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Hall, Stuart

Title
Stuart Hall

Your Name
Jessica Evans

Affiliation
The Open University

Email Address
Jessica.Evans@open.ac.uk

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Abstract

Stuart Hall, leading public intellectual and campaigner in the British New Left, was a progenitor of the field of cultural studies, influential critic of the Thatcher governments, and a central voice in discussions of postcolonial identity. As Director of the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies and Professor of Sociology at The Open University, Hall shifted a generation of sociologists towards the politics of representation and its role in the conceptualisation of identity formed through difference.

Hall's engagement with Althusser and Gramsci led to a critique of 'Thatcherism' the popular authoritarianism of which was anticipated in his investigation of the deviant figure of the black mugger in *Policing the Crisis* (1978). Stuart Hall pioneered an inquiry into the symbolic, ideological and political work 'race' is made to do at particular historical conjunctures along with a definition of multiculturalism foregrounding the dependency of 'Englishness' on its colonial history.

Main Text

Stuart Hall (1932-2014), was a leading figure in prominent iterations of the British New Left over five decades, foremost progenitor of the new field of cultural studies, influential critic of the Thatcher and New Labour governments, and a central voice in Black British politics and the meanings of postcolonial identity and multiculturalism. Becoming one of the UK's few recognisable public intellectuals, his work came in the form of lectures, interviews, television and radio programmes, political essays, and the founding of journals and associated political projects (founding editor of *New Left Review* in 1959; major contributor to *Marxism Today* in the 1980s; co-founder of *Soundings* in the 1990s). As an educator, The Open University textbooks he authored during his tenure as professor of sociology from 1979-1997 – on topics such as modernity; race; culture, identities and media; politics of representation; psychoanalysis and visual culture – shaped UK and Anglophone University courses in cultural studies and sociology as well as the work of a generation of academics.

Hall's earliest, late 1950s, writings foreshadowed a coherent set of arguments he would make throughout his life: that the discourses of culture are fundamental to any language in which socialism can be described; that 'the political' requires an "expanded definition" entailing a recognition of the proliferation of potential sites of conflict and constituencies for change not least the new social movements that are difficult to align with the agendas of the traditional left centred on the politics of production; and that the basis for a new politics must be a "movement of ideas" rather than a political party. (Hall, 1958; 2010)

As Director of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at Birmingham University (1968-1979), Hall and colleagues developed these ideas in the form of a 'cultural studies' project encompassing questions of power, ideology, contestation and resistance through an engagement with French structuralism and semiology, and, later on, Foucault. Hall's engagement with Althusser and Gramsci in the 1960s and 1970s fed into his lifelong critique of Marxian notions of economic determinism and false consciousness. Hall invoked Althusser's argument (1977) that any given conjuncture represents a "fusion" of heterogeneous economic, social, political and ideological factors, such that "the last instance" – of the economy determining everything – never materialises. However, although culture and meaning-making is one of the constitutive dimensions for the operation of the economy, Hall insisted that to claim the 'political' and the 'economic' are articulated with each other does not necessitate replacing economic materialism with cultural idealism. He thought this an error in some later cultural studies that returned to a literary mode by privileging textual analysis. Hall embraced Althusser's redefinition of ideology as a system of representations that work largely at an unconscious level. The door was opened to the idea of ideology as itself a site of struggle but also Hall turned to Gramsci's concept of hegemony to develop an account of contestation that, first, is specific to an historical period; second, would retain a sense of active human experience rather than reading human subjectivity as given in the self-sufficient structure of ideology; and, third, in which negotiation over meanings, including popular culture, is a full part of the process of establishing domination by consent.

Hall's analysis of the nascent ideological and political crisis that would eventually lead to the dominance of 'neo-liberalism' was displayed in the collaboratively written *Policing the Crisis* (1978). Along with a previous project *Resistance Through Rituals* (1976) – on urban youth subcultures – this developed Cohen's (1972) work on 'moral panics'. Beginning as an attempt to analyse the rise of a new category of crime, 'mugging', for which changes of operational procedure and priority on the part of the police were at least partly responsible, *Policing the Crisis* considered the coverage of the resultant court cases and media commentary fuelling 'public concern' resulting in greatly increased sentences to convicted muggers. As a discursive phenomenon, mugging was to an extent created by the very institutions charged with controlling it.

Applying Gramsci's and Althusser's work on the role of the state and the media in framing ideologies of national and racial crisis, the book pivoted on the deviant figure of the 'black mugger', a construct that nonetheless had real effects, not only invoking a metonymic relationship between 'black male' and criminality but also mobilising wider 'crises', presaging the rise of the radical 'new right' and its distinctive mix of economic liberalism and authoritarian conservative ideas of family, 'law and order', nation and state.

Hall (1979) predicted that this would not be temporary, identifying this political juncture and coining the term 'Thatcherism' even before the radical right came to power. He went on, in the 1980s, to interrogate the contradictions that were held together by the images and rhetoric of the Thatcher's 'authoritarian populism'. The term modifies Poulantzas' (1936-79) concept of authoritarian statism but, in Hall's hands, this also incorporates Gramci's notion of hegemony since what is critical is the idea of securing consent via the positioning of subjects in narratives – of, for example, nation state or family values. However, Hall had an uncomfortable message for the traditional left and the Labour Party, regarding them as complicit by failing to recognise certain fears, aspirations and experiences in parts of the population that the apparatus and discourse of the 'welfare state' suppressed. But he also disparaged Tony Blair's re-branded 'New Labour' government as operating on the terrain defined by Thatcherism. (1998)

Hall's multicultural conception of Britishness was inflected by a psychoanalytically oriented examination – on the heels of Fanon's work *Black Skin White Masks* (1962) – of his own subjectivity and conflicting identifications forged in the relationships between race, colonialism, nation and class. He was the darkest skinned member of an aspiring middle-class 'coloured' (not 'black') Jamaican family in a culture where skin colour was freighted with distinctions cutting across class and colonialism. His mother forbade him from bringing black school friends home – even though to colonial eyes he was black. Hall's ambition for cultural studies was born out of these contradictions lived out by his family – he could not understand then why his family pursued 'the subaltern position'.

His – as he saw it – impossible relationship to Jamaica brought him to Oxford University at the age of 19 on a Rhodes scholarship. There he became 'West Indian' for the first time, despite having never met anyone from any Caribbean island other than Jamaica. Hall's personal trajectory of becoming 'black' was based on these struggles of immigrant and colonial culture. Seeing Britain always as an outsider fed into a theorisation of multiculturalism as resting on inclusiveness but without an impossible imposition of mono-culture and a fantasy about the suppression of differences. This definition of multiculturalism was a key part of Hall's project of contesting absolutist British national identities – there could be no English culture without its colonial history. Multicultural ethos imagines immigrants remaining true to themselves and to the traditions that they wish to retain *at the same time* as making adaptations to another culture and country; not one *or* the other.

Hall pioneered an inquiry into the contradictory and ambiguous 'meanings' of 'race' and the symbolic, ideological and political work race is made to do at particular historical conjunctures. This led to a shift from the functionalist emphasis on relations of race (the aim of which was to increase the participation and visibility of black people, assumed to have a unified black identity, into the dominant culture) to the 'politics of representation'. Developing Fanon's (1962) activation of psychoanalysis to examine the relation of colonised and coloniser, Hall influenced a generation of young black artists, film makers, photographers, and scholars from the late 1980s onwards. Their abandonment of the reactive strategy of 'positive imagery' – moving beyond the question of the accuracy/inaccuracy of specific representations – was articulated in Hall's rejection of a unitary, transcultural 'black' identity. The emphasis

on representation as constitutive, rather than reflective of something prior to itself, opened up a recognition of the differences – historical, social and cultural – that comprise the category 'black'. The formation of identities, Hall argued, taking up the work of Volosinov, Derrida and Lacan, is relational, indeterminate and contingent – a dynamic process of identification where the self is marked by difference and positioned in discourse, haunted by those 'Others' from which it seeks to distinguish itself.

SEE ALSO: Althusser, Louis; Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies; Culture; Fanon, Franz; Gramsci, Antonio; Identity Politics; Multiculturalism; Race and Ethnicity, Structuralism

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