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## Stuart Hall and Our Current Conjuncture

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In his posthumous memoir *Familiar Stranger* Stuart Hall describes the impact on his thinking of being involved as a political activist with the New Left in the late 1950s and the early 1960s. He recalls getting to know England – ‘geographically that is’ – after about 1958, ‘as a result of travelling the country week after week, night after night, speaking at CND meetings’. He was at that time closely involved with New Left politics, which sought to offer an alternative to Stalinist socialism and the consensus politics associated with influential Labour politicians such as Anthony Crosland, and this was a very productive period for his theoretical and political development. As he later wrote, ‘an expansive conception of the domain of “the political” emerged from these political experiences and commitments. This was a conception of politics which ‘gave meaning to the work of the New Left and later, in a different social domain, to the founding project of Cultural Studies’.<sup>2</sup>

This expansive conception of the political animates the essays that we have recently brought together as Hall’s Selected Political Writings. The writings in the collection chart a vast swathe of (mainly) British political life stretching from Churchill to Cameron, and draw on an open and generous engagement with left politics, practices and cultures; taken together, they are testament to the value of this expansive understanding of the political for the understanding of key processes and formations. The analyses and questions that preoccupied Hall have a lasting relevance, as does the style of theorising he developed based on ‘conjunctural analysis’.

This essay outlines some of the most important aspects of Stuart Hall’s approach to politics, and discusses his influential analysis of Thatcherism and other questions during the period he was writing for *Marxism Today*. It closes with some reflections on the resonances of Hall’s analysis for the current post-crisis political terrain, and specifically the 2017 general election. These reflections seek to understand the current situation with his ideas and approaches in mind. I argue that Corbyn’s strong showing heralds a potential moment of decisive break with the neoliberal consensus that has both framed, and been reproduced through, post-crisis politics in Britain. This is a potential that needs to be both entrenched and developed.

### Politics and Conjunctural Analysis

Central to Stuart Hall’s approach to political theorising was the analysis of the make-up of particular political conjunctures – he sought to understand the economic, political, social and cultural conditions of their emergence and sustenance. The promise of such an approach lay in its potential for identifying elements in the movement of political forces, and for isolating the character of emergent social forms. This commitment to understanding how social relations and underlying historical processes came together in particular contexts, and to engage with politics as it actually existed on the ground, was shaped by his engagement with the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci. Gramsci’s work sought to engage with the complexity of different political contexts and situations, including the continuing battle for hegemony; he did not write about abstract forces or deploy

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<sup>1</sup> School of Geographical and Earth Sciences, University of Glasgow. Stuart Hall Selected Political WritingsL the Great Moving Right Show was published earlier this year by Lawrence and Wishart, co-edited by Sally Davison, David Featherstone, Bill Schwarz and Michael Rustin. I would like to thank my fellow editors for permission to draw on framing parts of the book in this essay and their helpful comments on an earlier draft.

<sup>2</sup> Hall, S. with Schwarz, B. *Familiar Stranger: A Life Between Two Islands* London: Allen Lane, 2017, 229.

axiomatic understandings of class relations. This resonated with Hall's broader approach of a Marxism 'without guarantees'.

This conjunctural approach was honed and mobilised in arguments with key intellectual and political adversaries. From the 1950s onwards his work had broadly two orthodoxies in his sights and they remained with him, in varying forms, throughout his life. The first of these masqueraded as no orthodoxy at all: it presents itself, *sotto voce*, as the reasonable, sensible acknowledgement of how in Britain politics 'just is'. This is a mentality disciplined by the institutional horizons of Westminster, as if these provide all that needs to be known about how politics operates. Such sentiments can be heard, *inter alia*, from representatives of the political parties; from accredited figures in the academy; and often in most concentrated form in the utterances of media commentators.

The second orthodoxy Hall held in his sights was a redundant and now largely lost version of Marxism. In Britain in the years before 1956 this cut deeper in political life than is easily recognised in our own times. Although there were always dazzlingly talented intellectuals working creatively inside the political world of Marxism – and it is these who tend to register most readily in the collective memory – the reflexes of a mechanical orthodoxy ran deep within postwar thinking. From the very beginning Hall understood that his encounters with Marxism would be conducted in the slipstream of a necessary but unprogrammed and yet-to-be worked out revisionism: in a bid, in other words, to rejuvenate Marxism in order that it could work for the historical imperatives of the mid-twentieth century.

The events of 1956 – most notably Khrushchev's denunciations of Stalinism, followed by the Soviet invasion of Hungary – generated a momentous fracture in the international communist movement and there followed substantial collateral damage for the authority of official, state-sanctioned Marxisms. From this point on Hall located himself historically as part of the political generation of '56: as a principled, self-styled, unapologetic revisionist. In this story Marxism had a constant if uneasy role to play, and it continued to do so until the end of his life. Hall's engagement with politics cannot be fathomed without acknowledging this long presence of Marxism in his thought.

Such affiliations proved anything but straightforward, however. As Hall himself later commented, they offered little in the way of a pleasing symmetry: after 1956 he found himself 'dragged backwards into Marxism, against the tanks in Budapest'.<sup>3</sup> He embraced a (contrary) version of Marxism just as its dominant, most conspicuously visible codifications were being universally vilified – properly so – for transmogrifying into a vehicle for the justification of Soviet colonialism. This idea of being 'dragged backwards into Marxism' depended on a vision of history in which political events are formed by their own – chaotic, unpredictable, asymmetrical, multiple – determinations. Abstract categorisations, such as the relations of production, the class struggle, the falling rate of profit, while potentially appropriate conceptual tools could not, in themselves, begin to explain the complex, contradictory and contingent terrain of politics, which was the consequence of many determinations. Such reasoning moved into the light of day in Hall's reading of Margaret Thatcher's Conservatism, but at the time most commentators derided the thought that Thatcherism was in the business of pursuing an ideological or cultural programme, with its own underlying philosophies, let alone that it could be construed as a historic bid for hegemony.

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<sup>3</sup> Stuart Hall, 'Cultural Studies and Its Theoretical Legacies' in David Morley and Kuan-Hsing Chen (eds), *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies* (London, Routledge, 1996), 264.

## ***Marxism Today, Thatcherism and the Left***

Hall's 'The Great Moving Right Show', and the essay which coined the term Thatcherism, in early 1979, stands as a model of conjunctural analysis. In it he was interpreting the making of a new conjuncture as it was happening. That this was so underwrites the degree of uncertainty which occurs at one point in the essay. 'There is still some debate', he noted, 'as to whether [Thatcherism] is likely to be short-lived or long-term, a movement of the surface or something more deeply lodged in the body politic'. At the start of 1979 he couldn't be sure. By the time he died, in 2014, he was in a position to see the deeper reach of this historical movement more clearly. By then it was apparent that Thatcherism had marked the first stirrings in something larger, and more deeply globalised, than had been visible at the end of the 1970s. In retrospect it signalled not just the beginning of a new postwar conjuncture in the UK, but the makings of a new political order that was to have epochal consequences. In it were the lineaments of what can now be named as the neoliberal revolution. It is this globalised order which inescapably defines our own historical present.

In this regard Hall's essays on Thatcherism and the faltering responses of the left are an important charting of political change, analysis and resistance during the emergence of the neoliberal project. His essays from the 1980s are unflinching in their assessment of the Thatcherite facility for moulding popular conceptions of politics and common sense, but they are also tough-minded in their engagement with the deficits of left strategy. Essays such as 'The Crisis of Labourism', for example, reflect on the longstanding limitations of the Labour Party's conception of politics. For example, he saw it as 'dangerous' that Neil Kinnock, Labour Leader from 1983 to 1992, had 'no feel for the language and concerns of the new social movements'. He also argued that the failure of the Labour leadership during the 1984-85 Miners' Strike to 'generalise the issues of the class it claims to represent on the stage of national politics and debate' meant that the strike was 'doomed to be fought and lost as an old rather than as a new form of politics'. This was, he insisted, 'doubly unbearable', because the miners' strike was 'instinctually with the politics of the new', in 'the solidarity it displayed, the gigantic levels of support it engendered, the unparalleled involvement of the women in the mining communities, the feminist presence in the strike, the breaking down of different social interests which it presaged'.<sup>4</sup> He also lamented the failure of Labour to adopt the strategy of a 'war of position' – 'that is, struggling for leadership and mastery over a whole number of different fronts in the course of making itself the focal point of popular aspirations, the leading popular political force'.

The expansive imagination of the left envisioned by Hall here should caution against any positioning of Hall's writings, or the *Marxism Today* project more generally, as being the primary intellectual antecedents of New Labour and Blairism. The New Times project, associated with *Marxism Today*, that sought to understand the 'fundamental political, economic and cultural restructuring' through the 1980s and Hall's essay on 'The Meaning of New Times' were undeniably influential on the New Labour project/ The idea of a straightforward political trajectory from Hall to Blairism is historically inaccurate. It is true that Stuart Hall was committed to a 'modernising' project for the Labour Party, but his ideas as to what form this would take were very different from those of Blair and New Labour.

Thus, in 'The State: Socialism's Old Caretaker', he argues that Ken Livingstone's GLC was 'so exciting, so prefigurative for the left' because 'one begins to see here and there a glimmer of a local state transforming the ways in which it "represents" society politically; being more dependent on the

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<sup>4</sup> On these solidarities, see Kelliher, D. 'Solidarity and Sexuality: Lesbians and Gays Support the Miners' *History Workshop Journal* 77: 1, 240-262.

passage of power into the state from constituencies outside it, than on monopolising power'. 'Pluralism', he asserted, was 'not a temporary visitor to the socialist scene: it has come to stay'. As Doreen Massey recalled, the 'sneering' attitude towards this left project that was 'feminist, anti-racist and anti-homophobic as well as challenging to capital' came as much from elements of the Parliamentary Labour Party as from Conservatives.<sup>5</sup>

Hall's antipathy to Blairism and the New Labour project is made clear in the final essays collected in the book. His essay 'The Great Moving Nowhere Show,' published in the one-off edition of *Marxism Today* published in 1998, argued that 'the Blair project, in its overall analysis and key assumptions, is still essentially framed by and moving on terrain defined by Thatcherism'. He came to see the 1997 election as a huge missed opportunity and was profoundly critical of the intellectual underpinning of the Blair project. He argued that the Third Way approach, most directly associated with Anthony Giddens' writings, was 'hot on the responsibilities of individuals, but those of business are passed over with a slippery evasiveness'. What Hall saw as particularly damaging was New Labour's failure to break with the discourses of neoliberalism: as he wrote, New Labour 'spread far and wide the gospel of market fundamentalism', as well as the idea of only 'markets and market criteria as the true measure of value' (305). This had the consequence of leaving Labour (and the centre-left elsewhere) with little space or resources to respond to the 2007/8 crisis, with the result being a failure to provide a clear political narrative or analysis.

### **Towards a post-neo-liberal politics**

The central premise of the *Kilburn Manifesto*, commissioned by Hall and his fellow founding editors of *Soundings*, the late Doreen Massey and Michael Rustin, was that 'mainstream political debate simply does not recognise the depth of this crisis, nor the consequent need for radical rethinking.'<sup>6</sup> They argued that the extent of the crisis required a proportionate response from the left, including recognition that it needed to break away from neoliberal discourses. Corbyn's spectacular performance in the 2017 election, achieving the biggest increase in support for the party since 1945, is testament to the importance of a break of this kind. The traction gained by Corbyn's articulation of a popular set of broadly left demands and proposals suggests the possibility of beginning to dismantle the neoliberal consensus that has continued to hold sway in mainstream political discourse even after the crash in the UK elsewhere. The ideas contained in a popular left manifesto have had a significant impact on reshaping the terrain of the possible in UK politics.

What is particularly significant is the broad constituency of support that Corbyn has mobilised, especially, but not exclusively, his appeal to younger voters who have been deeply disenchanted with political process and who have real grievances relating to issues such as housing and precarity. What is all the more remarkable is that this has been achieved in spite of the hostility of the vast majority of his MPs and an almost absurdly biased media. More significant than the overt attacks from the *Daily Mail* and the *Sun* have been the pernicious ways in which broadcasters, including many within the BBC, structured questions to Corbyn et al in ways that already positioned them as being outside reasonable terms of debate.

One of the major weaknesses of May's campaign was the lack of any articulation of a popular 'common sense' understanding of the political situation. Thus, where Hall understood Thatcher as having a project, and effectively seeking to mould aspirations and common sense, May seemed afraid to even engage on this terrain. This left an important political space for Corbyn to occupy,

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<sup>5</sup> Massey, D. *World City* Cambridge, Polity, 2007.

<sup>6</sup> Hall, S., Massey, D. and Rustin, M. (2015) 'Framing Statement- After-neoliberalism: analysing the present' in Hall et al (ed) *After Neoliberalism: The Kilburn Manifesto* London, Lawrence and Wishart, 9.

which he did with passion, hope and verve. His campaign demonstrated that a decisive break with the terms of the neoliberal consensus is possible. It also suggests the necessity of continuing to develop and shape this space, rather than to assume that it is now safely occupied. This necessitates engaging with the following possibilities and challenges.

Firstly, Corbyn and a broad left project has shaped popular debate and imagination in significant ways through getting ideas on the political agenda – such as those around progressive articulations of public ownership<sup>7</sup> – that have been systematically excluded for a generation; and these were articulated in a way that had significant appeal beyond the narrow left that was seen as Corbyn’s support base. It is, however, important not to assume that this necessarily represents a long-term shift of gravity of the centre to the left, or that there is an inevitable trajectory towards a Corbyn victory – though it clearly demonstrates that this can be achieved. Steve Richards’ claim that the centre of political gravity has been shifted leftwards is appealing, but it risks mis-recognising May’s attempt to appeal to centrism as constituting a more centrist politics.<sup>8</sup> Many of her positions retain a strong rightist cast, despite her attempt to position the Conservatives as the party of the workers, as her willingness to deal with her ‘friends and allies’ from the DUP attests all too clearly. This suggests the need to adopt a dynamic strategy to deepen and intensify a popular left project and to further diversify the support base for it.

Secondly, one of Corbyn’s achievements has been, against the expectation of many, to construct a political narrative which resonates with those on both sides of the Brexit debate. This has been important, but key challenges remain. One crucial issue is the nature of the response by Labour and other progressive parties to the increasing political centrality of racialised discourses of immigration, which have intensified in the wake of ‘Brexit’. One key task here is to challenge the terms on which class has become aggressively racialised through these debates, particularly through the uncritical use of terms such as the ‘white working class’. These have increasing purchase in media and political debates, but also in institutional terms, as Shirin Hirsch has noted in her critical analysis of the use of the term in the Casey Review on Opportunity and Integration.<sup>9</sup>

Hall’s work on the politics of multiculturalism is significant here. In the early 1990s he wrote of the dangers posed by ‘a particularly defensive, closed and exclusive definition of “Englishness” being advanced as a way of warding off or refusing to live with difference’. He was keenly aware of the struggle to shape positive responses to living with diversity. It is also important to stress Hall’s refusal to see multiculturalism as an elite top-down state strategy. Rather, he adopted a much more open sense of how multiculturalism worked, and the ways in which it reconfigured political and social relations: multiculturalism was always a response to actually existing diverse relations and experiences/ intersections. This analysis is still of acute relevance in challenging the ways in which class has been racialised during the recent period, and pointing to the perils of constructing the ‘white working class’ as a separate category from diverse social relations. In this regard Labour needs to make a stronger narrative and commitment to challenging racialized discourses around immigration and articulating a progressive discourse around multi-ethnic politics from below.

Thirdly, while a key focus of debate on the left was around the construction of ‘progressive alliances’ it is important to recognise that various ‘un-progressive alliances’ have also had significant purchase,

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<sup>7</sup> Cumbers, A. *Reclaiming Public Ownership* London Zed Books, 2012

<sup>88</sup> Richards, S. ‘Whatever the Result the Election has Pushed the Centre Ground to the Left’ *Guardian* <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/may/29/election-centre-ground-left-labour-tory-manifestos>, May 29<sup>th</sup>, 2017

<sup>9</sup> Hirsch, S. ‘From Powell to Casey: the Mythical White Working Class’ <http://discoversociety.org/2017/02/01/from-powell-to-casey-the-mythical-white-working-class/>,

the Conservative- DUP coalition clearly being the most concerning of these. What was perhaps more decisive in the election result itself, however, were the unofficial exchanges and links between the Tories and elements of Scottish Labour, notably the MP Ian Murray, around a shared opposition to the idea of a second independence referendum. This was part of Scottish Labour's broader strategy to distance themselves from Corbyn and to focus primarily on constitutional issues; the irony being that Corbyn's resonance in Scotland was a crucial element of their increasing in support. That this also began to move the terms of debate away from that defined by nationalist and unionist discourses also showed the promise of a strategy which is more in line with the kind of popular democratic left politics being shaped by Corbyn. It also emphasises, however, that progressive alliances need to be constructed across the uneven geography of a fractured and contested UK. At times during the campaign, despite these divisions, there were glimmers that different parties on the centre-left might ally rhetorically at least in ways which could produce a 'post-neoliberal consensus'. This is something that deserves to be built, not necessarily in the form of formal alliances, but in new and shared ways of working around particular issues, concerns and alternatives.

Finally, what was crucial and refreshing in Corbyn's campaign was the facility for engaging with the issues people face in their everyday lives in post-crisis Britain. They also put forward proposals that resonated with the challenges that many people face after years of pulverizing austerity. This has opened up important space for popular alternatives. There is much to be fleshed out here and to be done in ways which speak to diverse constituencies of support. The fact that Corbyn's campaign demonstrated that this can be done, however, offers the possibility for a decisive break with the terms of the neoliberal consensus.

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