



Introduction: 'Wrestling with the Angels'

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Stuart Hall, who passed away in February 2014, was one of the founding figures of what is known today as 'cultural studies' and long-time director of the renowned Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at the University of Birmingham. In addition, he was a central figure of the British New Left, founding editor of the journal *New Left Review*, and one of Britain's most charismatic public intellectuals. Crucially, for Hall, intellectual practice was a politics, and questions of culture were political questions. His was a thinking that was inquisitive, flexible and open-ended, regularly moving across disciplinary boundaries and synthesising different theoretical outlooks. It was rigorously contextual, extremely attentive to complexity, dedicated to the concrete, activist, committed and practical, and driven by a curiosity that constantly led onto new – and frequently largely uncharted – theoretical terrain. The subjects covered by Hall's work include topics as diverse as popular culture and mass media; representation and signifying practices; subcultures; questions of power, ideology and resistance; 'race' and ethnicity; globalisation; multiculturalism and diaspora; cultural and personal identity; Thatcherism; New Labour; and neoliberalism. The present issue of *Coils of the Serpent* endeavours to contribute to the timely exploration of the legacy of Stuart Hall's highly influential and multi-faceted work. For this, it takes its cue from Hall himself, who once said that theoretical work meant "wrestling with the angels" (1996a: 265) and that the only theory worth having was the one that one had to fight and struggle with. This, precisely, is what this issue aims to do: to engage with, examine, use, probe, criticise, develop and transform Hall's many concepts and ideas – and to encourage others to do so as well.

For it seems to us that Hall's thinking is perhaps more relevant than ever in the present conjuncture, marked as it is, among other things, by the vigorous reassertion of the nation-state, along with ideologies of 'race' and ethnicity and the articulation of ever narrower versions of cultural identity, by the comeback of authoritarian populism, the rise of a new internationalist right, and the concomitant paralysis of the left, by 'fake news', 'post-truth' politics and critical, sometimes even existential, struggles in the arena of the politics of representation, by the unrivalled, because not democratically checked, power of global capitalism, and the increasing subjection of academic and intellectual practice to the dictates of the neoliberal university. For both a theoretical comprehension



of phenomena such as these and as a starting point for political action, Hall's writings seem to be essential. In fact, in line with Foucault's and Deleuze's understanding of theory, Hall's thought is perhaps best considered as a 'toolbox' from which we can take whatever we need to 'work on' the issues and challenges of the present. We believe that this includes not only his arguments and concepts, but, importantly, also his critical pedagogy, his distinctive 'mode' of thinking, as well as his conception of intellectual work (which he distinguished from 'academic work'; cf. 1996a, esp. 274) and of the role of the public intellectual. While we would not want to negate its heterogeneity in any way, it would nevertheless certainly seem that cultural studies too would benefit in several ways (not least regarding its 'visibility' within and beyond the university) from reconnecting more strongly with its 'un-disciplined' (in the Foucauldian sense), politically committed and interventionist variant, producing work that would be more 'conjunctural', inter- or transdisciplinary, perhaps also more collective, and dedicated to differentiation and contextualisation as well as to mediating and popularising. It would, above all, firmly address the culture-power-identity nexus that Oliver Marchart (2008) has identified as lying at the heart of cultural studies.

It is surely not too daring to claim that, in one way or another, all of Hall's works confronted and discussed questions related to power. In the first article of the present issue, Gerold Sedlmayr therefore seeks to offer an overview of Hall's thinking about this topic. Starting from and ending with Hall's opening statements in "Cultural Studies and Its Theoretical Legacies" – statements through which he strategically attempted to distance himself from the essentialising position of power allocated to him by and within cultural studies – the article identifies the major aspects of Hall's understanding of power, particularly by pointing out the influence exerted on him by Antonio Gramsci ('hegemony') and Michel Foucault ('discourse'). Briefly summarised, these aspects are: 1) power is historically contingent; 2) power is not reducible to (a simplistic notion of) 'the state', precisely because power has to be conceptualised in the plural (not 'the' power, but powers); 3) power is material and involves spatialisation; and 4) power is productive of 'truth' (for example as Gramscian 'common sense').

Florian Cord's article engages with the position Hall's work takes with respect to the conceptual difference between 'politics' and 'the political' as first elaborated by Jean-Luc Nancy and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe. 'Politics' here refers to the concrete constitutedness of an empirically given political organisation (the 'ontic' level), while 'the political' means the negotiation and evaluation of these 'facts' by way of philosophical inquiry (the 'ontological' level). Starting from the New Left's *May Day Manifesto* from 1968, edited by Raymond Williams, Edward Thompson, and Stuart Hall, Cord explains how Hall not only agreed with, but in fact anticipated, the work of post-foundationalist theorists like Jacques Rancière, Alain Badiou, Slavoj Žižek, Ernesto Laclau, and Chantal Mouffe. Like them, he held that post-war consensus politics, in its changing shapes, instead of strengthening, has



actually contributed to eroding democracy in that it prevented any form of agonistic conflict which would have truly challenged the neoliberal organisation of the late-capitalist state. New Labour's 'third-way' politics of the late 1990s and 2000s is a case in point. However, in contrast to Rancière, Badiou and Žižek, Hall refused to reduce the possibility of a meaningful political 'event' disrupting the prevailing 'machine capitalism' to an 'anomalous' and singular exception. Instead, as Cord argues, "[f]or neo-Gramscian thinkers like Mouffe, Laclau and Hall [...], every social order is the result of *contingent hegemonic articulations* – it is an expression of power relations" (35). Precisely because the hegemonic order therefore is never static, democratic interventions are possible at any time in that they can and must make strategic use of the dynamic inconsistencies inherent in the consensual field of power.

One such intervention, as discussed in Mark Schmitt's¹ article, was constituted by the English riots in August 2011, whose immediate trigger was the shooting by police of the 29-year-old black Mark Duggan in Tottenham. By pointing out the continuities between these riots and the situation in the 1970s and 1980s, when crime, race, and class were associated within the hegemonic discourse in a fatally essentialising manner, Schmitt argues that Hall's call in his 1989 essay "New Ethnicities" for an end of racial essentialism and "the beginning of a positive conception of the ethnicity of the margins, of the periphery" (1996b: 447) had not borne fruit by 2011. Hall's demand for a historically specific and 'intersectional' approach to race and class has lost none of its relevance today, as Schmitt shows by bringing Hall into dialogue with Critical Whiteness Studies. Accordingly, his two or, rather, three case studies – the (white) rapper Plan B's song "Ill Manors", in combination with its video, directed by Yann Demange (both 2012), and George Amponsah's documentary *The Hard Stop* (2015) – allow for readings of the riots that demonstrate how these "mark a point in recent British history at which we see the social processes of whiteness, blackness and class identity mutually reinforcing each other" (50). In this way, they enable critical reflections "not only on the status of black subjects, but also on the centre of power, that is, whiteness as a hegemonic racial identity" (58).

Ingrid von Rosenberg's article complements Schmitt's in that she resituates Hall's well-known writings on race and ethnicity within the context of his life-long interest and involvement in the promotion and popularising of black British art, particularly visual art. Not least through his long tenures as chair of both Iniva (the Institute of International Visual Art) and the non-profit arts agency Autograph ABP, Hall's theoretical engagement with the political, social and cultural implications of representation found an apt practical arena in which to actively facilitate the "*access to the rights of representation by black*

¹ Mark Schmitt is currently a 'Stuart Hall Fellow', a title awarded by the Stuart Hall Foundation (<http://stuarthallfoundation.org/>).



artists and black cultural workers” while at the same time, in terms of a “politics of representation” (Hall 1996b: 442), overcome inhibiting essentialist binaries, especially with respect to constructions of identity. While pointing out these lines of connection and stressing that Hall’s theoretical and practical endeavours always *mutually* influenced each other, von Rosenberg offers what might be termed a very brief history of black British visual art, in which she touches predominantly upon film (e.g. Hall’s cooperation with Isaac Julien or John Akomfrah) and photography.

Cyprian Piskurek draws attention to an article by Hall published in the same year as *Policing the Crisis*, namely “The Treatment of ‘Football Hooliganism’ in the Press” (1978). Although its topic is one that Hall did not address much elsewhere, his article has been received widely in the field of hooligan studies because, in contrast to other publications during the heyday of supporter violence, it turned “from the agents *of* violence to the agents of reporting *about* violence” (90), i.e. the role of the media. Similar to the creation of a moral panic as a consequence of the media’s use of the label ‘mugging’ with respect to street crime in the early 1970s, as outlined in *Policing the Crisis*, the label ‘hooligan’ was instrumental in establishing a view of supporter violence as a major threat to the established order. The ‘amplification spiral’ could be set in motion so effectively by the mass media not least because of the fact that sports, normally considered as belonging to the domain of leisure and thus apolitical, was now depicted as spilling over into the political field. Hall’s text thus predicted later developments: as a consequence of stadium disasters such as those in Bradford in 1985 or Hillsborough in 1989, the violence exerted by supporters was supplanted by (invisibilised) forms of structural violence that not only eliminated the presence of hooliganism in the newly created Premier League but also, as a consequence of the neoliberalisation of football from the 1990s (all-seater stadiums etc.), priced out and hence excluded large sections of the working-class fan base.

Jürgen Kramer’s article accomplishes two feats at once: on the one hand, it offers an introduction to *Policing the Crisis* for those not yet familiar with this bulky landmark text of British cultural studies. On the other hand, by comprehensibly unrolling the study’s structure and methodological ‘mode of analysis’, Kramer also spells out why and how it indeed may serve as a model approach for all kinds of cultural studies investigations. This is done by way of sketching an analogous study of the cultural ritual of ‘taking tea’. At the heart of the methodology developed by Hall and his co-authors, Kramer claims, lies a need, growing out of the political and social motivation driving British cultural studies, to be able to place specific cultural phenomena within their wider contexts. In this case, this is done by taking the common stereotype of the ‘tea-drinking English’ as a starting point to connect British tea-drinking habits to a wider and complex colonial and post-colonial history.



Simone Borgstede's article perfectly ties in with Kramer's endeavour in that she also takes Hall's methodology as a means to investigate the wider ramifications of specific phenomena, in her case two political initiatives in Germany, namely the movement generated by the squatters in Hamburg's Hafenstraße in the 1980s and 1990s, as well as the recent struggles for the right to stay of the refugee group 'Lampedusa in Hamburg' (since 2013). The article forms an essential part of this special issue on Stuart Hall's theoretical legacy in that it offers the as yet missing perspective of a political activist. By combining her own outlook as an activist with her academic background, Borgstede shows how theory and practice may converge and complement each other in the way Stuart Hall envisioned. Taking Hall's writings on Thatcherism as a theoretical point of departure from which to understand "the dynamic character of power", she sets out to use his insights in order to explore "the conditions under which social movements challenge neoliberal hegemonies and [to estimate] their chances to successfully oppose them" (120).

We consciously chose this article to conclude the issue. It reminds us not only of Hall's insistence that cultural studies was a "political project" (1996a: 271) rather than an academic discipline and that, consequently, its theory, instead of being a manifestation of the will to truth, should take the form of "a set of contested, localized, conjunctural knowledges", of "a practice which always thinks about its intervention in a world in which it would make some difference, in which it would have some effect" (1996a: 275) – an understanding that motivates all of the contributions in this special issue. Beyond that, and relatedly, Borgstede's essay also brings to mind Hall's Gramscian maxim 'pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will', by stressing that, despite the often seemingly unshakeable position of influence of the hegemonic groups, subordinate groups are still able to empower themselves – in other words, that "change is always a realistic option" (Borgstede 120). In our times, this surely bears reasserting. It is not least with a view to this basic, interminable openness of the political field that we put together the present issue.

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