

Feature Contribution

## **STUART HALL: AN EXEMPLARY SOCIALIST PUBLIC INTELLECTUAL?**

Hillary Pimlott,<sup>1</sup> Department of Communication Studies, Wilfrid Laurier University

### **Abstract**

Most assessments of the influence of scholars and public intellectuals focus on their ideas, which are based upon an implicit assumption that their widespread circulation are a result of the veracity and strength of the ideas themselves, rather than the processes of production and distribution, including the intellectual's own contribution to the ideas' popularity by attending conferences and public rallies, writing for periodicals, and so on. This concise article offers an assessment of the late Stuart Hall's role as a socialist public intellectual by connecting the person, scholar and public intellectual to the organisations, institutions and publications through which his contributions to both cultural studies and left politics were produced and distributed. This article includes an emphasis on Hall's 'Thatcherism' thesis and his public interventions via the periodical, *Marxism Today*, during the 1980s.

Much has been written about Stuart Hall in the short space of time since his death on 10 February 2014, a lot of which encompasses the range of feelings of admiration and respect that I, too, have for him as a person, scholar and public intellectual. For me, it is not only that his work is significant for socialists and scholars, but also that he was a model socialist public intellectual, which is the case I want to make in this reflection.

Most assessments of the influence of scholars and public intellectuals tend to focus on their ideas, by which there is an implicit assumption that the widespread circulation of those ideas are based upon some sense of the veracity and strength of the ideas themselves, rather than the processes of production and distribution, including the scholar's or intellectual's own contribution to their ideas' popularity by attending conferences, public rallies and so on. That is, the recognition of the appeal or influence of someone like Stuart Hall becomes tautological: their ideas are great and significant because a lot of people have read and discussed them which demonstrates their veracity and appeal which is why people read and discuss them. These kinds of assumptions ignore how the relations of power, or the social relations of production in particular, within society help to shape the reception and popularity of ideas. Drawing upon cultural materialism, we need to focus on how ideas are produced and distributed by scholars and public intellectuals, such as Stuart Hall.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Herbert Pimlott is an associate professor of communication studies whose research emphasises the material production and circulation of ideas, particularly in the relationship between alternative media and socialist politics. He can be contacted at [hpimlott@wlu.ca](mailto:hpimlott@wlu.ca).

## The Personal is Political

I want to begin with a personal anecdote that reflects Stuart Hall's manner of engaging with others that exemplifies the feminist maxim, 'the personal is political'. My first encounter with him reflects much about his personality, politics and intellectual engagement. As part of my doctoral research into the journal-cum-magazine, *Marxism Today* (MT), I interviewed Hall about his participation in its political-journalistic project during the 1980s and early 1990s; MT's fame was attributable, at least in part, to his participation and he was keen to speak about it. If I had been made hesitant by his seemingly distant voice on the telephone, his welcome at the door felt nothing short of that for a long-lost friend.

Despite my own awkwardness of being in the company of someone, whose writings I had read avidly and discussed critically with friends and colleagues, he made me feel as if there was no other person with whom he would rather be at that moment. For someone whose writings reached across numerous disciplinary and national boundaries via print and broadcast media, Hall exhibited nothing of the manner of those 'celebrity academics' whose sense of self-importance tends to expand exponentially with their exposure via mass media. The three-hour-plus interview, extended at his request, was full of quick wit and laughter, sober second thoughts, and a kind of sceptical excitement about political possibilities and potential obstacles (John Major's government was in its last months), which brought to mind Stuart Hall's (frequent) reiteration of Gramsci's oft-quoted phrase: 'optimism of the will and pessimism of the intellect'.

As many others have noted from their encounters with Hall, he was generous, giving, courteous and with a ready – and great – sense of humour. No surprise then, that I came away with a much greater respect and fondness for the man whose ideas challenged, provoked and engaged. It wasn't that his ideas brooked no criticism, since his own writing often displayed a hesitation and contingency – to the point of irritation with some critics. Even in public arenas, it was hard for hecklers, who sought to provoke him, to contend with the charisma, disarming smile and generosity with which he listened even to them, before responding and sharing his thoughts.<sup>ii</sup>

For Hall, therefore, the maxim that the 'personal is political' was reflected in his respectful and open manner of engaging others, including the ways in which he worked as a scholar and educator. For example, much of the appeal of the Birmingham University's Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) was the collaborative processes of postgraduate students and faculty working together on various interdisciplinary approaches to subjects, such as popular and youth (sub) cultures and media, which were not then an integral part of university curricula.

This pioneering engagement in the collaborative process in a rapidly expanding arena of scholarly activity, which took on topical issues of public interest, made an important contribution to the appeal of cultural studies, particularly the emphasis on the politics of (popular) culture and on overcoming the separation of academic study and politics. In particular, it should be noted that the CCCS produced their 'Stencilled Occasional Papers' and 'Working

Papers in Cultural Studies' series, through which the collaborative work of the Centre was published to reach an academic audience beyond the Centre, with some of these collections being reproduced by the publishing company, Hutchinson, for a yet broader public beyond the academy.

No other work better represents this new subject matter for academic study and Hall's commitment to working collaboratively with graduate students and faculty than the 1978 book, *Policing the Crisis*, wherein he and four graduate students produced 'a multi-layered analysis of race, media and moral panics in the UK in the 1970s', that revealed the 'crisis' of the conjuncture as it was articulated through public discourses; 20 years later Hall still felt it was 'the best example' of cultural studies work (Pimlott, 2011: 518; Hall, 1997). The result of several years work, *Policing The Crisis* (PTC) actually began its life as an 'agitational leaflet'. Chas Critcher, one of the four postgraduate students and co-authors, had been closely involved in the community campaign over prison sentences handed out to three black youths in Handsworth, an inner-city neighbourhood in Birmingham; PTC evolved from that one single-page leaflet into five different pamphlets produced between 1972 and 1978, with each iteration drawing upon new research and analysis, which ranged across the courts, police, race, media and moral panics, and representing a more developed account than the previous one, until it was published as a book (Hall, 1997; Hall et al., 1978; Pimlott, 2011: 518).

This collaborative model and the overlap between politics and culture, including academic study, speaks to what cultural studies meant for me as a socialist agitator and organizer before becoming a scholar later in life. I, too, believe that PTC, with all its flaws, is a good example of both the promise that cultural studies held until the 1990s and why academic work should be connected to political, ideological and cultural struggle: i.e. that academic study should contribute to the betterment of our communities, our society.

### **Editor/Public Intellectual - Politics of Popular Culture**

In many ways, Stuart Hall's collaborative manner of working with others was a result of his active engagement in the political project of the First New Left (1957-1962), as an organiser, activist, writer and editor. From his work with *Universities and Left Review* (ULR), one of the two precursors to *New Left Review*, through to *Soundings*, launched in 1995 with his co-editors, Doreen Massey and Mike Rustin, Stuart Hall never lacked for a practical engagement in the material production of ideas for publics. He worked with Raphael Samuel, Charles Taylor and others to establish ULR and went on to become the first editor of *New Left Review* (NLR), a result of the merger of ULR with *The New Reasoner*, produced by ex-CPGB members, E.P. Thompson, John Saville and Peter Worsley. Hall's contributions were integral to the intellectual formation of the First New Left, from participation in editorial activities and public talks and conferences, to the promotion of and participation in New Left clubs and social events.

Besides Stuart Hall's involvement in the production of explicitly left-wing political interventions, such as the 1967 *May Day Manifesto* with co-editors, E.P. Thompson and Raymond Williams, he also contributed to debates, studies and periodicals across a range of social and cultural issues, including such topics as football hooliganism, newspapers and race, via organizations such as the BBC, Commission on Racial Equality and UNESCO, and he could be read in various periodicals, from the BBC's *The Listener*, *New Society* and *New Statesman* to *Socialist Review* and *Marxism Today*, as well as seeing his work translated into German, Italian and other languages.

His political and scholarly interests (if they can be separated) demonstrate a consistency in focus on popular culture and politics, including not reducing the former to the latter, although his interest in popular culture was very political, demonstrating the influence of Gramsci on his thinking. In 'Deconstructing the Popular', Stuart Hall makes the case for why socialists needed to take popular culture seriously. He writes:

Popular culture is one of the sites where this struggle for and against a culture of the powerful is engaged: it is also the stake to be won or lost *in* that struggle. It is the arena of consent and resistance. It is partly where hegemony arises, and where it is secured. It is not a sphere where socialism, a socialist culture – already fully formed – might be simply 'expressed'. But it is one of the places where socialism might be constituted. That is why 'popular culture' matters. Otherwise, to tell you the truth, I don't give a damn about it (Hall, 1981b: 239).

Indeed, it was this combination of both academic and activist interest in politics and culture that has always been an integral component of cultural studies' own political project – and therefore no surprise that Stuart Hall and cultural studies are so closely associated with one another. As NLR editor, he combined politics and culture (which had been part of ULR's focus), such as including essays, photographs and sketches of jazz music, apartheid in South Africa and the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament.

Stuart Hall was not shy about engaging others on the Left with whom he was not in political alignment. For example, he attended Communist Party meetings after 1956, when the CPGB had lost at least one-quarter of its membership, to engage in debate even as he knew the CPGB was more interested in recruiting than listening to him (Hall 2009). This engagement with the CPGB would arise again as the Communist Party began its own transformation in the late 1960s and 1970s as it broadened its approach to ideology and culture (Andrews 2004). For example, *Comment*, the fortnightly Party review sought out a broader, external audience under editor Sarah Benton, who engaged three cultural studies scholars to produce a regular TV column (1978-81) preceding the Left's turn to popular culture in the 1980s.

More significantly, Stuart Hall started attending the Communist University of London (CUL), which had shifted from a fairly orthodox Communist Party summer school in 1969 to an

open, dynamic and heterodox engagement of ideas by the mid-1970s; it attracted some 1500 activists and academics by 1977, many of whom were not members of the CPGB (Andrews 2004). Stuart Hall's work was gaining wider recognition beyond academic circles with presentations published in two of three books that the CPGB publishers, Lawrence and Wishart, produced from different CULs, including his widely reproduced essay on racism and the media (Hall 1981a).

### Public Intellectual and Political Intervention

Indeed, it was through the Communist University of London that Martin Jacques, the last editor of the monthly, *Marxism Today* (MT), became acquainted with Stuart Hall and his ideas. Jacques encouraged Hall to develop his analysis in *Policing the Crisis* further, and published Hall's first article for MT in the January 1979 issue where Hall names 'Thatcherism' nearly five months before Margaret Thatcher began her decade-long reign from Downing Street (Hall 1979). This article brought the 'overwritten' PTC analysis to a broader, albeit still small, public (compared to the later exposure that mainstream media coverage of MT garnered for the periodical). It was the start of a 12-year collaboration with Jacques and *Marxism Today*: 24 articles were published in *Marxism Today* between January 1979 and December 1991, where Hall was the author, co-author, interviewer, interviewee or roundtable participant; 15 of which were published in MT's last six years (1986-91), the period in which Hall officially joined the editorial board along with other non- or former CPGB members, such as David Edgar and Fred Steward.

Although MT was subtitled, *The Theoretical and Discussion Journal of the Communist Party of Great Britain*, Jacques was working to develop greater editorial freedom to pursue its own project, different from the *raison d'être* of the subtitle, to transform the Party (as was the goal of the Eurocommunist tendency). Hall's contributions became a key part of MT's political-journalistic project: to transform the Left (in a Gramscian direction via the construction of a 'counter-hegemonic' alliance) and to reach a broader public by turning the 'journal' into a 'magazine'. But, Hall was not alone. Eric Hobsbawm, a CPGB member and Marxist historian, was the other singularly important contributor to *Marxism Today* during the late 1970s and 1980s. Whereas Eric Hobsbawm appealed to an older constituency of CPGB loyalists and traditional labour movement supporters, who tended to be more interested in historical and political-economic analysis, Hall appealed to a younger, more heterodox and academic, Gramscian constituency, who were interested in the politics of culture, which enabled MT to reach another, non-CPGB audience. Although Hobsbawm's contributions to MT were the most popular with the national press, and especially *The Guardian*, it was Hall's popularity with the 'cultural studies' constituency that broadened MT's reach via postgraduate programmes of study more commonly found in polytechnics and local institutes of higher education than in the traditional universities. In addition, to Hall, MT gained other cultural studies contributors, such as Dick Hebdige, Angela McRobbie and Richard Dyer, and cultural studies in turn gained an

outlet for its analyses as applied to more immediate concerns and events, and which tapped into an audience beyond academic journals and conferences.

*Marxism Today's* role in popularizing the politics of popular culture helped in turn to popularize the academic study of popular culture, although the focus in MT always remained on the 'political' (Pimlott, forthcoming). Although it was not Hall who made MT what it was, it was his growing stature and popularity during the 1980s as a political speaker and writer, particularly through MT-sponsored events and talks, that helped to encourage the adoption of Gramscian ideas by parts of the Left. This engagement justified the focus on ideology and popular culture as an integral component of a strategic, counter-hegemonic 'war of position' against Thatcherism, which in turn helped to legitimize as political the focus on culture of all kinds and helped us to think of ourselves, whether graduate students, social justice activists or community organizers, as 'organic intellectuals' in the struggle over trying to develop 'good sense' out of 'common sense': seeing common sense as 'a site of political struggle' (Hall and O'Shea, 2013: 3). For example, in Stuart Hall's last contribution, 'Common-sense Neoliberalism', co-authored with Alan O'Shea, they point out that those: "critical or utopian elements" in common sense, "which Gramsci calls, 'the healthy nucleus'.... [which] express a sense of unfairness and injustice about 'how the world works'" could provide "a basis on which the left could develop a popular strategy for radical change" (Hall and O'Shea, 2013: 3). This emphasis on the ideological, frequently identified or located within culture, legitimized and provided coherence to cultural studies as a 'political project' during the late 1970s and 1980s (e.g. Barker and Beezer, 1992).

When Hall's Thatcherism thesis was first published in January 1979, it had been overshadowed by the debates around Hobsbawm's 'Forward March of Labour Halted?'; it was not until after Labour's 1983 general election defeat, when Labour nearly slipped into third place behind the Social Democratic Party-Liberal Alliance, that Thatcherism attracted attention from sections of the Left as a means of explaining Labour's defeat whereas others criticized it. The publication of a collection of MT articles on Thatcherism that same year helped promote Hall's analysis to a much broader audience (Hall and Jacques 1983). There was considerable debate in both academic and left political circles over its accuracy in determining the impact and influence of 'authoritarian populism' (as Thatcherism was known in more academic circles). Thatcherism became more widely accepted within cultural studies and so-called 'soft left' circles where its analysis was used to promote the idea of 'taking the Right seriously' and learning from it, which Hall emphasized was necessary for the Left if it were to develop a successful counter-hegemonic strategy.<sup>iii</sup>

During the 1980s, however, there was only ever one analysis published that demonstrated *how* Thatcherism worked in practice; Hall's account remained at a more abstract, meta-level of analysis (O'Shea 1984). More recent analyses have identified some problems with Hall's Thatcherism thesis, particularly with some of the ways in which some of Gramsci's terms were adopted, including 'common sense' and 'civil society', though there is not the space to go into that here (cf Davidson 2008). Nevertheless, I do think that what his Thatcherism thesis did do, was to get the Left to recognize the importance of ideology and popular culture and other social,

rather than economic, phenomena that might help to explain the rise and relative success of 'authoritarian populism', even when its economic policies did not appear to be working.

Besides the focus on Thatcherism, ideology and popular culture, Stuart Hall's contributions as a public intellectual was the employment of his considerable rhetorical skills to construct a particular image of the Left, which was part of the hardening of divisions between the so-called 'soft' and 'hard' Lefts. An example of his rhetoric is in the article, 'The Culture Gap', published in the January 1984 MT, where he sketches out the 'inverted puritanism' of 'middle class socialists' who "heaving under the weight of their new hi-fis, their record collections, their videos and strip pine shelving... sometimes seem to prefer 'their' working class poor but *pure*: unsullied by contact with the market" (Hall 1984: 19). The effectiveness of his rhetoric is that this particular image of the Left (or a certain section of it) resonated with readers, but it also played into a particular stereotype that itself was a characterization ('caricature-ization?') promoted in parts of the national press; all helped contribute to this division within the Left. Notably, Tony Benn, who has died just a month after Hall, and Hall represented opposing sides of the divisions within the 'democratic socialist' Left after the 1983 general election, which increased in the debates over the Miners' Strike of 1984-85 and other developments in the 1980s.

In addition to Hall's contributions to MT during the 1980s, he also wrote for a range of other publications, including *New Socialist*, *New Society* and *The Listener*, and edited collections of articles dealing with the 'rise of the Right' and the 'crisis of the Left' (e.g. Hall and Jacques 1983) to contributions to academic and more theoretical publications on culture, ideology and race. As part of the analysis of Hall's contribution to MT's position on the Left, it is important to note that the difference with Hobsbawm, is that none of Hall's articles that dealt with analysing Thatcherism and the 'rise of the Right' were published or reprinted (in part or whole) by any of the national press, including those which had reproduced Hobsbawm's critique of the Labour movement (e.g. Pimlott, forthcoming).

As part of MT's political project, Hall co-authored articles and co-edited collections with Jacques especially in the period of 'realignment' after the Labour's second general election loss to Thatcher in June 1983. Hall spoke at numerous events, small and large, that were not just academic conferences but political events and public gatherings. Hall would also be a key participant in the development of the 'New Times' project produced by the contributors around MT in 1988-89 and for a time Tony Blair was seen as the '*Marxism Today* candidate'. Hall alongside Hobsbawm, Jacques and others at MT cleared the ground for Tony Blair and 'New Labour' via their criticism of the 'shibboleths' of Labour and the Left.

However, the 'honeymoon' between Hall et al. and Blair's gang did not last. Less than eighteen months after the landslide election of Tony Blair and 'New Labour', I attended the one-off weekend seminar put on by the 'defunct' *Marxism Today*, many of the contributions of which would be published in the one-off issue of October-November 1998, in which the Blair government was criticized by many of its former contributors from the 1980s (MT had Blair on

the cover with one word across his head: 'Wrong'). Although Blair had a couple of defenders within the magazine, it was clear that Hall, Jacques, Hobsbawm and others were not impressed.

### Form Over Content

Stuart Hall in many ways is an exemplary role model for a socialist public intellectual, not because of the substance or content of his critiques and ideas *per se*, which were particularly influential on both academic and more practical politics, but because of his active engagement in editorial, political and public activities, events and projects in order to contribute to bringing about change. Nonetheless, I would add that his focus on popular culture and ideology, including especially common sense, as sites of political struggle have been helpful and useful, regardless of the faults with different aspects of his analyses, although it is only since the onset of the global economic and financial crises that we are seeing the (necessary) return of and a renewed emphasis on political economy.

### References

Andrews, Geoff 2004. *Endgames and New Times*, London: Lawrence & Wishart.

Barker, M. and A. Beezer (eds) (1992). *Reading into Cultural Studies*. London: Routledge.

Davidson, Alastair (2008). 'The Uses and Abuses of Gramsci', *Thesis Eleven*, 95: 68-94.

Hall, S. (1979). 'The Great Moving Right Show', *Marxism Today*, vol.23, no.1: 14-20.

Hall, S. (1981a). 'The Whites of their Eyes: Racist Ideologies and the Media', in G. Bridges and R. Brunt (eds) (1981) *Silver Lining*, London: Lawrence and Wishart, pp. 28-52.

Hall, S. (1981b). 'Notes on Deconstructing the Popular', in R. Samuel (ed) *People's History and Socialist Theory*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, pp. 227-240.

Hall, S. (1984). 'The Culture Gap', *Marxism Today*, vol.28, no.1: 14-18.

Hall, S. (1997). Interview with author, 21 January.

Hall, S. and L. Back (1997). 'At Home and Not At Home: Stuart Hall in Conversation with Les Back', *Cultural Studies*, 23(4): 658-687.



- Hall, Stuart, Chas Critchley, Tony Jefferson, John Clarke and Brian Roberts 1978. *Policing the Crisis: "Mugging," the State and Law and Order*, London: Hutchinson.
- Hall, S. and M. Jacques (eds) (1983). *The Politics of Thatcherism*. London: Lawrence & Wishart with *Marxism Today*.
- Hall, S. and M. Jacques (eds) (1989). *New Times*. London: Lawrence & Wishart with *Marxism Today*.
- Hall, S. and A. O'Shea (2013). 'Common-sense neoliberalism', Chapter 4, *Kilburn Manifesto*. London: *Soundings*. Online: 27 September 2013.
- O'Shea, Alan (1984). 'Trusting the People': How does Thatcherism Work?', in *Formation of Nation and People*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Pimlott, H. (2005). "From 'Old Left' to 'New Labour': Eric Hobsbawm and the Rhetoric of 'Realistic Marxism'," *Labour/Le Travail*, 56, pp. 175-197.
- Pimlott, H. (2011). "Eternal Ephemera' or the Durability of 'Disposable Literature': The Power and Persistence of Print in an Electronic World", 33(4): 515-530.
- Pimlott, H. (forthcoming). 'Wars of Position': *Marxism Today, Cultural Politics and the Remaking of the Left Press, 1979-90*. Leiden: Brill. Historical Materialism Book Series.

---

<sup>i</sup> For an assessment of Eric Hobsbawm along similar lines, see Pimlott 2005.

<sup>ii</sup> E.g. author's observation of a former local National Front leader who tried to goad Hall during his public talk on 'Race Against Time: Ethnicity, Nation and Race at the Millennium' at the Institute of Education, University of London, 1 July 1998.

<sup>iii</sup> There has been a number of issues that have arisen around Hall's understanding and use of some of Gramsci's concepts in the last decade or so (e.g. Davidson 2008). Pimlott (forthcoming) identifies a number of these sources.