

## GOLDSMITHS Research Online

Article (refereed)

---

Hall, Stuart and Back, Les

### At Home and Not At Home: Stuart Hall in conversation with Les Back

Originally published in Cultural Studies Copyright Routledge. The publisher's version is available at:

<http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/content~db=all~content=a913016861>

Please cite the publisher's version.

You may cite this version as: Hall, Stuart and Back, Les, 2009. At Home and Not At Home: Stuart Hall in conversation with Les Back. Cultural Studies, 23 (4). pp. 658-688. ISSN 0950 2386 [Article]: Goldsmiths Research Online.

Available at: <http://eprints.gold.ac.uk/2321/>

This document is the author's final manuscript version of the journal article, incorporating any revisions agreed during peer review. Some differences between this version and the publisher's version remain. **You are advised to consult the publisher's version if you wish to cite from it.**

Copyright © and Moral Rights for the papers on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners.

<http://eprints-gro.goldsmiths.ac.uk>

Contact Goldsmiths Research Online at: [lib-eprints@gold.ac.uk](mailto:lib-eprints@gold.ac.uk)

# At Home and Not at Home

## Stuart Hall in conversation with Les Back

The opening of Rivington Place, new home of the Institute of International Visual Arts' (inIVA) and Autograph A.B.P in east London is landmark not only for the black arts movement in Britain, it is also a testament to Stuart Hall's enduring contribution and relevance to its intellectual and political life. As chair of both inIVA and Autograph ABP (Association of Black Photographers), Stuart played an integral role in realising this vision of a public space dedicated to creativity and diversity. The £3 million building, designed by architect David Adjaye, offers a place to exhibit art but it also provides a home for ideas, thought and reflection upon the relevance of difference to the visual arts. A few weeks after its doors were opened officially, Rivington Place hosted the launch of Paul Gilroy's *Black Britain: A Photographic History*.<sup>1</sup> The book, planned initially to be a collaboration with Stuart Hall, portrays and documents the position of black people within British society through photographs drawn from the Getty Collection. Stuart's health prevented him from playing a full role in its completion, but he contributed a preface and at the launch he discussed the project with Paul Gilroy in front of an audience gathered to celebrate its publication.

---

<sup>1</sup> Paul Gilroy *Black Britain: A Photographic History* London: Saqi, 2007)

Stuart's attentiveness to the present through his notion of the conjuncture, always involves an acute historical sensibility. So, it is entirely in keeping that one of the first events of the new artistic enterprise should be concerned with re-thinking ways of telling and showing the history of Black Britain. The return of the "documentary impulse" for Stuart also necessitates of re-assessment of the form. "The photograph appears to have a more easy access to the truth" commented Stuart. "The 'beingthereness' of the photograph gives it this quality, and yet, the photographs can't deliver the whole truth. The truth moves on them and the truth moves on us." The images also contain the concerns and priorities of the white photographers who took them. For this reason, reading the photographs involves animating them and noticing other things within their depth of field. This Stuart refers to as their "incidental documentary features". "Putting black people in the frame is not just a figural practice. It is what is going on around the figure being photographed and the situation in which it is placed, even though the photographer is not really focusing on these aspects. In these photographs the body language, for example, is extremely eloquent." The result is an extraordinary historical document but also a different model of historical and sociological analysis. It invites the reader's involvement not only as a consumer but also as a producer.

A member of the audience asks Paul Gilroy if there is not something a little romantic about producing a book like this now. "I am quite attracted to the idea that black history might be modelled on the kiss" he says responding with a wry smile. "I've received lots of emails from people who are either in the photographs or who recognise friends or relatives. There is a lot of love in the photographs, or I should say, love circulates in that history." Gilroy's essay, that accompanies the photographic sequence, asks searching

questions of the reader that prohibits the book becoming a coffee table accessory with a cosy relationship to the past. The photographs seem to look back at us in an inquiring way. They beg questions of our present and its compromises and accommodations with a society that remains haunted by the legacy of empire and racism.

As the proceedings come to a close, Paul stands and thanks the audience, his publisher and the hosts of this evening's event. Then, finally, he turns to Stuart, who is sitting close to him, "I also want to thank you, Stuart." He pauses for a moment, then leaning forward, he says, softly, "Thank you." Furnished in the spaces between those words was something more than an individual debt of gratitude. Perhaps without realising it, Paul spoke for many of us in the audience who have been helped - directly or indirectly - by the generosity of Stuart Hall's thought. David Scott wrote "thinking for Stuart is a way of changing himself".<sup>2</sup> Yet this transformation is always sociable, a collective activity that happens in dialogue with others forming part of a larger conversation that also transforms those around him. His work contains the rare compound of critique without dogma, acute insight coupled with humility, grave political seriousness that also retains its sense of humour.

A few weeks after the event at Rivington Place, I met Stuart at his home in North London and talked with him about his life and work over several pots of tea. Subjects ranged from his love of Henry James to the contemporary state of Black politics and also included many of the issues addressed within this special issue. What is hard to represent is how much laughter that conversation contained. Sometimes it was simply a joyous way of punctuating thought, at other moments the mirth was sardonic and

---

<sup>2</sup> David Scott "Stuart Hall's ethics," *Small Axe*, 17 (2005) p. 4

satirical. I hope the conviviality of Stuart's style of listening and talking isn't muted in the transposition of his words to the page. What follows is a transcription of the entire conversation that lasted over two hours without a break. It not only contains insight into the key questions of our time, it also demonstrates what David Scott calls Stuart's "mode of practicing generosity."<sup>3</sup> This is expressed as much in the ways he speaks, as the content of what he says. We started by talking about the library at Rivington Place that is named in his honour.

Les Back: *The first thing I wanted to ask you about Stuart, is the library at Rivington Place - it is called the Stuart Hall Library.*

Stuart Hall: Yes, it is a very nice gesture of theirs really, to name it after me, a very nice gesture. So I'm very pleased. Have you been into it?

*I have.*

It's a wonderful room. It's one of the best rooms in the building. All those windows - it really is spectacular. And it's a very good library for its size and so on, so I'm very, very pleased with that association, and it's very nice of them. The only other people who are named are Barclays Bank, who gave them 1 million 1 hundred thousand pounds.

<Laughter>

So I'm in good company.

---

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. 12

*They're in good company we should say. I've always thought of libraries as a kind of place of refuge really.*

Well, I'll tell you another thing about it. I was going to say my move to the visual arts is very late in life, but it's not true. I've always been interested in the image, particularly interested in photography, always been interested in painting but didn't know very much about it etc. And then I got involved with inIVA and Autograph as the chairs of two boards etc. Two things about that. One is that the director, the artists around them, are half my age. They really are in their 40s, lots of them were active, emerged in the 80s, so they're in their early 40s now, so they just kind of rejuvenated me. It was like a dose of monkey gland.

<Laughter>

Come alive again. There's lots of people out there who want to talk to you, whose work you are going to have to facilitate. I write a bit in relation to them, as I always do. I always write *a bit in relation to* whatever I'm doing, rather than any longer plan of work. So that act of generosity mattered a very great deal. But the one thing I will say about them is that they're not really very much into books. They think writing is sort of passé. <Laughs> They're also not very into academic writing. This is only a mild criticism, it's not true of all of them. So it's not a hostility, but it's just not quite in their universe in the way in which it is in mine. So what I'm very glad about is that there's this subversive thing called an old-style library with a lot of books in this visual arts space.

<Laughter>

Sitting there at the heart of this visual arts building, wonderful building etc, quietly throbbing away.

*What a fantastic thing. Many people have said this that your work has been enabling, and I certainly feel that very strongly. A lot of the books in that library are written by people that your work has touched indirectly or directly.*

That's true, yeah. It's not at all surprising or out of order that it should be so. On the other hand, the library represents all those things I don't really know about but would like to. I would really like to know more about art and the history of art, and especially the history of modern art. I'd like to be able to write with more authority about that than I feel really confident in doing, though I've written recently much more about that subject than anything else, especially in the last seven or eight years. But it's not an area which I feel is mine in the way in which other areas were. My work was not unrelated to it, but actually, more surprisingly, many people say now, including artists, how formative that work was in some ways for them. And I don't quite understand it. I did an interview with Hans Obrist, who's now at the Serpentine Gallery.<sup>4</sup> He published this interview in a book of discussions with artists, and he mainly wanted to know how many artists were at the Centre for Cultural Studies, what were they interested in? Of course there weren't any. Not one. There were a few people interested in photography after a while, but generally it just wasn't like that. So it's partly because cultural studies has now become a much broader stream of influences and then visual cultural studies is a kind of illegitimate child of that, challenging art history as a discipline and 'infecting' the field etc. So I quite understand why people like Hans Obrist imagine that this is where

---

<sup>4</sup> See <http://www.serpentinegallery.org/>

cultural studies began, although it wasn't. The same thing used to happen about film. We were passionately interested in film, and film is for me in some ways the visual medium that I most respond to, directly respond to and emotionally respond to; but at the Centre we didn't have the money to work on film, to show film, get extracts, get copies. You can't work without the primary medium to look at all the time, so we sort of decided we couldn't do much research on film. But people imagine that cultural studies was falling down with film. <Laughs> And the same a bit about the visual arts now.

*You've said in the past was how much there was at stake in the artistic work of a whole range of artists I guess who were coming of age in the 80s.*

Well, I think that is the key moment in a sense, in that it's the big creative explosion in the visual arts and photography, amongst second-generation black people. It was born out of British racism and anti-racism, rather than the colonial context or slavery. It's born out of that direct experience of the metropolis. And by then I was writing about that issue quite consistently and in a sense more consistently than I ever had before. And also, it's very much a mutual, reciprocal influence. I could see that second-generation black people were deeply concerned about identity and their relation to the present and the past, but their relationship could not be accurately expressed in terms of a return to roots. Paul Gilroy said, not 'roots' but 'routes' and so I wrote about that, I wrote about cultural identity in those terms. Well, black and Asian artists were some of the people I was looking at, so not surprisingly they found the way in which I tried to explore the question of identity in some of those essays sympathetic. So it was a double movement really. I mean that's not the first time that's happened. I don't want to go into this please, but I left the Caribbean, in flight from the Caribbean; I felt I couldn't fulfil my



potential there and I couldn't work out my relationship to Jamaican culture. I just couldn't. Because of my middle class formation, because my parents are not only brown but thought the world would disappear with the departure of the British etc, coming departure of the British. Okay, so I was in flight. Then I 'discovered my' subject, or rather it discovered me. My subject was coming out of the station at Paddington. It was Caribbeans but over here, it was the Windrush journey to here. That has been my subject, ever since: the diaspora. So this is what I had to explain when I did the conference on 'The Thought of Stuart Hall' at the University of the West Indies. 'Are you a Caribbean intellectual?' Yes, but it's not the Caribbean you should have in mind. I unfortunately have not participated in the building of the nation there, so I have always had a bit of distance from the national movement which set fire to their imagination in Kingston. But Caribbean people have been my continuous subject. Lots of things that I've written about which don't appear to be about that are seen through the prism of trying to work out who the people of the diaspora are, who they think they are, where they want to go, where have they come from, what's their relation to the past, what's their memories etc and how they express their creativity, how they express where they want to go to next. That's what has been in a sense my subject. So that is really where cultural studies began for me. It didn't begin with Raymond Williams, it began with my struggle to come to terms with that experience, which is when I first discovered I was a black intellectual. I'd never called myself black ever in my life, nor did most Jamaican people. Many, many people in Jamaica, including lots of people who were black, did not think of themselves in the way in which people after the late 60s came to think of themselves as black. So it was a discovery for me, a rediscovery of the Caribbean in

new terms, and a rediscovery of my thinking about culture, and a rediscovery of the black subject. So it's not surprising that people who are then painting out of the invisibility, the marginalisation of the black body, figuring the black subject, the black experience, should hear something of that question resonating in my writing. And it's not just a sort of chosen intellectual project, if you know what I mean? I didn't choose that. I had no alternative.

*I think that's one of the things that's so powerful about your work is you're trying to make sense of those private, understood and not understood, both estranged and knowing, close-up experiences and the wider social, cultural, political forces.*

Yeah. Well, I know what you are saying, and it's again not something I tried to do but it's just how I write or how I think etc. But I sort of know what that comes out of. It comes out of this horrendous family experience that I had, in which I came to understand that my family were living out in the interstices of the family, the most private domestic space, this huge colonial drama. That is what it was about. So the meaning of colonisation was internalised into the intimate and the emotionally charged theatre of the family; it was same thing on another terrain. And ever since then, I've really not been good at thinking about the distinction between private and public, the inside and outside, subjective interior and objective social relations, I don't quite buy how that is usually written about or thought about.

*You've mentioned in passing the idea of an intellectual vocation. And I just wanted to ask you a little bit about how you do the practice of thinking and criticism and writing?*

*Or is it something that's so habitual to you now that it's hard to think about 'how do I do the craft of an intellectual vocation'?*

I must show you the Caribbean book,<sup>5</sup> because I do respond to the conference by saying, 'What is this strange object called *The Thought of Stuart Hall*, which is the unbelievable title that they gave this conference. I said, 'Who is this person that we've been discussing for two days? I sort of see him every now and again, I recognise some of him. I recognise some quotes but I don't recognise them all, and indeed I hope people will give me the references!'

<Laughter>

And when we had the launch in London I went back to that question, because it's not something planned, it's not something conscious, and perhaps I should say that it's very limited. There's lots of things it can't do. I'm very admiring of all sorts of people that do things and write and think in a way that I think are much richer, much more insightful than I do. At a certain point, round about the point where the cultural terrain went into high theory, I was nearly lost in a species of ventriloquism, and I suddenly saw through this at the point where people kept making French puns in English.

<Laughter>

They only worked in French. And I thought this is a crazy way to think. So it's not that one rejected the concepts, but ... And after that, I just sort of had to think in my own way. However you think is how you're going to think, so you'd better be satisfied with it.

---

<sup>5</sup> Brian Meeks ed. *Culture, Politics, Race and Diaspora: The Thought of Stuart Hall* London: Lawrence and Wishart: London, 2007.

And that's also how you write, so write like that; don't hanker after writing like Foucault, you don't write like Foucault, you know? I don't have the philosophical training, I just couldn't do it. I'm not that sort of person. So write like you write, accept your own voice. Having done that, I'm not very good at talking about what that process is. I think about it, and I have some thoughts now about it, and there are things which other people have said which help me reflect on it. David Scott says he doesn't read me because of cultural theory; he reads me because of my political interventions.<sup>6</sup> And I realised that almost everything I write is a kind of political intervention. It may not be about politics explicitly, but it is trying to shift the terms of the debate, intervene on one side or another, clarify something, wipe some other distorting views out of place so that something else can come through. I suppose that's critique or criticism or whatever it is, but I'm aware that it is a kind of political intervention. I think that accounts for why a) I've never written a big book, except for *Policing the Crisis*,<sup>7</sup> which is not all mine by any means, and secondly, why I write about so many different things. I write mainly because people ask me to, you know, 'Will you write a piece about this? Will you come a conference and write it up afterwards?' I don't sit in my study and think, 'I ought to write a piece now about this and publish it here.' If you look at the stuff I've written on identity, the first piece was given at the first film conference in the Caribbean. They're all occasional pieces. That's why they're not in serious sociological journals. One of

---

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. p. 3.

<sup>7</sup> Stuart Hall, Chas Critcher, Tony Jefferson, John Clarke and Brian Robert *Policing the Crisis: "Mugging" the State and Law and Order* London: Macmillan, 1978.

the big pieces on identity and the diaspora is in this little collection that Jonathan Rutherford called *Identity*.<sup>8</sup> Do you understand what I mean?

*I do, yes.*

So they are interventions in a field, rather than autonomous scholarly works. And the other thing I know about it is that I am interested in the conjuncture. I am a sort of writer about the 'history of the present,' but also I think the past is understood in that way too. Now people say what is this 'conjuncture'? I used to pass it off and say it's what Gramsci is interested in, because Gramsci does write about historical specificity and the difference between the conjuncture and the long term etc. But people have pointed out to me that Gramsci thought the conjuncture was more superficial, and I don't think that at all. I don't deny that there are longer-term, deeper structural movements of society and economy, which mark out different phases, for instances, in capitalism. But I think a conjunctural understanding of what is specific about each of those phases, what is specific about merchant capital that is not specific about, not the same as, industrial capital; what's interesting about Fordist capital that is not that same as global capital? Of course, the reason why I refer to capital is because this is something that I learnt from Marx: surprisingly not the Marx most people think about, because they assume that Marx unfolded the laws of movement of capitalism, which are going to be always the same. In some ways yes and in some ways no. At that level of generality capitalism in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, merchant capital was the same as global capitalism. But

---

<sup>8</sup> Stuart Hall 'Cultural identity and Diaspora', in *Identity*, J.Rutherford (ed.), London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1990. pp. 222–237

at the level of the conjuncture, they are not the same. I don't know if you've ever seen an essay of mine on Marx's 1857 introduction to *The Grundrisse*?<sup>9</sup>

*No, I haven't seen that.*

In this essay Marx says, first of all, you can't just reflect the empirical in order to analyse it, because if you look at society it's full of people so you begin with population. But people are divided into capital and labour, slave and slave holder, and that division, that difference, is more important than just the fact that they're people. He calls beginning with population, a chaotic abstraction; and that abstractions which arise from the differences is more worked through. That accounts for why he says you need theory, not to produce more theory, excuse me, but because you can't do without it. You need to change the scale of magnification. You have to break into the confusing fabric that 'the real' apparently presents, and find another way in. So it's like a microscope and until you look at the evidence the microscope, you can't see the hidden relations. And he describes this process as depending on adding more and more levels of determination. The basic laws may be the same, but you have to add more levels of determination before you - and this is another phrase of his produce 'the concrete in thought.' And so my notion of the conjunctural is more like that than it's like Gramsci. I really believe that the work is done by historical specificity, by understanding what is specific about certain moments, and how those moments come together, how different tendencies fuse and form a kind of configuration - never one that's going to last for ever, hegemony never does, it always has unruly elements and it's always struggling to

---

<sup>9</sup> Stuart Hall 'Marx's Notes on Method: A 'Reading' of the '1857 Introduction'', Working papers in Cultural Studies, no.6, 1974.

master a terrain etc. And those forces are going to produce a shift to another conjuncture. In Britain, the late 70s is a conjunctural shift of that kind - absolutely. What I thought was that Thatcherism was really the end of one configuration – the post war settlement - and the beginning of something else. We're not going to go back to what was before it, so that's why I'm interested in thinking the values that we hold in terms of the present. But about my sense of that break, people do ask me, 'How do you know of that?' I can't tell them that. It's not a precise methodology; it's not something which I apply outside to it. It's interpretive and historical. I have to feel the kind of accumulation of different things coming together to make a new moment, and think, this is a different rhythm. We've lived with one configuration and this is another one. Now let us try to say what that transition means, what this new one is, what the forces in it are, what the contradictory things are etc. That's the 'history of the present.' So I think conjuncturally. I'm what Larry Grossberg calls a radical contextualist.<sup>10</sup> I think that's about as far as I can go in reflecting on my own way of thinking. <Laughs>

*I remember hearing you say in the radio interview for Desert Island Discs if you could take only one book with you it would be Henry James', Portrait of a Lady...*

I did my PhD on James, but I didn't finish it.

---

<sup>10</sup> Lawrence Grossberg "Stuart Hall on race and racism: Cultural studies and the practice of contextualism" in Brian Meeks ed. *Culture, Politics, Race and Diaspora: The Thought of Stuart Hall* London: Lawrence and Wishart: London, 2007.

*I'd like to ask you about the other books you would choose to that Desert Island but before I do that, what was it about Henry James that caught your imagination?*

My undergraduate training is in literature. I never had a training in anything else to be absolutely honest.

<Laughter>

So when the Vice Chancellor of the Open University said, 'But you've been in literature, you've been in cultural studies, are you willing to profess sociology?' I said, 'I'm willing to profess anything if you'll only give me a job.'

<Laughter>

So my training is in literature. I was very disappointed with the Oxford course because it's so lodged in the past, I had to do so much Anglo Saxon, I was never very good at languages, I hated it. I was interested in medieval literature but I was interested in it in a critical way, not in a scholarly way, and so on. So I pushed towards the modern. So when I thought of staying on and doing my PhD I thought what would you like to write about? Well, what I wanted to write about was the social realist literature, American literature of the 30s, and they said, 'Well, you can't do that because most of these people are still living. Even Dos Passos is still alive.'

<Laughter>

So in any case I'd been reading a lot of American literature and American literature was, for me, a kind of escape from the constraints of Oxford English in those days. And so I



began to read Melville and Hawthorne and Hawthorne led me back to James, and so on. So I got interested in James. And I was aware of the fact that this was a pretty bizarre encounter – this black boy from Kingston and this highly refined, sophisticated trans-Atlantic mind. So I never confused myself with Henry James. But two things interested me about him. One was the international theme, the fact that the novels are often... a few are not but many of his works, early and late, are framed around this contrast between Europe and America, between one place and another: Europe and somewhere else. And although the other place is not at all the same as my own, I'm aware of the fact that that is a kind diasporic way of seeing the world, a diasporic question. James' is a kind diasporic imagination, though most people wouldn't dream of using that concept about his work. So I wanted to write about the international theme. And he goes over it three times. Once in the very early novels, *Daisy Miller*, *The American*, *The Europeans*, etc. Then again in the big novels: *The Ambassadors*, *The Golden Bowl*, *The Wings of the Dove*; and then a wonderful unfinished work at the end, one in particular where he goes back to America and encounters the self, a successful businessman, that he would have been if he'd stayed. And it's the source of T. S. Elliot's line about the first turn of the winding stair; there's an ivory tower in which he encounters this other self, he sees the other self across the space. I just thought it was incredible stuff, and a way of thinking about James that I hadn't seen before. So that's what I wanted to write about. And then I was of course interested, if you're interested in James, you're interested in a statement that he made: 'I want to be someone on whom nothing is lost.' I wanted to be a consciousness that could respond to everything in the world, not universal but specific and deep. James said, you can tell that from five

minutes of somebody's story at dinner that this is the source of your next novel. I don't want to hear any more. I don't want the literal detail. I want to explore the lives and conflicts that come out of that, but it must be to the full extent of my consciousness. Now the funny thing about that is that there is no full extent of one's consciousness because there's always the unconscious that one can't think about. And there was in James too, very profoundly – the wonderful things that James didn't, couldn't know which Colm Tóibín has written about in *The Master* - I think it's a fantastic novel.<sup>11</sup>

There are lots of unconsciousness in James, but he wanted to take the conscious as far as he could in each situation. Well, I didn't care about the fact that he mainly wrote about rich people. Shakespeare mainly wrote about kings and queens; so what? It doesn't work at that literal level. If you want to find out about kings and queens you go and read some history; you read *King Lear* for something else. And in the same way I feel about James. I didn't mind about the fact that lots of the content of his material was alien to me. I'll say one more thing which has just occurred to me, which is that his 'other' was different from mine, but his other was America and America has played a very important but ambivalent, role in my thinking. America was the site of imaginative escape for me when I was in Kingston, although I didn't go there. I came to England because the lines of connection were still to the mother country. Now all the intellectuals from the Caribbean go and are teaching and writing in the US. But although my connection was to the UK, my imaginative escape was cinema – I went to films every Monday or every Saturday throughout my teenage life, and a very rich period it was: Bogart, Bette Davis, film noir, melodrama - incredible cinema, American

---

<sup>11</sup> Colm Tóibín *The Master* London: Picador, 2004

cinema; and of course American music and jazz. And then once one came to England, America continued to stand as that which is modern, which is not weighed down by the English social class system. It's a source of that ambivalence, the ambivalence one feels about America, though I feel very distant from it now: I can't stand it at the moment, I wouldn't go there, I don't go there. I'm sure they wouldn't let me in, but I really don't want to go there. And it's not just because of Bush. It's about the culture and the politics in a much wider sense. But at one point America was a source of liberation for us all. Jazz liberated my soul and the coming of rock'n'roll transformed English popular culture. So it wasn't James's 'other', he wasn't writing about that bit either. He wasn't writing about the black experience, wanting to go to Ralph Ellison and to Baldwin and so on for that; but still America was not as foreign as it might have sounded. Sitting in Oxford, reading about James writing about New England and Florence was not quite as absurd as it has seemed to many people since.

*No, it's not absurd. But the idea of encountering the life that you may have had, as you said that, it reminded me of a few comments you made about sometimes you think about the life you would have had had you stayed in Jamaica.*

Yes, I do. I think about that very much because my school generation were in the thick of independence. I left. People don't remember, I came to England in 1951. Jamaica wasn't independent until 1962. So the people who became the political and intellectual leadership of independence, the political class defining the nation after decolonisation, were all people I knew and had been to school with, yet I wasn't there. I followed it from afar. My hopes and fears were invested in it. I often went back, I sort of debated with them. I tried at one point to bring a sort of reconciliation between the Black Power

people and the Marxists. So I wanted to be part of it. But I had always the sense that that could have been me, and I know many people who were like me. They went to the big secondary schools like me, they were in my class at Jamaica College, they're judges and political leaders and senior civil servants and so on, many of them retiring now or retired. So there always was another life and there's also the long period in which I wasn't sure whether I was going home or not. After I gave up my thesis and moved to London I was going home any time now. Perhaps I'm still going home any time now...

<Laughter>

It wasn't true. I wasn't going back. I knew to go back at that point for me was psychic death - it would have enclosed itself around me, I could feel it waiting for me. So I was right not to go back. But it was a loss. One has to say that. Diaspora is a loss. It's not forever, it doesn't mean that you can't do something about it, or that other places can't fill the gap, the void, but the void is always the regretful moment that wasn't realised. History is full of what is not realised, and I feel that about it. Whenever I go back, I think I'm at home but still I'm not at home.

*It reminded me as you were talking there of the beautiful George Lamming book, *The Pleasures of Exile*,<sup>12</sup> on the one hand the pleasure, the freedom of exile; at the same time, the loss which you are describing.*

---

<sup>12</sup> George Lamming *The pleasures of exile* Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992.

Wonderful book, it's a very, very important book for me. You asked me about important books, that is one. Of course, I knew George in London. He used to work for the Caribbean World Service, which a lot of writers did, and indeed the Caribbean novel was written in London. And what's more, we became consciously West Indian in London. I came as a Jamaican. I'd never been to anywhere else in the Caribbean. I remember at one point in the 6<sup>th</sup> form, a Latin master came from Barbados to teach us. Well, I'd been taught by the Scots, by the British, by the Irish, but I'd never been taught by a Caribbean and I thought his accent was the funniest thing that I'd ever heard, I thought he was from outer space. We used to have this joke with him: of course Barbados produces good cricketers because it's so small, the whole island is the pitch. You have to hit the ball into the sea to get a six.

<Laughter>

So very strange. And then suddenly we discovered what was common between Caribbean people. In spite of the fact that the islands are all different, nevertheless there's a kind of core commonness. So I discovered myself as a West Indian at that point. That was a very liberating moment for me. I mean there's a dark moment in that as well because what that meant was that politically the idea of West Indian Federation became the focus of all of our hopes. We thought we can't do this without each other. It works in London. It produces wonderful literature. Each place is too small to sustain independently. And I suppose if eventually a West Indian Federation had come off, I might well have gone home.

*Really?*

I don't know when I took the decision not to go, but by then it was sort of already made really. So *The Pleasures of Exile*. I feel my experience has been close to two books. One is Lamming's *The Pleasures of Exile*, the other is Edward Said's *Out of Place*.<sup>13</sup> Though it's from the other side of the world, in relation to a different set of histories and cultures etc, I just find myself 'read' into the centre of Edward's book. I felt out of place in Jamaica, and when I came to England I felt out of place in Merton College, Oxford, and I feel out of place even now. I feel out of place in relation to the British, which might sound a very strange thing because I've lived here for 50-something years. I know the different kinds of English, the British people, I know how the society works from the inside. I love parts of the landscape. I feel at one with it. It is my home in a certain kind of way. But I will never be English - never. I can't be, because traces in my life, and the traces in my memory and the traces in my history of another place are just ineradicable. I can't get them out of my head. I don't want to have a fight about it, but that's just how one is. So being displaced, or out of place, is a characteristic experience of mine. It's been all throughout my life. I even felt displaced in relation to black culture in Jamaica. I was a kind of nationalist from the very beginning, lots of my friends were, we were anti-Imperialist, we wanted Jamaica to be free etc. But in relation to black culture and the life of ordinary black people, I really didn't know what it was about in any depth and I couldn't get to it. I was a middle-class brown schoolboy with middle class parents, I couldn't reach it. I could sort of imagine it and relate to it by empathy, but I couldn't be of it. I was never a Kingston street boy. I can't pretend to have been, because I wasn't. So even out of place in relation then to what became black in England. Black people sometimes talk about things like slavery as if they know it in their genes. They don't

---

<sup>13</sup> Edward W. Said *Out of place: a memoir* London: Granta Books, 1999.

need to find out about it because if you're black you know it. Well, first of all, I don't believe that. I think unfortunately a lot of black people don't know enough about their own history to begin with, and aren't passing it on to their kids and so on. That's a separate question but that is what I feel. But I've always felt that there's no kind of automatic relationship to one's belonging. It's forged. Jamaica became consciously black in the 60s and early 70s. I don't care what Jamaican people look like - and remember that people don't always look like people here imagine them to be. Most people who go to the Caribbean are surprised at the range of colours that people are, and the more we know about it, the more we know a lot of people who look black are not in any sense genetically 'African.' It's a very mixed, very hybrid society. Black is important historically, because it's the bit that was never named, never spoken, couldn't speak its history until it was released and that was not until after Independence. So all of us in different ways learn to be black. All of us are out of place in relation to slavery. How can we think about slavery? How can we think about ancestors of mine being enslaved in chains to somebody else, particularly to the English and the Scots? It's kind of unthinkable. So I think out-of-place-ness is inevitably a condition of the diaspora, but is strangely enough a condition of the Caribbean too, which is of course a diaspora too, because everybody who is there came from somewhere else. The indigenous people who belonged there were wiped out within 100 years and after that everybody comes from somewhere else. The Spanish, the Dutch, the French, the British, the Africans, the Indians, the Chinese, the Portuguese, they're all from somewhere else. We are one of the first diaspora societies. So I don't think 'out-of-placeness' is just because of my peculiar biographical history.

*I wonder whether it's part of that sense of dislocation, out-of-place-ness, also enables a kind of insight?*

Well, I suppose it does. I used to comfort myself I think with that thought. You know the German sociologists, Simmel said the stranger has insights into where he or she is, which the people who live it instinctively, live their culture instinctively, can't possibly have. You need the shock of translation etc. So I think that may be true. I thought you were going to say something else, which is that really a lot of people who are diasporic also have that. C.L.R. James called it the insights of the people who "are in but not of Europe."

*One of the lessons is the mutual implications of all of these stories of being out of place are about, to use Said's words, 'overlapping territories, intertwined histories'.*

Yes. Contrapuntal. There's a little piece of mine called *Minimal Selves*,<sup>14</sup> don't know if you know it?

*Yes, of course.*

And this was given at a conference at the ICA, which myself, Homi Bhabha, Salman Rushdie, and I can't remember who else, spoke. It was about identity. And I looked out into the hall and I saw a lot of white faces and one after another everybody stood up and said, 'Well, actually I'm not really English because my parents come from 'Australia' or 'from the North' or 'from Scotland' or 'from Wales' or 'from the working class'; and I suddenly got this feeling that everybody was becoming diasporic. There wasn't an

---

<sup>14</sup> Stuart Hall 'Minimal Selves' in *Identity: The Real Me*, ICA Document 6, 1988.



English person in the room! And I met a friend in the loo, and I said, 'Speak up for England.' I had always thought of him as a kind of quintessential English person. So I went back into the room and I said, 'Welcome to the diaspora'. Something about modern experience is the experience of dislocation, which I associated very much with my own experience and with living in the diaspora.

*Could we go back a little to your early days in London. I've read that you worked for a time as a teacher South London, is that right?*

Yes, when I left university I came to London, I was editing *Universities & Left Review*, which had an office in Soho. I lived in South London in Clapham in the house of a wonderful old Trotskyist called Jock Haston, and I wanted to stay in London until I went home - still not quite deciding when I'm going. So I thought well, what can you do? Practically, nothing! I couldn't then drive, so I couldn't drive a milk float. You can teach. So I got a job in a secondary school as a supply teacher, and you're sent round to different schools, but my school was unable to retain any of its supply teachers, or indeed its teachers. So once I'd got in there they never let me go. I was a supply teacher in a school at the Kennington Oval, for quite a while, about three or four years, and I used to leave there, get on a train, go to Soho, and edit the journal, and go back on the night bus - try to wake up in time to get to the Oval for the opening of class. I've written a bit about that. There's an essay which has never been republished, in *Universities & Left Review*, called *Absolute Beginnings*, which is sort of a nod to an old

friend, because I got to know Colin MacInnes well, but it's about my experiences in secondary school. <sup>15</sup>

*I love those books as well. Those were very important to me.*

Me too.

*I read that some of the kids you took home afterwards because of the intensity of street racism at that time?*

No, I followed them. I was going to edit the journal and all of a sudden these kids, who were bedded down in South London - I wasn't sure they'd ever even been to Piccadilly Circus - were actually on a train. And I said, 'Where you going?' 'Oh sir, we're going across town.' I said, 'What do you mean "across town"?' 'We're going to Notting Hill, Shepherd's Bush'. I said, 'What's going on?' 'A bit of argy-bargy' they said meaningfully. And so then I began to get interested in what was happening over there. And a lot of people then working in Notting Hill came to the *Universities & Left Review* club and people got involved in the Notting Hill riots and their aftermath etc. One of them was Michael X. I used to go down there to see where on earth these kids were, and they were on the street corners and the adults were in the pubs behind them shouting through the doors; and they were harassing women black women who were walking home from work, going in to the multi-occupation flats in Powys Terrace and the terraces behind. So that's one thing. Then I got involved in the politics of Notting Hill through the club. Do you know Michael de Freitas?

---

<sup>15</sup> Stuart Hall "Absolute beginnings" *Universities and Left Review*, 7 Autumn, 1959 pp. 17-25.

*Yes, Michael X.*<sup>16</sup>

Well, Michael came to the New Left club and I got to know him. First of all, we talked about jazz, because Michael was passionate about jazz, and he used to go to Stockholm at the weekends to hear American jazz bands. But after a bit he said, 'Well you know, a lot's going on round my place.' Well, Michael was a thrower of black families out of their homes for ..... what's the name of the rack-renting landlord? Rachman.

*Of course, the notorious profiteer Peter Rachman.*

He [Michael] was a sort of strong-arm man on the street, putting the belongings of people who couldn't pay rent on the pavement. On the other hand he had all these local connections, he didn't like what was going on. He said, 'We must do something about this.' This is why I think Michael X is a tragedy, because he had exactly the same formation as Malcolm X, who was from exactly the same hustling background; and Malcolm became something and Michael lost his way. Anyhow all that is irrelevant. It's just that we got involved in Notting Hill, but my first awareness that something was happening in Notting Hill was before the riots, by kids in my school alerting me. So when we got back to school I said, 'What are you doing up there?' 'Oh, you know' I said, 'Why are you shouting at them?' 'Well, they're taking our women.' I said, 'What do you mean? If only you had had any women!'

---

<sup>16</sup> Michael de Freitas emigrated to London in 1957 from Trinidad. He re-named himself Michael X styling his politics on the 'black power' movement in the US. In 1969 he founded the Racial Adjustment Action Society, and became the self-appointed leader of a Black Power commune on Holloway Road, North London called the "Black House."

<Laughter>

'They're taking our things' etc. So I said, 'Do you mean these?' And I pointed to several black kids in the class and they looked at them as if they'd never seen them.

'No sir.'

*He's one of us.*

'They're one of us.' So I said, 'What about me?' 'No sir. Not you. Them.' It was a very important experience to me.

*Incredible. What an incredible scene actually, and also I guess in that one moment a whole conjuncture really.*

That's the conjuncture. There's no doubt, yes. That's when a great deal of racism which has been simmering underneath finally gets spoken; finally erupts in the straightforward open aggression and violence. It's a moment like Powellism in '68, when people can say and do on the street what they've been careful not to say and do until that moment.

*They're being taught by Stuart Hall, who they don't count as being in the 'them' and their black friends who they're walking home from school with, maybe not, but certainly in the playground with, they don't count as being 'them' either.*

Exactly. Funny. Complicated. I became aware of how complicated local allegiances and images of the people outside are. I think you've written about this. I became aware of that really then. I loved teaching though it was a completely harrowing experience for

me. First of all I couldn't keep discipline. I was very young still and had no experience of teaching. I'd never been taught to teach so I just walked in. I was given a class, which was 4FX. This was a Secondary Modern school so everybody in it had already failed their 11 Plus.<sup>17</sup> The classes started at 1A, 1B, 1C, and at about 1E they fade into 1FX. So this is kids right at the bottom of the pile. What was I to do with them? So I said, 'What are you going to do when you leave school?' 'Oh sir, we're going into the print.' Their fathers all worked then in the print, that was the only route into the print. You couldn't get into the print industry by knocking on the door and filling out a form. So they didn't see any reason why they should ever study anything again. Well, I'd teach them, I tried to teach them English Grammar. Can you imagine? Gerunds, commas and semi-colons.

<Laughter>

I had to teach them geography, and one day the geography master came in and said 'This is interesting. You're teaching them about the trade wind, except that you've got the south-east and north-west wrong way round on the blackboard.'

<Laughter>

I was so naïve I'd left it there. I tried to get them to act *Romeo and Juliet*. Craziness - just completely crazy and made up out of my head really. But I also had to take them swimming and do life saving. I'd never life saved anything in my life, so I was terrified. I said, 'Before we go to the pool, we're going to practice life saving in the hall upstairs.'

---

<sup>17</sup> These exams taken by children at 11 determined whether or not they went to selective 'grammar schools' or the second tier of secondary modern schools. Secondary modern schools became synonymous with working-class schooling.

<Laughter>

These kids, all lying in the hall, saving one another, while I read the book. Eventually of course I had to take them to the pool. I was sure one of them was going to drown, I was absolutely certain, but they didn't. My only problem was when, coming back from school on a Friday afternoon, from the pool, I was supposed to bring them back to school, to be dismissed. Well, they were passing their homes - it was completely ridiculous nonsense. They were not going back to school for anything – least of all bring them to school to dismiss them. So of course they used to peel off, just disappear. So I'd start out with 30 and by the end I had about 15 stragglers. It was a very rich experience; but not for very long.

*I often teach the Culture is Ordinary essay by Raymond Williams. Well, every time I teach a first year undergraduate class I start off with that. There's something about what you were saying about being out of place, the library figuring within that essay too, and the tea-shop and all that stuff, but I did my spiel on this particular year on Williams, and said about him and I showed some images of him, showed the signal box and all those images. And then there's this black student at the back of the class puts his hand up and says, 'Les, but you know, I read this essay and I really loved it, but I felt sure that Williams was black.' (Stuart laughs wryly) And he just assumed, because what he was describing was that sense of out-of-place-ness I suppose.*

Yes, of course.

*And I know that some people, have criticised you for not writing about issues of racism and the black experience until quite late in your career. I wanted to ask you a little bit*

*about what was possible in terms of making the connection between that Kennington school and the drama, the theatre of race and racism that's unfolding there, and then the intellectual, political circles?*

Well, I also became a socialist and part of the Left at Oxford. *Universities & Left Review* was started in Oxford in response to '56. So if you're out of place the Left becomes a kind of home. And so for a time lots of people like Raphael Samuels, Peter Sedgwick and Chuck Taylor and all of those people were my interlocutors. In that period I'd read a bit of Marx before but I read Marx for the first time, and I used to go to ... I was one of the few people, there was myself and a Scot called Alan Hall, who were permitted to go to Communist Party meetings and not be communists, because they thought, 'We'll get them soon.' I had no intention of becoming a communist, but I used to go. And I'd argue with them, and argue with Raphael about class. So, of course, I got involved in those debates and in British socialist politics. So before the critique of the exclusiveness of the politics of class arises, and it doesn't arrive until the social movements of the 70s really, until that moment, everything was organised through the perspective of class and its politics. The black people in Britain who came in the early 50s, were they members of the working class? Yeah, lots of them were. Did they have the same kind of class-consciousness? Clearly not. If you're a conjuncturalist like me, the difference between Raymond Williams' class-consciousness as the son of a railwayman in South Wales and the boy who comes from the back streets of Kingston is very evident. The black cause, the politics that arises from race, is not an autonomous political arena to which you could relate, until I would say the mid 60s. It doesn't surface in that way. So it's not that one didn't think about that. Let me put it personally, it's not that I didn't think about

that, but I thought partly one is a subordinate element of the other - really this is a question about capitalism and imperialism and the poverty of Jamaica, the situation in which black men and women find themselves in urban deprivation and class politics are really a slightly differentiated part of one whole thing. I'm not defending this you know. I'm just telling you, this is the consciousness you're inside. It's not a moment of autonomous black politics and that debate doesn't happen until later and it happens in relation to the arrival on the scene of a black presence, and that happens kind of in response to racism which is very... as we said, in the Notting Hill period, is just coming to the surface as a conscious political movement and issue. The response to that, in terms of anti-racism, doesn't come until a bit later than that. So there wasn't really yet what people mean by 'black politics'. You couldn't get writing about black politics in the way in which you could in the US, because the black presence has been there forever. It's written into part of what America is, and what it means to be American. It wasn't written into part of what to be British was. Of course imperialism was, but it all happened so far away. To try to indigenise race in relation to Britain and find a way of identifying the importance of race in relation to class politics. So it isn't a surprise to me that I didn't write very much about that at this stage, though my first pamphlet when I went to Birmingham in 1964 was about the second generation, prophetically entitled *The Young Englanders!* *The Birmingham Post* said it was much too pessimistic. It's not so much of a surprise to me, but a regret, that people who were older and more sophisticated at that stage than I was, like Raymond [Williams] and Edward Thompson, couldn't see that the whole political terrain was changing. They couldn't see what the emergence of a black politics was going to mean. Well, people say it's because they're



too English. They were too English, no question about that. I was the only black person on the editorial board of *New Left Review*, the only black person. My symbolic fathers, Edward Thompson, Raymond Williams, Ralph Miliband, Peter Worsley, John Rex - these were very experienced people. They were interested in imperialism, they were committed to the anti-imperialist struggle as part of left politics, but they didn't understand that the black presence within Britain would be a transformatory social and political presence, that it was going to expand, that it was part of the first tip of a wave which was going to follow in much expanded numbers after. They didn't see it was a change of conjuncture. I know you can't imagine yourself to that time, but it really was like that. I mean it may have been that I could have been more articulate about it. You have to remember also that having just taken the decision to stay, I was thinking about something else really. I was thinking about, well, you're going to be here, what's your accommodation with here? What is your relation to British politics? What is it in relation to British class questions etc? So my mind was slightly somewhere else. And I guess people can't now imagine a black intellectual whose mind was somewhere else, until you think about C.L.R. James. C.L.R. was always conscious of race. He wasn't articulating an indigenous and authentic independent black politics in relation to Britain. He was a Trotskyist, he was one of the finest speakers. Jock Haston, who I used to live with, told me he'd never heard anybody speak in public like C.L.R. James, on the hustings for the ILP.<sup>18</sup> He wasn't addressing a crowd of black people. Do you know what I mean?

*I do, yeah.*

---

<sup>18</sup> Independent Labour Party

And now, having discovered the degree to which James was always thinking about that, the fact that he was a Marxist has got lost. Nobody wants to talk about that anymore. So I just think that it's a mess really, to be absolutely honest. I think there's so much that needs disentangling, and I suppose the most important thing I would say about it is, if you have a historical imagination, you have to transport yourself to the moment you're writing about and what it is like to be interior to it, to live it inside it. There's no point asking why wasn't she a feminist in the 17<sup>th</sup> century - excuse me. It has nothing to do with whether women weren't oppressed and exploited, or whether there wasn't, as there was in the 17<sup>th</sup> century already, a small consciousness of women who thought they would have to struggle to be independent. There was a large number of women who talked about marriage as a form of slavery, even by the time you get to Wollstonecraft. But you can't just say why weren't they feminist, in the same way as you can't really say about British politics in the 50s, why wasn't it black? Now I want to separate that from the question, was I at fault? Was I not sufficiently involved and committed? Couldn't I carry the argument with those people? Were they blind to it? All of those things are true.

*For Williams, that border landscape is such a primal kind of place to think, not unlike your Kennington classroom.*

And for Hoggart, I mean Yorkshire, Hunslet is the same. That kind of respectable, industrial working class landscape is at the back of his head all the time, all the time, no matter how elevated he eventually became.

*Yes, indeed, though, on the one hand, that furnishes a kind of imagination, but it also forecloses.*

Yes, it always does. It does both. It makes possible insights that you can't really get any other way, because it takes you deep and close, and it frames you emotionally as well as analytically, and it takes you subjectively as well as objectively. So there's certain kinds of insights you can't gain without that. But it means the furniture of your mind is sort of set. What can you do about that? You have to try to expand it.

*That's a beautiful way of putting it. You also wrote that race was the modality through which class was being experienced which was a very suggestive and powerful idea to me.*

Yes, and I know other people for whom it is. That comes out of the work on *Policing the Crisis* in the 70s, and it was a way of rethinking what in the 50s would have been seen as two quite separate things, race and class. Would I say it now? Well, I would also want to remind people that the class is the way in which race is lived. Once you get into globalisation and the working classes, people earning one dollar a day in Calcutta, class is lived through race and race is lived through class. So they're two interdependent, not exactly the same. The mistake earlier was to try to collapse them together. If you solve the class question, you would of course solve the other question. So when Edward Thompson responded to *Policing the Crisis* by saying, 'What's all this stuff about race?', he didn't mean that race was not important but he meant that once you get rid of capitalism, the race question will of course solve itself, because of course we all are against imperialism. My father was a friend of Tagore's, my house was full of Indian

nationalism, as indeed it was. It didn't figure as a political question which somebody involved in British class politics could ask directly. That was a limitation, a severe limitation. But that is what consciousness is like. So now we are in another conjuncture. We're through the conjuncture, to that extremely important moment when race, class and gender emerged as overlapping but distinct formations.

*I was struck by that comment that Orwell made about the British working class, most of whom don't live in Britain.*

Yes.

*I wanted to ask you about Policing the Crisis because just reading it again and thinking about it again, it's so much a book about the damage that fear does in a society like this one. And it made me think about how enduring those fears have become, and shifting at the same time. I know that you wrote about that specifically.*

Yeah, I think it was particularly acute in the 70s, because one could see an unconscious or subconscious set of feelings being released in relation to race, which is not released in relation to anything else. I mean, of course, some people might have hated the working class, or hated the organised labour movement etc but the hatred about race was visceral and it had to do with things like that 'otherness'. People think about race in terms of skin-colour, and I don't think that's really the right way to think about it, though skin-colour matters. In that period it mattered profoundly. It mattered as a line of difference inscribed by nature: these are other than us; they don't belong to 'us'; they don't come out of ourselves. It was real massive historical denial of Britain's responsibility in relation to imperialism over 400 years, but nevertheless it was there. I

think of Mary Douglas you know. What is 'dirt' but 'matter out of place'. This is what Enoch Powell thought: 'matter out of place'. And they felt black people were dirty because they were 'fouling up our space'. I said to somebody who was making a radio programme about Powell, Powell adored India. He's almost a sort of classic Orientalist. He thought it was a wonderful, rich civilisation. He just thought none of them should be here - not here, not in my back yard, not living in our houses, disporting their picaninnies in my street, but in Delhi etc, of course, wonderful city, wonderful people. So I guess we wrote about fear in *Policing The Crisis* because we were aware of these unconscious feelings - the unrequited roots of racism in British culture. It doesn't mean everybody is racist, it doesn't mean there are no anti-racist white people, it doesn't mean any of those things, but this culture does partly live off a reservoir of unconscious feelings about race, and in particular those feelings remain unconscious because they're about race. It's difficult for them to get expressed somehow. So of course you need equal opportunities, of course you need legal defence of people's rights, of course you need people to be punished if they incite violence etc, but how you get to the core of the subconscious roots of English racism, which is the legacy of colonization, I don't know. But what we were aware of in the 70s is that this was a spiralling up of a kind of fear. And remember that in the 70s they began to be afraid about all sorts of other things - afraid about young people, about hedonism, about the explosion of sexuality on the streets, about drugs and 'turn on, tune in and drop out,' about student riots, about the anti-Vietnam war protests you know; the hydra-headed other was stalking the fields of Britain.

<Laughter>

And a lot of people that we were reading in the press, and political spokespeople, really spoke about it like that. Hailsham spoke about it. We think it's just one thing, but it's not. Everything is sort of out of control; and you can move from one thing to another. It's a kind of symptomatic reading of the crisis, because the race problem is only symptomatic of the violence problem, which is only symptomatic of the drug problem... You know, everything is symptomatic of something else. That is why in *Policing the Crisis* we felt justified in calling it a crisis because it was experienced as a crisis, that's a breakdown of the whole society and you don't really ... you don't understand Powell's speech until you understand that it comes out of that vision.

*I think sometimes people forget actually how concerned you were with the different aspects of that hydra, if you like, and in particular the book you edited *Resistance Through Rituals*.<sup>19</sup>*

Yes. In some ways the break in English culture begins there. It begins in television, it begins with youth culture, it does begin with *Rock Around the Clock* in a funny kind of way.

<Laughter>

Those of us who listened to *Rock Around the Clock* just knew that something was happening here which, if it gets loose, if it leaves the Odeon and starts to take root out there, will unhinge the British stoicism, the tight-arsed, stiff-upper-lip class, whatever

---

<sup>19</sup> Stuart Hall and Tony Jefferson *Resistance through Rituals: Youth Subcultures in Post-War Britain*, London: Hutchinson, 1976.

that is, repression. It will just unpack that from the inside. And so it has done, so it has done.

*I also wanted to ask you, I know that you've written a couple of times about a scepticism about revolutionary movements that move everything in a few days. But I also wanted to ask you about your notion of multicultural drift.*

I know there have been revolutions, I know that there are circumstances in which there is nothing to do but have a revolution. If only one could have a revolution tomorrow in Burma, it needs it - it owes itself a major rupture. So that's not my concern, although I've never myself been into revolutionary politics very much. And that's because the Caribbean became independent without an anti-imperial struggle, whereas Kenya, Burma and so on did not. And I came and got involved in British class politics. Well, British class politics just, I'm sorry friends, is not a revolutionary formation. Would that it were in some respects.

*If only that were the case*

But it ain't. So one has a more difficult task of understanding how class politics really work and how class reconciliation works, and how class enmity... it's not without questions of class, but it's not pointing towards a single explosive moment. Well, is that just because of the milieu in which I've had to think? I think not only. It is because of the two revolutionary moments to which my politics are very much related. One is the Russian revolution and the other is the Cuban revolution. And the Russian revolution I knew was not the beginning of year one. It was not Thermidor, it was not start again from the beginning. You've only to look at what happened under Stalinism to see the

vengeance which the past wreaked on the present. Just to see things which could not be undone, the drastic attempt to drive society in some other direction simply could not get away from the grip of the long authoritarian political culture, for instance. And the Cuban revolution, well, of course I was more excited about the Cuban revolution. I went to Cuba a year after it happened and I thought it was incredible. Coming down the steps of that plane into a tropical airport of a Caribbean island which had just had a revolution. This could be Jamaica it just happen to be there. And also I think that there are many achievements of that revolution which have to be defended, but what it isn't is a start again from the beginning. I just think if you have a sort of historical cast of mind... I'm not a historian but the notion of conjuncture and historical specificity gives my thinking and writing a certain ever-present historical cast, and if you have a historical cast of mind, you just aren't persuaded that everything can start again from the beginning. Year One. Socialist Man, Thermidor... I don't really believe in origins of that kind. I don't believe in origins culturally, I don't believe in them in terms of identity and I don't believe in them in terms of history and politics.

*You said at the beginning when we were talking, the dynamism of black British life has been one of your touchstones and, in a sense, your writing life, your intellectual life has run parallel with that.*

It's what I've been thinking about. It is my subject. It's not the only topic that I've written about but it is my subject in so far as I've written with these lives and experience in mind, written to a kind of imaginary audience, in so far as new questions are seen through the prism of an experience which arises from that, it's my subject. It's not what



I've always written about. I don't know what to call it. It's not my topics, but it is my subject in a way.

*It's a really profound way to describe it actually I think, but when you use that notion of 'multicultural drift'*

Ah, yes. Don't misunderstand the term. I don't mean that there's nothing to multiculturalism but its drift. Without anti-racist politics, without the resistance to racism at the local level, without a change of consciousness among black people, no multiculturalism of any kind. Multi-cultural drift is really an idea from the other side. Things are not going so well really. There hasn't been a profound change in British society. We haven't got to the deep level of racism in the culture that I think throbs on. Well, has nothing changed? Yes, something has changed. What has changed is, you go into the street - and I came here in 1951 - and it just looks different. Britain will never go back to being a culturally homogenous society ever again. It can't. I mean it can have purges, it can throw people out into the sea, it can enforce assimilation but it can't go back to being stable and steady on its own mono-cultural foundations. It can't happen. So I want to say multicultural drift is sort of what we've had to be getting on with. At least this is the thing that's not in their control. It doesn't, unfortunately, lead to or underpin a very active black politics, which as you know has sort of declined since the 80s in a way. '80 and '85 were the last moments of a really big black conscious political movement.

*Why do you think some people react against the idea of multicultural drift?*

It's because people don't like the word drift you see. They think politics must be conscious etc and I think that too, but if you don't succeed in making a movement, do things stop? Do they not change? They continue to change incrementally. And that is the raw materials out of which another politics will emerge at some later moment, so you'd better attend to it. It's not Bob Marley, it's not kids in the street with afros, it's not Rastafarianism, it's not black consciousness, it's not black is beautiful, it's a much more ambiguous world. But does that mean the impact of the black presence on the wider society has halted? It has not. They've not been able to halt it. It goes on unravelling, very slowly unravelling, and Gramsci called it a passive revolution. Multicultural drift is a passive revolution, but passive revolutions happen. Only they happen more incrementally.

*What I like and admire about it is the idea that they are small, incremental, cumulative, no going back kind of change.*

I think that is so. That's exactly what I was trying to capture in the term drift. So it wasn't by any means a recommendation that you should work for drift. You should work for something more serious, and more wide ranging and far reaching, than that.

*Some of my friends have said, 'Well, there are things that make the current move faster, and that's what you have to focus on.'*

Of course, absolutely but when that is not around, what Marx called the old mole, the old black mole, is still working along, weaving its way through in the bowels of society, looking for another way out.

*I suppose as well the thing I wanted to ask you about was several times in your writing you talk about how important it is for that black presence in Britain or there to be understandings and representations that are recognisable, that in some ways make sense of that conjuncture, of that predicament, if you like, of those people.*

Yeah, I think that's very important, and in some ways it's because if you move towards... if your analysis moves towards the level of the conjunctural, you have to take a much wider range of phenomena into account. You can't just rest with the underlying structural logic. And so you think about what is likely to awaken identification. There's no politics without identification. People have to invest something of themselves, something that they recognise is of them or speaks to their condition, and without that moment of recognition... Politics also has a drift, so politics will go on, but you won't have a political movement without that moment of identification. So, of course, it matters to me profoundly what strikes the popular imaginary. What is not necessarily a political theory or a political doctrine, but what appeals to the imaginary and in the imaginary unlocks something which isn't usually unlocked elsewhere. I once said about popular culture, which as you know I've been an aficionado and still am (I must be the only academic viewer of *Neighbours*<sup>20</sup> left on earth!) that often the first sign of a deeper political and social rupture we have is in the culture of everyday life.

<Laughter>

So I'm still addicted to parts of popular culture, but I said once about it, it's only what is at stake in the popular that makes it worthwhile. Otherwise who gives a shit about it?

---

<sup>20</sup> An Australian soap opera.

Otherwise it's of no importance. And also it's just an inventory. This is popular culture, that is high culture, and this is a bit of popular culture moving into high culture... who cares about that? What matters is where the popular imaginary gets itself expressed, and how its meanings are struggled over and it does not always get expressed in high culture. It gets expressed in the dirty, compromised, commercialised, over-ridden world of popular culture, which is never an un-contradictory space, never an uncontested space. So one must attend to it.

*And I guess as well there's no sense of what British popular culture is in this context without a black presence?*

Of course that is so and it's so politically. That's why I said, today class is lived through the modality of race in the same way that race is lived through the modality of class. That's what has happened. So that is true of any kind of politics you can think of, but even if you didn't, the signs of the black presence are all around us. So there isn't a... there may be less of a black movement, less of an affirmation of black consciousness but it's there. How could you look at popular culture, popular lives, how could you look at the cities, how could you look at football, how could you look at popular music, how could you look at any of those spheres, how could you look at the NHS? For goodness sake, I go to dialysis three times a week, it's like a cross-section of multicultural drift. If you want to see multicultural drift come with me on a Thursday to the dialysis unit of St Charles Hospital - you will see it. You will see it, I tell you.

*It's very alive in my mind too Stuart, the hospital is an incredible important place to think about issues of multicultural.*

The hospital, absolutely. I do a lot of my thinking there. So what sustains the black presence? Well, it's sustained in all sorts of ways, and there's no reason to give up hope because it's not at the high political pitch that it was in the 80s, not at the high level of political consciousness. The problem is really not so much going back to that but trying to imagine what that might be in the next decade, in the next conjuncture. How will these informal presences which are so important come together in another moment to create another kind of black or whatever, multicultural politics? We don't have the capacity to imagine that yet, but still, that is the question. So the sustainers of that black presence and what is happening in them, including a lot of contradictory things you know. I mean what is happening to black young people, young boys especially, is completely horrendous, completely horrendous and I have to confess to you that one of the reasons for it, or one of the things which contains it, is precisely some of the deformations of black popular culture. As an aficionado of black popular culture, it gives me deep pain to have to say it, but black popular culture gives young black people an alternative point of recognition, which they're not going to find in the everyday world, they're not going to find through academic success. Some of them have of course, that's one of the things that's happened in multicultural drift - some people have made it. Some black people make it much more than they ever had before, and some by dint of very hard work - for instance, a lot of women at the bottom of the social work and medical professions etc have studied, brought up their children on their own, they've really lived a heroic life in this period; but not everybody can do that. And an alternative has been offered to them in certain aspects of what we used to

be quite romantic about – drop out; yeah, that’s cool. But lives are being lost, lives are being sacrificed.

*There’s no easy way to speak about it, is there?*

I find it almost impossible to speak about it. The terrain of the dialogue is so horrendously skewed that one can hardly talk about it at all, but I mourn it every day.

*I think of those young lives damaging themselves, actually damaging people who are the mirror-image of themselves.*

Damaging themselves and damaging other people just like them.

*I wanted to ask you, to end with really, about our current conjuncture. Do you think that our current conjuncture begins, as so many say, with September 11. There’s been an awful lot of talk about the death of multiculture and death of multiculturalism.*

Well, in pure conjunctural terms but this is just speculation, I think the present conjuncture begins in the mid 70s, with Thatcherism as the first instalment of it. It’s really about globalisation - so all the things to do with this world and that world, with the other here, with asylum, with waves of migration, with people thrown out of their homes, with people living in transit camps, all of that stuff is the underside of globalisation, in my view. Globalisation is how capital saved itself from the welfare state. Once it realised it couldn’t directly roll back the welfare state, it had to go somewhere else and increase its capacity to exploit labour and ‘global’ is where it went; to the new division of labour between the office in Manhattan and the dollar a day worker in Indonesia. And I happen to think that the present phase of Muslim extremism, or really, of the politicisation of

Islam, is part of that phenomenon too, which is not to say it doesn't have religious roots and not to say it doesn't take another step up to get to the moment of the suicide bomber and terrorism and all that. September 11<sup>th</sup> did make a profound change in explicitly making cultural difference and multiculturalism dangerous. On the other hand, it takes us a step right backwards in terms of occupying other people's countries, which is so old and ancient that apparently the Brits and the Americans don't even recognise it to be what it is. They can't imagine why they're seen in that way. They came to save them! This is the oldest imperialist story there ever has been. 'We're here to discharge the white man's burden.' I think about Islam, I think about the possibility of Islamic nationalism, I think about the moment of Islamic socialism. All of them exhausted, one after another, in the Cold War and in the period after that. What is left as a way of identifying yourself but religion? Unfortunately, this is a move to the regressive side of the political spectrum, but it's performing a lot of the same functions as these other movements performed at an earlier stage. And I happen to think that, as they say, it's really being driven by young people, young people on the street. Why are they as poor as they are? Why do they feel boxed in by so many constraints? Why is it that they can't recognise themselves in the modern world? Well, because of the way in which the division of labour in global capitalist society does make them the objects, rather than the subjects, of economic, social and cultural development. So I think there are these underlying factors. That's why I hesitate to say 9/11 came out of the blue, we don't know where it came from, suddenly everything has changed. It didn't come out of the blue, it's been on the history books since the Brits only left Iraq in 1892 when they were driven out - it's not very long ago since we were there. We colluded in the formation of

a religiously exclusive state in Palestine at the expense of driving Palestinians into camps. Nothing in the Middle East is from the day before yesterday – nothing. Of course that's not to say it remains the same. This is a new phase and it's a phase particularly difficult for people on the Left, because of religion, the ambiguous situation of religion, and because we've never understood religion, and because our secular sociological selves thought religion was going to go away, and because communism and the socialist movements were all secular movements etc. Culture has taken its revenge on our failure to understand history. So, of course, in one sort of way I feel we'll never be the same again, and I think we may never be, but I wouldn't myself identify the conjunctural shift there [September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001]. I identify it at another place.

*I suppose in a way identifying it there enables an easy forgetting or an erasure of what's gone before.*

Yes, I think it involves precisely that and I think it allows Americans precisely to absolve themselves of a long historical responsibility, which has been going on since the end of the 19th century.

*You've said that many times that New Labour has been a historic missed opportunity.*

I think it's a missed opportunity, yes, but it is the second phase of Thatcherism really – really, that's what it is. So it's missed opportunity only because it would have had to do something just as dramatic as Thatcherism to have found a counter-politics. And that's what those of us on the Left kept saying - you aren't going back to the nationalisation of everything in sight, you aren't going back to the old-style Labour movement. It has been de-centred and distributed around the world by global capitalism. The way is not



to go back; the way is to go forward. And it is to try to redefine what your hopes were of that forward movement and of that kind of equality in the new conditions. That requires a lot of hard thought, not sentimentality. And the thinking never happened. The thought was, since there is no alternative, how do we accommodate to it? That's what Giddens taught them. Globalisation is irreversible – what we can do is accommodate to it, improve the supply side, build up the entrepreneurial skills, make Britain more competitive, marketise society, open the doorway to trade, lower the barriers, deregulate and privatise, make globalisation work. And the surprise to me is, of course, that social democracy in its New Labour form has been more successful than Thatcherism was because, in addition to it attends to the poor, it attends to those who are residually left out. Whereas Thatcherism didn't give a damn about anybody, it was just driving the new managerialism and marketisation through society etc. And the end of Thatcherism is really an interesting moment for me, because nobody quite explained why it happened. The Conservatives adore her, they think she's the most wonderful leader they've had since Churchill. Why did they get rid of her? There was some sense that you can't fundamentally remodel society just like that, that the costs, that's what's falling apart as a consequence of this has to be dealt with as well. So they moved more to the middle terrain, a bit of good governance, etc. So I see it's not just swearing. If you're talking about a long-term political project, essentially the neo-liberal global capitalist project, New Labour is a more successful instalment of it than the first instalment, which was Thatcherism. And as you know, I wrote a lot about Thatcherism, much of it was to try to persuade the Left to take it seriously. I argued, it's not just a turn of the electoral screw, it's a much deeper movement going on here. The call to think

deeply didn't catch fire, but actually some people heard it - the wrong side heard it! The Blairites heard it and thought, 'Oh yes. This is inevitable. We've got to adapt it.' But what I was going to say was that, at the time, I was preoccupied with the impact of all that on Britain. I sort of saw the relationship to Reaganism abroad but I didn't see its global dimensions. It was a global moment, not a national moment. It paraded under the nationalist guise - British values, the flag, the Falklands, send the gunboat etc, but that's just the Marxist notion that the future comes masquerading like the past; it was a masquerade. What was happening underneath was much deeper, more transformatory than that. The rise of a new more planetary phase of global modernity.

*On occasion Stuart you have referred to Althusser's idea of the importance of bending the twig, I just wondered how you think we need to bend the twig now in terms of what you've described, in which direction do we need to bend it, what kind of things do we need to bend the twig towards and away from?*

(pauses) No, I mean if I were more certain I would have written more about it, so this is a very tentative answer, and it will reveal how old-fashioned I am. We need to bend the twig in the direction of understanding the full outcome of the new phase of global capitalism. And that is about difference, it's about why the question of difference is so much on the table, it's why religion has made a return, it's why half the world feels as if it's become the proletariat of the other half, it's why so many people are left out, it's why Africa is in such a terrible disastrous state, on and on and on. So that is not enough. Lots of things follow on from that. But if you ask me in terms of how I would intervene in any discussion, I'd intervene to remind them of the global dimensions of what is going on. So whereas 20 years ago I would intervene in relation to questions of blackness in

terms of race, I would intervene now, not forgetting race at all, but intervene in the direction of questions of difference.

*Under New Labour there has been a hardening of the border, the open hand being shown those people seemed to speak to something that you're pointing towards and at the same time talk of cohesion and integration?*

You asked me earlier on and I didn't reply to you, whether I think that's what's going on, and I do. I think the so-called declared death of multiculturalism is a route back to assimilationism. And assimilationism is a new way of dealing with difference, by way of erasing it. It might say, 'only some of you can belong,' but 'if you're here, you must look and behave like us.' You must, in other words, liquidate all those differences that meant anything to you - erase them and become like us. And if you become deeply black English, yes, some of you can stay. That's the new accommodation. It's not quite the Powell moment, when I guess they did think they could send us all home. The agents of global capitalism didn't understand that global capitalism is not going to send anybody home. I do think that the crises that are appearing now appear in very different forms. You talked about the closure borders, I'm transfixed by people displaced from their homes, millions of people across the world who are living in transit camps or in UNICEF camps, who are the objects of humanitarian aid, who are being fed from the air. This is Agamben's bare life. This is a way in which the system has simply ground half of civilised life into nothingness, into just relying on its bare bones, operating on its flesh and its body and nothing more to give. People stowing away on the undercarriages of aeroplanes to get out of it, setting sail in leaky boats when they know they probably won't arrive, boats that are already leaking before they leave, but they

must leave the horrors that they are now obliged to live in. I don't recognise this world in the way in which most people describe it at all. I know perfectly well that at the other end two-bed flats in Mayfair can go for £2 million. I know that. Of course, markets have always done that, always created the very rich and the very poor. But global capitalism at the moment creates such a gap between the wealthy and the deeply immiserated people and societies. And so some of that will surface in terms of black people in terms of Africa, where the people we're talking about are black. But in the Middle East the people are brown, and in China they're something else; I don't know what they are in China, China is a complete mystery, but you understand what I'm saying? Race alone, the line along which the field was divided, will no longer on its own sustain the strong sense of difference around which contemporary struggles polarize. You have to expand it in some way to see how difference plays into the way in which rich and poor now have to negotiate a common space, a common life. That's the 'multicultural question'!