language and dramatic forms as his documentary evidence of the past in his works of literary criticism: in the realm of feelings that he describes in his

personal testimony we are shown a more physically sensual world of clothing and community, food and furnishings.

In many ways the world of clothing and furnishings might offer a different sensitivity for registering changes in ‘structures of feeling’ than that found in language and dramatic forms. As Williams seems to suggest in *Keywords* semantic shifts and semantic struggles are usually slow, accumulating over decades and centuries. Clothing, food and furnishings, on the other hand are much closer to the world of commerce, and much more sensitive to the vagaries of taste, as well as directing and giving form to such changing tastes. They are syncopated to much faster rhythms. Of course in some ways I’m setting up a false alternative here: the world of novels and films, for instance, rely heavily on conjuring mood and feeling precisely through their particular use of clothing, architecture, language, furnishings, food, and so on.

In the words of Kathleen Woodward, ‘Williams’ concern is to find a way to feel the pulse of social change, to grasp what is emerging, to reveal it in its ‘generative immediacy’, to preserve it, and above all, not to reduce it.’¹⁰ To foreground patterns of feeling and to see taste as a motor for changing these patterns of feeling is to sensitise enquiry to the way that changing orchestrations of the sensorial reconfigure social differences and social connectivity.

To treat taste as a ‘feeling’, that also patterns feelings, is to recognise the historical agency of taste as a key element of everyday life. It is also to see it as a form that animates both the synchronic and diachronic axes of culture. As tastes are introduced, adopted, championed and enthused over, diachronic changes occurs that we can recognise from one epoch to another, from one taste moment to another. I want to suggest that historical enquiry could look at the way structures of feelings are found in the complex intermingling of words and things. In this there are key-things as well as key-words. Or rather key-feelings that exist across and between the interplay of words, things and practices. Stripped pine kitchen tables, Japanese paper lampshades, knocked-through kitchens and living rooms, French cuisine, coalesce with words like ‘freedom’, ‘lifestyle’, ‘design’, and ‘social life’ in Britain in the 60s and 70s and onwards. And these relays are animated by practices as varied as home ownership,

squatting, impromptu dinner parties, casual dress, second wave feminism, gentrification, belonging to CND (the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament), and so on. As a structure of feeling it actively recruited for a new class fraction, but this class had a broad and changing cultural and political role.

An example of describing a structure of feeling in terms of material culture was given in 1982 by the historian Raphael Samuel as he described what he called 'the new middle classes' who he saw as the constituency who would be attracted to the 'radical' centrist politics of the newly formed Social Democratic Party (formed in 1981 and made up, primarily, of defectors from the Labour Party). What makes them the 'new' middle classes is the way that their tastes have departed substantially from an earlier middle-class who anxiously aped a version of aristocratic sensibilities. The 'new' middle class were more confident in their choices, more sociable in their outlook and more deluded in their class consciousness (they saw themselves as classless). For Samuel:

The new middle class are outward-looking rather than inward-looking. They have opened up their homes to visitors, and exposed them to the public gaze. They have removed the net curtains from their windows, and taken down the shutters from their shops. They work in open-plan offices and establishments, with plate-glass windows and see through partitions and doors. In their houses they make a fetish of light and space, replacing rooms with open-access living areas and exposing the dark corners to view. They turn servants' attics into penthouses and make basements into garden flats. Back yards blossom out as patios; kitchens are aestheticized; even the lavatory is turned into a miniature folly.¹¹

We can catch the noise of new office complexes being built – all polyvalent space, all 'transparency' and 'creativity', all personnel departments and team-building exercises. We can catch the sound of gentrification – all floorboard sanding, wallpaper stripping, and rent increases.

The uniforms of this new class formation were militantly casual:

They dress down rather than up, for parties, in tight trousers rather than dinner jackets, pinafores rather than gowns. They go hatless to work and spend long and expensive hours at the hairdresser's, to cultivate a windswept look. They make a show of peasant pots in their kitchens. Their homes are imitation farmhouses rather than miniature stately homes, with stripped pine rather than period furniture, linens rather than chintz, and concealed lighting rather than cut-glass chandeliers.¹²

Perhaps they buy their furnishings new from shops like Habitat, perhaps not. By 1981 you could certainly save some money by scouring junk shops and jumble sales for your 'peasant pots' and your 'stripped pine' tables, and if you were young and in the business of gentrification then you might very well need to save that money. Conspicuous thrift might well be your style.

The British lifestyle shop Habitat, launched in 1964, was a taste formation that offered a lifestyle based on an amalgam of Mediterranean food, informal sociability, and a domestic aesthetic that liberally borrowed from Japan and Scandinavia. Habitat wanted to democratise modern domestic design and ended-up exacerbating the uneven development of everyday life: it simultaneously provided the accoutrements for urban gentrification and the scenography for middle-class radicalism. In 1964 when Habitat opened its first shop it was clear that it wasn't simply inventing a look, a style *ex nihilo*. The design journalist Fiona MacCarthy caught the feel of this style as some sort of melange of rural-urbanism. Reading the jokey catalogue descriptions for Habitat she finds that 'the adjectives, downright and jovial, mount up to an elaborate townsmen's code for country living. Habitat merchandise is fashionably basic, a kit for farmhouse cooking, preferably French.'¹³ Such a style wasn't specific to Habitat, it could be found in any number of boutique shops, and 'new' antique shops that were selling 'not just stripped pine' but a whole panoply of retro bric-à-brac. (This is a world that is described in a French context in Georges Perec's novel *Things*.)

Terence Conran, the founder and chief designer at Habitat, always maintained that Habitat was a progressive project designed to extend democracy

by providing inexpensive good design to as many people as possible. In 1964 he would write: ‘five years ago, good taste meant a rosewood dining table, eight dining chairs and rosewood sideboard to match, costing £600. If you couldn’t afford that, you simply didn’t have good taste. But all that is changing now. Today good taste can mean a simple wooden table and half a dozen bentwood chairs, for as little as £50. Suddenly, it’s within everyone’s reach.’¹⁴ Even in the 1970s he could still think that the shop was producing citizenship rather than surplus value:

Many people still think of Habitat as a shop for the young – or even just the higher-income-bracket young. ‘Certainly our customers are much younger than the majority of customers in other furnishing shops’, says Mr Conran, ‘but we particularly dislike being thought of as a young ‘trendy’ organization. We would much prefer to be thought of as High Street furniture store selling good, solid-citizen furniture’.¹⁵

Habitat grew out of a time when design was part of post-war reconstruction, when ‘good design’ had a moral ethos as part of a democratic culture. Conran, as a designer emerged in this climate: ‘My whole attitude to life was really formed in those couple of years – about why shouldn’t design be something that is available to the entire community? The mood in England in those post-war years was that we had an opportunity to reshape the world.’¹⁶ He pursued this ethos within a private sector that required ceaseless expansion and ruthless competitiveness. Contradictions were bound to ensue. For a time these contradictions fed a lively culture that could support various forms of middle-class radicalism. But it also provided an incentive to the endless property booms that have produced the savagely uneven developments that have scarred our cities making them so inhospitable to so many.

¹ A section of this essay has been published previously under a creative commons attribution licence as Ben Highmore, 'Formations of Feelings, Constellations of Things', *Cultural Studies Review*, Vol. 22, No. 1 (2016) pp. 144-167 (doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5130/csr.v21i2.4413>).

² Stuart Hall and Les Back, 'In conversation: At home and not at home', *Cultural Studies*, Vol. 23, No. 4 (2009), p. 665.

³ Raymond Williams and Michael Orrom, *Preface to Film*, Film Drama, London, 1954. While the book is co-authored it was made up of two distinct parts. The first part 'Film and the Dramatic Tradition' was written by Williams, and 'Film and its Dramatic Techniques' by Orrom.

⁴ Williams and Orrom, *Preface to Film*, pp. 21-22.

⁵ For a succinct statement of her anthropological approach see Ruth Benedict, 'Configurations of Culture in North America', *American Anthropologist*, Vol. 34, No. 1, 1932, pp. 1-27.

⁶ Gregory Bateson, *Naven* (second edition), Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1958. The first edition was published in 1936.

⁷ Benedict, 'Configurations of Culture in North America', p. 2.

⁸ Richard Hoggart and Raymond Williams, 'Working Class Attitudes', *New Left Review*, 1, 1960, reproduced in *Border Country: Raymond Williams in Adult Education*, edited by John McIlroy and Sallie Westwood, National Institute of Adult Continuing Education, Leicester, 1993, p. 113.

⁹ Hoggart and Williams, 'Working Class Attitudes', p. 114.

¹⁰ Kathleen Woodward, *Statistical Panic: Cultural Politics and Poetics of the Emotions*, Duke University Press, Durham, 2009, p11.

¹¹ Raphael Samuel, 'The SDP and the New Middle Classes', *New Society*, 22 April 1982, reprinted in *Island Stories: Unravelling Britain (Theatres of Memory, Volume II)*, Verso, London, 1998, p. 258.

¹² *Ibid.* p. 258.

¹³ Fiona MacCarthy, 'In Habitat', *Guardian*, October 5, 1966, p. 8.

¹⁴ Conran quoted in Anne Barrie, 'Terence Conran: Young Man Leading a Furniture Revolution', *House Beautiful*, December 1964, p58.

¹⁵ 'Counterpoint', *The Times*, February 16, 1973, p20.

¹⁶ Conran quoted in Nicholas Ind, *Terence Conran: The Authorised Biography*, Sidgwick and Jackson, London, 1995, p37.