Consciousness and Commitment in the Political Conjuncture

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Stuart Hall, *Selected political writings – The Great Moving Right Show and other essays*, edited by Sally Davison, David Featherstone and Bill Schwarz, London, Lawrence and Wishart, 2017.

The first of Stuart Hall's essays collected in this volume is called 'The New Conservatism and the Old'. Published in 1957, in the first issue of *University and Left Review*, it's opening sentence is this: 'The disorderly thrust of political events disturbs the symmetry of political analysis'. That line encapsulates something fundamental to Hall's style of thinking and analysis – as demonstrated in all the essays collected here, and spanning forty years. For him, events always came first. They issue the call to intellectual labour – with an unexpectedness it is the goal of analysis to grasp rather than to reduce or erase. That analysis is not wholly separate from those events. It does not observe with an unobstructed view, disinterested in the outcome. It is profoundly affected by them. And while that may disturb, it is not a reason for anxiety, hesitation or for the abandonment of analysis which, though provoked by disorderly events, is not entirely beholden to them. Theoretically informed it never allows the desire for conceptual elegance to restrict attentiveness to the thickness of our multiform political reality, and to the transformative possibilities which inhere within it.

In his early writings, as well as in the famous essays from the nineteen-eighties on Thatcherism and Labourism, Hall shows a gift for applying this attitude and for insightful reflection on ongoing political events. Those insights come in part from a refusal to take for granted exactly which sorts of events are most disturbing. While properly and necessarily interested in what is happening in Westminster and in party politics, Hall is never constrained by them. He is alert to the varied currents of social and cultural as well as economic change which can create and constrain the force of state action. He sees in particular the complex and protean nature of ideologies and how different histories, moving at varying speeds, flow into them. Contrary to a common misconception, he never treats ideology as autonomous. Even in 1957, Hall points to the material processes by which ideas formed in one part of society (the lectures of Michael Oakeshott for example) flow through elite news media, literary culture and mass culture, adapting and becoming part of what he is not yet calling 'common sense'.

Something else is also evident within the early writings as much as in the subsequent critique of authoritarian populism, the interpretation of 'new

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times', the investigation into the 'expanded cultural and subjective ground on which any socialism of the twenty-first century must stand', and the coruscating 1998 critique of new Labour's hostility to a party organisation within which 'profound matters of strategy may gain, through debate, some broader resonance in terms of the everyday lives and experiences of ordinary folk and genuinely be modified or win consent'. In 1957, without the conceptual vocabulary that would come later and be one of his great legacies, Hall is centrally concerned with how individuals, caught within economic, political and social systems not of their own making, draw on the cultural, intellectual and symbolic resources available to them, and try to make sense of their own experience. In a 1958 essay, 'A Sense of Classlessness', Hall writes about the negotiations of experience occasioned by consumerism, the availability of hire purchase, the changing nature of work in a technical and knowledge economy, and the new styles of urban life in the new towns and housing estates. 'Where does the old end and where does the new – the real not the superficially new – begin in this maze of gradual accommodations?' he asks. And how, crucially, does it affect the capacity to form a political consciousness? For Hall sees this capacity - to negotiate experience and form political consciousness – as one of the things that democracy (as a culture and ethic as well as a political system) is meant to enable.

If all Hall did were attend to political experience, and combine erudition and insight with fine writing so as to say interesting and engaging things about the politics of his day – then he would be remembered, certainly. But he is celebrated – and anthologised – because his legacy is part of something larger: the history of British socialist theory and politics, and in particular that tradition's productive yet unresolved encounter with Marxism. Mike Rustin, in his afterword, remarks that it is perhaps strange to call a set of Hall's texts 'political writings' given that everything he wrote was political. The point can be reversed and still stand. All of Hall's writings are also theoretical. And their theoretical object is political consciousness. Indeed, working within and upon a problematic produced by socialist and Marxist theory, Hall is one of the great theorists of political consciousness.

Althusser (in some respects as important for Hall as Gramsci) argued that philosophers are, despite their protestations, always also doing politics – 'class struggle at the level of theory' was how he put it, in a much misunderstood phrase. That opened up a field of inquiry focused on the relationship between theory, philosophy and the ideological hegemony of the ruling class, and which asked whether the former's relationship to the latter is, in some particular instance, that of 'organising it, strengthening it, defending it or fighting against it'. One way of understanding Hall's writings across his career is as different ways of asking that question of Althusser's while also generalising it. Everyone, as Gramsci put it, can be a philosopher and philosophical themes, Hall understood, are at work in all sorts of texts and practices – political speeches, novels, news magazine programmes, the

way young people dress. In that respect Cultural Studies is the study of the 'disorderly thrust' of texts and events, and concerned above all with how some instance of thinking understands and creates a relationship with - for or against - ruling class hegemony.

Hall's work can thus be read as a form of philosophically and sociologically informed social criticism, examining the normal, everyday and obvious in order to show it as not obvious, everyday or normal at all. He does that by contextualising such thinking, showing where it came from, its specific determinations, the contradictions, exclusions and repressions on which it relies and – most importantly – its relationship, to the moment of the social formation of which it is a part. That criticism is not an end in itself however and is part and parcel of the development of a distinct concept of politics: the processes by which a society makes sense of itself and of what is happening to it; these are processes which constitute that society as the particular society it is, and they do so in part by excluding all sorts of things from even being considered as sensible. Hall described this kind of politics through an analysis of the New Right in 'The Great Moving Right Show' in 1979: 'It works on the ground of already constituted social practices and lived ideologies. It wins space there by constantly drawing on those elements which have secured over time a traditional resonance and left their traces in popular inventories. At the same time, it changes the field of struggle by changing the place, the position, the relative weight, of the condensations within any one discourse and constructing them according to an alternative logic'. The analysis makes clear the terrain upon which opposition to the New Right must fight. But, importantly, that opposition is not simply a mirror image of that which it opposes, co-opting the popular inventory for its own project of state power. At the core of Hall's writing is a concept of democracy which we might call normative; it is that way of doing politics in and through which people can, as it were, consciously struggle to become conscious of the political processes of which they are part. That understanding is also inextricable from Hall's conception of what Socialism is and of what Socialism does.

In 'Political Commitment' a brilliant essay from 1966 and not easily available before, Hall first of all notes, in a way that would not be out of place in a contemporary critique of neoliberalism, that '"political man" in the old sense is a fast disappearing species'. The lesson he takes from this is that the emergence of a political sensibility cannot be taken for granted; it is not simply part of the essence of the *zoon politikon*. At this point many a theorist would retreat to the study and think really hard until they had come up with a new concept. But not Hall. He inquires further into current events, identifying within it the conditions for the emergence of political consciousness – and the obstacles. That is to say, he doesn't simply point to or describe 'the absence of political sensibility', and then moralise about it. He asks about the place just this sensibility has within a specific, historical form of hegemony and the contemporary forms of consciousness it engenders.

Political consciousness, for Hall, was always an historical phenomena, and its precise nature changes. It is always an 'achievement'. In 1966 Hall identified the country as in a 'transition period between two stages of political consciousness', one which political analysis might understand and evaluate. That understanding and evaluation are of course also part of that moment – part of the history within which political consciousness is achieved or not. Recognition of this fact, makes clear the political commitment of a certain kind of theory and a certain kind of politics. 'The commitment of the socialist in this period', Hall writes, 'is to the making of socialist consciousness'.

These essays, as well as reminding us of how important and interesting Hall always was, are also reminders of lessons of immense importance for intellectual and political work: to look at and to look out for the emergent forces within a conjuncture be they of the right, left or something else; to remember that the centre (of media, culture, politics or economy) is often led, perhaps unknowingly, by the periphery where people are negotiating the crises in which they are enmeshed, on the basis of the resources they can find. Theory, culture and politics rather than look inward or look outward with disdain are, if they are Socialist, efforts to increase the volume of such resources and to more effectively redistribute them.

In 1990, looking back to the time of that 1957 essay, Hall explained how it was part of a larger conjuncture, situated between the Soviet Union's crushing of the Hungarians' demand for freedom, and the British and French invasion of Suez - violent events which, he wrote, 'defined for people of my generation the boundaries and limits of the tolerable in politics'. Alert to the balance of force and consent in politics, Hall was also opposed to its reduction to violence and committed to politics as part of the free self-creation of life to which Socialism is intrinsically committed. The conjuncture of 1956 is not ours. The conjuncture now is different, with its own violence and new forms of politics which exceed the limits of what is tolerable. But that commitment remains. It is something which, in our responses to the disorderly thrust of political events, we may keep – as Stuart Hall did – at the centre of everything we do.

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