

## **“We’re all mad here...” Soviet leadership and its impact on education Through the Looking Glass of Raymond Williams’s cultural materialism**

“If I had a world of my own, everything would be nonsense. Nothing would be what it is, because everything would be what it isn't. And contrary wise, what is, it wouldn't be. And what it wouldn't be, it would. You see?”

Lewis Carroll, *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*

Just like Lewis Carroll’s *Wonderland*, a human society can be seen either as a chaos of incomprehensible absurdity with its unpredictable and unconstrained happenings or as a vibrant, intricate and enigmatic edifice of political, cultural and economic liaisons that require continuous decoding and interpretation. Within this complex structure of human interrelations, culture occupies a special role. The history of human civilisation shows us that it was the conflict of beliefs, values and norms – the main pillars of culture – that fuelled the engine of human development, as different social orders tried to reconcile their dissimilarities through the processes of adaptation, invasion and mutation.

Despite a vast body of literature on Soviet leadership (Gill, 1980; White, 1990; Akiner, 1991; Hirsch, 2005; Rindzeviciute, 2008; Brown, 2009; Kalinina, 2014; Rittersporn, 2014), very little work in this field seems to have engaged in a critical discussion about its specific impact on educational practice. This inference prompted me to revisit the key junctions of my experiences of Soviet social order during 1980s, when I was working as a teacher of English at a primary school in Tbilisi, the capital of the Soviet Georgia. My interest in the field was further piqued by the ambition to take Raymond Williams’s concept of cultural materialism outside its typical application confined to literary theory and use it instead as a tool for dissecting Soviet leadership in my attempt to examine its impact on Soviet educational landscape. In this paper I shall suggest that a broader appropriation of Williams’s ideas of

cultural materialism extended beyond its original domain of literary theory, can add a rich stratum to the interpretation of Soviet leadership phenomenon, offering a number of valuable insights into its inherent concepts as well as presenting a further opportunity of examining in more depth its relevance to the contemporary educational developments.

### **Making sense of culture**

There were doors all round the hall, but they were all locked, and when Alice had been all the way down one side and up the other, trying every door, she walked sadly down the middle, wondering how she was ever to get out again.

Lewis Carroll, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*

As is the case with many concepts related to social sciences, finding one common definition for the notion of culture has proven to be a mammoth task due to its multi-faceted nature and a resulting diversity of its applications and assigned meanings. Not in any way trying to compete with Kroeber and Kluckhohn (1952), who provided 164 definitions and discursive statements on culture, I nevertheless felt compelled to make another attempt at delving into the subject with the aim of creating a more or less substantiated point of departure for the subsequent discussion.

Contemporary attempts to define culture seem to be more fruitful when instigated not from a universal standpoint but from a specific disciplinary or ethnographic position. In practical terms, an artist, for example, would probably define culture as a notion related to creative activities; a foreign national, living in the UK, would probably associate it with traditions, language and cuisines; while a historian would most likely see culture as an integral part in the development of human civilization. Remarkably, all three of these descriptions would be true, if we take into consideration the writings of Raymond Williams (1983), one of the most prominent theorists in the field, who defined three different facets of culture, depending on their broad categories of usage:

...(i) the independent and abstract noun which describes a general process of intellectual, spiritual and aesthetic development [...]; (ii) the independent noun, whether used generally or specifically, which indicates a particular way of life,

whether of a people, a period, a group, or humanity in general [...]; (iii) the independent and abstract noun which describes the works and practices of intellectual and especially artistic activity (p. 90).

Nevertheless, while each of these aspects of culture are going to be discussed separately, it is worth acknowledging here the significance of the overlap in these meanings that ‘indicate a complex argument about the relations between general human development and a particular way of life, and between both and the works and practices of art and intelligence’ (Williams, 1983, p. 91). This perception of ‘complex and still active history of the word’ (ibid.) helped me to accept the impossibility of its adequate formulation while also allowing me some oscillations between its various inferences. Instead, it seemed to be more helpful to focus on a search for its interpretive meanings, as suggested by Geertz (1973), who saw culture as webs of significance that people themselves had spun and got suspended in, presenting the interpretive study of culture as ‘an attempt to come to terms with the diversity of the ways human beings construct their lives in the act of leading them’ (Geertz, 1983, p. 16). Against this contextual background, and using the Williams’s three dimensions of culture as the focal reference points, I can now turn to the essential subject of this paper – dichotomising the impact of Soviet leadership on education in the Soviet Union through the lens of cultural materialism, starting with identifying the key theoretical features of the latter.

### **Culture as a general process of intellectual, spiritual and aesthetic development: theorising Williams’s cultural materialism and Soviet leadership**

“Well! I’ve often seen a cat without a grin,” thought Alice “but a grin without a cat! It’s the most curious thing I ever saw in my life!”

Lewis Carroll, *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*

Prominent contemporary researchers within the field of leadership and, particularly, educational leadership (Gunter, 2001; Leithwood, 2003; Giroux, 2004; Hatcher, 2008; Bush, 2011) seem to consent that leadership practice cannot be cognised in disjunction from the

economic, political and cultural milieus in which it is exercised (“a grin without a cat?”), as leaders act as accomplices in creating and enforcing specific societal orders in the service of particular economic and political systems. Indeed, understanding leadership demands that we apprehend not only its influences on individuals and social institutions, but also the tapestry of underlying base relations of production that allowed the dominance of certain ideas within the heterogeneity of any particular society. As Williams (1980) noted, if leadership practices with their associated ideologies were merely ‘some abstract, imposed set of notions, if our social and political and cultural ideas and assumptions and habits were merely the result of specific manipulation, of a kind of overt training which might be simply ended or withdrawn, then the society would be very much easier to move and to change than in practice it has ever been or is’ (p.37). From this perspective, the concept of Soviet leadership in this paper has been concomitant not with specific leaders’ identities or leadership styles, but has been comprehended as an all-embracing social pyramid of power that controlled all aspects of social existence in the Soviet Union.

In terms of defining the concept of cultural materialism, throughout his intellectual journey, Williams had always accepted the complexity of the notion of ‘materialism’ as such, stating that

materialism and the associated materialist and materialistic are complex words in contemporary English because they refer (i) to a very long, difficult and varying set of arguments which propose matter as the primary substance of all living and non-living things, including human beings; (ii) to a related or consequent but again highly various set of explanations and judgments of mental, moral and social activities; and (iii) to a distinguishable set of attitudes and activities, with no necessary philosophical and scientific connection, which can be summarized as an overriding or primary concern with the production or acquisition of things and money (Williams, 1983, p. 197).

Williams’s cultural materialism shared a good deal of its outlook with its American counterpart – new historicism. As Williams (1977) noted, his position of cultural materialism was ‘a theory of the specificities of material cultural and literary production within historical materialism’ (p.5). Dollimore and Sinfield (1994) presented a useful interpretation of the

differences between the two approaches based on Marx's (1852, p.1) statement that 'men make their own history, but they do not make it under self-selected circumstances; they make it under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past.' According to Dollimore and Sinfield (1994), cultural materialists focused on people's powers to intervene in the process of 'making history', while new historicists emphasised the restrictions on people's actions imposed by the powers of social and ideological structures. This construal allowed to place new historicism within a vista that saw history as 'a safe and approved harbour, a place where one may sleep peacefully, lulled by anecdotal stories, after tossing on the stormy seas of deconstructive and theoretical Marxist uncertainty'(Simpson, 1995, p.29), whereas cultural materialists were more likely to challenge existing power structures and offer interpretations of a historical change and its cultural meanings through the concepts of hegemony, ideology and empowerment of marginalised societal groups (Milner, 1994).

These constituent parts of cultural materialism – hegemony, ideology and marginalised societal groups - make it particularly applicable to the critical analysis of Soviet leadership, which cannot be viewed separately from the issues of power and control, leading to the manipulated consent of the subordinate classes to the dominant (hegemonic) culture. Thus, it is useful to take a closer look at each of these constituent parts within the context of Soviet societal order.

With regard to hegemony, the USSR was led by the Communist Party that was exclusively based upon the ideas of Marxism-Leninism and was organised in a meticulous hierarchical order driven by concomitant 'nomenklatura' principles. The Party played a hegemonic role in both political and economic spheres, where all its decisions were accepted in a seemingly 'unanimous' way and by open voting at the Party congresses, accompanied by 'stormy, prolonged applause, occasionally turning into an ovation' (White, 1990). This embodiment of the prerogative function of government as a steering wheel for the Party elite was exercised

under the slogan of the 'dictatorship of the proletariat' (Marx, 1850, p.27), and continued to infiltrate the Soviet society across all its constituent republics and administrative divisions, blatantly presenting itself as the only recognised and accepted way of existence. Like in Bhabha's (1994) concept of the 'Third Space', Soviet leaders attempted to ignore the ambivalence of individual cultural enunciations of different nations and ethnic minorities within the borders of the Soviet empire, replacing them with the invading syncretism of a new cultural hybridity of 'Soviet People' and creating 'the in-between space that carried the burden of the meaning of culture' (Bhabha, 1994, p. 37). This view of Soviet hegemony as a deep penetrative power resonates strongly with Williams's (1983) understanding of hegemony as a notion not only depending for its hold on the interests of a ruling class, but also on its acceptance as 'normal reality' or 'common sense' by those in practice subordinated to it. Williams's perspective in many ways echoed Gramsci's (1971) ideas on hegemony as a force that was created on a universal plane, when the dominant group is 'co-ordinated concretely with the general interests of the subordinate groups, and the life of the State is conceived of as a continuous process of formation and superseding of unstable equilibria between the interests of the fundamental group and those of the subordinate groups' (p.406).

In terms of ideology, the system of Soviet political machine was clearly set out to establish the legitimacy of its ideological doctrines at the apex of the Soviet social order in the forms of both a visible fundamental flagpole of its regime and a shrouded mechanism for creating a distorted representation of political and economic organisation of the Soviet society. Williams (1977) saw the concept of ideology as an important aspect of cultural materialism, distinguishing three broad versions of its interpretation in Marxist thinking: a system of beliefs characteristic of a particular class or group, a system of illusory beliefs - false ideas or false consciousness, which could be contrasted with true or scientific knowledge, and the general process of the production of meanings and ideas. These facets of cultural materialism seem to largely correlate with the Soviet leadership model that used a system of communist beliefs to

create a false consciousness of ideological harmony, while engaging Soviet propaganda in the general process of sustaining and promoting the meanings and ideas of communist ideology.

Finally, in relation to the disadvantaged layers of society, Williams (1973) recognised that civilisation had produced not only 'wealth, order and refinement, but as part of the same process poverty, disorder, and degradation' (p.18). In his later work Williams (1977) provided a distinct link between hegemony and issues of inequalities, stating that hegemony connects all social processes to specific distributions of power and influence, creating a society, where there are specific inequalities in means and, therefore, in capacity to enable people define and shape their lives. These observations can be used as a valuable point of reference in the analysis of Soviet leadership, one of the key proclaimed objectives of which was to promote the ideas of equal opportunities for all cultures as the main epitome of Soviet reality. Nevertheless, seemingly promoting indigenous cultures within its 'empire of nations' (Hirsch, 2005), the Soviet state 'hyper-processed' them, creating new ideological and cultural identities within eponymous territorial units (Broers, 2009), concomitantly marginalising the former in terms of their access to the power positions in Soviet institution that were exclusively occupied by the Russian elite.

Yet, Williams's conception of cultural materialism went beyond the analysis of hegemony, ideology and empowerment of marginalised societal groups, extending it to the fundamental issue of the relationship between culture and society. Challenging the Marxist standpoint that culture could be understood only as a superstructure determined by its underlying economic base, Williams (1958) argued that a culture was 'a whole way of life' (p.93), and thus, culture was not just a resonance to the system of economic means of production, but it was a political and social concept, embracing the ideas of 'culture as a 'whole social process', in which men define and shape their whole lives; and that of 'ideology', in any of its Marxist senses, in which a system of meanings and values is the expression or projection of a particular class

interest' (Williams, 1977, p. 109). This position takes us back to the allegory of a cat without a grin, as we can see that dissecting the culture of Soviet leadership is unattainable outside the terrain of constitutive social processes, where the omnipotence of leadership structures is imbued with the political, economic and ideological realities and their upholding premises. With this in mind, the next part of the discussion will focus on the next dimension of culture as defined by Williams (1983, p.91): 'the independent noun, which indicates a particular way of life, whether of a people, a period, a group, or humanity in general,' and its specific application to the Soviet educational landscape.

### **Culture as a particular way of life: Soviet leadership as an instrument for building a new cultural identity of a 'Soviet Man'**

"Who ARE You?" This was not an encouraging opening for a conversation. Alice replied, rather shyly, "I-I hardly know, sir, just at present-- at least I know who I WAS when I got up this morning, but I think I must have been changed several times since then."

Lewis Carroll, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*

Referring to Williams's view of culture as a general process of intellectual, spiritual and aesthetic development, I turn my attention here to the role of Soviet leadership in driving these aspects of development towards an ambitious objective of the Soviet state: to create a new common identity - 'a Soviet Man' - which was seen as an inevitable condition of successful development towards the idyll of communism, thus becoming the ultimate goal of Soviet educational system. Interestingly, Williams (1983) warned us about the implications of the capitalised singular usage of the word 'man' as it created assumptions of its false universality that could only be applied to 'universalist unilinear' contexts, but not to specific historical and cultural variations. Nevertheless, Soviet ideological machine relentlessly worked its way through the educational landscape recycling diversity of cultural identities on its way to



creating a common Soviet identity of 'a Soviet Man' as the panacea for building a future communist society.

One of the key vehicles for the indoctrination of Soviet ideology across all educational institutions was the language policy of 'russification.' Soviet Union including all its constituent republics operated a centralised educational system, where all decisions regarding language of education were made by government agencies, i.e. ministries of education or local educational authorities, and were reflected in official documents such as national laws, curricula, or other types of legislation, providing the legal means for implementing government agendas. Taking a step back in history in order to understand fully the origins of 'russification', it is important to note that, whereas Lenin had stressed the pluralist aspect of Soviet language policy, the centrist aspect became increasingly evident with the rise to power of Stalin, after the death of Lenin in 1924. The Soviet Union always defined itself as a multi-national state, though its multi-national educational policy seemed to be determined, on the one hand, by the goal of a political nation-building and, on the other, by the attempts to create possibilities to meet the educational needs of the individual ethnic groups. This found expression in the constructions of a Russian 'super-nation', where the ethnic minority groups became incorporated into the USSR at least politically, if not linguistically and culturally. Although Georgian, Stalin pursued the policy of drawing other nationalities closer to the Russian nationality ('sbleegenie'). According to Akiner (1991, p. 36), 'Stalin looked toward Russian culture and language as the links that would bind different nations together, creating in the process a single Soviet people who would not only speak Russian but also for all intents and purposes be Russian.' The reality of the situation was that the USSR was increasingly surrounded by political systems hostile to Communism. There was a need to consolidate internal unity, identifying the various Soviet languages with Russian and setting them apart from outside influences. As Wheeler (1964) argued, in order to achieve this aim, the Soviet language policy employed a number of direct and circuitous measures: centralised authority in Moscow was strengthened, and self-governing powers of the republics were curtailed; native

communist elites were purged and replaced with Russians or thoroughly ‘russified’ persons; Russian was established as ‘a second native language.’ These practical steps signified the beginning of a new era in language education known as a process of ‘russification.’ As the Encyclopaedia of Georgia (1987) defined the concept, ‘Russification’ was the ‘aggregate of political measures and processes that stimulate non-Russians to adapt the Russian language and culture as their own, expanding in this way the political domination of Russia’ (my translation).

Referring back to critical materialism, it is useful to mention here Williams’s (1977) powerful message that language and its use were important indicators of social and cultural reality of life, describing it as ‘a socially shared and reciprocal activity, embedded in active relationships, within which, every move is an activation of what is already shared and reciprocal or may become so’ (p. 166). Indeed, this process of ‘activation’ can be applied to the phenomenon of russification that was ‘shared and reciprocal’ as a consequence of a deliberate Soviet educational policy, resulting in the introduction of the teaching of the Russian language - the language of the dominant nationality - as a compulsory subject. This again takes us back to Williams (1977), who emphasised the political interplay between the individual subjects and social forms of their time and place, where ‘no man was the author of himself,’ and when to be a writer in a particular language meant to be already ‘socially specified’ (p. 193). In addition, the policy of ‘russification’ in education also comprised strategies, such as the ‘cyrillisation’ of some national scripts, praising Russian historical figures while condemning national heroes as ‘the agents of imperialism,’ disapproving of traditional national literature in favour of new socialist realist works in Russian, and portraying the Russian Empire as the benefactor of the backward non-Russians, who had come under her control (Hosking, 1985). Later Under Brezhnev, Soviet educational leaders emphasised in countless pronouncements that the Russian language has been *voluntarily* (my emphasis) adopted by the Soviet people as the language of international communication, has promoted the ‘social, political, and ideological unity’ of Soviet nationalities, has enriched the

cultures of all other nationalities in the Soviet Union, and has given 'each Soviet people access to the treasure of world civilization' (Brezhnev, 1976). As observed by Rindzeviciute (2008), russification, an understated goal of Soviet cultural policy in ethnically non-Russian territories, was comparable to colonial projects in the West, thus, combining important features of European modernity. However, what made Soviet cultural policy special was the creation of strongly centralised governing bodies, which spanned enormous organisational networks to achieve their goals in implementing their language policies as well as other ideological agendas.

Within Williams's (1977) ideas of cultural materialism, the notion of language occupied a special position in the process of knowledge acquisition, as it was seen not just as a medium for the process, but as a constitutive element of material social practice, being at once 'a material practice and a process in which many complex activities, of a less manifestly material kind - from information to interaction, from representation to imagination, and from abstract thought to immediate emotion - are specifically realized', also meaning that language was in fact 'a special kind of material practice: that of human sociality'(Williams, 1977, p.165). Comparably, Shohamy (2003) noted that a way of describing the function of leadership within the Soviet educational system was to say that they introduced, established, and often imposed a specific language of education as a way of managing and controlling the linguistic repertoire of the nation. Soviet leadership in education was focused on the implementation of the Soviet state's decisions on which languages should be taught, when (at what age), for how long (number of years and hours of study), by whom and for whom (who was qualified to teach and who was entitled or obligated to learn), and how (which methods, materials, tests, etc.). Educational institutions, in turn, served as the vehicles through which these directives were implemented. In this sense, Soviet policy of 'russification' of educational institutions, according to Mackey (1993), was no longer just an academic exercise, but a practical response to social, economic, and political pressures, which were becoming stronger and more evident

in powerful groupings of ethnic minorities. Significantly, Williams, as noted by Shashidhar (1997), was instinctively correct in perceiving the language to be a crucial vitality in navigating a particular culture, seeing the latter more proportionate to the area of a language than to the area of a class. Indeed, we can see that in the Soviet Union language education policy was not neutral, but rather embedded in a set of political, ideological, social, and economic agendas, driving forward the empire of a 'common Soviet culture' away from individual and ethnic diversity.

On the way to creating a new common culture and community of Soviet people, one of the key roles of Soviet educational system as envisioned by the Soviet leaders was using it as a vehicle for constructing an egalitarian society free from class or ethnic partitions through instilling its ideological principles of manufactured consensus in the minds of its young growing citizens. Bauman (2001) referred to such illusory community of people as 'a collectivity which pretends to be community incarnate, the dreams fulfilled, and (in the name of all the goodness such community is assumed to offer) demands unconditional loyalty and treats everything short of such loyalty as an act of unforgivable treason' (p.4). This transformative potential of education and its deepest impulse in forming cultural politics was described by Williams (1989, p. 158) as 'the desire to make learning part of the process of social change itself.' Soviet pupils were to be enlightened about the historical mission of being a 'Soviet Man' and granted access to a new culture of 'unclouded happiness' of a communist society as opposed to both the preceding culture of bourgeois elite and the modern destructive culture of the West. This obscured hybridisation of educational, political and economic aspects of society created a particular change in the existing culture as a general process of development. This change seemed to obey Williams's (1977) concept of the *structure of feeling*, which he described as meanings and values as they were actively lived and felt as distinct from more formal concepts of 'world-view' or 'ideology'. Williams (1977) saw these structures of feeling as forms of 'practical consciousness of a present kind, in a living and interrelating continuity' (p.132),

which define a particular quality of social experience and relationship, historically distinct from other particular qualities, which gives the sense of a generation or of a period. It was those structures of feeling that Soviet educational leadership was assigned a task of changing, a task of what Barnes (2016, p.40) accurately defined as ‘engineering of human souls.’

As my personal experiences of working in Soviet educational establishments show, the process of ‘engineering of human souls’, similar to Williams’s (1958, p. 93) idea of ‘the making of a mind’, was executed by means of coercive style of Soviet leadership employed to ensure a successful implementation of associated educational policies. A classic pattern of Soviet leadership behaviour in 1980s was based on the perception of the leader’s unlimited power and over-exaggerated sense of self-importance, when contradicting or disagreeing with those in power meant either a political or professional death. This style of leadership influenced all educational establishments in the Soviet Union, creating an obstinate leadership culture, where the power relationships were informed by the principles of what I call a *manipulative clientilism*, which was characterised by the unlimited power of a *patron* (the leader) over his *clients* (the team), where the few existing rules were interpreted and manipulated in the ways that suited the patron (Beattie, 2017a). As Gill (1980, p. 181) noted,

The significance of the development of such informal political machines based on patron-client relationships can be substantial for both patron and client alike; reciprocity is the key, although this may not be equal. For the client, the informal machine can represent both security and promotion. ... For the patron too the possible benefits are great. For people in responsible positions at many levels of the party, excessive criticism from below can be not only embarrassing but also politically dangerous. If this can be short-circuited through the creation of a personal following, a leader's position is thus rendered more secure.

The dominance of these clientelist practices made it easier for Soviet leaders to use powers of their leadership positions to cultivate and promote Soviet epitomes among those below them in the hierarchical order across the entire educational landscape.

The development of Soviet leadership and domination that has evolved after the 1918 October Revolution was refined and refocused on, what Williams (1977) described as, the subliminal

internalisation of control within individuals rather than the external imposition of domination. Indeed, the type of manipulative leadership exercised by Soviet school principals, as well as the local and national education authorities, is very close to Williams's (1973) description of a transition in social consciousness, when the state engages a system of subtle socio-political rather than directly military and physical influences, with 'just enough continuity in titles and symbols of authority, in successful composition of a 'natural order', to confuse and control' (p.39). Herman and Chomsky (2002) called this type of ideological domination a defamation apparatus, which manifested itself as 'a powerful system of induced conformity to the needs of privilege and power' (p.306). Williams's resistance to this type of parliamentary, as opposed to participatory, democracy created a significant continuity across Williams's work as a whole, placing the ideas of cultural materialism as a means to cultural empowerment and political emancipation through making connections between education and politics and drawing attention to the processes being employed by the power structures to disseminate their ideology. Indeed, just like Alice in Wonderland, Soviet educational professionals, including myself, seemed to have had lost their ability to question who they were, becoming casualties of induced conformity, and at the same time, falling deeper into the trap of complicity and almost colluding their own subordination to the 'common Soviet culture.'

The next part of discussion will focus on the third dimension of culture defined by Williams (1983) as the independent and abstract noun that describes the works and practices of intellectual and especially artistic activity, and which 'seems to be the most widespread use: culture is music, literature, painting and sculpture, theatre and film' (p.90).

## **Culture as the works and practices of intellectual and artistic activity: Soviet education under the ‘sickle and hammer’ of communist propaganda**

“If I had a world of my own, everything would be nonsense. Nothing would be what it is, because everything would be what it isn't. And contrary wise, what is, it wouldn't be. And what it wouldn't be, it would. You see?”

Lewis Carroll, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*

The Soviet leaders' capacity to impose the ideology of communism within scientific, artistic and educational domains, also known as Soviet propaganda, was often referred to as a Soviet 'secret weapon' or an instrument of 'thought-control' (Benn, 1985) that was aimed at promoting and sustaining the hegemony of communist domination. Nonetheless, Williams (1977) explicitly contended that hegemony did not operate only at the level of ideology nor did it only utilise the most obvious methods of control such as manipulation and indoctrination; hegemony, according to Williams (1977), involved a whole body of practices and expectations, over the whole of living, including our senses, our perceptions of ourselves and our world. It was 'a lived system of meanings and values - constitutive and constituting - which as they are experienced as practices appear as reciprocally confirming' (p.110). Indeed, it was these practices, symbols and rituals that penetrated the landscape of Soviet education under the monopolistic superpower of Soviet leadership in its maniacal pursuit of the communist nirvana.

Specific practices within the system of Soviet educational establishments can be broadly typified through the teaching styles and the content of the curriculum. Soviet education was a highly centralised system with strictly determined curriculum and methods of teaching. As Janashia (2015) noted, the curriculum and syllabi were uniform throughout all Soviet republics. The Soviet system of centralised education was almost a caricature of the continental development of educational centralisation that emerged in the 18<sup>th</sup> century from complex socio-cultural interactions constrained by structural forces of mono-integration and subordination (Archer, 1984). The main distortion of the European approach could be

observed in the standardisation of curricular choices, which served to suppress certain academic disciplines or completely abolish the others in favour of promoting the subjects that allowed a more efficient indoctrination of Marxist-Leninist ideology. Soviet teaching philosophy rested on three main pillars: structured delivery of the curriculum dictated by needs of the State, respect for the teacher and firm discipline. The underlying principle of the Soviet approach to education was embedded in the psychology of behaviourism, where the process of learning was seen as a system of behavioural responses to physical stimuli driven by reinforcement (Beattie, 2015). Within this teacher-centred behaviourist approach, pupils were seen as relatively passive recipients of knowledge, whose behaviour needed to be moulded by external reinforcement controlled by teachers. In line with this approach, Soviet school teachers perceived their goal as educators to de-construct subject matter into smaller units and transfer knowledge to their pupils in a clearly structured linear way to enable them to progress from 'not knowing' to 'knowing'. Hence, rather than a facilitator of the learning process, Soviet teachers considered themselves to be an influential authority in charge of the learning process and providing knowledge. The ultimate aim of that learning process was to make the learners memorise knowledge for further reproduction, rather than enable learners to use the knowledge creatively. Popper (1986) called this 'the bucket theory of knowledge.' Nonetheless, it is worth mentioning here that the Soviet philosophy of education did not remain static throughout the years of communist domination, as it evolved continuously, starting from Krupskaya's community-based child-centred education and Makarenko's 'authoritarian quasi-military regime' (Attwood, 1991, p.37) to Stalin's static conservatism that descended 'like a clamp on all areas of life' (Pethybridge, 1981, p. 482) and, finally, reaching the status of 'collective leadership' under Khrushchev and Brezhnev, who adopted the populist leadership approach in the attempt to preserve their power via building a simulated consensus for educational policies that appeased the masses without threatening the prerogatives of established, organised interests (Breslauer, 2016).



Soviet school textbooks in history and Russian literature suffered particularly heavily under the pressures of the Soviet propaganda machine, presenting information that was factually inaccurate and saturated by Marxist-Leninist ideology (Caroli, 2016). Consistent with the tradition of cultural materialism, Williams (1983) placed a significant emphasis on the ties between education and democracy, specifically highlighting the processes by which dominant forces appropriate literature (in the sense of ‘the whole body of books and writing’ (p.185)), utilising it for the enforcement of their values on the educational establishments and other social structures. As Williams (1983, p.185) clarified, ‘the sense of ‘a nation’ having ‘a literature’ is a crucial social and cultural, probably also political, development.’ The reality of the 1970s-80s was that the Soviet Union was increasingly surrounded by political systems hostile to Communism, which created a need to consolidate internal unity via careful monitoring and pruning of all novel ideas and setting them apart from outside influences. Wheeler (1964) argued that one of the direct and circuitous measures employed by the Soviet state to protect its communist ideology was zealous censorship that punctuated the entire fabric of Soviet life. Ross (2015) sarcastically described a notorious case of Swan Lake production, when in 1950s the original story of a battle between good and evil had to be changed, following Stalin’s directive, from a gloomy and tragic ending to a cheerful finale that showed the victory of good over evil. A new happy end fitted very nicely into the combative ideology of the Soviet leadership, which was constantly preoccupied with black-and-white struggle between communism and capitalism. This is how the final sixty seconds of Swan Lake - perhaps, the most dramatic music in all of classical ballet - came to depict Siegfried slaying the evil sorcerer Von Rothbart and living happily ever after with Odette, rather than plunging headfirst into a lake. This example embodies the reality of Soviet cultural landscape, resonating with Williams’s (1977) view of art as a reflection of real world, ‘reflection not ‘mere appearances’ but the ‘reality’ behind these: the ‘inner nature’ of the world, or its ‘constitutive forms’ (p.95). And as the Soviet leaders sought to consolidate a cultural identity of a ‘Soviet Man’, they also focused on the process of cleansing the Soviet culture of all the

elements that could imperil its purity, that was, in Bauman's (1992) words, complementing the promotion of homogeneity by the effort to brand, segregate and evict the 'aliens.' The promotion of cultural homogeneity using censorship was extensively applied to Soviet education, where the school curriculum was carefully pruned to ensure the commitment of the teachers' and their pupils' to the epitomes of communism.

Aside from compliance to the uniform curriculum, Soviet schools were characterised by rigorous adherence to specific rituals and obligatory respect for the symbols of Communist Party. School spaces were filled with busts of Marx and Lenin, red flags with the images of sickle and hammer, photographs of enthusiastic muscly factory and agricultural workers, Pioneer and Komsomol oaths on the walls and multiple banners with fervent communist slogans. Red Pioneer kerchiefs were considered a particle of the blood of people who died in their fight for communist future and being admitted into the Pioneer organisation was seen as a great honour. As Kalinina (2014) described it, on turning ten years old, every self-respecting 'Oktiabrenok' (the pre-stage for becoming a Pioneer) removed a red star with the face of a young, curly-haired Lenin from their chest, and, taking a solemn oath, tied a red kerchief around their neck. The red tie was a matter of pride: losing the tie was cause for great shame and grief. The state of the tie was strictly monitored by Pioneer leaders: many students were not allowed to enter classes without wearing it. Pioneer ties were succeeded by Komsomol badges, when pupils (usually at the age of 15) entered the Komsomol Organisation, as they recited their Komsomol oath in front of a panel of senior Komsomol members. These symbols of the Soviet reality served to deepen the opposition between 'Soviet' and 'Western', between 'us' and 'them', an opposition that seems to be close to Kristeva's (1982) concept of abjection, where the ambiguous oppositions I/Other, Inside/Outside - manifested themselves 'through symbolic practices, without by the same token being integrated into the judging consciousness of those particular subjects' (p. 7). To serve further that 'integration into the consciousness', all the events associated with the 'evolution' of school pupils from Oktiabrenok to Komsomol

were staged with grandiose ceremonies and meticulous rituals, all accompanied by pompous Soviet songs and marches. Interestingly, there seems to be a certain correlation between these ideological rituals and religious practices, as described by Geertz (1973), who perceived the latter as some sort of ceremonial form - even if that form was hardly more than the recitation of a myth, the consultation of an oracle, or the decoration of a grave - that allowed for the sacred moods and motivations induced in men and the general conceptions of the order of existence, which they formulated for men, to meet and reinforce one another. Similarly, Harari (2011, p. 254) drew convincing parallels between Communism, along with liberalism, capitalism and Nazism, and religion, admitting that 'these creeds do not like to be called religions, and refer to themselves as ideologies. But this is just a semantic exercise. If a religion is a system of human norms and values that is founded on the belief in superhuman order, then Soviet Communism was no less a religion than Islam.'

During late Soviet period, the cult of the Soviet leadership reached gigantic magnitudes, using all possible gismos from its arsenal - from seemingly innocent symbolic additions to school uniforms to annual grand parades and assemblies held at local and national levels - to create an illusion of a successful advancement towards the communist paradise. Geertz (1973) called these symbols and rituals 'culture patterns', describing them as ordered clusters of significant symbols that help people make sense of the events through which they live. 'The study of culture, the accumulated totality of such patterns,' he added, 'is thus the study of the machinery individuals and groups of individuals employ to orient themselves in a world otherwise opaque' (Geertz, 1973, p.363). Williams (1961) identified these culture patterns with selective traditions, clarifying that within a given society these selections were governed by many kinds of special interest, including class interests, social situations and historical change. Within the Soviet educational domain, these cultural patterns and symbols selected by the Soviet leaders contributed to the calibration of teachers' and pupils' behaviour, providing them with an invisible demarcation line that shielded them from a conscious or subconscious

trespassing of the borders of the ‘sickle and hammer’ land. Indeed, as Williams (1977) noted, these symbols and rituals served to activate specific relations between ‘men and things’, serving as an active material basis for linking ‘matter’ and ‘consciousness’ and creating, what Geertz (1973) described as an illusion of factuality even when the society movement ‘conduces to a sense less of progress than of agitated stagnation’ (p.237).

We can see that Soviet educational system had to shoulder the burden of Soviet cultural and political dogmas, as they penetrated all practices of intellectual and artistic activity during the late Soviet era, spreading predetermined symbols, rituals and traditions, ‘for tradition is in practice the most evident expression of the dominant and hegemonic pressures and limits’ (Williams, 1977, p. 115). Subliminal Soviet propaganda was skilfully employed to persuade the educational professional of the value of Soviet social order and the bright horizons of the communist future, pumping out the messages of non-existent achievements and creating an illusion of common happiness and content. Yet again, just like in Alice’s imaginary world, everything was nonsense, and nothing was what it was.

### **Cultural materialism and Post-Soviet educational developments**

“Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to walk from here ?”,  
asked Alice. “ That depends a good deal on where you want to get to,”  
said the Cat.

Lewis Carroll, Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland

Though a deeper analysis of this facet falls outside the scope of this paper, it would be germane at this point to have a brief look at the educational developments beyond the Soviet period in the attempt to see, in Alice’s words, ‘which way we ought to walk from here’ in terms of the potential relevance of Williams’s theoretical framework to the post-Soviet educational space.

The downfall of the Soviet Union in 1991 resulted in radical economic, political, cultural and educational transformations across all former Soviet republics (Heyneman, 1997; Zelvys, 2004; Rindzeviciute, 2008; Takala & Piattoeva, 2012; Kalinina, 2014; Chankseliani, 2017). Understandably, the new realities required fundamental educational reforms, including major shifts in education policies, in the curricula and in the language of education. In Post-Soviet Georgia, educational system was one of the first public spheres that underwent precipitous changes in its transition from dictatorial monolithic Soviet leadership to democratic pluralism. Among the first attempts of the Georgian democratic forces to regain ground in the new political and social order were the efforts aimed at eradicating the remnants of the Soviet leadership and promoting Georgian culture - the position that allows us a further association with the Williams's (1983a) idea of the commonness of a cultural landscape that is reshaped by the dynamic between the inherited repertoires of tradition and the new distributions of power and influence. As noted by Kobaidze (2001), to eliminate the impact of Soviet leadership on education, the new Georgian government advocated a greater 'humanitarian orientation' in curriculum design with greater emphasis on Georgian language and literature, law, ecology, aesthetics, and health, all subjects they felt were sorely ignored by the Soviet authorities; in addition, de-marginalising Georgian population through making Georgian the language of education was meant to demarcate a clear national boundary that would separate new educational structures from previous Soviet models. Korth (2001) argued that the explicit connections of language education and culture in post-Soviet Georgia were most evident when utilised as a mode of social planning in hopes of creating a strong national identity – a point that is convincingly echoed in Williams's (1883a) close associations between the notions of culture, identity and language, where the latter is referred to as 'no secondary factor, but a practical and radical element in itself' (p.338).

However, these sudden diversions from Soviet practices in ex-Soviet countries were not instantaneously effective, as they caused immense disruptions to the established infrastructures in the areas of financing, approving reading materials, licensing teachers, establishing salary

norms, lack of teaching materials in native languages and no adequate financial and professional support to teachers and schools that was previously available in a form of educational assistance from Russia (Heyneman, 1997; Takala & Piattoeva, 2012). In addition, these new developments resulted in multiple inter-ethnic conflicts, as new language policies left minority nations living in ex-Soviet countries with an uncertainty of their social and political status. Indeed, in the example of Georgia, the situation of small titular languages like Georgian competing with a world language like Russian has been, in some ways, similar to the revitalisation of threatened minority languages in Western Europe, like that of Catalan, Basque, Welsh or Gaelic, contending world languages such as English and Spanish. This ‘threatened language versus world language’ dispute, along with its cultural and political implications, seems to be one of the common markers of post-Soviet developments in the former USSR as well as across the former ‘Soviet bloc’, including Poland, Romania, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, East Germany and Bulgaria (Bruen & Sheridan, 2016).

These consequences of the post-Soviet educational developments across the countries of Eastern Europe have been described by Mepharishvili (2006) as common and predictable patterns similar to the most post-colonial situations in which nations were left in a state of disharmony, where different groups based on race, religion, history, and language competed for viability as national standards. As pointed out by Takala and Piattoeva (2012), in line with the Soviet belief in the power of education to create new Soviet humankind, the similarities of post-Soviet educational development across all ex-Soviet countries were grounded in the expectations to both dismantle the whole culture of Soviet leadership within education and help create a new democratic and market-oriented one. This once again takes us back to Williams’s (1958) understanding of culture as a whole way of life with its common and general purposes as well as deep personal meanings, where a simple configuration of dominant powers, discourses and borders surreptitiously leads to an omnipresent cultural change. From this perspective, Williams’s ideas are essentially radical, making them

inherently applicable to the perpetual struggle of education to work towards a viable and participatory democracy (Higgins, 2012), or, in Williams's (1989) words, making education 'a part of the process of social change itself' (p.158).

### **Final Thoughts**

"But I don't want to go among mad people," Alice remarked. "Oh, you can't help that," said the Cat: "we're all mad here. I'm mad. You're mad." "How do you know I'm mad?" said Alice. "You must be," said the Cat, "or you wouldn't have come here."

Lewis Carroll, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*

Williams's three-dimensional perception of culture as a general process of intellectual, spiritual and aesthetic development, as a particular way of life and as the works and practices of intellectual and artistic activity, permitted the exploration of complex cultural spaces of Soviet leadership; whereas an engagement with cultural materialism brought to light new epistemological possibilities of elucidating political progenies from a cultural materialist standpoint. Nevertheless, it is worth acknowledging here the boundaries of present discussion, which encompasses only a brief analysis of Soviet leadership based on Williams's theoretical standpoints. To construe a more comprehensive picture of the impact of Soviet leadership on the landscape of Soviet education through the lens of cultural materialism, a much more extensive and systematic study of the subject would be required; yet, even a brief snapshot of that impact as apprehended through Williams's ideas allowed me to make a few edifying reflections.

First, Williams's view of leadership as a product of complex cultural and economic transferences allowed us to contemplate both an inexhaustible diversity of cultural realities as well as their contiguous economic structures. At the same time, the key dimensions of his cultural materialism - hegemony, ideology and marginalisation of societal groups – provided a

useful template for further exploration of Soviet leadership as a force mediated through educational policies and thrusting towards the stifling of ideological conflict. Second, Williams's ideas of cultural materialism have brought new insights to bear on the Soviet language policies as the vehicles used for indoctrination of Soviet ideology across the educational landscape. Specifically, engagement with the concept of 'structures of feeling' helped me to recognise a venomous nature of these policies in terms of their conspicuous absence of concern for people's cultural consciousness and their 'real life' experiences. Third, the interpretation of symbols, practices and traditions characteristic to Soviet educational establishments has become more eloquent when perceived as cultural dimensions symptomatic of hegemonic phenomena aimed at de-canonising the interests of subordinate societal groups.

As a final point, I maintain that regardless of the theoretical preferences of any specific epoch or a social order, Williams's ideas promise to remain current and relevant as they are tempered with a humanist view of culture as a central arena of struggles and hopes, punctuated by perennial quandaries and recurrent changes. Engagement with Williams's ideas impelled me not only to reflect deeper on my previous experiences of Soviet social order, where we were 'all mad' without realising it, but also to look beyond past experiences into the current issues related to leadership, manipulative powers, hegemony and social justice. As Williams (1958) remarked, we live in an ever-changing culture, all elements of which are expanding, begging the questions about the relative rates of this expansion, about the related social and economic problems, about the social and economic answers, and most importantly, 'a special kind of material practice: that of human sociality' (p.100). Juxtaposing Williams's theoretical perspectives to the contemporary political, economic and cultural scenarios could help to create new contours for substantiated impending changes aimed at preserving and sustaining of 'human sociality' and refining our perceptions of culture, democracy and humanity.



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