

Experience

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Experience is one of the most compelling and elusive words in the language. It was once closely allied to "experiment," as in Spenser's "she caused him to make experience / Vpon wild beasts" (*Faerie Queene* V.i.7) (1596), but that sense, as Raymond Williams pointed out in *Keywords*, has long been obsolete. Today the word is more commonly used in a variety of overlapping and sometimes contradictory ways that involve appeals to lived realities and (sometimes) dead certainties. On the one hand, there is the sense, marked most dramatically in Blake's *Songs of innocence and experience* but also in daily usage, that experience is something bitter and chastening: as we grow from childhood to old age, for instance, we **learn by experience** that the world is not to be redrawn according to our desires. For Romantic poets and all who have been influenced by them since the eC19, the accumulation of experience is the deplorable process by which, as Wordsworth put it, "shades of the prison house begin to close / Upon the growing boy" (1806). On the other hand, there is a sense in which "experience" is something greatly to be desired because it bespeaks a heightened and sensually alert mode of living in the world; to speak of something as "quite an experience" is to say that it was memorably out of the ordinary, for good or ill, and certainly Jimi Hendrix's pointed question, "are you experienced?" (1967), suggested a realm of apprehension and cognition unavailable to ordinary mortals who had not yet encountered the **Jimi Hendrix Experience**. (There is an ancillary sense here, having less to do with psychoactive drugs than with sex, in which "experience" is simply shorthand for **sexual experience**, and desired or feared for that reason alone.)

More generally, "experience" signifies a realm of rocky solidity and certainty, over against the airy abstractions of philosophy and social theory. It often confers authority when it is associated with the direct **experience of life** as opposed to "book learning," and it often serves as a common-sense, eyewitness guarantee of truth: "I know because I was there." Indeed, at around the same time as Wordsworth and Blake were writing dolorous laments about childhood innocence and wizened experience, Edmund Burke was writing in his *Reflections on the revolution in France* (1790 [1790]), "If I might venture to appeal to what is so much out of fashion in Paris, I mean to experience." In *Keywords*, Williams argues against the Burkean association between "experience" and conservatism, since "it is quite possible from experience to see a need for *experiment* or *innovation*" (R. Williams, 1983: 127). Williams differentiates Burke's appeal to what he (Williams) calls **experience past** from **experience present**, which involves "the fullest, most open, most active kind of consciousness" (p. 127) necessary to learn the lessons of experience past. Experience present might then be said to be a kind of gateway to an unspecified experience future, as when we say that a person is "open to new experiences."

Apart from its contradictory usages in ordinary speech, "experience" has also been a loaded term in intellectual debates since the IC20, particularly in feminism and cultural studies. As Stuart Hall (1980) argued, the concept of **quotidian experience** or **material**

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experience was central to so-called "culturalist" modes of cultural studies (associated with Richard Hoggart, E. P. Thompson, and the early Williams) as opposed to later "structuralist" modes (associated with French Marxist Louis Althusser), which stressed impersonal social conditions and ideologies rather than individuals' immediate perceptions of their world. In early second-wave feminism, "experience" was often adduced to anti-theoretical but not necessarily politically conservative ends, as in the appeal to **the authority of experience**, which sought to validate women's actual lives and perceptions over against dominant masculinist constructions thereof. Some second-wave feminists took their cue from R. D. Laing's *The politics of experience* (1967) – and some others, perhaps, from salient literary foremothers like Chaucer's Wife of Bath, who, disclaiming any knowledge of worldly or secular authorities, begins her Canterbury Tale (1400) by saying, "Experience, though noon auctoritee / Were in this world, is right ynough for me / To speke of wo that is in marriage."

Such appeals to **individual experience** were then challenged by feminist theorizing in the 1980s and 1990s; Joan Wallach Scott's influential essay "Experience" (1992) sought to mediate the growing debate by insisting that experience is not merely given but *produced*. "Documenting the experience of others," she wrote, "has been at once a highly successful and limiting strategy for historians of difference" (p. 24). Its success, for Scott, lay in its ability to conform to the evidentiary protocols of historiography: the new histories of slavery or working-class communities, for instance, looked recognizably like histories. But its limitations were attributed to the "appeal to experience as uncontestable evidence and as an originary point of explanation," which "weakens the critical thrust of histories of difference" (p. 24) by foreclosing on "the possibility of examining those assumptions and practices that excluded considerations of difference in the first place" (pp. 24–5). In other words, revisionist historians may be able to recover the experiences of individuals or cultures overlooked by previous histories, but if they rely on experience as "an originary point of explanation," they fail to investigate the larger social conditions that produced those histories and their exclusions. Williams had made a similar point toward the end of his entry in *Keywords*, writing,

At one extreme experience (present) is offered as the necessary (immediate and authentic) ground for all (subsequent) reasoning and analysis. At the other extreme, experience . . . is seen as the product of social conditions or of systems of belief or of fundamental systems of perception, and thus not as material for truths but as evidence of conditions of systems which by definition it cannot itself explain. (Williams, 1983: 128)

For writers such as Williams and Scott, working between these extremes, experience is neither associated with simple, brute immediacy, nor opposed to the consideration of the larger systemic and historical fields within which individuals and societies move. Yet if

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experience is any guide, the term "experience" will remain compelling and elusive for as long as people use it.

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See: ***EMPIRICAL, KNOWLEDGE, OBJECTIVITY, PRAGMATISM, REASON.***