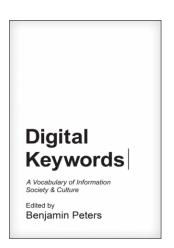# Keyword Up!

Benjamin Peters (Ed.), **Digital Keywords: A Vocabulary of Information Society and Culture**, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016, 352 pp., $24.94 (paperback).

Kelly Fritsch, Clare O'Connor, & A. K. Thompson (Eds.), **Keywords for Radicals: The Contested Vocabulary of Late-Capitalist Struggle**, Chico, CA: AK Press, 2016, 572 pp., $22.95 (paperback).

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Reviewing one book of keywords filled with numerous entries would be enough of a challenge. Doing two is an attempt to catch water in a net. With 25 keywords in *Digital Keywords: A Vocabulary of Information Society and Culture* (*DK*) and 57 keywords in *Keywords for Radicals: The Contested Vocabulary of Late-Capitalist Struggle* (*KFR*), the sheer number of discrete entries confounds the review genre. In addition, while both collections situate themselves in the legacy of Raymond Williams' touchstone work *Keywords* (1983), they share only a couple of entries (*community* and *democracy*), barely generating a Venn diagram. Compounding matters, instead of being a bounded set of terms, each collection motions toward a realm f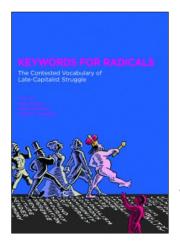illed with still more words. The editors of *KFR* acknowledge that some proposed words didn't make it into the final lineup, foregrounding the value of the negative, or the omitted. In *DK*, the omitted appears in the form of an index listing more than 200 related words. Finally, while both projects have an internal "see also" at the end of each chapter, *DK* also includes a cross-reference to Williams' (1983) original list.

These gestures toward exteriority thus turn the seemingly closed circles of the Venn diagram into bursting-at-the-seams water balloons, and if we were to zoom into their boundaries, we would find tiny droplets crossing the borders. We would need a more sophisticated informational visualization model to see the several sets of keywords in motion and relation. I will instead attempt to give a flavor of each collection with an eye toward thinking, along with the editors, about the significance of keywords.

Keywords for Radicals: The Contested Vocabulary of Late-Capitalist Struggle

This splendidly sprawling tome arrives with a title announcing its interventionist direction and anticipated readership. The book thus broadcasts its commitment to the radical potential of the words within it. What is a keyword? Fritsch, O'Connor, and Thompson do a fine job distinguishing keywords from definitions: Rather than settling meaning, meaning itself is the subject of historical investigation. In tracing out these historical settlements, a keyword analysis can undermine common sense, especially when (due

to historical circumstances) the words are more "brittle" (Williams' 1983 term, as the editors note). The keywords here do not fix meaning, but mark moments when consensus is in crisis, thus rendering the terms contestable.

Keywords for Radicals is a considerable enterprise, containing 57 entries with as many authors. Some of the words have been commonplace in the radical milieu and thus are expected to appear herein: *representation, utopia, vanguard, oppression, hegemony, rights*. Others are timely as relevant additions to radical analyses: *commons, crip, prefiguration*, and *trans*/-* (a word that even looks different). One entry that is both timely and traditional: *occupy*. A.K. Thompson gives us a much-needed analysis of the contested meanings of this word, since key voices even at the time of Occupy Wall Street objected to its usage, citing its colonial legacy.

Other keywords were previously radical, became more mainstream, and were recently re-attached to radicality: *friend, love, privilege, care, bodies, reproduction, leadership*. Some, like *populism*, have accrued a new prominence since the book's publication. And of course there are always omissions that are worth mentioning, such as *party*. I learned much from these entries—they all have some nugget to recommend them, whether as a thorough primer or a curveball thought-changer. For the latter, I would suggest readers start with *demand, friend, victory*, and *accountability*.

Fritsch, O'Connor, and Thompson lay out three main differences between their book and Williams' initial project. First, its periodization. It's not just that vocabulary changes in late capitalism—the editors trace how a number of thinkers, especially those with autonomist tendencies, have analyzed the *subsumption* of linguistic communication into Post-Fordist economic processes. Along these lines, the editors remind us that Williams (1980) also wrote a piece called "Means of Communication as Means of Production." If language has been subsumed, then the means are in the hands (some would say brains) of the cognitariat. What would it mean to seize these means of communication? From whom, and by whom? The collection offers an excellent starting point to begin this reappropriation.

The second divergence is that while Williams developed a list of wide-ranging terms that could define contemporary flashpoints, *KFR* teases out words that indicate specific clashes on the radical left. While having broader implications, the material herein is most relevant to political struggles. Fritsch, O'Connor, and Thompson mark Williams' own attempts at refusing the institutionalization of vocabulary. At the same time, the book embodies this tension over academicization, as many contributors find themselves in different positions vis-á-vis academic institutions (and to this we can add "being reviewed in an academic journal").

Finally, and perhaps most obviously, this work emanates not from a solo author but via collective authorship. The decentralized writing (though centralized peer editing) means that a temporary community is formed in the making of the keywords. Here I should note one of the special features of this collection:

the use of infographs in each chapter that visualize the "see also" function. Individual authors created lists of words they thought were related, which were then supplemented by the editors to generate an internal map of the book's entries.

Fritsch, O'Connor, and Thompson are clear that the mere existence of many contested keywords does not result in pluralism or relativism. There is a method here, even a guide to how words are to be understood. In foregrounding the conflict over words as part of wider struggles, the editors refuse to treat the relation of word to thing as a relation of transparency or correspondence. The book instead takes a nuanced, dialectical approach to language.

Words are signposts of the linguistic turn, underscoring how language shapes, not just describes, the world. Those readers conversant with the decades-long development of this approach (the introduction covers a number of these thinkers: J. L. Austin, Adrienne Rich, Iris Marion Young, Judith Butler, Stuart Hall) will find this book covering familiar ground, whereas it functions well for those first encountering the linguistic turn.

The editors argue that, even if we take as given that language performs rather than reflects, we need to ask how performatives *stick*. What are the means of authorizing some utterances and meanings as definitions? In addition to the means of communication, we need to examine the means of authorization. Curiously, deconstruction is not mentioned as part of this lineage. As performed by Jacques Derrida and others, deconstruction amounted to an unraveling that exposed the operations of authority through which meaning was established. More than a social constructionist approach to the world via language, deconstruction deployed a series of stratagems and gestures that inhabited an authorizing mechanism to defuse that mechanism's ability to settle matters.

Fritsch, O'Connor, and Thompson are also wary of the utopian projects of resignification, in which radicals find agency in reclaiming and detourning meanings. According to the editorial collective, these efforts indicate more of an intent than a success in transforming established social relations. Instead of a politics of resignification that affirms the ability to make any meaning stick, "radicals are left in the difficult position of having to *complete* or *resolve* the words inherited from injustice rather than simply disavowing them in favor of" new ones (p. 15, emphasis in original).[1]

The collection takes its own position in this terrain, one that wards off transparency as a guiding value. If we take as given that power operates not primarily by obscuring its actions but "through extreme contradiction" (p. 5), then clarity and transparency will not address power's capacities to manage meaning. A word instead is an "index of the struggle to shape reality according to particular interests" (p. 5). Vocabulary here is analogous to the commodity in Karl Marx's *Das Kapital*—an analytic starting point that becomes a gateway to the hidden abode of production. A word is examined "so that its contradictions might be productively explored" (p. 18).

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[1] This telos raises some curious questions: Do we push the terms to their exhaustion? Could we diminish, banish, reduce, rather than disavow? What would it mean to complete a concept borne out of injustice?

In paying attention to the words used about keywords, we find transparency banished but revelation installed. Words are *indexes* of socioeconomic dynamics: "When analyzed closely, words *reveal* themselves to be *symptoms* of underlying and overarching social contradictions" (p. 20, emphasis added). This is a method that places importance on the conflicts we "*uncover* in our most intimate utterances" (p. 18, emphasis added). And again: "Language as object that contains contradictions which, once *unearthed*, will collapse in favor of the new" (p. 18, emphasis added). Revelation is back, no longer pointing to referents in the world, but to dialectical processes.

There is thus a two-step process: (1) "*unearthing* [language's] contradictions" and (2) "using those contradictions to map the social world they *reflect*" (p. 18; emphasis added). Words and world have a common ground: not correspondence, but homology. Each is filled with mirrored contradictions, with words as symptoms whose internal logics can be completed by, then found in, social relations. The collection thus seeks to reground usage not in consensus about meaning (this is not the "OED for Radicals") but in an epistemological convergence—our maps of the social world will be discoverable as true once we see the linguistic debates in a particular, dialectical fashion.

This kind of homology, itself a variant of the base/superstructure model of analysis, is true to Raymond Williams' legacy and open now to new audiences. Whether these concepts (dialectics, base, superstructure, map, social world, homology, symptom, contradiction, terrain) are worth debating (e.g., by finding their way into their own keywords collection) remains to be seen.

Ultimately, we can turn to the collection's subtitle to summarize its trajectory: This is a contested vocabulary, one whose stakes are found in the book's context—namely, late capitalism, but moreover the struggles against it. If, in the Trumpist era, we've seen an increasing weaponization of tools, techniques, and words, then this collection is a much-needed arms storehouse.

Digital Keywords: A Vocabulary of Information Society and Culture

Like *KFR*, *Digital Keywords* (edited by Benjamin Peters and hosting an impressive list of key scholars in the field of digital studies) extends Williams' (1983) project, this time for an era marked by socio-technical reconfigurations. Peters defines a keyword as "a socially significant word that does socially significant work" (p. xx). It is this latter phrase that Peters emphasizes: what a word "does, not what it means" (p. xx).

While the entries appear in alphabetical order, the introduction organizes its 25 words into four broad categories: subjects (actors), objects (things), verbs (actions), and prepositions (environments). In doing so, Peters makes some inventive moves. What are often considered things (*prototype*, *algorithm*) become subjects here with agency in their conduction and effects. Objects are things that do not remain constant or static through time, but produce new powers. For example, an *archive* or *mirror* organizes information via particular arrangements of time and space, while *memory* is an intervention into storage and retrieval that generates effects on how we (mis)understand events. Verbs/actions are also reworked. While *sharing*, *participation*, and *personalization* are obvious choices to classify in this way, what comes as a pleasant

surprise is how *analog* and *digital* circulate here not as forms or states but as actions: "analog represents and waves; digits count, point, and manipulate" (p. xxxiii).

The fourth category, environments/prepositions, is especially thought-provoking. Initially, it appears to be an uneasy convergence (prepositions seem to stand in for grammar or langue rather than parole in this formulation). As Peters explains, classifying some words as primarily "in between" other words as connectors, directors, or mediators pushes us to think relationally and contextually. Some keywords are designed to sustain, organize, and guide subjects, objects, and actions. Here, *culture, activism*, and *event* are notable as environment words that connect and articulate.

While there is not enough space here to warrant a decent assessment of even a quarter of the book's entries—Peters' intellectually engaging, lengthy introduction deserves its own review!—I will highlight a handful that I found notable for different reasons. Of course, one can mention that there are always missing terms, not least because the rapidly changing words become buzzy (here I thought this group would have given us some wonderful takes on things like *file*, *download*, *property*, and *affordance*).

The collection kicks off with *activism*, a timely opener. Much virtual ink has been spilled on social movements and media technologies, and Guobin Yang's contribution focuses on the ambiguity of the concept in relation to radical versus civic action. Incorporating definitions and practices from the Chinese protest context, Yang convincingly demonstrates that we should avoid letting *activism* become an amorphous, catch-all term, even as its referents increasingly produce a new normal.

The modifier in the book's title (*digital*) gets attention via a chapter authored by Peters (as well as in the lengthy introduction). *Digital* has the commonsensical usage in reference to matters pertaining to contemporary society as it has been technologically conducted and mediatized. But, in a twist, he argues that all words are digital insofar as they are discrete operators whose function is to separate and connect. Words codify and are "propositional forces in reality" (p. xxi)—they intervene and make differences appear in their clarity. It is a keyword that, as environment, organizes other keywords.

Community by Rosemary Avance is a timely antidote to those researchers (current and budding) who still seem to be doing scholarly work as though the biggest problem we have is bowling alone. With *Geek*, Christina Dunbar-Hester provides a lively, informative peek into this newly hegemonic figure, a once-outsider in tech and other realms that has become the object of admiration and critique. Limor Shifman gives us a wonderfully concise history of *meme*, especially how the word itself became a meme. Differentiating between memes in digital culture and Internet memes, Shifman ends with a provocative claim that memes fuse together both the transmission and ritual models of communication developed by James Carey (1989).

With his entry, Bernard Geoghegan puts our current breakneck obsession with *information* into a protracted history: from medieval natural philosophy to 19th-century telegraphy's demands for standardization and technical infrastructure, and finally to communication industrial needs for error-free transmissions. As information increasingly becomes an area of investment (in the name of data science and

big data solutions), it is important to know its semiotic history as, itself, a signal selected out of a murkier realm of practices.

Other chapters can be linked to the following themes or operations that the book performs:

- *Intervening* into what we might call, following Gilbert Simondon (1992), transindividuation. Rather than focusing on either the individual or the collective, *DK* projects itself into the milieu organized by individualization and collectivization. Terms like *participation*, *sharing*, and especially *personalization* investigate the techniques that manage the passage from one to another, along the way constructing personhood and sociality.

- *Reworking* the familiar and settled. There are so many to list here, but *cloud*, *geek*, *mirror*, *prototype*, *digital* and *forum* are particularly striking in their remixing.

- *Cutting* through the glut. While 25 might seem like a long list, from another perspective, the project is subtractive. It reduces the ever-expanding concepts (new and old, found in the book's appendix) to guide us through "mounds of misleading information." In other words, keywords function as signals not just amid noise, but against other signalization. Entries like *hacker, culture, flow, Internet, sharing*, and *democracy* are among those that challenge definitions that seek control through winnowing, canalization, and exclusion of culture/power/discursive matters from meaning making.

It is this last operation that can be said to be the book's political force: The project preserves and extends the richness of these keywords in an age where many are getting reduced, narrowed, and instrumentalized. By introducing such complexity and weight, *DK* does its part to prevent the rather violent channeling of cultural adventures toward objectives established by technocratic capitalism.

Conclusion/Convergence

Raymond Williams was a member of the British Royal Corps of Signals during World War II. Among other inheritances, *Digital Keywords* and *Keywords for Radicals* both perform similar tasks: How to concentrate attention amid noise? How to do so within a chaotic and conflictual context (perhaps even outright war)?

Both see words as temporary anchors in a sea of signification while being contested linguistic artifacts. In one case, keywords are mobilized within and against the hegemonic discourse of our techno-oriented times, whereas the other ensures that this legacy remains in touch with the movements challenging the present. Their shared words (*community* and *democracy*) tell us something about what's at stake in these acts of renewal and struggle.

In both cases, the collaborative and distributive spirit lives on. With their 80-plus writers, the books collectivize singularities—they are multitude projects. In *KFR*, the editor function has moved from solo to collective. In addition, authors link their entries to others to create a *KFR* mapping network. In *DK*, the peer review typically enacted via sharing electronic documents was supplemented by an in-person feedback conference. The project thus highlights the importance of embodiment and colocation in the age of digital production.

As books, both projects provoke musings on the continued value of the book form for distributing and contesting keywords. There is much to recommend for print—from readers' tactile experiences to the concentration of thought into a contained object (not to mention that *publication* is itself a keyword indexing academic professional stability and success). But to be cheeky, what kind of keyword is *print* in an age of digitization?

The books are initial provocations. What if they were also like passkeys, unlocking more open environments? We could imagine a modifiable keyword map based on reader input on a digital platform, for instance. Such interactive versions of these collections would alter future collaborations by extending Williams' project into the popular realm.

Some final differences: One book is resolutely academic in its lineup and field of analysis, while the other is an intellectual intervention into the conceptual underpinnings of struggle-based discourses that can occasionally be academic. One, from an Ivy League university press, collects and distributes emerging scholars within different areas of academic study. The other, from one of the best known radical publishers, operates via what I have called *machinic intellectuals*: generating ideas at border zones, perhaps even translating across and transforming the boundaries that separate spheres. Both analyze praxis (words as deeds) and enact their own versions. In both projects, we see the spirit of an author (even a founder of a genre) honored, extended, multiplied, and mutated. These are dual successful interventions that speak keywords to power, powerfully.

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