

## STUART HALL: THE LAST INTERVIEW

Sut Jhally

*In August 2012, I interviewed Stuart Hall at his home in London, on the occasion of the republication of the co-authored 1978 book, Policing the Crisis. He discussed not only the continuing relevance of the book, but also talked about the direction that cultural studies has taken since the early days of the Birmingham Center.*

SUT JHALLY (SJ): Could you talk about how you think *Policing the Crisis* fits into the broad panoply of cultural studies and why it is still worth reading today?

STUART HALL (SH): Well, *Policing the Crisis* fits slightly oddly in the cultural studies endeavour over the whole period because it is quite early on; it's written in a probably more collective way than a lot of contemporary cultural studies, which is very much singly authored by researchers and scholars and so on. It's more political than a lot of cultural studies; it deals directly with a set of political events and with a specific political conjuncture in the 1970s. So, it fits the earlier part of cultural studies, the 1960s and the 1970s, better than it fits the 1980s and 1990s, which went into high theory and more into the media and was more interdisciplinary and so on.

So, I suppose it depends on what you call *cultural studies*. I have always thought that cultural studies had to have a political dimension. By that I do not mean that it had to be recruited to a particular party line or political position, but that if your task was critically thinking, you were bound to question the boundaries, the hierarchies, the orthodoxies, the established views and that was itself a political project – a challenge to existing forms of knowledge. In that sense, *Policing the Crisis*, which tried to read the 1970s in a very different way, against the grain, was centrally related to the long project of cultural studies, which I still think is bound to be political as well as intellectual and aesthetic, etc.

If I think more specifically, that was one of the first moments in cultural studies when the question of race and culture really came to the centre. Before that it wasn't that the people were not interested in it, but we had no black students to begin with; there were very few black students in early

days in higher education at all. So, the odd thing was that *Policing the Crisis* was written by graduate students who weren't black, but were riveted by the questions of race. That is an important point. Another thing is that at that stage race was not taken as a central political question; if you wanted to get into the centre of the understanding of the cultural shifts or the political movement of a period, you didn't use race as your prism. *Policing the Crisis* was particularly important because it said you can get into a conjuncture from several different vantage points, and race is an excellent way for getting into the hidden and unconscious – as well as the conscious and explicitly discriminatory – effects of race on the society.

So, in all those ways it is a part of what I would call the long cultural studies project. By which I don't mean everything that has happened in cultural studies. I don't necessarily approve of everything that has happened in cultural studies. I have my own criticisms of it. If I think something is boring, I don't read it. Things change and you have to accept that, but I don't feel I have got to defend cultural studies as a project. I think what we tried to do then and what I've tried to do in my own work and what a number of people have continued to do throughout the whole length and breadth of the project, that is the kind of cultural studies I read and I am interested in and contribute to. From that point of view, *Policing the Crisis*, with its more explicitly political edge and its concentration on race, as well as its interest in the relationship between politics and culture, was dead-centred to the cultural studies project.

SJ: How would you characterize its methodological and theoretical contributions?

SH: It is what I would call conjunctural analysis. We didn't know we were doing it. We got into *Policing the Crisis* because of a series of events: some boys all with a mixed race background got involved in an incident in Birmingham and were getting a whacking great sentence by the courts. We started out by asking, Why the huge sentence? What's the big fuss? What does it have to do with the fact that these boys are not white English working-class lads? They could easily have been.

So, we started to try to understand that and we came conceptually and methodologically very much from what were called 'deviance studies' at the time. A lot of the youth work, the work amongst youth and youth culture, like *Resistance Through Rituals*, a book we published just before *Policing the Crisis*, was very much drawing on that tradition, which asks who sets the definitions of what is not normal, What is abnormal? What is criminal? What is deviant? Who sets that? Who controls it? Who patrols it? The deviancy is not just the act of the deviant, but a social act that depends on all the people, all the actors involved in defining this group as responsible for something. The first half of *Policing the Crisis* is driven by that. But there is a shift even in that because at a certain point in deviance studies people began to

say, 'Well, you put these agencies of social control together and what you get is something we used to call the 'state'. It was not called the 'state' in American research on deviancy and so on, but that is what it is.

So, we looked at the agencies of the state. We looked at the courts and the police and the media, and those institutions whose definitions were feeding into defining the situation. When we put that together, we realized that we were really looking at a very much broader political moment. What we were looking at in *Policing the Crisis* is what happens to a society when it starts to disintegrate, when the settlement that dominated a period starts to disintegrate, and what Gramsci called 'morbid symptoms' begin to appear. Anxiety, social anxiety about other people. A sense of threat and danger, anybody different is a danger, etc. The book sort of turns at that point into looking more at the state, but the last half of the book then pursues that line even further and asks, What is this moment? What does race have to do with it?

Methodologically the book takes us from a base in deviance studies into Gramscian or Marxist analysis of race and politics and a historical period. Central to that analysis was the idea that this moment of the 1970s constituted a very distinctive political moment, what Althusser calls a 'ruptural break.' The idea of thinking historically not as an evolutionary development, but in terms of moments of rupture and settlement is a conjunctural analysis. It looks at the conjunctures – how they're different, how they arise, what sets them in motion and what sometimes resolves them, and what doesn't resolve them. So the notion of conjuncture, which really comes from Gramsci and partly Althusser is introduced into the field almost in the centre of this work and transforms what we're doing. Looking back, I think of this as one of the first works in English, in British work certainly, that uses a conjunctural analysis. I, myself, think conjuncturally about politics now. If I were to talk about the period between Thatcherism and now, I would look at the various moments of fusion, moments of conjuncture where things have kind of come together and fused over that period. So, I think that's what it does methodologically.

SJ: Is 'conjuncture' the main theoretical contribution of PTC?

SH: I don't know that it is. You see, conjuncture does appear in Gramsci. It's a concept that has a long history in critical and Marxist thinking. It doesn't always mean the same thing; it is not always applied the same way. I would say it's not the only concept by any means. I would say that you only understand how to analyse a conjuncture if you use many other Gramscian ideas. The idea of hegemonic power, being different, related to but different from moments of dominated power. Gramsci is very interested in the mechanisms by which popular consent are won, not just by which the people are dominated by a system, but by which they come to invest in it themselves. The whole range of concepts like that. Gramsci uses the phrase 'social forces' where, I think, we would tend to use the phrase 'classes'. Why does he do

that? Because he is aware that classes, which are basically constituted at the level of what we would call economic, don't appear politically in their own disguise. They don't march onto history as 'we are the ruling class' or 'we are the working class', and so on. The term is related to class very much, of course, and it is related to all that we understand about the laws of motion of a capitalist economy. But, politically, you have to understand what is distinctive about the political domain and how forces of governance and oppositions and resistance appear on the political stage. In understanding conjuncture you need these subordinate or other related concepts to say, 'Okay, this is the conjuncture of neoliberalism, a high point in neoliberalism. How am I going to analyze it?' At that point I think we need many of these other concepts, but the conjuncture is a sort of framing device for referring to all these other ways of trying to unpack a political moment.

SJ: This is more of a personal question, but the way I use PTC in my classes is most probably heretical – I actually stop at the end of part 3 and the section 'inside the yellow submarine', which seems to me to bring the narrative arc to a conclusion when you write, 'It is also the moment of mugging'. I tend to leave out section 4 and the long discussion of mugging from a more traditional deviancy perspective. Do you think that is an incomplete reading of the book?

SH: I think it is the moment of the mugger. There is no question about that. I suppose the last section tries to raise the questions of the mugger to a more general level. It starts to say, this is about the crisis around the questions of race. How are racial minorities, how are racial others positioned structurally and culturally in the British social formation? It's important because it gives the centrality to racial distinctions, which are usually thought of as separate from class distinctions. Of course you can stop anywhere you'd like. But I would say that though the answers that we give are not very satisfactory and not narratively driven, as you quite rightly say, but more speculative, they open more structural issues about race, which are not dealt with elsewhere in the book. So, that would be my main reason.

And there is a second reason: that the book – since it's not based on interviews or long field work or participant observation – does not, and is unable to, get behind how people who commit crimes that are labelled mugging actually commit them, what their motivation is. It doesn't get to that level. It can't get to that level. We couldn't do a more structural study and a participant observation study as well. We chose the former rather than the latter. But, we did feel toward the end as if we had to try to put together out of the material that we had some idea of what might have been impelling people to commit forms of crime, rather than, say, take up a political campaign. We touch on that at the end, but the end is much more speculative than the rest of the narrative, sure.

SJ: To what extent do you think PTC is relevant to understanding the contemporary political context, or the period from the 1970s to the present?

SH: I would say *Policing the Crisis* is extremely important in understanding the whole arc of development from the post-war period. I see that as composed of two basic eras: the social democratic Keynesian welfare state moment from the end of the war up to the 1960s, when it begins to run into trouble, until the 1970s, when its disintegration is palpable and it is coming apart at the seams. Then a new paradigm comes into existence: neoliberalism. That has gone through several versions and variants and huge developments from the early stages of multinational corporations to the global capitalist system we have now. It's a huge historical development, but I think all of the period between the 1970s and now is part of that.

So, almost casually, almost by chance, we hit on the moment of transition between two major conjunctures. Now, it gives me pleasure to say that though sociology thinks it's predictive science, it doesn't predict anything very much, very well. Based on the analysis it made, *Policing the Crisis* said, this is not just a swing of the intellectual pendulum, not just the usual ins and outs of politics – this a major historical shift we are looking at. Really deep and profound. The place will not be the same when this one gets going. It's a historical moment. And the second thing that we said was, if a certain kind of authoritarian populism is the way in which this crisis is resolved, it will have profound historical effects. That's anticipation of Thatcherism, before Thatcher. So that when the election came, when Mrs Thatcher to everybody's surprise took power in the Conservative Party (not at all a leading contender), and initiated Thatcherism or whatever that strange combination of authoritarianism and liberalism was – when she initiated it, we said if that takes root, she will win. Nobody else thought that Mrs Thatcher was going to win that election. For a long time [people] went on thinking that this was nothing more than the Tories will come back in, the conservatives will come back in, they will go out, they will come back in. The alternation of political parties. It was not that. It was the start of a completely different phase of capitalist development. So, I think PTC was important because it was right, right about what was coming. What was coming has justified the analysis we made. It was the moment of transitions of two conjunctures, and what was going on was not just electoral politics – it was a historical shift.

But what does PTC tell us about now? I don't think we can say that nothing has changed. I do not think that is true. If you look at any of the indicators, things have changed sometimes in different directions.

For instance, take policing and social control. They are now partly in the hands of capitalist enterprises. They have been outsourced. Private companies run our prisons. Security firms are completely privately owned. So, the kind of market element, which wasn't present during Thatcherism in this area, has become much more important. Does that mean that the prison system is

any nicer? No, it doesn't. It doesn't mean anything of the kind. Does it mean that the police are less politicized in their view of the world? No. I think it means that in some ways they are more politicized in their view of the world than they were. It doesn't help me to say we are still in the Thatcher moment, because we are not. We are not.

So, what I think *Policing the Crisis* does is not to answer your question, what does it have to tell us now, but it obliges us to do a *Policing the Crisis* now. To go back to that and say what has changed? What remains the same? How does the media function in it? How does a market function in it? What is the nature of the state in a moment when the state isn't coming but going and so on? So we don't, even in our new preface, try to answer that question when we try to say this is why the book was important. If you want to ask how it is important now, you would need to do a conjunctural analysis of your own on *this* moment and put race and crime at the centre of it as we did and see what happens.

SJ: Do you think that's even possible given how cultural studies has developed? Are there people who could do that in the present context?

SH: There are always people who could. Whether they are in cultural studies or not, I don't know. Cultural studies had a long period when it tried to forget that it had a political edge or political dimension. It went into a splurge of high theory. I'm not against theory – I don't think we can understand things without theoretical concepts – but cultural studies was never an enterprise to produce critical theory, which it kind of became. Much more damaging than that, in its attempt to move away from economic reductionism, it sort of forgot that there was an economy at all. So is cultural studies in a position to do that work? It's not in a wonderful position to take on that job of conjunctural analysis now. Though some people within cultural studies are, because they understand the culture is constitutive of political crisis and a lot of other people don't. So they are potentially in a position of making a deeper analysis of the present conjuncture than a lot of traditional political scientists or economic theorists would. But they would have to recover lost ground. They would have to go back to the political function of cultural studies, the political dimension of cultural studies, and they would have to ask themselves, 'If the economy does not determine everything in the last instance, then what is the role of the economic in the reproduction of the material and symbolic life?' They would have to ask themselves economic questions.

The funny thing is that historical circumstances impose themselves on how people think. I hear cultural studies people now talking about the LIBOR interest rate and trying to understand how the neoliberal global capitalist economy works in ways in which I haven't heard cultural studies people talking of economy for over 20 years. There's a kind of return. I don't want to see a return to economic reductionism, which as you know I have never

thought explained anything very much. But as Gramsci always said, the economy can never be forgotten. It has to be taken into account. So, cultural studies has to find a way, a language of reintegrating politics, culture and history, as we were trying to do at the beginning of the project. You won't be surprised to know I think it's more like a return to what cultural studies should have been about and was during the early stages. It sort of lost its way. But when I say that I have to remember that there are many varieties of cultural studies, it is a kind of international movement so you can't sum it up; in some places the political has always been close to the edge of what was being done. In other places the economy and politics have been completely forgotten. It is not at a good, healthy state to take on that work. But it does have something to contribute to that work of conjunctural analysis of the present, which a lot of other schools of thinking and research and critical work don't have. So, I think it could, if it pulls its socks up ... I am sounding like a headmaster (laughs). Sounding like the headmaster I never wanted to be! I never wanted to be cultural studies judge. It is too varied, too wide; too broad for any one person to say this is cultural studies and that is not. I came out of that sort of patriarchal position in relation to the field. I wanted to say, I am going to do some work of this kind in cultural studies, but I am not going to legislate what is and what isn't cultural studies. So, what I am saying now is more of an impression of where I think we are and what the state of the field is than a kind of serious analysis of the trends of cultural studies now.

Nevertheless, I feel there is a choice of pathways going on. A lot of people in cultural studies think we cannot just go on producing another analysis of *The Sopranos*. Sorry, something more is happening in the world that requires our attention. I don't know if they know quite how to do it or where to go, but I do feel that shift of mood happening in cultural studies now.

SJ: I hope so. When you've talked about the kind of questions that cultural studies originally posed, you've mentioned how central Marxism was to that formulation – not as in, this is how you do a Marxist analysis of culture, but as a conversation with, against, talking with Marxism, shouting at Marxism.

And I think that sense of a Marxist presence is no longer there. For example, people don't really read Marx anymore and without that frame you end up in a kind of free-floating idealist world of culture, where culture is constitutive but not driven by anything. How important do you feel that is, not that the Marxist approach is not there, but that conversation is not there, that those kinds of questions are not there?

SH: Yes, I would put my weight on your second emphasis. It is not that Marxism is not around, but that kind of conversation that cultural studies conducted with, against some aspects of, around the questions, expanding a Marxist tradition of critical thinking – that is absent and that is a real weakness. That is one of the reasons why we are not in a very good position. I myself

don't regard the whole of the period between the weakening of that tradition, which I suppose happens by the end of the 1970s, early 1980s, and now, as completely lost. Important gains were made which enable us to understand culture, cultural discourse, the place, the relationship of the ideological to the cultural – they are related but not the same things exactly. A lot of conceptual ground was covered, which could enrich the position, provided the basic conversation was reengaged. But, if it is not reengaged, then that interim period is when cultural studies lost its way.

SJ: I am thinking about what has happened to work on audiences as an illustration of this, where the focus has shifted from a concern with ideology, to a concern with questions of subjectivity and identity, in the process sidelining those fundamental questions of power that the conversation with Marxism raised.

SH: I would agree, that's one of the missing dimensions. The critique of ideology is rather reductive. It was taken too far. It is a loss of real important elements. I would say, for instance, that you cannot define culture and culture developments solely in terms of being driven by a kind of economic frame, but you have to look at the articulation between culture and, for instance, economic interests. Somebody has an interest in the shape, ownership of, and control of the media. It is not the only way in which power intervenes in the media. Some of the work that has gone on about discourse and the nature of discourse really enlarges and expands our attention and understanding of how exactly ideology works. You could take that bit forward, but still you would have to come back and engage with those points at which culture and political interests or class interests or social interests interlock. I do not want to return to something, but I want to reengage the same kinds of issues.

My own feeling is that this is what cultural studies was in the beginning. It was an attempt to understand culture and its relation to other social practices. In the beginning I always thought that culture was not an autonomous sphere and that what cultural studies was trying to do was understand the ensemble of relations between the economic, the political, the cultural, the ideological and the social. I don't think that it was ever intended that culture would arise, as it did in the 1990s, a spectre of its own autonomous generative power. That was never intended, it was not what it was about. So, we have to go back to those early questions of the relationship between culture and ideology; culture, ideology and class; culture, ideology and power; culture, ideology and other spheres of social life, including some that we didn't look at. Education. Gender. Race. The enterprise is incomplete. But unless they are sure to make that the focus of critical thinking, it won't hit its target.

SJ: If we can change the subject a little bit, I'd like to get your take on Obama and American politics. I think a lot of people on the left are quite confused as we head towards the 2012 Presidential election about their view of Obama

and the Democratic Party. Looking at it politically, what advice could you offer them?

SH: Oh, I don't know about that. But, I see the point you are making. I will tell you my response to Obama's getting the presidency. I said at the time this has two halves. The election of the first black president is a historical moment and you can't take that away from it. It does alter all sorts of things, including the political response of the right towards it. It changes the terrain. But, the value of Obama's presidency remains to be seen. I think, now, after a few years we are in a better position to see what that meant. But, what did it mean? I do not think Obama was ever a radical. It amuses me to see that the Tea Party thinks that he was a socialist. He never was. He is what he was. He is a good community organizer. Someone with his heart in the right place in relation to civil rights and the social and economic oppression of black people and so on. But, he was never a secret lefty of any organized or theorized kind. I never expected that.

And the second thing is that, I would give more weight to the simple inertia of the American political system. I thought to myself, anybody who fools themselves that because you touch a popular nerve, as he did, and you engage a very large number of people who had been largely depoliticized, that that tells you anything about what is going to happen when you get in to power ... (shakes head). I have a spectre of Obama with his ideas, sitting at the first meeting of the foreign policy or one of those Senate committees, saying 'I'm going to wind up Guantanamo', you feel the whole system like a steamroller just prepared to roll over him. You don't know what you are talking about. How do you win a crucial vote on health in the system? Well, you don't. That is not what the American political system is about. You bargain. You bargain for the lowest common denominator. You sell a pork barrel here and a directorship there. That's what it is – you go across the aisle. The idea of constituting a radical alternative conception of America was never there in the Obama campaign and I do not know quite how it works itself into the American system in the US. I am more pessimistic about the terrain than I think a lot of people on the left are. That's why I suspect that it is less a question of him abandoning the cause. I don't think the limits of his movement were properly understood. I blame him more for not understanding them himself and not squaring up to the people to say, 'Washington is not going to change the day after tomorrow because I have arrived in a white limousine at the White House'. It's not going to change like that. This country is much more stubborn, much more deeply invested in a conservative history and a conservative common sense and a kind of market consciousness than anybody really acknowledges. It has an absolutely vicious, practically insane, far right, anti-statist religious formation, which is not mirrored anywhere else, certainly not anywhere else in Europe. You've got to understand those things.

Gramsci used to say, 'Pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will'. What he meant is, understand how the bloody system works. What confronts you, the fact that the terrain is not favourable to your project. Understand that, even if it disillusiones you. Even if it makes you awake at night. Understand it. Then you are in a position to say, What can change? What are the emergent forces? Where are the cracks and the contradictions? What are the elements in public consciousness one could mobilize for a different political programme? I am a bit suspicious of the simple reverse: he is going to change the world; no, he has not changed anything. I don't think that is a very useful response. Although I have to acknowledge that I am very disappointed, deeply disappointed about many specific things. I am disappointed about the compromises around health. I am disappointed by the double talk about Afghanistan. I am disappointed by the conceding collapse into Israeli Middle-Eastern policy. I am concerned about the unwillingness to really tackle vested interests in social policy. You know, on and on and on I could tell you things. I, too, am deeply disillusioned about Obama's period. But I do not think I would say that I thought it couldn't happen and that he has just sort of given the game away.

SJ: One of the interesting things about Obama I think is that he is in some sense a blank slate on which people can project whatever they want – sort of like a Rorschach inkblot. Within the USA this plays out in terms of race in fascinating ways. There's an interesting moment in George Bush's memoir where he is asked what his worst moment as president was, and rather than list the many political disasters of his time in power (9/11, the Iraq war, etc.) he answers that it was when Kanye West accused him of being a racist, for his reaction to Katrina. In his eyes being called a racist was the worst thing he could imagine! So, even among conservatives like Bush, a kind of fantasy around race is being played out. It reminds me of something that bell hooks once speculated about when she was talking about the white consumption of black-identified popular forms, such as rap music. She said, this is the way 'fantasy will mediate fascism.' Pretend you're going somewhere you're not really going, so when the state comes calling, you haven't really left home. What do think about the idea that a large part of what people, white people especially, were attracted to in Obama was a notion of themselves as being different than what they were, that the guilt associated with America's racial past would be partly dissipated with his election?

SH: Well, I would say two things in response to what you have just said. One is, I never thought he was a socialist. I never thought he was of the left in some traditional sense, but I cannot say that his early work is not inspirational. It *is* inspirational. And it speaks perhaps to the second part, namely that fantasy. It may be nothing more than his articulacy. He is able to frame in words what you would think of as the beginning of a project, which is larger than anything

he intends and which would take him much further than he intends to go, but he does conjure it. This is not just an illusion and that is what certainly got to me about him.

Secondly, I do think it was a historical moment. I mean the moment when America elects its first black president. I don't care who he is, that is some kind of historical shift. I don't think we can neglect it. But thirdly, you know what hooks says is really extremely insightful. It had as much to do with a fantasy about race that firstly, I am not that kind of person myself. Secondly, that America is not really that kind of place. All of these are fantasies, but some are the fantasies that enable you to take part, to participate in movements and positions that you think are moving you towards the realization of that fantasy. Whereas actually, they are not at all. They do not correspond with reality. The trends are really right against you and so on. So it is a very important observation.

Let's ask the question where you began. What does that tell us about black popular culture now? What does it tell you about the fantasies and the illusions that are invested in black popular culture? I think it has become an extremely contradictory domain. The idea that there is a depository of alternative visions of liberation is just not the case. The idea that it is just integrated into the normal capitalist American way of life, the American consciousness, is not so, either. Its ambiguities are very profound, very profound. Difficult for us to acknowledge, but very profound. There are fantasies that [black popular culture] generates in some ways because of the languages that it uses. Languages of emotion. Languages of style. Languages of the body. Languages of sexuality. It is in a better position than the language of politics to conjure up those fantasies. Some difficult work remains to be done around the question of what is happening to black popular culture in the new century.

SJ: The 2012 London Olympics have just concluded and the last three weeks have been quite extraordinary, especially in terms of issues to do with race and Britishness. How have you thought about these issues?

SH: I've thought about this question of race and Britishness and the Olympics a lot. I have been quite preoccupied with the question of Englishness because there has been a debate about Englishness going on in British society over the last 10 or 15 years, partly in response to immigration, partly in response to black presence, partly in response to the position of a different culture indigenizing itself at the heart of Englishness itself, which is such an imperial and self-deluding form of superiority. I have been preoccupied with that. Of course, clearly, race is central to that question. Central because it is a kind of repository of difference, repository for everything that is not naturally and normally British or English. So it is an important question.

Now, what do I think has been happening? I can't tell you I think it is the same as it was in the 1950s and 1960s. But has it changed completely? By no means. Are some of the old elements still present? Yes. The riots that

took place in the British cities last year – their equivalence could be spotted right across these last five decades. Events like that, misunderstandings, conflicts between the people and the police, have triggered rioting or explosive moments. In that sense, it's all too familiar. On the other hand, it is not quite familiar as all that. Why now? Lots of people were white. Were they participating in the riots for the same reasons as black men and women? I do not know. So there are a lot of issues, a lot of questions. Is it the same? Is it absolutely different? Is it a transitional moment? I would say we are still in a very transitional moment.

Take visibility. When I first came to England in the 1950s and 1960s, there was not a black person on television to be seen except in a comedy programme or the equivalent of coon show. Now, black presenters are all over the place, black sports people are all over the place. They are relatively low, of course, in the promotion stakes in every field, there are all sorts of occupations they do not occupy, but they also have a lot of visibility that they did not have before. How do you explain that?

I think there has been a kind of multicultural drift, a sort of acknowledgement: 'Well, they are there, they do not seem to be going home. I guess one must get accustomed to having them around, though I don't like it.' A kind of grudging acknowledgement that is not quite the celebration of multiculturalism that you do find among some young people who really like living in a diverse society. The majority of English people do not like it, but I think they acknowledge that it is not going to change overnight. And that has led into a kind of drift of acceptance. Okay, you go into a store on Oxford Street, or one of the shopping malls. The attendant is likely to be a very smartly dressed, fashion-conscious, street-conscious, streetwise, black man or black woman. And that is no surprise any longer.

There is a kind of drift going along, which has transformed the situation, but not dramatically. On the other hand, to those people who say it is totally different – it is not totally different. Completely not. At the bottom of the ladder are still oppressed black people who on every social indicator are worse off than their white counterparts. On employment, earnings, income, professionalization, educational achievement, social mobility – worse. There are substantial sections of young black people who are not just angry as they were in the 1970s about prejudice and discrimination and racism, but who feel completely outside the society. They form a society of their own, in a way. They don't relate to the rest of the society very much. They are deeply disaffected. And they are disaffected not just literally because they are poor or can't afford consumer goods or can't buy the kind of clothes or technological gadgets that they would like, but because they feel just sort of rejected. As if society has set its face in stone, like a wall, against ever seeing them as part of itself, even as a subordinate part of itself.

So, there are very contradictory tendencies going on, very contradictory. I don't know that I could come to a definitive judgement as to where the balance of forces lies. I was not optimistic, but I was hopeful about what I would call the moment of multiculturalism, because I thought 'well, ideas of diversity are beginning to sort of be acknowledged, grudgingly, to take root in the society'. Well, that moment is gone. The prime minister said multiculturalism is dead. And it is quite true that 9/11 and 7/7 and the politicization of Islam and terrorism has done incredible damage to the possibility of gradual inclusiveness becoming sort of an English common sense. So I don't think that's happening at all.

Indeed, in some respects, we are in the reverse. Borders are much more closed, asylum seekers – not just black people but anybody from anywhere else – are not welcome. They are a source of threat; they are a source of difference. Difference is a threat. The society feels itself now as in decline into the status of second-rate power. It has been for a long time, but it now feels itself. And in those circumstances, really, it produces all kinds of very dangerous symptoms, of which racism is one. So I do not think we are in a settled state at all. I think the riots have all these elements in them.

But let's take the Olympics. The Olympics consist of all these moments. First of all, the hype about Englishness and the English, and Team GB, and all that rubbish chauvinism that went on. Which lasted into the Olympics in one important way. In the first week, you did not know anybody else who had won any medals; everything on the media was about what Team GB had done. You know, one two three, and Team GB was seventh. Who was fourth, fifth, sixth? So, the chauvinism is not unfinished. Secondly, the political capital is hugely exploited and used. Boris Johnson intends to make his entire political career and his challenge to the conservative leadership founded on a kind of London Olympics moment, a certain reading of it. Politically, that is the way it is going.

Commercially, it was a shocker. Both the Paralympics and the Olympics themselves were mainly sponsored by people who are the deep enemies of the Olympic ideal. The Paralympics, which opened today, is mainly sponsored by one of the organizations whose job it is to test disabled people so that fewer and fewer of them can get government benefits. And let's not speak about McDonalds and Coke sponsoring the Olympics. The commercialization was horrendous.

On the other hand, half of Team GB was black. What am I to think of that? False consciousness? They didn't look embarrassed as Linford Christie did at one point earlier on. It was not an act of defiance to take the Union Jack and run around the track. They felt a certain pride in it, a certain kind belonging. Not to Britain as such, but to 'where I live', like Hackney or South London. They were not completely alienated. A very difficult position for me to be in because, as well as that, there were the bloody Jamaicans! One, two three!

There was Usain Bolt, who is a figure from another planet, an extraordinary character. So what am I to do with that?

And I do not think there is any question of the genuineness of the response of a good section of the crowd, that this is a good thing. That this is a multi-cultural occasion. Lots of diverse people, everybody claiming to be English or British in some way. Then there was the sport itself and, in the Paralympics, the tremendous courage and triumph of people who are disabled, which has a very positive charge to it. So, what do I make of the Olympics? I am bloody puzzled. It is part of that ambivalent, ambiguous transitional moment, which I tried to describe earlier on.

SJ: You alluded to this earlier, but how are Linford Christie and Mo Farah different, or more specifically, how are these moments different?

SH: I do not think Mo Farah is angry. He does not seem to be angry with being in England, with white people, and so on. He is not trying to represent himself as if he were just an ordinary English person. He is who he is. He has this great gash of a smile that could only appear in a black face, and it is just impossible for a white face to mimic that. I am told that in his native country they think he is running for them, not for Britain! I do not know what he makes of that. So I do think it is a different moment. The English were never proud of Linford Christie's triumphs, never. And I think they are quite proud of Mo Farah. I think they are very proud that Jessica Ennis turns out to be mixed race. Her father is a Jamaican carpenter. Her mother is English. These are the two emblematic figures of the 2012 Olympics. It can't mean nothing. What does it mean? I do not know. But it is a different moment from that of the 1970s. Very different moment. I don't invite anybody to resolve that into either 'things are getting better' or 'things are getting worse'. I do say, Think about the contradictions which are in play at the moment.

SJ. Do cultural studies!

SH: Indeed!

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