



# Introduction: The Challenge of the New Right

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Europe and North America are currently witnessing dramatic shifts in the existing balance of power. Whether the AfD and Pegida in Germany, UKIP in Britain, the French Front National, the FPÖ in Austria, the Dutch Party for Freedom, Fidesz and Law and Justice, which have already come to power in Hungary and Poland respectively, Donald Trump in the US, and similar parties and movements in Switzerland, Sweden, Denmark, Italy and elsewhere – while these groups and developments are by no means identical, it is nevertheless obvious that in many places today, national-conservative forces are on the rise and ever more forcefully – and successfully – making a bid for power (two of the most recent and, perhaps, most shocking instances of this success being the Brexit vote and the election of Donald Trump as president of the US). A new ‘international from the right’ (Ahr et al. 2016) is emerging or has emerged. And its main characteristics seem to be populism as its preferred method or ‘form’, and authoritarianism, nationalism, reactionism and racism as its key ‘content’ (cf. Köckritz/Randow 2016).

Journalists, scholars, writers, intellectuals, students and many more are now everywhere debating the causes and meaning of as well as possible counter-measures to this rise of the new right. What contribution can Cultural Studies, with its various theoretical approaches and methodologies (the theory of hegemony, discourse analysis, semiotics and the study of representations, theories of identity and subjectivation, etc.), and its unique way of addressing questions of the political by always linking culture with power, make to this debate? This is the topic we wanted to address with a workshop held at the University of Leipzig in early 2017. Many of the articles included in this special issue are based on papers given at this event. Stuart Hall has always insisted that doing Cultural Studies meant not just ‘academic’, but ‘intellectual work’, and has stressed what he called the “deadly seriousness” (1996: 274) of the latter. There was, he said, “something *at stake* in cultural studies” (1996: 263). For him, in other words, Cultural Studies was not just an academic discipline, but a political project, one – I quote again – “which always thinks about its intervention in a world in which it would make some difference, in which it would have some effect” (1996: 275). In a way, this seems a lot to ask of scholars, especially with regards to the conditions under which they are working in today’s more or less fully neoliberalized universities. It is certainly also these conditions that have contributed to the ‘dogmatic slumber’ that Lawrence Grossberg



(2010: 4) has diagnosed Cultural Studies. In spite of this, it seems to me that Hall's notion is nevertheless one worth keeping alive and aspiring to – perhaps by also heeding more strongly Judith Halberstam's (2011: 6-18) call for courage concerning 'undisciplined' forms of knowledge production and the commitment to what she, drawing on Hall, terms 'low theory'. In other words, the path might be, as Stefano Harney and Fred Moten have it, to "sneak into the university and steal what one can[,] [t]o abuse its hospitality, to spite its mission, [...] to be in but not of it" (2013: 26).

Our workshop was thus meant as an attempt to be responsive to what Hall (1996: 272) called the 'worldly vocation' of Cultural Studies and to stress its political, interventionist side or character. In certain regards, it seems to me that Cultural Studies is today confronted with a situation not unlike the one it was in in the late 70s and early 80s when Thatcher (as well as Reagan, Kohl, etc.) came to power and that Hall and others so skillfully analyzed with the help of the theory of hegemony (cf. esp. Hall et al. 1978; Hall 1988): once again, the context for the emergence of a counter-hegemonic project from the right is an organic crisis, i.e. a profound dislocation of the existing social formation; once again, there is a distinct right-wing populism manufacturing consent and attempting to remake the common sense, which opposes the 'people' to the 'power bloc', and again, this populism is mobilized to win support for the erection of a statist authoritarianism; once again, a number of discourses are being reworked so that various elements are resignified and/or rearticulated into new chains of equivalence; like Thatcher's, so the contemporary right is successful in part because it manages to address the lived problems, experiences and contradictions particularly of the socially disadvantaged and marginalized in such a way as to articulate their desires and aspirations to its own project; once again, what Hall in 1980 termed the 'question of democracy' is today one of the principal sites and stakes of the struggle (cf. e.g. Viktor Orbán's vision of an 'illiberal democracy'<sup>1</sup>); and, as in the 80s, the left today seems alarmingly paralyzed in the face of both, the general crisis of hegemony and the problems that urgently need to be addressed *and* of the challenge presented by the new right in particular.

The essays collected in this issue tackle these and other issues connected with the rise of the new right. They address topics such as populism and 'affective politics', neoliberalism, political rhetoric, the Brexit, Donald Trump, gender and sexuality, 'race' and class, the realm of culture, as well as the role of the left, of Cultural Studies and of the university more generally. In line with Hall's conception of intellectual work, our issue is intended not just, or even primarily, as an academic publication, but also as a *political intervention*. Thus, I am hopeful that it will make a contribution, even if only a small one,

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<sup>1</sup> On the contingent nature of the articulation of liberalism and democracy, cf. Mouffe 2005: 102-16 and 2009.



to the task of finding ways to understand and adequately respond to the challenge presented by the new right.

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