

obituary

Stuart Hall

SIMON DURING

UNIVERSITY OF QUEENSLAND

After arriving in Oxford from Jamaica in 1951 to write a PhD in English (on Henry James), Stuart Hall quickly established an intellectual career as a left Leavisite among the young Oxford Marxists. Unlike peers such as John Saville and Charles Taylor, he was from the very beginning primarily interested in culture but he differed from older left Leavisites (not least Raymond Williams) in his willingness to see progressive potential in some non-traditional cultural forms. (As, indeed, did his rough contemporary, the Stalinist Eric Hobsbawm). As such, Hall was able to help organise the ‘new left’ institutionally as a simultaneously cultural, intellectual and political movement which joined Americanised youth culture (jazz, blues and all that) to the politics of nuclear disarmament and non-Stalinist socialism. All this on an analytic basis spelled out by figures like G.D.H. Cole, Richard Tawney and, most importantly as it turned out, Raymond Williams in *Culture and Society*. The high point of this phase in Hall’s career came in 1959 when he was appointed founding editor of the movement’s flagship journal, *The New Left Review*.

But three years later he was unceremoniously displaced as the journal’s editor by Perry Anderson, who along with Tom Nairn and Robin Blackburn (Anderson and Blackburn straight down from Oxford themselves) quickly opened it up to internationalism, to European theory and to Anderson’s new and compelling quasi-Althusserian account of English history (see the essays collected in his *English Questions*). Anderson disconnected the magazine from the English culturalist

heritage (as variously constituted by Arnold, Ruskin, Morris, Leavis ...) as well as from the British communist party and the institutions of British socialism to which Hall remained aligned almost to the end of his life. The new *NLR* did not take the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament particularly seriously either. Indeed the journal was a leap into a radically new and then strange intellectual order. Certainly, up until about 1980, it was much more interesting to my generation than anything coming out of the culturalist lineage could have been. It was in the *NLR* that we encountered Adorno, Derrida, Habermas, Lacan and so on for the first time. In comparison, incipient cultural studies looked conservative, meager.

Nonetheless, after his editorship came to an end Hall moved to Hoggart's Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies where, making good use of his personal qualities (he was, as those who knew him attest, a man of unusual and exemplary integrity, loyalty and generosity), he organised and led the loose collaborative grouping we came to call British cultural studies. Under his leadership it did indeed, if rather cautiously and via different routes, connect with an intellectual formation which Anderson in particular had already named and structured as 'theory'.

At first cultural studies' most important theoretical model was Gramsci's, but the group also produce work in semiotics that remains pedagogically important (Hall's essay on decoding for instance). The breakthrough came, however, when the Birmingham School began to expose the left to questions of migration, race and multiculturalism, without losing a sense of popular culture's progressive force. By the time of *Policing the Crisis* and the account of Thatcherism, Hall and his collaborators had recaptured the attention of many interested in advanced theory. And the Birmingham School's influence increased institutionally through Dick Hebdige's book on subcultures and the turn to cultural populism (which Hall himself, to his credit, held back from). A decade later, cultural studies, as what we can call a post-discipline whose connections with socialist thought had all but evaporated, was well positioned to take advantage of the 'democratisation' of the higher education in the United Kingdom and Australia especially but also globally.

Amazingly, despite cultural studies' global success, the Birmingham Centre was shut down in 2002 (for managerialist reasons, enabled, I believe, by the fact that it had remained a small postgraduate program which found it hard to secure state

research funding in competition with social scientists). And, indeed, in the years since, cultural studies, at the very time as it has consolidated itself pedagogically and institutionally, has lost a great deal of its capacity for theoretical and methodological innovation (I know many will disagree with this!). It may turn out, despite everything, that Hall's most substantive legacy will develop out of his work with the Black Arts Movement and his sponsorship of the Rivington Centre (slap bang in the middle of today's gentrified London district, Hoxton).

What remains of most interest to me (and I suspect to many) is his early 1980s work on Thatcherism, and then the late 1980s/early 1990s 'New Times' project, just because they are an early and influential response to neoliberalism which remains the dominant form of global governmentality (though the name 'neoliberalism' was not used by Hall and his colleagues in the 1980s).

Looking back, this work has problems too, however. Drawing on Gramsci and Nicos Poulantzas, it does offer an unprecedentedly rich analysis of Thatcherism as a form of 'authoritarian populism'. What this means is that under Thatcherism, and the 'crisis of authority' which it hijacks, there was a move from hegemony and consent to coercion. Coercion (largely in the form of militarised policing) gained social legitimacy in effect by harnessing a suite of popular-cultural imaginaries that create and demonise 'others', especially (but not only) racial others. For Hall at this stage of his career, the crisis of authority that happened in the wake of the 1971 ending of the Bretton Woods agreement may have particular economic conditions of possibility, but it was, for him, primarily a political and cultural event.

As it turned out, that analysis was wrong. Thatcherism was not the key formation, global neoliberalism was. And neoliberalism has often (but not always) been able to absorb multiculturalism and other 1960s liberation movements without much trouble. It wants, after all, to organise society on the model of a market as conceived by classical economics but as such remains a *liberalism* and one that works most powerfully by proliferating markets into and for new cultural zones and identities without being limited by the particular moral and cultural norms (homophobic, racist, nationalist) to which Thatcher and many Tories alongside her personally remained attached. As such neoliberalism has certainly gained widespread consent, and triumphed in many places without the application of

increased state coercion, despite the enormous (and unanticipated) increase in surveillance that has occurred in many developed nations since the late 1980s.

For all that, the conditions which propel neoliberalism forward are (though here, cf Wolfgang Streek's excellent recent work, we must tread carefully) economic more than they are political and cultural or technological. Political economy 'explains' neoliberalism much more powerfully than do Gramsci and cultural studies or even its ideological appeal to liberalisation. Political economy explains neoliberalism more powerfully even than the period's extraordinary increase in computing capacity, which does indeed enable and shape finance capital's current functions worldwide. Indeed it would appear that Hall would have been better to have remained closer to Poulantzas whose concept of 'class utilisation of the state' is nearer the truth of neoliberalism, namely the way in which those with a large stake in property and capital have been able to use the state to secure their holdings in times of further crisis quite independently of cultural or even political contestation; quite independently, too, of digitalisation or biopower.¹

By the period of the 'New Times' movement (organised by the British communist party's journal *Marxism Today*) Hall and his collaborators had themselves recognised that political economy was the central tool for understanding the new governmental and political situation, and questions of race, sexuality and multiculturalism are sidelined there to an alarming degree (but not of course in cultural studies more widely).

The problem now was not so much that the analysis was wrong but that the group didn't sufficiently face the fact that they didn't have a solution to it. They spoke in the name of modernisation (a word they swiped from their opponents) or rather a modernised socialism. But they didn't seem to believe in or have a modernised socialism in the sense that when they looked to the future they couldn't offer a socialist program for overcoming neoliberalism (here called 'new times'). They pointed instead, and incoherently, to nationalism, environmentalism and internationalism. And, implicitly accepting the cultural-pluralist potential implicit in neoliberalism, they continued the strategy of conceding to the enemy: socialism must come to involve more 'choice' and so forth. As Hall put it in *The Hard Road to Renewal*, socialism must find ways towards a 'deeper democratisation' but, pretty obviously, 'deeper democratisation' is only a meaningful concept if it is given some

institutional and political flesh. (And, leaving aside the unimaginable, a democratic socialism in power today, can we attach our hope to democracy anymore anyway?)

It is remarkable that of the various alternatives to neoliberal governmentality that have emerged more or less sketchily and *sub voce* in the academic humanities by appeal to 'theory', modernised socialism would appear to be about the least substantive. (For the record, let us name some of these alternatives: civic republicanism as hinted at by Quentin Skinner et al.; pluralism or corporatism as embraced by the one-time Althusserian Paul Hirst et al.; Spinozist ecological anarchism as embraced by some Deleuzians; Levinasian anarchism as embraced Simon Critchely et al.; the Occupy movement.)

Enough. Stuart Hall's place in the history of the academic humanities is secure. Who else has played so substantive a role in establishing what has become a global discipline or, at any rate, post-discipline? He was a great and fine person. Much of his work invites ongoing engagement. But for the most part not, I think, agreement. Which remains a remark very much in his spirit, I hope.

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Simon During is a research professor at the Centre for the History of European Discourses at the University of Queensland.

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¹ See Nicos Poulantzas, *Political Power and Social Classes*, Verso, London 1975.