Stuart Hall: An Organic Intellectual

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Stuart Hall (3 February 1932 – 10 February 2014) is acknowledged as one of the founding figures of British Cultural Studies. His extensive academic work on topics such as race, ethnicity and identity reflects his own position as a diasporic intellectual. His contribution to the study of popular culture is determined by the importance of his political character in every social act, his non-deterministic view of Marxism, and is especially determined by his insistence on playing an active role beyond academia in order to contribute to the transformation of hegemonic structures. The following biography aims to give a focused view of his personal history and its direct influence on his key theoretical reflections.

Keywords: Cultural Studies, Organic Intellectual; Race; Ethnicity; Neoliberalism

An Organic Intellectual

Racial, ethnic and class struggles played a significant role for Stuart Hall beyond his academic life. Not only the fact that he was born in a British colony, but also the mixed heritage of his family, influenced the processes of identification that would last throughout his lifetime. Stuart McPhail Hall was born in 1932 in Kingston, Jamaica. In his family, class and color were represented by the different origins of his parents. His father, a black employee of the United Fruit Company, belonged to the "coloured lower-middle-class" (Hall, *Diasporic Intellectual* 486); whereas his mother, who identified herself with England, belonged to the "lighter-skinned English-oriented" (ibid.) middle-class. His family, as with many middle-class Jamaican families, was a mix of colors, but Hall was perceived as the "blackest" (Hall, *Diasporic Intellectual* 487) member, and this role was significant in creating his perception of himself as an outsider. This would characterize his identification as a displaced subject and his interest in topics such as race, ethnicity and identity, as well as his interest in social exclusion, politics of difference, and the negotiation of power throughout his extensive collection of academic work.

Feeling displaced within his own family, and identifying neither with the colonized

nor with the empire, Hall thought of himself as an independent Jamaican boy. He was enthusiastic about the Jamaican Independence Movement and the changes that the future would bring to the country. Despite this, he did not remain in the country to witness Jamaica's independence, and instead, emigrated to England in 1951, where he studied English at the Merton College in Oxford. Although he had always wanted to study in England, the main reason for his decision to emigrate was his tense relationship with his family. His sister's nervous breakdown, a result of a confrontation with her parents based upon their disapproval of her relationship with a black medical student, exacerbated his contradictory view of colonial life in Jamaica. From then onward, the conflictive relationship with his family deteriorated even further. Thus, personal and social struggles in Jamaica contributed to his decision to save himself and leave (Hall, *Diasporic Intellectual* 491). His career at Oxford was successful, though he could never fully identify himself with the pinnacle of the English Academia. In fact, after having realized that he would never live in Jamaica again, he considered England his home, but stressed that he would never consider himself British.[1]

In the middle of the 1950s, Hall was an enthusiastic activist of the New Left. He was one of the founders of the *Universities and Left Review*, which was later merged with the *New Reasoner*, resulting in the *New Left Review*, where Hall became a full-time editor in 1958. After finishing his studies, Hall began a PhD project on the classic American novelist Henry James. However, since this form of literary analysis did not serve to resolve the cultural questions he was exploring, Hall abandoned the project. After having worked as a teacher of media, film and popular culture at Chelsea College, University of London in 1961, he published *The Popular Arts* together with Paddy Whannel in 1964. This was the first handbook for the study of mass media that was directed towards school and university teachers. In the same year, Hall joined the Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) in Birmingham, at the request of its founder Richard Hoggart, and became director of the center in 1968. By the end of the 1970's the feminist fraction at the CCCS emerged and Hall found himself in a contradictory position where he was both a feminist supporter of the feminist fraction but was also a "symbol of male authority" (Procter 53). In 1979, this contradiction was one of the reasons for Hall's resignation from the CCCS and for the start of his tenure at Open University, where he remained until his retirement in 1997 as a teacher of soci-

ology. To him, Open University represented a place where he could work on cultural practices and social realities beyond the traditional academic frame; his aim was to reach a wider audience, people who did not have access to the traditional academic system. In the years after his retirement, Hall continued his activities as a committed public intellectual, for instance, working on post-neoliberal politics[2] until his final days. He passed away on February 10, 2014.

Cultural Studies and Marxism
Although Stuart Hall did not want to be acknowledged as the founding father of British Cultural Studies, his name remains attached to the history and development of the discipline, as it currently exists. What is known today as Cultural Studies began as a project that focused on popular culture as a field of study and which aimed to analyze power relations and asymmetries between social groups. In the beginning, the goal of the project was not to establish a master discourse, but rather an alternative for the analysis of cultural phenomena within social groups. The relevance of this approach lies in the political role of every social act, which is unavoidably determined by culture. In the beginning, the CCCS focused on working-class cultures and mass

media; they were interested not only in the social and economic aspects, but also in the more symbolic side: culture, ideology, and language (Hall, "Cultural Studies" 36). Questions about power and power relationships were also significant in Cultural Studies at that time. Although empirical studies at the Center predominated over theoretical work, which, at the time, was more generally thought of as "theoretical noise" (35), theory was still considered relevant. Reflecting on the CCCS history and the development of Cultural Studies in Britain, Hall recalls the "politics of theory" and nevertheless stresses its important role, not as "the will to truth […] but as a set of contested, localized, conjunctural knowledges. […] as a practice which always thinks about its intervention in a world in which it would make some difference" (44).

Understood as just one of many discursive formations regarding the study of culture, Cultural Studies in Britain has, since its beginnings, had a strong Marxist influence, and this can be directly related to Hall's career in the New Left and his later work on the *New Left Review*. While questions of power, class and exploitation, were pivotal in the field of cultural studies, Hall's understanding of Marxism was a critical one, known as *Marxism without guarantees*.[3] Instead of the traditional deter-

ministic understanding of Marxism it was about "draw[ing] upon Marx while always seeking to question and move beyond him" (Procter 44). In the context of the New Left, the deterministic view of Marxism was considered "as a problem, as trouble, as danger, not as [a] solution" (Hall, "Cultural Studies" 36). Hall was a revisionist of Marxism and interested in cultural studies because he did not believe that lives were determined only by economics. He was a critic of the Eurocentric Marxist notion of capitalism that ignores its dependent relationship with the rest of the world, as well as its very nature that results from conquest and colonization.

This critical attitude towards Marxism is evident in the predominant influences found in Hall's academic production, such as Volosivov,[4] Laclau,[5] and Gramsci,[6] all of whom he primarily adopted in order to challenge essentialist ideas of class in relation to popular culture. Volosinov's concept of 'multi-accentuality,' for instance, was used by Hall to explain how meaning and value are "constantly being reproduced as signs are articulated, dis-articulated and re-accented by different social groups at different historical moments" (Procter 31). Laclau's notion of *articulation*, in concordance to Gramsci, has influenced Hall's work, not only regarding his revision of the relationship between ideology and

class, but also as a theoretical practice in Hall's writing, "linking two or more different theoretical frameworks in order to move beyond the limits of either framework on its own" (54).

It is especially Gramsci's concept of hegemony, which will play an extensive role in Hall's reflections on culture. Gramsci's revision of Marxism offered answers to questions that were not (or not sufficiently) addressed in traditional Marxism. Among these are historical specificity and ideological and political aspects in the analysis of social formations. Gramsci's contribution to the study of popular culture can be grasped from his interest in "the character of different types of political regimes, the importance of cultural and national-popular questions, and the role of civil society in the shifting balance of relations between different social forces in society" (Hall, "Gramsci's Relevance" 415). Hall appropriated some of Gramsci's concepts in his reflections on cultural phenomena, such as the notion of the *ruling bloc*, the *conjunctural*, the practice of articulation and the role of the *organic intellectual*. In his criticism of postmodern intellectuals, Hall points out the lack of reflection from some authors (e.g. Habermas and Lyotard), who ignored the presence of other realities (outside central Europe and North America) and who took for granted the univer-

sality of their own theoretical assumptions. It is in this context where he argues for the notion of the organic intellectuals—someone who is "at the forefront of intellectual theoretical work" and who is responsible for "transmitting those ideas, that knowledge" (Hall, "Cultural Studies" 281) beyond academia and thereby contributing to the transformation of hegemonic structures. One of these movements beyond theoretical frameworks was his analysis of the traditional linear model "Sender-Message-Receiver," giving way to the "Encoding/Decoding" (Hall "Encoding and Decoding") approach toward communication; this was one of his most significant contributions to mass media analysis in cultural studies. In this context, meanings and messages are considered as products embedded in a dominant discursive form. In the linear traditional communication model, the audience was homogenized, thought to have a passive role, and was understood as a passive recipient of information. In Hall's model there are the different kinds of audiences, who are not considered anymore as passive receivers or consumers but as active producers of meaning. In addition to that, mass media are not considered only as instruments of the dominant hegemony in order to transmit a determinate ideology, but as the very site of ideological struggle. Through

this approach Hall positioned his work beyond the culturalistic and structuralistic views that predominated in cultural studies at that time (Procter 57-72). This sort of conceptual appropriation and transformation had a significant effect on Hall's analysis of issues of race, identity, and ethnicity. The 'mugging' incidents in the beginning of the 1970's and the following reactions of British society appear to have been a catalyst that motivated CCCS's work with "moral panics" and their relation with race and youth crime. The concept of "moral panics," introduced by the British sociologist Stanley Cohen,[7] was employed to analyze how the mugging incidents were instrumentalized by the media and how this lead to the stigmatization of youth subcultures and black people. The publication *Policing the Crisis: 'Mugging', the State and Law and Order* aims to understand the social causes behind muggings and their extreme counter-reactions.[8] From the appearance of this work forward,[9] Hall's criticism against the conservative British social politics, especially during the Thatcher era (1979-1990), would increase considerably. This pattern would then manifest in his published work, which, following Morley and Chen, "is deeply rooted in the history and politics of the international flow of labour and migration, and subsequently in the reconfiguration

of British society under and after Thatcherism" (Morley and Chen 12).

The Sugar at the Bottom of the English Cup of Tea

Stuart Hall could never identify himself with Jamaica or with Britain. In many interviews and articles, he expressed his own feelings of displacement. His multiple identities as an immigrant, scholar, and political activist were especially intertwined during his editorial work on the *New Left Review*. As a diaspora scholar, an emigrant and an immigrant in England, Hall's work stressed the need for the reflection of one's social and academic position. Reflecting on his own identity and the idea of a *British* identity, he recalled the roots of what is known as *British* culture, its colonial past, and its negation through history:

"I am the sugar at the bottom of the English cup of tea. I am the sweet tooth, the sugar plantations that rotted generations of English children's teeth. There are thousands of others beside me that are, you know, the cup of tea itself. Because they don't grow it in Lancashire, you know. Not a single tea plantation exists within the United Kingdom. This is the symbolization of English identity – I mean, what does anybody in the world know about an

English person except that they can't get through the day without a cup of tea? Where does it come from? Ceylon Sri Lanka, India. That is the outside history that is inside the history of the English. There is no English history without that other history." (Hall "Old and New Identities" 48-49)

This passage condenses his position towards the unstable character of identity and the dislocation of the subject, always positioned within a specific historical and social situation. Because of his own history and the social formations of Britain in the 1970s, Hall's interest in race became central to his academic production. Taking into account the historical conjuncture in Britain in the middle of the seventies, Hall reflects on racism as the result of the denial of British colonial history.[10] In this context, Gramsci's influence is again significant, and it can be especially seen in the notion that historical specificity helps to undermine the idea of racism as a homogeneous and omnipresent practice, that is to say the clarification that there are many historical forms of racism depending on the social formations in which they appear, and that it does not occur in "all sectors of the social formation" (Hall „Gramsci's Relevance for the Study of Race and Ethnicity" 436). Understanding social formations, class and class-subject in a "non-homogeneous" way is, as Gramsci shows by questioning the idea of unity, central to a non-reductionist approach to understanding the relationship between class and race.

The same applies to the idea of subject, which in Gramscian terms, is understood as contradictory and as a social construction. In this line of thought, and in concordance with postmodernism, Hall rejects the traditional and essentialist understanding of identity, and conceives of it as unstable, fragmented and non-unified. In his analysis of black culture and black politics in Britain, he introduces the term of ethnicity as an anti-essentialist concept. This *sous rature* movement enables him to disentangle the notion of ethnicity from referents such as nation and race. Thus ethnicity undermines the idea of difference as racial or genetic and instead "acknowledges the place of history, language and culture in the construction of subjectivity as well as the fact that all discourse is placed, positioned, situated, and all knowledge contextual" (Hall "New Ethnicities" 447).[11] Ethnicity thus helps to elaborate on the concept of *black* "within the British context at a significant historical conjuncture as an identity formation that is presently shifting from one position or context to another" (Procter 122).

After Neoliberalism

Hall witnessed the consequences of thirty years of neoliberal politics and was attentive to manifestations of resistance against it and to ways of articulation that could serve as solutions for the neoliberal crisis until his last days. During his final years, as a founding editor of the *Soundings* magazine, Hall continued to reflect on neoliberalism and post-neoliberal politics. His criticism of the neoliberal hegemony had already begun in the late 1970's, and continued throughout the 1980's with his analysis of what he coined *Thatcherism*. The neoliberal hegemony demonstrates how a given ideology can permeate all classes as it influences and determines all fields of social life, not only with the taken-for-granted nature of the market and the stress placed on competitive individualism, but also with the well-known premise of the preservation of old values, such as tradition, family and nation.

The uprising of opposition and protest, especially after the banking crisis of 2007, shows not only the despair of the *poor* against neoliberalism and against the indifference of those busy with their self-improvement and self-sufficiency. Rather, these movements also represent the reaction to a crisis that is not only economic, but also political and social. For Hall this "moment of potential change" is a con-

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juncture, a period "when social, political, economic and ideological contradictions […] come together producing a crisis of some kind" (Hall and Massey 55). In this line of reasoning, alternative ways of opposition, which represent disenchanted social formations, can destabilize even strong hegemonies, showing that these "are never totally secure" (Hall, Massey and Rustin). However, even if the successful neoliberal hegemony is not free of contingency, this does not mean that it can be easily defeated. As Hall reminds us, neoliberalism is a "hegemonic project," (Hall, "Neoliberal Revolution" 25) a continuous process that is never complete but rather constantly negotiated. The role of the excluded in this negotiation would then be to continue destabilizing the dominant hegemony and in doing so, thereby open spaces for new emancipative projects.

Notes

[1] The movie *The Stuart Hall Project* directed by John Akomfrah (2013) provides an outstanding portrait of Stuart Hall, in which the character of his hybrid identity is shown in concordance with his academic reflections and his public life.

[2] See Hall, Massey, and Rustin, After Neoliberalism? The Kilburn Manifesto.

[3] See Hall, "The Problem of Ideology. Marxism without Guarantees."

[4] See Voloshinov, Marxism and the Philosophy of Language.

[5] See Laclau, Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory.

[6] See Gramsci, Selections from the Prison Notebooks.

[7] See Cohen, Folk Devils and Moral Panics: The Creation of the Mods and Rockers.

[8] See Hall et al. Policing the Crisis: 'Mugging', the State and Law and Order.

[9] The book appears one year before the election of Margaret Thatcher as Prime Minister.

[10] See Hall, Racism and Reaction

[11] See also Hall, What is this 'Black' in Black Popular Culture?

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