

Stuart Hall's pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will: reflections on an intellectual life

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ABSTRACT

Stuart Hall was a seminal figure in the development of cultural studies and his death in 2014 has left an intellectual and political void. This article, based on a memorial talk, offers a number of perspectives on Hall's life and work: the relationship between his speeches/interviews and his written work; the cultural and political context of cultural studies' emergence; the contradictory and productive relationship between cultural studies and Marxism; the centrality of 'conjunctural analysis' to the project of cultural studies; the continuing relevance of the recently republished book *Policing the Crisis*; the responsibilities of intellectuals to make ideas matter in the world beyond the academy, and the political nature of Hall's version of cultural studies.

KEYWORDS Stuart Hall; cultural studies; marxism; Gramsci; conjunctural analysis

In a conversation about Stuart Hall's work with the British/Australian scholar John Hartley in the early 1990s, I commented that I was always surprised when people described Hall as difficult to read, because for me he is one of the clearest writers I have ever encountered. John agreed and offered the thought that how you approached Hall's *writing* was partly dependent upon whether you had heard him *speak* (either in lecture or in conversation), as that offered a prism through which you could interact with the written word; you could hear the cadence and the poetic nature of his speech, that mischievous little laugh that often accompanied the words. I think that is essentially a correct interpretation, that his speeches and interviews are an integral part of his intellectual and theoretical legacy. It certainly matches my own introduction and interaction with his work.

As an undergraduate at the University of York in England in the 1970s, I was not a particularly serious student. I was much more interested in football and music, but I had started to read some of the early cultural studies work on

subcultures, partly I think to try to understand my own self-construction – an immigrant kid born in Kenya of Indian parents thrust into the maelstrom that was Britain in the 1960s – as an ‘Englishman’. Hall was presenting at a conference at York in 1976, and as I had read some things he had written (the early *Working Papers in Cultural Studies* from the Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies) I attended his lecture and immediately discovered something I was not aware of – that he was Black! Long before I heard the term ‘identity politics’, I knew that this was a salient (if not a defining) point. As I listened to him, it was not particularly the content of his speech that interested me (why it was well worth reading Marx’s obscure text on French politics, *The 18th Brumaire of Louis Napoleon*) but much more the sense that intellectual work could be about passion, fun, excitement and imagination, that it had to be in service to something broader, to the world beyond the academy.

So that conversation with John Hartley confirmed what I already really knew, and led me a few years later to work with Hall on a couple of filmed lectures, to introduce him to audiences in a medium different than writing. These were released by the Media Education Foundation as *Race, the Floating Signifier* (1996) and *Race and Representation* (1997). They have since served as an introduction to Hall’s work for many college students, especially in the United States.

Since Hall’s passing in 2014, I have reflected a great deal about the exemplary intellectual life he lived, and what lessons or guidelines may be drawn from it, especially at this time where the world seems to be close to ecological and economic collapse. I believe *origins and starting points* are important, not because they tell us the true meaning of anything, but because the traces of that history are still here (perhaps buried) in the present, and although cultural studies has come a long way since its beginnings, we should not forget the conditions of its emergence.

In the case of the cultural studies tradition connected with Hall, there are actually *two* origins, simultaneously political and theoretical.

The first is connected with the year 1956 and the twin crises of Budapest (the Soviet crushing of the Hungarian revolution) and Suez (the French, British and Israeli attack on Egypt). Hall called the progressive response to this the birth of the ‘first new left’ (the second new left emerges in 1968 in Paris) which was *both* anti-imperialist *and* anti-Stalinist. As a result, Hall famously characterized his (and cultural studies’) involvement with Marxism as coming in to it ‘backwards’:

In that sense I came into Marxism backwards: against the Soviet tanks in Budapest, as it were. What I mean by that is certainly not that I wasn’t profoundly, and that cultural studies then wasn’t from the beginning, profoundly influenced by the questions that Marxism as a theoretical project put on the agenda: the power, the global reach and history-making capacities of capital; the question of class; the complex relationships between power ... and exploitation; the

question of a general theory which could, in a critical way, connect together in a critical reflection different domains of life, politics and theory, theory and practice, economic, political, ideological questions, and so on; the notion of critical knowledge itself and the production of critical knowledge as a practice.

These important, central questions are what one meant by working within shouting distance of Marxism, working on Marxism, working against Marxism, working with it, working to try to develop Marxism. (1992a, p. 279)

Anyone familiar with Hall's work will surely recognize this description of his relationship to, and lifelong argument with, the Marxist tradition (as well as the appropriateness of his final resting place in Highgate Cemetery, just a short distance away from Karl Marx himself).

The second origin does not have a precise date and emerges out of the period of transition from the 1950s into the cultural and political revolutions of the 1960s. Cultural studies develops initially not as an academic theoretical project, but as part of an attempt to understand the new conditions of political possibility, to make sense of a world in transition, of a cultural revolution that the traditional disciplines (and political parties) were not able, or perhaps willing, to understand. As Hall put it:

In short, a kind of Cultural Revolution in front of our eyes. And nobody that we could see was studying it seriously. Nobody thought it worth, let alone right and proper to turn on this dramatically shifting kaleidoscopic cultural terrain, the searchlight of critical analytic attention. Well, that was the vocation of cultural studies. That is what cultural studies in Britain was about. But I would insist on this starting point. I would insist on the tension characteristic in this work, which marked my own intellectual development and my own intellectual work ever since.

The maximum mobilization of all the knowledge, thought, critical rigor, and conceptual theorization you can muster, turned in an act of critical reflection, which is not afraid to speak truth to conventional knowledge, and turned on the most important, most delicate, and invisible of objects, the cultural forms and practices of a society, it's cultural life. (1992b, p. 12)

Hall's seminal contributions to the development of cultural studies, especially in this early period, have been about theorizing transitions, not as smooth evolutionary processes but as interruptions, and of understanding the connections that are undone and redone as a result of such ruptures in terms of both politics and identity. It is why the concepts of 'articulation' and 'diaspora' are interwoven in the totality of his work.

From the start *this* project of cultural studies always had a *political dimension*, not in terms of adherence to a particular vision or set of policies, but as a way to approach the function of knowledge. In one of the last interviews he gave, Hall addressed this directly:

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. (Jhally 2016)

Bringing the full weight of our theoretical understandings to bear on the history of the present – of trying to make sense of the present – has always been central to a critical sociology. This of course also describes what Antonio Gramsci calls the necessary theoretical work of ‘organic intellectuals’ – the understanding of the real conditions of possibility for praxis. (Writing from the depths of Mussolini’s prison, to evade his censors, Gramsci used the descriptive code phrase ‘the philosophy of praxis’ to refer to Marxism.) Nowhere are these two concerns (of politics and theory) more clearly articulated than in the great masterpiece of the early period of cultural studies, *Policing the Crisis* (Hall et al. 2013).

Policing the Crisis ends up being a work about a society in transition – from the social-democratic settlement of the post-war period to the neo-liberalism conjuncture that would come to be known as Thatcherism. But it started out in a very different place with a different set of concerns – by trying to make sense of why three kids of various races in the community where the Birmingham Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies was located, were given unprecedented sentences of up to 20 years for a street crime that before had carried nothing like that penalty. From that very concrete and historical starting point, Hall and his co-authors were able to map out the political, ideological, cultural and psychological conditions of the new law & order neo-liberal social order that defined Britain in the 1970s and 1980s. What was distinctive about the analysis was that the story was told not as an evolutionary tale, but as a story of contradiction and rupture, a story of the social anxiety that such change unleashes. It was one of the first examples of what has come to be called ‘conjunctural analysis’:

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 center 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. (The Last Interview 2016)

Policing the Crisis was also the first work in cultural studies that put questions of race at the centre of the analysis.

At that stage race was not taken as a central political question; if you wanted to get into the center 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 ... 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-centered to the cultural studies project. (The Last Interview 2016)

When the second edition of *Policing the Crisis* was republished, 35 years after the original, Hall was very clear that while the book offered many lessons on how to do a conjunctural analysis, it could not simply be a model that could be applied to situations (and conjunctures) that were historically specific in themselves:

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 center of it as we did and see what happens. (The Last Interview 2016)

In this age of mass incarceration, the war on drugs and racialized police and state violence, Hall has issued us a theoretical, methodological and political challenge, and at the end of his life he was relatively agnostic as to whether the contemporary incarnation of cultural studies was indeed capable of meeting it.

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 ... 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. (The Last Interview 2016)

To engage in this project productively means to reinvigorate a set of questions that have fallen largely dormant in the intervening period – to re-engage a discussion with Marxism, or at least the questions that it put on the table of cultural studies.

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 70s, early 80s, 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. (The Last Interview 2016)

If Hall remained a Marxist (despite his many criticisms and revisions of classical Marxism) he is of course a Gramscian Marxist. In addition to Gramsci's contribution to the theoretical development and displacement of central elements of Marxism, Hall was also influenced by his view of the responsibility of intellectuals:

The 'organic intellectual' must work on two fronts at one and the same time. On the one hand, we had to be at the very forefront of intellectual theoretical work because, as Gramsci says, it is the job of the organic intellectual to know more than the traditional intellectuals do: really know, not just pretend to know, not just to have the facility of knowledge, but to know deeply and profoundly. If you are in the game of hegemony you have to be smarter than 'them.' Hence, there are no theoretical limits from which cultural studies can turn back.

But the second aspect is just as crucial: that the organic intellectual cannot absolve himself or herself from the responsibility of transmitting those ideas, that knowledge, through the intellectual function, to those who do not belong, professionally, in the intellectual class. And unless those two fronts are operating at the same time, or at least unless those two ambitions are part of the project of cultural studies, you can get enormous theoretical advance without any engagement at the level of the political project. (1992a, p. 281)

Hall encourages us to think seriously about issues of *translation*, not least in the academic practice which defines our day-to-day existence in the academy – teaching. How do we have meaningful conversations with young people with very different backgrounds, interests, learning styles, etc. We cannot just teach our students as though they are our colleagues and expect to be understood. Further, writing in academic journals for narrow specialized readerships is not enough to be engaged in intellectual work. Hall's distinction between 'intellectual' versus 'academic' is vital in understanding the role of 'organic intellectuals', as is his insistence that academic work is not the same as intellectual work.

I come back to the deadly seriousness of intellectual work. It is a deadly serious matter. I come back to the critical distinction between intellectual work and

academic work: they overlap, they abut with one another, they feed off one another, the one provides you with the means to do the other. But they are not the same thing. I come back to the difficulty of instituting a genuine cultural and critical practice, which is intended to produce some kind of organic intellectual political work ... as a practice which always thinks about its intervention in a world in which it would make some difference, in which it would have some effect. (1992a, p. 286)

In the academy, especially, I think sometimes that ‘theory’ gets us off the hook of having to be in the world in any meaningful way. Hall talked very explicitly about the tension inherent in being engaged in the kind of intellectual practice that should characterize cultural studies:

I think anybody who is into cultural studies seriously as an intellectual practice, must feel, on their pulse, its ephemerality, its insubstantiality, how little it registers, how little we’ve been able to change anything or get anybody to do anything. If you don’t feel that as one tension in the work that you are doing, theory has let you off the hook. (1992a, p. 285)

One of the lessons that I learnt from Hall is that our own work always involves *choices* and he was quite disturbed by the high theoretical turn in cultural studies that seemed to divorce the project from the world. In contrast he wanted to stress the *worldliness* of the project of cultural studies.

This is a way of opening the question of the ‘worldliness’ of cultural studies, to borrow a term from Edward Said. I am not dwelling on the secular connotations of the metaphor of worldliness here, but on the worldliness of cultural studies. I’m dwelling on the ‘dirtiness’ of it, the dirtiness of the semiotic game, if I can put it that way. I’m trying to return the project of cultural studies from the clean air of meaning and textuality and theory to the something nasty down below. (1992a, p. 278)

The subject of cultural studies is the ‘dirty’ semiotic world where knowledge and power intersect, and although Hall used the academy as a base, he was not an academic but an intellectual in the Gramscian sense. His concern was ideas applied to something in the world.

This is of course Gramsci’s crucial intervention – that recognition that intellectual work was a material force in the society every bit as important as other forms of struggle, that there is an intellectual function to all struggle. It is what is captured in his famous dictum, ‘pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will’. Hall explains how he interprets the phrase.

What he meant is, understand how the bloody system works. What confronts you, the fact that the terrain is not favorable to your project. Understand that even if it disillusion you. Even if it keeps you awake at night. Understand it. Then you are in a position to say, well 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 political program? (The Last Interview 2016)

In this version of cultural studies there are *choices* to be made about what we study, how we study it, and for what ends, and at the end of his life Hall thought the implications of what we study were at least getting clearer.

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. (The Last Interview 2016)

The Polish sociologist Zygmunt Bauman says exactly the same thing about our necessary choices.

I do not believe that a student of human reality may be ethically neutral. The sole choice we face is one between loyalty to the humiliated and to beauty, and indifference to both. It is like any other choice a moral being confronts: between taking and refusing to take responsibility for one's responsibility. (2001, p. 41)

Hall always took that responsibility seriously, and was frustrated his entire life that the left had not learnt the real lesson that Gramsci taught us – that politics was not only about policies and ideas, but about identity and belonging and passion, that culture was constitutive, operating not like a dependent variable but much more like an overdetermined independent variable.

If *Policing the Crisis* is the exemplary theoretical and methodological text of early cultural studies, I think Hall's most important political work is the *Hard Road to Renewal: Thatcherism & the Crisis of the Left*, his collection of essays on politics and the possibilities of fundamental progressive transformation. The essays are a Gramscian analysis of what Hall called Thatcherism – the cultural and ideological underpinnings of the neo-liberal revolution of the 1970s and 1980s. It is significant that his last project, the co-authored *The Kilburn Manifesto*, dealt with the same issues for a contemporary conjuncture – how to create the conditions for a truly left/socialist political culture. That was why he had such enmity for Tony Blair and New Labour. They had not only adopted the policies of their neo-liberal opponents – Mrs Thatcher identified 'New Labour', her transformed opponents, as *her* greatest achievement – they had stolen the spark of imagination and passion from the left for a different kind of society.

Although he often said he came into Marxism backwards, Stuart remained a committed socialist his entire life, and it is worth quoting a little-known essay from *The Hard Road to Renewal* at length on what he believes is the difference between progressive reformers and socialists.

Socialism has, in its past, learnt a good deal from progressive people who have contributed in important ways to the labour movement ... But progressivism can never provide the lure of socialist ideas. Between good reformism and the will to socialism runs what William Morris once called the 'river of fire'. Of

course, when socialism touches the imagination, people do still go on living just as they did before, trying to survive, coming to terms with a society in which they have to make an existence. But their imaginations have been fired by the possibility of an alternative way of making life with other people, and nothing less will do. Socialism may be just half the turn of a screw away from reformist and progressive ideas but it is this final twist which counts. It is what makes the difference between good and humane people and committed socialists: between the logic of one principle of social organization and another. Now when that gulf opens, the river of fire dissects people's lives, and they glimpse the possibility not of having the existing set of social relations improved a bit, but of beginning the long, dangerous, historical process of reconstructing society according to a different model, a different logic and principle that does not come 'spontaneously'. It does not drop like manna from the skies. It has to be made, constructed and struggled over. Socialist ideas win only because they displace other not so good, not so powerful ideas. (1988, p. 183–184)

Even in his time Marx identified the fundamental choice between 'barbarism' and 'socialism'. I think that we have already been living in barbaric times, that at this point in human history the stakes are very high. Neo-liberalism as a practice and a philosophy could well be the last stage of a trajectory that fundamentally divides human beings into a minority that deserve to live decent comfortable lives, and the majority condemned to eke out an existence that could barely be called human. These are the questions that Stuart Hall's work poses. What is the responsibility of intellectuals at this time? How do we use the relative privilege we have been granted? Do we ask the fundamental questions of the age and struggle to make them matter in the world, or do we remain 'academics' (useless, marginal, impotent)? That choice, between resistance and complicity, has never been starker, and we know where Stuart stood on that.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Notes on Contributor

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